IVAN LUTZ

CALL IT EARTH

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For Stars, Olja and Ena

I

Everyone can listen,
Few want to listen up,
But only the chosen will
actually hear the future.

"Sir, he has arrived!"

Staring through the window of his cabin facing the Space Station dock, the administrator did not seem to hear the young officer, and continued to stare hypnotized at the large metal containers disappearing into the hold of the monster ship. As the head of the Space Station, he had brought its systems to optimal capacity – in preparation for the next day. He hadn't set foot on the Home Planet in four years; he hadn't wanted to, nor had he felt the need at any moment. The day he lifted his shuttle at escape velocity he'd said goodbye, albeit quietly, to everything that mankind had created over the centuries, and he prepared for the task that he had been given.

"Mr. Administrator?" said the officer again.

"Yes, Turk, I hear you," he responded glumly in a low voice.

"Everything is ready. We're waiting for you."

A minute of silence ensued. The eerie sounds of creaking metal could be heard on the highest level.

"A big *guy*," said the administrator, his eyes still peeled at the window.

"Yes, Sir."

"You may go! I'm on my way."

Turk saluted and turned on his heel. It took him seven steps from the blue command line on the floor to the door leading out of the administrator's office. On his fifth step he heard:

"Turk?"

"Sir?"

The administrator turned to the young officer and took a dress jacket dappled in ribbons from a silver clothes hanger. He slowly draped it over his shoulders.

"Is that it?" the administrator asked benevolently.

"It seems so, Sir."

"Are the passengers in place?"

"In place and decontaminated, Sir. Everything is as you ordered."

"Very well, Turk."

The administrator walked toward the officer, paused by his side, put his hand on his shoulder, patted him several times in a fatherly manner, and let him pass in front of him through the automatic office doors.

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Bristling with movement, the Space Station's Reception Hall was a busy place. The administrator walked quickly, while Turk, keeping up with his pace, almost stumbled with every step. Greeting everyone he met along the way with a nod, the administrator made his way to the decompression dock at the

far end. It was almost a two-kilometer walk, and he was in a hurry, because the ship that was about to come out of the dock was carrying the most important passenger in the world.

The walls of the Reception Hall, exactly 76 meters tall, enclosed – again precisely – seven hundred sixty million cubic meters of space. People in hazmat suits of all colors were running around and hastily preparing for the big moment. Some stopped and saluted the administrator, and then quickly become lost in thought, concentrating on the job at hand. Hundreds of vehicles, worker droids, mechanics and magnetic conveyor belts were working at full capacity. The time of great conservation was over; all the energy resources collected over the course of forty years had been gathered for the following day.

The administrator turned his head to the right and gazed once again at the monster-ship attached to the Space Station. Almost twice the size of the Space Station, it stood peacefully and rotated in harmony with the Station, exposing only the narrow side of its cargo bay. The administrator stopped. His blue eyes were tranquil and hypnotized, counting the boxes on a conveyor belt. He looked at his watch.

"How much time do we have?" Turk asked.

"About ten minutes. The shuttle came in at 06:03."

The administrator passed his hand through his gray, keeping his eyes on the docked ship. He stuck his hand in his pants pocket, took out a long, thin cigar and put it in his mouth. Turk automatically pulled out a lighter and lit it. After his first drag, the administrator took a deep breath.

"*ZX 00*. What kind of a name is that for such a machine?" he said, smiling sourly.

"I think that it was supposed to be called *Zeus* or *Odysseus*, but they gave up on it," Turk remarked.

"Ha, I don't know, but the engineer who designed it should have come up with something better… As it is *Monster* is all that will remain… " he said absentmindedly, exhaling smoke.

"He just calls it *Z*, *Zed*, and the new American captain has accepted the name. I think it's become standard with the crew."

"Mother of God! What a mockery. Let's go. The compression will be complete any moment now."

He crushed the cigar butt on the metal floor with his polished boot and started toward the Reception Hall. The green light on the compression chamber came on and the large sliding door opened. From within the chamber, guided along a pair of rails, a small shuttle slid towards the large yellow circle marking the landing pad. The shuttle door opened and two worker droids rolled out the stairs, placing them precisely in the designated location.

A man with gray hair and a wise gaze stepped out of the shuttle with a heavy step. The camouflage uniform hung from his slim frame, and one might conclude that it was several sizes too large. Dust fell from his shoulders, and the torn pockets on the uniform revealed that the shuttle's departure had been rushed. One pant leg, tied in a knot at knee height, swung freely as he descended down the stairs on crutches. His wrinkled face, full of worry mixed with relief, revealed the entire drama that had occurred Below.

Behind him two soldiers tried to help by holding him while he descended – which he categorically refused and probably cursed the young men into saluting him.

At the bottom of the stairs an electric wheelchair waited,

specially polished for the important passenger.

"Mr. President, welcome aboard the Space Station *Esper*," said the administrator as he saluted, and held out his hand to the man who was already seated in the wheelchair.

"Oh, thank you, Robert. Glad to be here. I thought I'd never see the Station, but then again – here I am," he said with a smile.

"Your crew was the last one that managed to use the towers. All of them, including the ones on the ocean and in the Northern Hemisphere, have been destroyed."

"I know, I know… They sent us a report, but it seems that communications are down too. We received the last report 45 minutes ago, and nothing since then," said the president.

The administrator continued.

"Unfortunately, none of the satellites are operational. This antimatter crap – pardon my French – has destroyed the entire communications network. We barely have any navigation."

The man in the wheelchair gave a heartfelt laugh and pounded his chest, choking.

"Oh, Robert, you always knew how to choose your words around politicians. Tell me… when is the departure scheduled?"

"At 12:00 tomorrow. The last cabins are being decontaminated, and provisions are being fastened to the sides. They will be finished this evening, if not earlier."

The wheelchair-bound president looked at the monster-ship at the other end of the hall. The sail hatch was visible through the openings on the huge hull. It blocked the open space along the entire length of the Station at the opposite end. The president could not even judge the height of the Monster from where he sat, but the position of the cabin windows hint-

ed that it was much taller than 76 meters. The administrator turned his head in that direction too.

"I couldn't have even guessed its size," said the president in a low voice, full of delight.

"Yes, a big guy," confirmed the administrator.

The president shook his head as though wakening from a daydream. Snapping out of his reverie, he looked at Turk and the administrator.

"I hope the food is ready, Robert. We got hungry saving our hides."

"Of course, Sir… We have prepared especially for…"

"For God's sake, Robert," said the president, interrupting him. "You didn't fall for that nonsense about pork knuckles, did you? Never believe what the newspapers write! Damn journalists!"

He laughed wholeheartedly and drove the wheelchair away from the welcoming committee. Two soldiers, Turk and the administrator kept their eyes on the gray-haired man in his electric wheelchair. When he was several meters from them, driving straight for the elevator, the president raised his dusty hand in the air without turning and shouted:

"Grilled sausage and Dijon mustard. That's what they should have written, the bastards!"

The administrator raised his right hand and switched on his communicator.

"Hal, do you read me?"

"Yes, Sir. What can I do for you?"

"The president has a new order."

"I'm listening, Sir."

***

The large clock in the Presidential Suite read 19:37. Evening on the Space Station suddenly became peaceful and serene. The lights slowly went out and only auxiliary lights illumined the walkways along the large Reception Hall. The artificial, dimmed lights simulated sunset, preparing everyone for bedtime. The occasional worker was returning to the dormitory, interrupting the unusual silence with his steps.

"We're all finished," said the administrator, hunched over the chessboard. Across from him sat the president with a contemplative gaze, planning his next move.

"Right on time, Robert. Right on time."

The president's white knight made an L-shape over the black bishop.

"What is the situation Below, Mr. President? Who remains?"

The administrator advanced the king's pawn one square.

"Exactly how you imagine it, Robert. There isn't a single person who hasn't lost someone. Below… it's hell, Robert."

"I heard what happened. My condolences, Sir."

The president castled and unemotionally put a cigarette into his mouth. The administrator lit if for him. Nodding in appreciation, the president raised his eyebrows, highlighting the eyes that had seen too much.

"Seventeen days ago they fired the first antimatter bomb. Unimaginable. We had two, the East had one. Luckily you are not allowed to see images from the planet… Three children, Robert… three children."

A tremor and strain could be felt in the president's voice. He was no longer looking at the chessboard, but rather through it.

"My grandchildren… obliterated in a fraction of a second. You know, they were playing war in front of my house. My son… had left them there… it was safer… I mean, it's safest to stay with the President of the Western Alliance…"

"Easy now, Mr. President," said the administrator in an even tone. "There was nothing you could do. Nothing at all. It was a great tragedy, but if we could have prevented the bloodshed, we would have, for God's sake…"

"Bloodshed!?" said the president angrily. "It wasn't bloodshed, Robert, it was complete annihilation!"

The administrator moved the pawn in front of the queen's bishop, continuing the Queen's Gambit. He lit a cigarette in silence.

During several minutes of silence, the two pensive men made random chess moves. Each for himself, they thought about mankind's past, their own past, their loved ones…

"But, you know…" said the president, breaking the silence, "perhaps it's better this way."

"Mr. President?" the administrator asked cautiously.

"You see, Robert, Below there are no more enemies, for the simple reason that there is no future. People are destroying everything that they see or touch, in fear; they are killing each other without regret or a guilty conscience. My geologists say that the Planet has already started to implode. For God's sake, the southern tectonic fault is two hundred kilometers wide. It's a matter of days… perhaps months before it's all destroyed. I ask you – how can you raise children in a world that has no future? A world where the future is this damn Monster? How, Robert?"

"I have to admit that you're right with regard to the future,

Sir, but our survival instinct is stronger than…"

"What survival instinct!?" said the president, interrupting him, and slammed his rook on the board. "These thousand and some people in the Monster are proof of our *instinct*. It's only a matter of days before they too kill each other, before they succumb to incest… Doctors claim that… all of them… oh, God!"

The president stopped mid-sentence and moved away from the table. He went to the window and gazed out into the empty Reception Hall beneath their level.

"We've lost everything, Robert… everything, and we're not even aware of it."

The president's cold gaze cut through the space behind the glass, looking vaguely at some distant, nonexistent point at the end of the hall. Silence reigned in the room. The administrator straightened his back with a sound of relief and stretched.

"Some things we can't get back, Mr. President. In my humble opinion, my concern will not significantly affect the outcome. I stopped worrying long ago… I can't even recall the day."

"I know, Robert, I know. I'm aware of that."

He turned to the administrator and looked at him with a friendly expression. Then, like a rubber doll, he returned to his previous position and gazed out through the cabin window again.

"I was the most powerful man in the world and I still couldn't do anything. The situation got out of control even before we started to understand what was happening. It outgrew all of us. And now it is the end…"

The president was absorbed in thought and the administrator did not want to interrupt him, so they sat in silence for several minutes. The president sized up the anchored sailing ship

at the opposite end of the Space Station and his gaze stopped on the monitor that displayed the entire exterior of the Monster. Now he could grasp its true size, because when he had looked at it from the shuttle, he hadn't been able to make out its contours in such a short time. Two or perhaps even three times larger than the Space Station *Esper*, it glittered in the darkness of space like a Christmas tree. The openings through which lights shone constantly changed colors, and there was visible commotion behind the thick cabin windows. He couldn't recognize anyone because the glass, reinforced with different metals, was opaque and only let diffused light through. He could only guess what was happening inside. Tomorrow, tomorrow he would talk to the new American captain for the last time, the last time… and then… and then it would be over. *Zed*, along with its crew of a thousand and some people, would soar into the vastness of space, leaving behind all the people on the Station. Somewhere in the vicinity of Mercury it would deploy its kilometer-wide sails and activate the magnetic shield. With significant acceleration, it would leave the solar system in as little as a month. He could be going with them, but had refused the privilege. He wanted to stay behind and meet his end like everyone else. Humanity was something priceless, linked to the Home Planet, linked to the rivers, the mountains, family… Not to the *Monster Zed*, the only interstellar sailing ship built by the hands of a true Man.

"Perhaps we should finish the game, Robert?" said the president, approaching the small table and adeptly putting the brakes on his wheelchair. The administrator was already holding a glass of cognac in his hand and lighting a second cigarette. He responded affirmatively, with a humorous curse.

They ended in a draw.

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No one slept that night. Whispers could be heard from the cabins, people were walking around the Station, the ultrasound showers were on all night long, the sports hall didn't have any empty slots, and the smell of coffee kept coming in waves. When the lights started coming on, announcing morning, all the workers of the *Esper* put on their best clothes and quietly made their way to the Reception Hall, without uttering a word. The metal stairs screeched under their trampling feet and the handrails shook and quivered for minutes after being released. The quarters of the workers, soldiers, the cabins of the officers and commanders remained empty and calm, quiet, silent, tranquil, vacant. Everyone was in one place. The confusion did not last long, and in a rehearsed fashion rows were quickly assembled according to uniform color, corps and rank. Each row was headed by its superior, all organized according to chain of command, precisely and evenly, everyone at attention, as though laid out by a robot. Even though it seemed that all these rows and columns of people could not be any more precise, a loud command was followed by the sound of four hundred and some hands slapping thighs, and the ranks lined up even more tightly.

The president stepped into the empty space between the people (it was more like he drove in, nonchalantly controlling the wheelchair), and behind him were the administrator and the faithful young officer Turk. While passing by the young soldiers, workers, cleaners and engineers, he recognized pride and sorrow on the faces of them all, blended into a feeling that could be described as melancholy; but they were not melancholic – he

knew this deep inside. Sometimes frowning, sometimes with a sour smile, the commanders still held all the strings of this odd lineup, troop, assembly, group, tribe – of people. As though it was a call to morning battle, standing at attention with their flat hands extended across their foreheads, they stood proud and bold, wanting to please the president.

And the president…

He had seen all the power of a parody of the human spirit, but also a spark and hope in the eyes of these young people. He stopped looking at them, and as he turned his gaze forward, out of the corner of his eye he noticed an unknown young soldier proudly looking at the Monster at the other end of the hall. Head held straight, from the gaze of this anonymous man the president realized the magnitude of the task before the Monster.

He was relieved that he was not going with them.

Having reached the end of the space cordoned off by a low yellow rope, the president stopped, turned around and greeted the assembly in the Hall. He made his way to a small platform, which dropped a few millimeters under his weight, and chrome bars came out vertically, creating a small fence, perhaps twenty centimeters high. The platform secured the president's wheelchair with metal pins, and the hydraulics hummed, hinting that it was about to ascend. He started to rise at a comfortable speed – facing the entire crew of the *Esper*. It stopped when he was five or six meters up, and a projected image appeared on the large metal bulkhead behind him, covering almost its entire surface. It was the picture of a young officer with many scars around his eyes and a large, freshly-healed gash on his forehead. The rank insignia sparkled on the shaky projector

image, and the officer's stone-faced expression emanated courage and honesty.

The president addressed the people below him. Before his very eyes, and to his great astonishment, the ranks compressed into an even more orderly form. As straight as a cut diamond – the *species* had become all ears.

***

Captain Pollard oversaw the programming of the course and calculation of the trajectory that they were supposed to take. It was best to leave the maneuvers to the autopilot at least until they were out of the solar system, and in any case – no human could pull them off. There was one man, an ingenious German called Hank Hertz, the best military pilot in generations, but Captain Pollard didn't leave anything to chance, so Hertz worked diligently on the calculations and followed orders. Even though he was convinced that he could complete the snap maneuver for deploying the sails without crashing into Mercury, he kept his mouth shut and obeyed orders like any other soldier.

Pollard was and remained the first choice of the Western Alliance. Even though the states had lost their names, the American captain instilled confidence in the Board, because although some wouldn't admit it –the Americans had been spearheading space exploration for centuries. Belorussian Nikola Kolas, Military Academy valedictorian and the most intelligent of all the candidates, was "too soft" when it came to commanding. This is why he had been made first officer and Pollard's right-hand man.

Pollard, on the other hand, did not complicate things. He knew how to carry out orders unquestioningly, to improvise if necessary, and he didn't hesitate to take risks in difficult situations. He was the ideal person to captain the *Zed*. Not too tall, around 175 centimeters, he had pale skin and a stern look. The scar beneath his eye was a reminder of his days in combat Below, and the freshly etched gash on his forehead – the result of him hastily opening a hydraulic hatch in Sector D – was just another mark of the vast experience he possessed.

The preparations for departure had been in progress for seventy-nine hours. Pollard had inspected every single part of the ship, and if he could not inspect something in such a short period of time – he read the reports of all the officers in charge of the individual decks. There were no problems, only the occasional technical glitch, easily fixed and soon forgotten. The crew – the fifty-seven chosen ones – were at their posts, ready for departure, prepared for the voyage. The *Zed* itself had exactly one thousand two hundred and seventy more people onboard, chosen by the Western Alliance's logical method. They were placed around the sailing ship, systematically, mathematically, each with a purpose of their own, even through the purpose of each person who was not a member of the crew would become apparent only in the coming years, the years that would come, and the years that should come. The trajectory took hours to render, appearing on the photon field of the holographic monitor, one pixel at a time in the three-dimensional interface, wriggling through the asteroid fields, planets, known space, and the not-very-hospitable and not-so-known space. Several parameters were selected at random, using probability and predicting the chaos of floating bodies and objects through

the vastness of space. Kolas raised his head, scratched his nose, issued the order to prepare the course and got up from the first officer's chair.

"Captain! The decontamination of the last containers has been successfully completed. There are only trace amounts of microorganisms and bacteria that last just a few seconds on the outer skin of the *Zed*. They are mostly microaerophiles."

"Is the vacuum doing its thing?" added the captain while seated in his seat, visibly tired.

"Yes, Sir. Precisely."

"What about the electromagnets? We had problems in the simulator yesterday."

"There was a problem with the power supply, Captain. The separation system was designed to be used only once. The simulator was wrong, not us. Don't worry, we'll separate, I promise."

"I hope that we won't tear something off along the way."

The captain got up from the armchair and traversed the length of the bridge. It was a narrow space, several meters wide (nine meters to be precise) and twenty meters long, sensibly organized for only a few people. There was no wasted room on the large sailing ship; it had functional cabins and practical spaces for its passengers. At the very end of the bridge was a large display, taking up its entire width. Pollard walked up to it and stared at it. Rotating cameras showed the space in front of the *Zed*, and when they reached the far left boundary of their range, he could just make out the contours of the Planet that he would never return to. He recognized the eastern hemisphere and the huge ocean. Closing one eye he stretched out his hand and seemed to grip the planet between two fingers, like a ball

when he was a boy. The cameras changed direction, once again making a semicircle, leaving darkness and endless space between Pollard's fingers.

"Broadcast in seventy-three minutes, Kolas. Tell the crew to stand by. There is a lot to be done, perhaps some…" He stopped for a moment and used a strict commanding tone of voice "… have forgotten that today is the day."

Kolas saluted and sent out a video message, a reminder to all members of the Bridge Crew that the broadcast and farewell from the Space Stations *Esper* was in seventy-three minutes.

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By inspecting the systems one by one, Pollard wanted to *kill* time, but he also wanted to slow time down, and even turn it back, so that he might set foot on the Planet one more time and kick a stone at the great ocean on whose shores he was born. All the systems were up and running. On all three decks – the Command Deck, Science Deck and Civilian Deck – the systems were functioning as they were designed to. He was satisfied because of the commitment and gravity of everyone onboard the *Zed*. There was something in the air, something showing that all of them were breathing as one, as one great primitive newborn being. Having scanned the Science Deck, which was designed for four hundred and fifty-six people, the sensor did not get a reading from the North Wing, rather produced a void in the holographic monitor, like a hole in a vertical pane of glass, smashed by a rock.

Pollard pressed the palm-sized green button on the control panel and the display showed an unremarkable, thin little old

man in a white lab coat that emphasized the paleness of his skin even more.

"Captain, how may I be of assistance?" said the man politely.

"I'm scanning the sectors. Departure is in half an hour. Last check. You know that we cannot see your sector on the sensors," replied the captain, equally polite.

"Everything is in the best of order. We have just run the diagnostics on the entire system. I'm sending the report on energy stability."

Another window appeared, displaying the diagnostics for the North Wing. Everything was in order and even better than expected, because the systems were operating at half capacity and were producing an enormous quantity of energy. Pollard nodded in satisfaction and closed the link with the unremarkable little old man.

This North Wing and all the secrecy surrounding it were the stumbling block when he was selected for the mission. No captain, regardless of how inexperienced, wanted to have something onboard that they didn't know, something that they could not know about, something foreign.

Perhaps the worst cause of bad feelings about the North Wing was the knowledge that several people did in fact know what was going on in that mysterious part of the ship. But it was surrounded by a veil of secrecy and they were not allowed to, did not want to, or most likely could not tell the captain anything about it. Pollard had made no effort to conceal his annoyance and clearly told the Board what he thought about the entire secretive farce. Now, several minutes before departure, he suppressed this feeling and thought about the greatest adventure on which he would ever embark.

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At 11:00 the young communications officer Wilson stood on the blue command line and shouted out.

"Broadcast to commence in five minutes, Sir!" He saluted and disappeared down the corridor, leaving the Bridge. Pollard stepped in front of the display and Wilson commanded the Bridge Crew to stand at attention. He smoothed his uniform with both hands and stood up straight, so much so that it seemed he was several centimeters taller. The Reception Hall of the *Esper* appeared on the display, dappled in the colors of the various uniforms. The president spoke in a soft voice and Pollard, as though in a haze, listened to the sentences without being able to grasp their meaning. He attributed this to adrenaline; he took a deep breath and calmed his racing heart. Just a few minutes later, the president's unruffled and clear speech reached his neural synapses.

"…and without lament, because we are not here to grieve and cry on each other's shoulder. This is a bold mission and the only mission that is possible if we want to preserve what little is left of the human species. All of us who are staying behind should look at this day with pride and remember every moment, every movement, every breath, every word… it would be nice if I could say that you will tell your children about this… but this is not going to happen, we are quite aware of that. We have complete confidence in Captain Pollard and his crew. We hope that the ship will survive and carry out the plan when the time comes. Perhaps not immediately, perhaps not in ten or a hundred years, but we will find a planet where we will settle these people behind me, and continue to expand the human

race throughout the galaxy. Be proud that this is happening in your lifetime."

The president looked behind him and stared stridently at the projected image.

"Captain Pollard?"

With several bars of microphonics, the captain's voice came across clearly, as coarse and authoritative as it was in reality.

"Mr. President! Ladies and gentlemen! My crew and I are ready for departure. All systems are operating optimally and every passenger has been informed about the departure. Each person on all three decks knows what to do. I would like to note that my crew and I will strive with our entire beings to fulfill the mission that we have been entrusted. The *Zed* will find its destination, you can be certain of that."

Applause erupted in the Reception Hall. Pollard was not big on words, but he was as clear and precise as a surgeon's scalpel. The president applauded, the administrator applauded, and that was a moment of unity and greatly needed psychological balance that everyone on the mission craved. The applause faded and only a few numb hands still disrupted the new silence. The president moved to the edge of the platform, looked at the people beneath him, and then at Captain Pollard.

"The only thing I can say is *bon voyage*, Captain. And good luck."

Pollard saluted enthusiastically and snapped his heels together. The crew on the Bridge did the same. The display went dark and a deathly pall fell over the Reception Hall.

The platform carrying the president descended slowly and when it was about halfway down, the loud noise of metal hitting metal was heard, and instantly turned into grinding. Elec-

tromagnets were separating the Monster from the Space Station., The *Zed* covered its first meter lethargically, as though on a funeral march. The connection cables fell off and flapped around like dead snakes in the vacuum of space. Everything fell silent in an instant. They saw the huge intergalactic sailing ship on the display, leaving the Station. The engine's jet, several hundred meters long, revealed the huge thrust, but the silence of space muted the power of the machine, and brought the melancholy of sendoffs to the people on the Space Station.

The president did not look at the display. He left the platform and passed in silence in front of the people, who did not even notice him. He went up to the administrator, raised his head and sighed deeply.

"How are we for supplies on the Station, Robert?"

The administrator kept staring at the display, absorbing the Monster's every meter, and felt as never before the entire brunt of his chosen calling. His eyes came to rest on the president and he placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Enough to watch the planet disintegrate, Sir."

II

2,500 years later – the Interstellar Sailing Ship Zed

When an alarm wakes me before dawn, I'm nervous all day. You don't even have time to go to the toilet and wash off your dirty dreams, let alone get your blood pressure up and the blood flowing using tonics, medicaments and electroshocks. While flying across the cabin I managed to grab a B-pill and rush down the corridor to the elevator. A groggy person rarely has any coordination while running down the corridor. Lights are flashing, you stumble like after a Sunday orgy at the House of Leisure, and your legs don't obey you as you traverse the illuminated squares that keep on flashing as though possessed by the devil. The day dawns quickly, which is why your eyes hurt for a while, until you get used to the white light. You squint for a good half hour, and grasp the hand rails and walls; but you run, and you never even consider stopping. The alarm sounded now and again, about once a month, and I greeted that moment every time as though greeting my last breath. There was something powerful in the muffled sound of the siren and the flashing lights. Most of the crew would panic and check the systems, looking for faults, scanning the surrounding area in search of a meteoroid, asteroid or anything that might have made the pilot sound the alarm – but not me. Members of the

Order awaited action eager and ready. Adrenaline spiked, driving our heartbeat, just the way we liked it. We were composed, ready every time. Sometimes the alarm would mean that the sail had been torn off of the *Zed*, sometimes it was holes in the magnetic shield and simple welding of the fuselage from the outside, but to go out and fix the ship in space was the greatest excitement we could hope for. Only occasionally were there disturbances in the Correctional Sector that required our intervention. Rarely were the disturbances so great that the alarm would be sounded. The Correctional Sector was a place that suited me. There was always tension and it was always crowded. All you had to do was graze someone's shoulder or look at them the wrong way, and it would to lead to a brawl, a riot and much-needed chaos. Few people, however, messed with Members of the Order, the MotOs. When someone did come along who challenged anyone from the Order, I didn't know whether to kiss them and give them a reward for making my day, or hug them and take them for a drink of *white crap* at A.D. bar. Nevertheless, it always ended up with them kissing my boot and begging me not to break their arm, and then they retreated to the dark part of the Correctional Sector with a gash over their eye, where they would describe their encounter with the MotOs to all those who would gladly smash our faces. I often thought that it would be a good idea to separate such convicts into a special sector, because their weak challenge was in fact a smoke screen hiding those who would actually muster the *cojones* to go against us. But an alarm at dawn – what a pain in the butt.

I entered the elevator alone and composed. These B-pills really are a remarkable thing. If you ask me, the alarm shouldn't

be so loud. The siren reverberated throughout the elevator as I went up to the Bridge; something had actually happened or else the sirens were malfunctioning. I ran out of the elevator straight toward the briefing room. Members of the Order appeared from everywhere, saluting me as they ran by. They were feeling just like I was. On their faces I could see their happiness - actually their joy - that the sirens were sounding for so long. Something had really happened. I smashed my shoulder into the door of the briefing room because I had reached it before the sensors could detect me. I cursed and went inside. The other MotOs followed me in from the hallway. The captain stood there in the room, staring at a digital tablet on the table, with Nosri already standing by his side. I couldn't understand how a quadriplegic in an E-minus suit could get ready for the mission so quickly, faster than anyone else. I mean, it was clear to me when he was in the E-minus suit, but for God's sake – being ready before anyone else at 04:12… and damn it – who helped him into it? This Nosri kept surprising me with his devotion to the Order. We entered the service together. It wasn't so much our decision or that of our parents, it was the purpose of every Brenna and Nosri on the *Zed*. For generations (actually for twenty-three generations) only nineteen families had served the Order. Why and how? There were records that confirmed and explained this, i.e. ordered it, but I don't have the patience or time to discuss that now. He was the same age as me, but during training he'd had a bad landing and was left permanently disabled, paralyzed. I later learned that quadriplegia was actually *the consequence of an injury to the spinal cord in the cervical section of the spine with complete loss of function below the point of injury* and that my comrade-in-arms Mihael Nos-

ri would have be wear an E-minus suit for the rest of his life. This had a greater impact on me than on him. Three days after his injury, when he put on the suit for the first time, he even bought me a drink and consoled me, telling me that it could have happened to anyone. Now he wasn't even paying attention to any of us.

The first officer saluted us, standing on the blue command line, and calmly gestured for us to sit down in the chairs arranged in a semicircle. I was already in my seat when the last MotO entered the room, with Pilot Kovalsky awkwardly trotting in behind him. Kovalsky approached the captain and placed the D-tablet on the table. He whispered something in his ear while the captain looked him over, shaking his head and obviously choosing words – waving his hands while explaining. Then they turned to us. Nosri nodded to me and winked, and then took the last seat in the semicircle. I knew what that wink meant – "Here's the middle finger, you healthy and sluggish man. I still got here before you." Nosri and I were always competing; it was something we used to kill bloody boring time on the *Zed* – the time between brawls with the bastards from the Correctional Sector. The lights went out and only the command platform was illuminated. I hated the atmosphere, which reminded me of the old crumbling movie theatres from the Civilian Deck. It stirred innumerable feelings in me about these people who sat like sardines for two hours, staring at motion pictures, the calmest showing backhand slaps to the side of the head and make-yourself-useful; get-a-life. However, the siren wouldn't stop so the entire atmosphere was becoming more bearable. Something had in fact happened.

The captain stepped forward and greeted everyone, cor-

dially just like any other time. Captain Wilson instilled respect in each of us. Even though he was thin and unremarkable, I wouldn't have the balls to challenge him to a fight. With such small men you really didn't know what they could do, and his savage gaze hinted of mysteries that I didn't want to know about. Who knew what that old fart, anointed with all the wiles of the service, had hiding up his sleeve. My thinking was – he could shove your own hand up your ass without you having enough time to even turn around, let alone realize what had happened. I simply didn't want to get on the bad side of such a man, and yet I got close to him whenever I had the opportunity. I felt good in his company.

He now looked even meaner than usual – with a diamond glint in his eyes that sparkled red with ruptured capillaries. He glanced around us and then spoke with military precision.

"The irregularity in *Zed*'s trajectory started slightly more than 500 years ago, as we are all quite aware. Since that day, all my predecessors have strived to correct the trajectory and direct us toward the star that was originally designated as our goal. At 02:23, during Pilot Kovalsky's shift, an abnormality was noted in the mass readings. The mass was simply too great for this marginal part of space, so we switched on the long-range sensors to investigate more closely. It turns out that there is a star that is closer than was thought, because we have been moving at a speed in excess of nineteen Pollards. (One Pollard is equal to 100,000 km/h.) And we have lost a sense of time."

It was true. For years no one had asked when we would reach our destination. No one believed that it was at all possible to get anywhere in our lifetime. The trip was what we had grown accustomed to, and it passed like everything else – *en passant*,

unnoticed and unremitting. One could say that the voyage itself was the sole predictable constant for the entire crew. Pilots dodged piloting duties and new ones could only be recruited by command. Volunteer pilots had become an ancient legend, even before the time when piloting was considered interesting, unpredictable and the most sought out profession in the entire universe – on the *Zed*. Yesterday, today and tomorrow – being a pilot meant being part of the most boring damned job ever. The captain continued:

"The proximity of the star indicated something else, which is why I summoned you at this hour. Our sensors detected a body orbiting around the star, and then another and another. Of course, it is no surprise that stars have bodies around them, but one of the bodies is a category G planet. We are quite certain…"

As though someone had thrust an ice pick under my ribs, I felt excitement like never before in my service. Shivers went throughout my body, stirring my digestive organs, and I could barely contain myself. Among other things, I, like everyone in the briefing room, could not believe that this was happening in our lifetime. Would we actually leave the *Zed* and finally inhabit a planet? A category G planet had everything necessary for settlement: an atmosphere, water, suitable temperature, carbon-based life, and a hundred other factors that I had never had the desire or time to learn. I knew only that they were planets *composed of rocky materials, like our* long lost *planet, they were covered by oceans, had temperatures ranging from -5 to 40 degrees Celsius, and water is a liquid under these conditions. Gases such as methane hinted of suitable living conditions, and chlorophyll markers, if positive, were crucial for plant pho-*

tosynthesis…

The captain seemed to let us gather our thoughts after what had been said. It was like in the olden days, a catch-and-release situation. We had the information, but we knew nothing about life on the planet – whether there was any life at all. We sat like cats at a lecture given by a pit bull terrier: no one moved, we didn't even breathe loudly or have the strength to comment. Suddenly we were overcome by fear of what we might learn about the G-planet. As far I was concerned, it could be inhabited by sharp-toothed dinosaurs, hostile and ready to kill, or a super-intelligent civilization prepared to fight our colonization and draw blood for a single cubic centimeter of its home – that is how I would act if someone dared to attack the *Zed*. But it appeared that we were too close; a developed civilization would have discovered us before we discovered it. I didn't even think of the worst. What if… Praise be to the Stars, the captain interrupted the paranoia created by the new knowledge.

"We are slightly more than seventy-seven billion kilometers away, which means that we will be in the plant's orbit in slightly less than five years. Our sails are being showered with photons as we get closer to the star, so we are accelerating more and more with every second. We immediately sent out an optical probe. In seventy-two hours it will be near the planet and take up a stationary orbit. We will get the data in 150 hours and then we will know exactly the kind of a planet we are dealing with. Let's hope for the best."

Then a voice full of antagonism was heard from behind us. The man coughed and then started to speak. He was small, gray-haired and pale, with little exposure to UV radiation, even though it was necessary for survival and the stability of our

bodies. I recognized his uniform as belonging to the secretive North Wing. He could have been about sixty years old (it was difficult to determine the age of those jerks), but he looked like a damn monster: haggard, weak, like he could collapse on the floor at any moment. Just imagine me resuscitating him – yeah, right! I wouldn't touch that wrinkled, dry, lifeless mouth even with a beam of light, let alone my own mouth. Those bastards from the North Wing always had something to say and always had all the damn privileges. I knew that the captain couldn't stand them, and who could - when they looked like skin tossed over a bony frame; as though evolution had gone awry in that North Wing. Gray hands and extremely red fingertips, silvery eyes coated with an organic mesh. For God's sake, he looked like the monsters that we feared as children (I would have kicked him if only I dared) and we still had to listen to him. The clearance level in the North Wing was seven, the highest on the *Zed*. The captain had level six, which meant that the damn freaks had access to parts of the ship that even the captain had never seen, and they could issue orders that even Wilson had to obey. A horrific realization, if you ask me. I was already on edge and I thrust my hand into my pocket looking for C-pills. I didn't find any. I nodded and counted primary numbers from 100 backwards, then forwards, barely keeping my focus. Yet, I could not but hear the dark and damn monotone voice.

"There will be no need for that, captain," said the man. "We actually know what kind of planet it is. We have been preparing for this moment for thousands of years, since our departure."

"…17, 13, 11, 7, 5…" He approached the command platform, emerging from the darkness. We were all silent. Nosri's foot shook uncontrollably, producing the only noise in the

room, other than that of the creature's dull voice.

"We will give you and your people the necessary information in a few days when we get the complete analyses from the optical probe. We actually still aren't sure what our telescopes caught more than two thousand years ago. The likelihood that our calculations are correct is high, but still insufficient to launch the command protocols that we are responsible for."

"…73, 79, 83, 89, 97…"

"Mr. Wilson, I would kindly ask you to come with me and receive the preliminary orders for this situation. Of course, it won't take long, and the Members of your Order could return here in two hours to receive their instructions. The time has come for the captain of the *Zed* to finally learn what is going on."

The lights came back on and blinded me again. I got up and was the first to start toward the exit. Everyone was muttering and the captain most of all, again waving his arms and explaining something to the pale one. "Everyone in the briefing room in two hours, no exceptions!" shouted the captain as he turned away from the pale one and continued to scream and wave his arms.

Two hours! Two damn hours was not enough time even to go back to bed and return rested. I looked at Nosri, who waved me away, suggesting that he had to charge his suit. The E-minus suit had to be charged for eight hours in order to function optimally, and since he had put it on earlier than usual, he had to hurry back to his cabin to connect it to the charger. Of course, he could have charged it in any part of the *Zed*, but charging the E-minus suit battery meant removing it, and Nosri did not look at all attractive without his suit. Quadriplegia was in fact

a private illness. If he wanted to be alone, who was I to object?

The Command Deck was not really that interesting. There was absolutely nothing for a person to do to kill time. Had I been allowed to step onto the Bridge perhaps I would have had fun studying how the systems function, but it was forbidden to enter the sector around the Bridge – the punishment was being thrown in the brig. Come to think of it, I would be sent to the Correctional Sector, and every day there would be filled to the brim. I decided not to try anything until I learned what the pale creature was telling the captain. This way, out of the corner of my eye I checked out the Bridge crew cabins, the canteen, some quasi-miniature A.D., but without alcohol (I will never actually understand that), and a gym. There was a constant rush, melee, noise everywhere… So I looked down on the Science Deck for something to keep me busy and help me unwind a bit. If you don't know what it's like to look for entertainment on an interstellar sailing ship, then imagine a well-organized termite hill and a single bloody ant trying to figure out the organization of the collective, arranging eggs by size and coming up with a pattern – that ant would be me.

I took a left on the Science Deck beneath the dormitories and the huge micropropagation lab. Carmen had taken me on a tour of it once, talking gibberish about the ancient *technique of in vitro and meristem culture, and making possible the reproduction, i.e. multiplication, of the produced material without the threat of recontamination, while yielding a large number of plants with their own roots and excellent natural characteristics*.

I didn't really understand any of it, but coming from her mouth it sounded interesting and powerful. I even asked for a cabbage, although it wasn't my turn that month, but I got it,

farmed it a few days, and ate it cooked, in several greedy bites.

Carmen isn't bad company when there's nothing better. Her mouth is never shut, she talks about her work and rarely answers questions. She babbles on her own, and I quickly get bored by it, but she's not malicious and she always lets me cut the line for plants, so I stop by from time to time to renew our friendship. I think that I'm the only one who goes to see her because of her; it would make no sense to tell her that I come for the cabbage and kale, but her excitement when she sees me is something that I use to feed my ego and boost my vocabulary. I feel that she needs me more than I need her. The under-the-counter fruits and vegetables are only the collateral victims of our relationship. And I put up with her, so I collected on it. It was too early to look for Carmen, so I quickly slipped down the narrow spiral stairs, convincing myself that no one would notice me, and entered the garden.

I had my bench. I mean, everyone on the *Zed* had their bench, but this one was mine alone, because it overlooked a holographic fountain and the entire irrigation system. On several occasions I'd had to use my skills as a MotO to make room for myself and enjoy the pleasant UV radiation in peace. On several other occasions I had not been able to because I was too dejected, so I'd suppressed the MotO in me and twisted several arms, broken a few teeth and done several chokeholds. Over time it appears that they learned not to sit in this place, and in most cases I found it vacant. That was the case this time. I sat down and started taking deep breaths.

I dozed off a bit. My head slumped, even though I wasn't really asleep. The B-pills and the tachycardia that they cause provide very few ways to slow down one's heartbeat. I tried sev-

eral times to apply Nosri's technique of meditation and uniting the body and soul (whatever that means), but I would simply snap after several seconds. I don't know why, but he still hasn't given up on me in this respect. I believe that with sufficient practice I could become good at meditation and finally quell what he calls the *animal instinct* in me. My heart raced and my body started filling with the familiar heat produced by nerves that are frazzled in every possible and impossible way. It wasn't that I hadn't looked for help. The ship's psychiatrist said that I was a lost cause, and that I should try C-pills. Perhaps what led him to this conclusion is that I smashed his vase (brought up from the Planet 2,500 years ago) after he said:

"*The conflict here isn't caused by the surge of external stimuli, but by the influx of current internal stimuli, the stress of unfulfilled needs. Based on a person's constitution and individual history, the clinical picture takes the shape of an anxiety neurosis or neurasthenia.* According to some theories by this sexual maniac, Freud, *the origin of the neurosis was an Oedipus complex. Understandably, the Oedipus complex represents a phase in the course of normal and natural development, Cal, which a person overcomes, and which can only be experienced under exceptionally auspicious conditions, for example – in a dream. In the case of neurotics, and Cal, I think that is what you are, this complex is not entirely overcome because of the exceptional intensity of the urge, affect, and the defense mechanisms that comprise it…*"

And that was it. I smashed the vase and he prescribed the pills for me. I didn't go see him anymore, and he went out of his way to avoid me in the corridors, as though I had something against him. I mean, I did – because after all these years of medical developments, psychiatry was still using ideas that were

over five thousand years old. Even though I wanted to wring his neck at the time, I felt sorry for him, so wrinkled, his head in the D-books in front of him, so I stopped thinking of him as someone credible. A Member of the Order does not have the right to be self-possessed. At least that is what my father taught me. And I wasn't. That *was* a big problem for everyone around me. Nevertheless, I controlled my anger as much as I could, but the predawn alarm triggers rage – really damned rage.

I made myself even more comfortable and gazed at the photon fountain simulation. There's something truly soothing in the sight and sound of falling water. Only then did I realize that the siren had stopped and it had been damn silent for some time. Perhaps I should focus on psychiatry. I would probably be better than that uptight jerk within a year. A shadow passed over my sleeve, blocking the UV rays.

"Hello, Cal. Calming your nerves again, are you?"

She sat on the bench next to me and patted me on the knee in a friendly manner – Susan Penn, level one scientist. If anyone was allowed to sit on this cursed bench, it was certainly her. She wasn't even good looking, she didn't even have a nice body, but something radiated from her, something that turned me on. Like in the old quizzes from the Planet that I flipped through: who or what would you take with you to a desert island – if you could take just one thing? *Damnú air*, I would certainly take Susan. In addition to being a walking encyclopedia, she was smart and sharp-tongued, with a strong mannish chin and protruding brown eyes, and her voice contained the entire secretive world of femininity. So many times when her voice came over the PA system, I would close my eyes and just listen to the melody, not the message. She was one of those people

whose voice said nothing about their stature. She was almost as tall as me, with broad shoulders, and she instilled respect in others. A person would have no problem clapping her on the shoulder while telling a joke in a friendly chat, without cringing or thinking that it would cause her pain – no. She would return in kind, and her blow would even make you strike her even more forcefully the next time. It had never occurred to me to invite her to the House of Leisure; she would turn me down most likely. It had never crossed my mind to have any kind of sexual relationship with her and that is why I respected her like no one else on the ship. If it ever happened that we ended up in some coitus partnership, she would be the last female that I ever touched, because Susan Penn was the jackpot.

She settled down on the bench, rustling her lab coat, and leaned her head back, sighing deeply. I couldn't see her jugular pulsing; she knew how to slow down her body and rest.

"What are you doing here so early?" I asked with a sleepy yawn.

"My shift just ended. I was going out and I saw you, so I just stopped by to say hello to you, Lieutenant Brenna. You know, Cal, fewer people tease me or ask me for anything when they see me with you. That works for me."

She smiled slightly, showing her starry-white teeth. I knew that she was telling the truth. She was brutally honest.

"I didn't know you worked nights."

"Oh, yes, for the past few weeks. The cryo-chamber for plants is finished. Testing has to be carried out at night because we use more energy, so the systems suffer. This way no one feels the reduction."

"Cryo-chamber? I thought that the project was *put on ice*."

She laughed. She got my sense of humor.

"It was, Cal, but I was stubborn. If this works with plants, in five-six years we will be able to put even people in cryostasis. We will increase life expectancy by 500 years."

"Increase life expectancy?" I laughed. "People will sleep most of their lives, for Star's sake – what kind of damn life is that?"

"You know what I mean. Wouldn't *you* like to be part of settling the Planet?"

I smiled sourly because she had no idea that we were approaching a Category G. Something made my stomach cringe; that feeling when you have to do something unpleasant, or a job that you have been putting off for centuries is finally due. Something was damn fishy about this alarm and I couldn't wait for the next briefing to learn what was actually going on. I could just imagine the pale freak, with his smartass eyes and gray hands hovering over the keyboard of the holo-computer, selling his knowledge to the captain. The captain would be burning up inside, because a sense of duty was the most sacred thing on the *Zed* – the duty to listen to the highest clearance level.

"Of course I'd like to. What kind of question is that? But…"

"It will be possible, Cal, believe me."

And I believed her.

"How will you solve the problem of the deterioration of brain cells in cryostasis?" I asked her even though I wasn't interested in this type of research. Still, we were talking about people. It wouldn't be good if I were to wake up in 500 years as a complete moron who couldn't tell a gun from a flute. Maybe (I say only *maybe*) if the captain or those gray shits were to or-

der me to jump into a cryogenic chamber, then I would do so, but certainly not of my own free will.

"That was the biggest problem. The brain can survive in cryostasis for about seven minutes without any stimuli. After that the probability of complete retardation increases exponentially. I mean, it isn't a hundred percent, but most likely when you woke you would ask for a banana, or hump someone's leg. I solved this by studying plants…"

"But plants are plants, Susan. As far as I remember, the brain is a bit more complex."

That made her laugh, but she gave me her you-don't-say look. No one liked when I started digging around my memory. In any case, I used it very rarely in conversation.

"So, Cal, every six or so minutes we send a second of information to the living organism. It can be a sound, an image, an electric impulse, anything. The brain registers it and resets in a way – it isn't inactive. After the same period we repeat the information, but this time two seconds of information. The brain remembers the time interval and after two years it actually unconsciously expects information that we can send it after six or so minutes - every time different. The brain doesn't die off, and the chance of retardation is drastically reduced."

"It makes sense, I must admit. But does the brain still age if it reacts to every stimulus?"

"Yes, Cal, but it ages 45 seconds every hour. And then it starts from the beginning. A person ages 18 minutes per day, which is progress – you must admit."

And I admitted it.

I got up from the bench because just a few minutes were left until the new briefing. I said goodbye to Susan and wished her

luck with the cryogenic chamber, excused myself politely so that no one would notice me, and headed towards the Bridge.

***

The briefing room fell silent the moment the captain and the pale creature entered. I moved aside a bit in order to make room for Nosri, because the E-minus suit really did make a person twice as wide and twice as strong. We somehow squeezed in, looked at each other and fell silent.

The captain looked tormented and somehow perplexed, as though he was refusing to believe something. He sat with his hands on his knees, like a retarded monkey after a dose of white crap. I had once pushed a bottle of it in the monkey cage and almost pissed myself laughing. Those little bastards really love alcohol. Well, that's what the captain looked like, only his eyes were clearer and he was somehow composed. And of course, he didn't have didactic toys with hilarious colors in front of him.

The pale gray creature raised himself slightly from the chair, poked the captain and whispered something in his ear. Captain Wilson jolted as thought from a deep slumber and nodded. He straightened up and again had that sharp gaze of the killer captain and the title of having the biggest balls on the *Zed*.

"What I'm about to tell the Order is not easy. I'm still in shock from talking with the bioinformaticist, even though it is difficult for me to perceive everything that he said. The North Wing has been monitoring a Category G planet since the beginning of the voyage, which is the reason why they boarded the *Zed*. The secrecy that has surrounded them is now somewhat clear to me, it was necessary for the implementation of the

plan. The G-planet that we are approaching is *not* inhabitable."

I was having an episode of acid reflux, but I kept my mouth shut. Nosri elbowed me imperceptibly, but enough so that I almost fell off my chair. I pushed him back and growled quietly, warning him not to do something that foolish again. My knee started jumping up and down on its own and my eyelid twitched, so I followed the rest of the captain's exposé as though through a stroboscope.

"… I repeat: it is not inhabitable. The environment that this G-planet is in, with all its resources, suits us, but it is not chronologically suitable. The entire flora and fauna on the planet, which are quite diverse, have an evolutionary prefix that is three to five million years prior to our species. By settling there we would completely destroy the ecosystem and set development standards that would destroy the natural evolution processes of the G-planet."

Chatter spread through the hall. It wasn't a murmur of disappointment, because you have to understand that the *Zed* is our home, our hearth, our state - our only world. We all liked the comfort of our quarters and the renewable resources on the ship could still last for centuries. The murmur was along the lines of what's-with-all-the-damn-secrecy, and no one, not a single Member of the Order liked the fact that the pale skinny bastard was pulling the strings.

"Our primary mission was never to reach this star, nor was it to inhabit the planets around it. The original measurements show that our destination is at least 400 years away, so the pilot sounded the alarm. At this moment, however, our mission is more important than inhabiting G-planets. You have to believe me."

I believed him. The captain's word weighed as much as the entire *Zed* and no one ever dared contest it. The mumbling faded and the captain stuck his hawk nose into the D-tablet.

"We have almost five years to prepare. All the senior officers (he meant the nineteen of us) will attend regular briefings by the bioinformaticists for the next two months. During those two months of preparations each of you will select nine young people from the *Zed* and train them, so that they become soldiers and loyal allies of the Order in the coming years. The mission itself is exploratory, scientific and far-fetching. We will have to be cautious, invisible, deadly stealth warriors, and that is why I am counting on the highest performance of everyone present."

That is where he finished and we got up silently, each going their own way, after signing the confidentiality statement concerning everything that we had just heard. Just as I was leaving the room, the captain stepped in front of me and put his hand on my shoulder. Standing behind him was the bioinformaticist, all pale and unhealthy. The captain motioned toward me with his hand, as though introducing me to an old friend.

"Lieutenant Callan Brenna?" spoke the bio-freak with a velvety voice.

I nodded and sulked, giving the captain the evil eye that I had learned from the prostitutes in the Correctional Sector.

"Captain?" I said almost fawningly, burping acid and holding back my breath.

"Lieutenant Brenna, come to my cabin for a word."

Nosri shrugged as he passed by. I didn't respond. I was overcome by anxiety mixed with rage. The feeling was one-of-a-kind, unpleasant and rather messed up. I walked in silence

toward the Bridge, following the captain and paleface, pondering what this might be about.

The Bridge opened up before me and it was exactly as I had imagined it. I had never felt the need to peek inside, because I had simply never been curious – there were so many things already on my mind. A long corridor led to the open cockpit where the captain's chair was visible. The first officer was pacing behind the pilot and monitoring the image on the large display that covered the entire opposite wall. I saw only a few hands, as though severed from their human bodies, individually entering numbers and coordinates, but only for a split second. Left of me a white hand with four rings – one of which was an obvious copy of white gold with the inscribed initials *M. L.*, – was writing "12-009 XV", while on my right dark-skinned hands without any jewelry, but with a considerable scab on the left forefinger, were writing "12-012 XV". After that split second I entered the cabin.

"Lieutenant Brenna!" said the captain as he laid the D-tablet on the desk.

I stood at attention and listened. The pale ghoul tilted its head as though looking at a newborn cyborg. It was looking at me.

"Captain?" I said in a military tone.

"In consultation with Mr. Radol," for Star's sake, that was apparently the name of the bio-creature, "I have decided that your unparalleled ability will be used to an extent that you can hardly imagine."

I stood completely still, looking the captain in the eye (one does not do this to a superior office under any circumstances).

"What do you mean, Captain?"

Mr. Radol joined the conversation, choosing words with great difficulty, leaving the impression that he did not know exactly how to arrange them in a sentence.

"In essence, Lieutenant, we need a complete record of everything that happens, in essence. You see, in essence, the entire operation will be run on several layers, i.e. levels, in essence, and we cannot ultimately arrange that into one totality. We cannot record the entire time, in essence, but if you have access to all the information and take part in the mission, as the captain said, in essence, according to my information, you are the only one capable of memorizing everything and ultimately entering it into the ship's log, in essence."

In essence, I wanted to say "*Téigh trasna ort féin*", perfectly in my mother tongue, but I remained silent because of the captain.

"Actually, Brenna," the captain continued, "you would be keeping a log that would become part of the history of mankind. The mission is a historic one and by tomorrow everyone will know of its magnitude. It is important that you accept it."

Somehow I knew that if I didn't accept, he would have to order me to. I didn't feel like keeping a log about everything that happened over the next five years. I didn't give a rat's ass for them or the *historic mission*, which I knew even less about. My curse – I called it my disease, everyone else on the *Zed* called it a gift – had finally emerged in the worst case scenario. Record keeper?! A fucking record keeper?

I had been tested in kindergarten. The new *Wunderkind, future leader of the scientific community, pilot among pilots, future captain, member of the North Wing (according to all indicators they were the smartest on the ship) – this is what they called me.*

Until I took an IQ test one day and had an average score. Everyone fell on their asses, and then my mother screamed at everyone to leave me alone, because they had accused her of teaching me nonsense just so I could show off in front of the teachers and her superiors. I had no idea what was happening, but day after day I received more and more information and puzzled everyone around me by applying it. They finally discovered that I had a photographic memory. They said that memory is an organism's ability to store information that it recognizes as such, and recall it again from this storage. We need to study how this child memorizes, what he memorizes and under what circumstances, what he can remember and why he forgets certain pieces of information.

I don't forget. Anything, ever, under any circumstances.

All it takes is a glance at something, for a moment, for me to remember it for the rest of my life. I would read the average book from a D-tablet in the time it took to flip through it. Combinations, conversations, protocols, inscriptions on cabins, on bathroom walls, the names of all devices, industrial schematics, mathematical equations (even though I couldn't explain them), everything that passed before my eyes, I remembered and never forgot. The ship's psychiatrist even told me once that there is a name for my condition; he literally said "photophobe and something".

Even though the Brennas were predetermined to become Members of the Order, as an adolescent I was reassigned to the scientific unit on the second deck. I cannot say that I wasn't of any help; I served as a portable manual for any type of problem. In my spare time I flipped through everything they gave me, and later I went for walks with the scientists and answered their ques-

tions. I memorized calculations for the Lorentz force, thousands of numbers, installed betatron particle accelerators, corrected incorrect detector schematics, calibrated probes to the specified and measured values, thousands of things. In any case, I was busy and thought that work on the Science Deck was the best thing to ever happen to me.

Little by little my mean streak surfaced. After slapping the scientists lightly several times – for being smartasses or purely for the tone and way that they said something – I earned reprimands and was degraded to the auxiliary scientific unit. I was useful there too, and did the same job, just more of it.

It's amazing how many things the lower ranks of the scientific community have to prepare so that those insolent shits can carry out experiments and measurements unimpeded. I read all kinds of things, everything that I could get my hands on. I enjoyed the work that I was assigned, perhaps more than anyone else on the Zed.

I couldn't describe it, and I can't describe it now either; I simply have to cram information into my head otherwise I will go insane. On the other hand, I would like to forget some of the things that I've seen, but I can't do that either. I think of this as a type of cursed paradox of the "photophobe and something".

Then in my third month of serving in the auxiliary unit, I knocked the teeth out of a pretentious guy who screwed up the schematics that I had spent hours drawing. It was an accident, but he'd placed the D-tablet with the drawings near the antimatter disk, just against the tank, and fried it, of course. He was on the floor in an instant, and the singed parts of the D-tablet blended in nicely with the black gaps between his teeth. He spat out several mouthfuls of blood and ran out. In that rage I kicked the

antimatter storage, which took the entire system offline. Something had overloaded and they couldn't figure out what. Two fucking grams of antimatter remained trapped in the tank (and are still there), and that meant that I was going back to the familiar embrace of the Order. Finally, my short temper had become both my weapon and my job. I had been one of the calmer ones at the beginning of my service – I enjoyed it. As the years pass people get older, more experienced and calmer, but with me I got more anxious and this increased exponentially over the years.

The captain knew this, but for some reason he didn't tell this pale freak from the North Wing. A thousand volcanoes stirred within me, just like on the footage from the old planet. But I stood calmly and stared at the captain. I swallowed. I clenched my fists and my chin twitched.

"Alright, Captain, I accept!" I said in a manly and resolute tone.

After a few explanations from the bio-freak, some advice from the captain, and the official handover of the phonolog for keeping the log, I officially became the record keeper for the *historic mission*, which I still didn't know a damn thing about.

III

I entered the packed A.D. and took my seat next to Nosri. It was always crowded in there, but this time it didn't bother me. The pleasant noise, good alcohol, and the thought that we had stepped away from all the preparations felt better than ever before. This was the first time in a month that the captain had permitted us to have a normal daily routine. I ordered a dose of white crap and one might say that I was sipping it and sighing deeply even before it came, so I ordered another one to make a toast with Nosri.

Exactly 26 days ago we received data from the photo-probes on the G-planet. They weren't at all pleasing, but they were sharp, precise and slightly tedious to analyze. The planet was uninhabitable! That was a fact you could not avoid regardless of how much you thought about it. The civilians did not know anything about the entire situation. The story had been spun that we were approaching the first star in 2,500 years, and that the *Zed* would make a brief stop to study one of the planets orbiting around it. For Star's sake, that didn't sound so bad considering that for thousands of years we had been staring at the empty vacuum of space, filled only with boredom.

I began to understand why we couldn't tell anyone about what was going on. A few people from the Civilian Deck were unusually disappointed by this information. I mean, they would never set foot on a G-planet, but still, they thought that

they would inhabit some cursed place in their lifetime. They kept their children together and talked among themselves; genuine sorrow was visible in their eyes, and one father's gaze at his child as he explained that his great-great-grandchildren might see an inhabitable planet haunted me for two nights, and I spent a good portion of the night in the garden, trying to find peace.

As I said, the data was presented brutally with only one goal – to kill the little hope that remained regarding settlement of the planet.

The planet was truly in a type of evolutionary past. The era could not be precisely defined because the conditions were not the same as they had been on our Home Planet, but the best approximation (and this was from the mouth of the bioinformaticist), was that the G-planet was some three to five million years behind our Home Planet. Evolution, development, the struggle for domination were yet to come.

The photo-probes came back with exabytes of data, but the only thing they could not bring back were images of the beings that were literally teeming on the planet. As Susan explained to me, a photo-probe was actually *smart light*. Even though I never fully understood the principle of how it worked, it proved to be the most useful device on the *Zed*. Actually, there are always unlimited quantities of photons – I know the scientists would not agree with me, but I'm allowed to say what I want and how I want in the log, so I say that there are a damn lot of them. The probe uses a ray that is programmed with EM impulses and travels at the speed of light, of course. It is programmed with the trajectory, orbit, distance, influence of gravitons on the trajectory, really with everything. I mean, someone could – I can-

not – imagine how a photon is programmed and commands are entered into it. They even drew it for me, conveyed through simulations, did the calculations in front of me, but after all the explanations, I caught myself starting to think about the House of Leisure, C-pills and white crap, so they lost interest in my scientific advancement. The first probes were used (and are still being used) to explore space along *Zed*'s trajectory. They send information about all the bodies, asteroids, meteoroid clouds, dust, etc. The ship's computer receives the data and defines the trajectory according to this data. We never deployed them very far, only a few light hours in front of us, but this time they were altered and the photons were deployed much more densely, and were therefore more stable, carrying more information.

The planet had an atmosphere abundant in nitrogen and oxygen, and was breathable. The probe also recorded several powerful storms, with winds of up to 300 km/h, which indicated that it could sometimes be quite dangerous down there, at least judging by the Order's criteria.

Perhaps the most striking part of the entire absurd situation came on the twenty-fourth day of the regular briefing. The presentations lasted several hours each, with short breaks. You couldn't bat an eye, couldn't go to A.D., sometimes not even to the toilet – there was only the cursed jabbering about the G-planet, which we would not settle. Don't think that they told us what we were going to do when we got there. Nevertheless, as the presentation proceeded that day, one could gather that preparations were under way for the first interplanetary war, finally caused by human greed. Even though only hinted, secretive and mysterious, there was tension in the air – silent, bleak, unpredictable, strange – similar to the one that is

felt only among warriors. It doesn't take spoken words to feel something like that. It didn't take bloody anything to notice nineteen burning bodies in front of a gun barrel, longing to be shot out like a projectile. The mere thought of war gave me the best feeling of my life.

The captain gave the keynote speech and broke down every segment into details, as he did every time. He later gave the floor to the bioinformaticists, who rotated on a daily basis and passed on to us all the details of what we would be doing once we reached the planet, and how to do it. The plan was for daily presentations to last 60 days, after which they would not be as often, and we would report on the progress of the recruits, whom we still had not selected, by the way.

That day I expected something different to happen compared to the previous days with their empty stories about the effect that the atmosphere would have on the landing crew, how to breathe, how to calibrate the suits, how to move around in the slightly lower G-force than we were used to. The G-planet orbited about 150 million kilometers from the third star in the system. I mean, I could list all the damn parameters and variables endlessly, but I didn't understand them, so I tried not to think about them and focused on the mission. The mission? I didn't have a clue about it until that day.

"We can expect a hostile environment when we land," the bioinformaticist began. "There is an increasing amount of information in the database, and it doesn't support the notion that the G-planet is a hospitable place where everyone awaits us with open arms. The fact that we can say with certainty that we have distinguished several thousand different species on the surface itself goes to show how much progress we have made in

our research. They range from creatures with a large mass that are rather sluggish, to smaller, fast and unpredictable ones. The photo-probes have picked up something and we have determined that we were right. There is a primate species, actually several of them. It is up to us to determine, in the years ahead, which species is best suited for our research. I know that you are on edge and that you are a bit bored with listening to different stories about the planet and its composition, but I ask that you be patient. In conversation with older colleagues from the North Wing we have decided to present the scope of our mission much earlier than prescribed by protocol, with the aim of achieving the greatest possible collaboration between the Order and the North Wing."

That was it. We kept our mouths shut while the bio-freak spoke.

It was the captain's order.

After a while the discussion became watered down and he started talking once again about the state of the young atmosphere, the weather conditions, the tides, the surface of the planet. Almost the entire G-planet had been mapped using data from the photo-probes. It was apparent where the mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, lakes and great seas were located. Just as we had heard the first day: more than seventy percent of the plant was covered by water, which sounded familiar to us and somehow distant, melancholic – even though we had never seen or felt our Home Planet. I couldn't stop thinking about what he had said before this damn babbling.

"We can expect a hostile environment when we land." It echoed in my head like an ancient large bronze church bell from the mid-eighteenth century. All the members of the Or-

der in the briefing room seemed to be better focused after this presentation, and even if the bio-freak had been talking about the philosophic direction of early Art Nouveau, we would have listened to him and hung onto his every word with great interest. After the presentation they sent us to our quarters, but it was almost like I knew – I hung back slightly before leaving the room. All the Members of the Order had left and were headed for their regular daily chores. Nosri waved to me, gesturing that we'd see each other later at the gym. The captain had already turned his back on his way out of the room, so I sneaked a look at the D-tablet belonging to today's bioinformaticist, which read "Preparations for State of War".

From that moment on I was the first to arrive for the briefings and memorized every bloody breath of the creatures from the North Wing.

Another round of drinks slid past my elbow and the laxative-like politeness could not be wiped off android Bob's face.

"Here you are, Mr. Cal," said Bob and disappeared to the other end of the bar.

I raised the glass, just enough to lift it, without my elbow leaving the polished silver bar, and lazily clinked Nosri's.

"So, Cal, what do you think is going to happen?" said Nosri, interrupting his uninhibited drinking.

"It's difficult to say, my friend. Anything is possible."

"That's what's worrying me," answered Nosri, staring blankly ahead, causing his eyes to water. Of course he wasn't crying, he just didn't blink for a long time. That's probably a normal reaction. I wouldn't know – my eyes never water.

"What are you worried about? The possibility of a conflict?"

I could almost hear my voice change in surprise.

"No, not a conflict, Cal, but the purpose… Look…" he propped himself on his left elbow and leaned toward me. "We've been travelling through this cursed universe the whole time hoping that we would be the generation that settled some distant planet. But Cal, *I* don't want to settle on a planet and pretend to be old nomads on the old planet, if you get my drift. And now that we are so close to a G-planet, after thousands of years, we're talking about conflicts and rehearsing attacks. At least I think that we're talking about an attack. Something stinks and I don't like it. There's too little information. Too few facts. Cal?" he leaned over, bringing his lips to my left ear, and said softly – "Do you think that perhaps they want to get rid of us?"

He caught me just as I was taking a sip and I choked and spilled liquid on the bar. Bob quickly appeared and deftly wiped up the spilled white crap and polished the bar, the expression on his face that of a small child who has just been offered chocolate.

"Get rid of us, Nosri? What do you mean *get rid*, for Star's sake?"

"Listen, the Order hasn't been in good shape for some time. We don't have any work. Since they opened the Correctional Sector, it's like we don't exist. Cal, people are going to the CS by themselves, we don't even apprehend them anymore. You have to admit that we're out of a job. But it's in our blood to be prepared, to be fast, strong and sharp. Riots and chaos are in our blood, but… the circumstances have changed, Cal. Now we are the ones who need to be gotten rid of, because we cause chaos. Get it?"

Coming from Nosri this sounded very logical. Truly, if anyone was getting into trouble it was the Members of the Order. But it didn't seem likely to me that the captain would betray us just because the bioinformaticists ordered him to. However, I had been chosen to keep the logs and I tried to summarize everything in the phonolog. Nosri's paranoia started to amplify my own. You try working on a problem, assignment or anything, while not knowing anything about the subject that you are processing. The human mind is a curious playground, sometimes very evil and treacherous, because the synapses don't choose our imagination, rather they create it, much as electric impulses, and churn it out even faster than the speed of light, creating problems for us. The brain moves at a Pollard per second when it is engulfed in mystery. For Star's sake – that's how conspiracies are born!

I used to spend time studying in the archive from the Home Planet and would stay there for hours, reading the newspapers, watching the news, going through the primitive documentary programs about the diversity and protection of life on the planet (which, I should note – we destroyed). I remember every word spoken or read in the archive. There is a disorder called *synesthesia* that was suffered by a Brit long before the countries united. He spoke nine languages, one of which he had invented; he saw the shapes and textures of numbers; he could make calculations with very large numbers quickly and easily, and he knew the names and particularities of all the numbers from zero to 10,000. Even though it was never clear to me how numbers could have particularities – this ancient little man had figured it out. I mean, what am I trying to say?

Seeing the color of a number or the taste of a word does not

seem at all unlikely when talking about the human brain. Perhaps some people think it is a gift, but I know that it is a curse, because a similar feeling has haunted me my entire life. Let it also be included in this record that Nosri's paranoia was supported by logic, and then again, some people have the ability to smell colors – Nosri has the ability of paranoia. And that is what I appreciate about him.

"Listen, Mihael…" I said as seriously as I could, without revealing that his theory actually carried weight and had that little bit of wisdom that we needed so badly. "Whatever the case, we will carry out the orders. It is our duty. The Order was not created to run into a mouse hole at every suspicious step or for us to review commands as we see fit. This is not about our opinions. If you ask me, I would say that you're talking nonsense, but then again, you have the right to be suspicious. Let me repeat that I don't believe you, I simply don't want to believe that the captain would betray us. The truth is that we carry something in our blood that is extinct, but – for Star's sake – the goal *was* to eradicate violence and bigotry. If you look at it that way, we are the only ones who have completed our mission entirely and now we are being left to enjoy the benefits. I think it's about something much bigger than our lives, Nos. Get it?"

"Alright, Cal. What you say makes sense, just… Be careful, that's all I'm saying."

"You should worry less, Nos. Focus, you're supposed to choose recruits in three hours. Immerse yourself in the list and be ruthless. You know what they taught us. I'm going to see Anna. I told her I'd stop by today."

I downed the last shot, slammed it on the bar, ordered another round for Nosri, turned on my heel and left.

I had to visit Anna. I'd been promising I'd see her every day for a month already. After I got off duty, the *com* would notify me every time that it was full of messages. All of them were from Anna. Actually, one had been from Carmen, in which she spoke *about clusters of undifferentiated cells or the callus tissues from which she had succeeded in extracting and then developing the new bud of a kale-like plant, using the new bioelectrical nutrient medium, and which she still hadn't named*. Carmen never rested when it came to science and was as dedicated to it as a pig when it finds an acorn in the forest. She never deviated even a millimeter, and she talked about only one topic. That was her sole virtue.

After leaving A.D., I could barely make my way through the crowded corridors. I love the smell of the Civilian Deck. I think this is the smell that spread throughout our planet at a time when smells had some importance, before the collective crap and the antimatter war towards the end of known time. There is something intriguing in the sundry civilian colors and the Brownian movement that these people followed every moment of every day, with every twitch, all day long. I used to stand at the end of a connecting corridor for hours, looking toward the curved section. I could almost never predict what someone would do and who would turn where. You would think that a million tasks were being performed on the Civilian Deck, but you would be very surprised to learn that the citizens simply lived out their lifetime, some subsisting, some carrying out small chores around the *Zed*, and some ending up in the Correctional Sector after they grew sick of the their fellow citizens. Incidentally, as stated briefly, but precisely in the first and only rulebook created before we embarked on our voyage, the citi-

zenry served one purpose only – propagation.

And that was it.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Nevertheless, it had been impossible to hold the citizens in check during all these years of communion in the cramped space of the interstellar sailing ship, and from time to time a civic soul would shine, distinguishing itself in the brief history of the new era. Once the second sail became entangled, because the correction system had malfunctioned unexpectedly, and the *Zed* drifted by inertia without a recorded trajectory for an entire month, and of course – going in who knows what direction. Incidentally, it had incorrect coordinates for 12-00-56X, but that meant nothing to me, so I had no intention of divulging this fact. A civilian named Pavao Hodak performed a miracle by finding a solution to quickly repair the sails. He was a Pole, of pure Polish ancestry, and from a not too prominent family that had made it on to the *Zed* thanks to the hard and dedicated effort of the Hodak Bodyworks Co. during the construction of the first Space Station. Hodak proposed that the magnetic shield be switched off for slightly more than five seconds (even though that could have been fatal to the *Zed*, but Captain Pollard took a chance and did as he said), and then to quickly electrify the sail foils. The electrical effects within the magnetic field were unknown to Hodak, but he somehow intuitively knew that switching off the magnetic field and releasing a certain amount of charge through the foil would create a critical voltage that might frizzle all the electronics for transferring data from the sail to the computer and completely destroy the adjustment system. But switching the charge of the clinging skins and electrifying them by force, using the same voltage,

would lead to them naturally separating. At that moment the magnetic field would be switched on, producing Ampère's force on the foil, through which the current would still be flowing, and using simple physics, the sails would right themselves. The magnetic field would then be turned up and would continue protecting the *Zed* from the harmful elements in space. Hodak was killed while installing the charge plate on the sail, but the *Zed's* problems were solved. We call the sail the Hodak Sail, in memory of the family whose last member passed away more than seven hundred years ago.

Hodak was a *civilian*, and that still counts today.

Anna's office was in the center of the Civilian Deck. I had to pass along the entire semicircular system of cabins and the small improvised plastic park at the end of the corridor, and then, if I was anyone else - follow the signs to the center. A person can easily get lost in the maze of the deck that contains several retail shops, antique shops, movie theatres, disco-clubs, pharmacies, about twenty canteens, and so on. I was lucky that I never forgot anything, so I didn't forget the route to Anna.

I greeted several antique dealers who dotted the edges of the corridor. Here and there I noticed a few of my things that I had either sold or they had mysteriously disappeared without a trace from my cabin years ago. Things were sold in these improvised markets, but the currency was not money, as it once had been. I could pay for anything I wanted by giving up my place in the line for vitamins, vegetables, candy, watching films, reading books, and the most valued were my rights to the House of Leisure. Bachelors, bachelorettes – men and women – had the right to visit this place once a week, while married people were only allowed to use its services once a month. This

was a protocol I actually understood, but there were others that I did not. It was logical to me that a man used for propagating his family should not throw his seed about so easily, while the ban for women, especially those who had given birth to five children and were spared from further reproduction – didn't make any sense.

The procedure of exchanging goods was actually very simple: if you saw something you liked, you offered credits that you had earned as a protocol gift, and you made the swap. Of course, it was all legal. You just needed to enter your code into the ship's computer and the code of the person who you were transferring the service to. On several occasions I traded a movie screening, a gala dinner with the captain, and the right to a new uniform – for a handful of pills that I was short of at the moment. Somehow it always turned out that I traded everything I earned for C-pills, but it is what it is – when you are a Member of the Order you have at least twice as many benefits as anyone else on the *Zed*, and therefore – a better bargaining position.

It was already impossible to walk leisurely. The number of people increased exponentially with every meter. If blood ever rushed to my head and prevented me from thinking straight – then it would be here, on the Civilian Deck, just before the junction that led to the Temple and the House of Leisure. I must say that people tried their best not to breathe in my face or down my neck, they moved out of my way because the maroon uniform of the Order was valued and respected here – if anything is valued anywhere.

This entire hubbub carried a dose of some damn order that I never quite understood. Even after so many years, the corri-

dors and everything in them was absolutely clean, even in all that chaos the worker androids performed their jobs – disinfection and cleaning – as long as the lights were on. During the night – the simulated night of course – an assemblage of giant pipes and drains roamed the corridors and expelled the dirt into outer space, and then polished the corridor for the following day. Just before morning - simulated, of course – they would retract their tentacles into the walls and cede the entire space to the civilians and androids. In my lifetime they had never once broken down, never failed and were never ineffective. The ship was bacteria-free, or at least it strived to be.

Civilians would greet me cordially when they happened to graze my shoulder and then would go back to minding their own business, continuing on their way – pretending that nothing had happened. Everyone, absolutely everyone – was always clean; immaculately clean and neat in their colorful civilian attire. Almost unnatural, when I compared it to our world on the Home Planet, so many years ago. They looked like the hordes of people that we always tried to be like – calm, refined, prepared to be tolerant and levelheaded. I have no idea how they managed it. Perhaps that was the reason why I felt so damn unnatural as I wandered through the crowded corridors searching for the way to the Temple.

The square on the Civilian Deck was behind me. In the very center of the moderately lit semicircular hall was a photo-fountain with the sound of falling water, shining light on Proxi, which was 2,500 years old. Walking more sideways than straight, staying close to the silver wall, I quickly slipped through the open door and finally found myself in the Temple. It was a deserted place with a large circular corridor and sever-

al cabins where pilgrims lived. It was as though I had entered a different world, isolated both acoustically and culturally from the one that I had just left. Something was always different here, peaceful and enchanting, so much so that almost every time I slowed down my breathing and stopped for a moment to gather my thoughts. Perhaps this was a form of that meditation and slowing down of the heart that they kept telling us about, but I never admitted to anyone that this was how I actually felt when I stepped into this serene place.

Anna's cabin was the second one from the end, on the left-hand side. Each door was marked with a symbol of the religion, denomination, and method of preaching: from the Star of David, the Islamic open doors without any iconography, nondenominational, Protestant, druid, to the large red door with a cross, which concealed the Christian priestess Anna.

I entered, passing my hand lightly over the sensor, just enough to announce my presence. I didn't want to prepare myself, as I did every time when I went to see her. Anna was depressive, one might say a chronic manic depressive. She had the most beautifully sculptured body on the ship, a beautiful face, slender feminine hands and fittingly rough skin that revealed her maturity. She had just turned forty. She had never been with child, so even her God had preserved absolutely every part of her body from the difficult strains of childbirth. The last time I'd been there was several months before. I took a deep breath in front of the red door in order to more easily endure the intense depression that she rained down on me. Come to think of it, I had never seen her smile, even though she had crystal white teeth and a very pleasant breath.

She was kneeling, with her back turned to me, in her

close-fitting black vestment with a white ribbon drawn across her chest. She was quietly whispering the last lines of a prayer.

The room had the scent of a woman. The intimate, dimmed lights around the crucifix completed the experience, which was serene, even though it was foreign to me. I stopped at the door, not wanting to interrupt her prayer, but just as I was about to listen to her words, she spoke without turning, and broke the silence.

"Peace be with you, Lieutenant Brenna."

"Peace be with you, Anna." It seemed unnatural to speak in this silent space.

"It's finally my turn? Is it, Cal?"

"Ha, look, Anna, you know the situation is serious. People are complaining, grieving, they're frustrated… Members of the Order have never been so busy."

Of course, I couldn't tell Anna anything about our *most important* mission in the history of mankind.

"So I've heard, Cal. So I've heard."

She got up with a gracious move and blew out the photon simulation of a candle. I don't know why she always did that, because the device was switched off by pressing a button, but she always pressed the button and blew air in that direction at the same time. She turned toward me, brought her hands together beneath her bosom, kissed the tips of her fingers, and only then came out of the trance. She looked at me with her weary eyes that flashed from her pale face like two green photons.

"When was the last time you went for some UV, Anna? You have to go from time to time, you know that," I said to her as gently as possible. That was the problem, because I was still un-

der the influence of white crap and quite unsteady on my feet. Anna came up to me and kissed me on the cheek. Her warm lips were a surprise on her deathly pale face. Her nose was cold.

"Drink, Cal?" she whispered.

I had had enough to drink. After the C-pill and several shots of white crap at the A.D., the ground beneath my feet started shaking. If I were to have a few more, I would cross the limit of my self-control, and that was something I definitely did not want. I hated being out of control more than anything. To be honest – it terrified me. In such a state I was capable of challenging one and all, and would learn only in the morning what I had done, who I had hurt, what I had destroyed. The captain tolerated it. I don't know why.

I thought about it. Warm lips. Cold nose. Close-fitting vestment.

"Always, Anna. Always," I said.

A good 45 minutes passed. I lost my memory, now and again, downing more and more white crap, until I was completely hard. That's where we ended things. Thank the Stars, I didn't disappoint, but I quickly fell asleep.

I first heard the familiar sound of the injection, and only then, with a slight delay, did my brain register the pain. I instinctively grabbed my right biceps. The blur before my eyes was clearing up. Anna was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding a sobering injection, a cocktail of preparations that annihilates the alcohol in the body. Ten minutes later I was like new.

"We have to talk," she said and disappeared behind the sliding doors of the sleeping quarters.

I got up quickly and jumped into the ultrasound shower.

The UV ray option hadn't been used in months; for some reason UV radiation increased Anna's depression – but it felt good to increase my vitamin D level.

My pressed uniform was hanging next to the stall. I'd been so absorbed and relaxed under the shower that I hadn't heard her come in and leave it there. The steam-processed material was still smoking – it smelled like rebirth.

I entered the living area. Anna was kneeling in front of the altar and whispering a prayer. I didn't want to interrupt her, so I sat in silence on the worn-out chair in front of the confessional. She didn't turn around, and I didn't notice that the mumbling had ended.

"The captain summoned me, Cal," she said in such a meaningful tone that she grabbed my complete attention. There was something in the sentence that made it sound like "it's no use playing soldier, you damn MotO."

"Why, Anna?" I played it cautiously, not wanting to reveal anything.

"I'm going with you… with the Order…"

She turned her head toward me and looked at me with half-dead eyes. I swear by the Stars, I felt as though her gaze had slashed my lungs and I started breathing faster.

"You mean, when we get there… *Ní thuigim*… What? I mean… *cén fáth*…?"

I sounded like the bloody bio-freak, not able to produce a damn sentence.

"To the planet, Cal. The cursed *uninhabitable* planet that is teeming with creatures. The bioinformaticists suspect that religion is developing down there. They're not sure that their calculations are correct. The creatures, primates, whatever you

want to call them, could be much more developed than we think."

"But… How… Today I… *Damnú air*!" Anna interupted my stuttered monologue.

"Yes, Cal. You are going to shoot, I assume, and I will preach. That is why I called you."

Perhaps it didn't bother me that Anna was going to the planet. It didn't even bother me that she knew there was highly evolved life on it. It didn't even bother me that she'd kept quiet about it until she'd gotten what she wanted.

But I could have spewed fire at the very thought that I was hiding information and playing the role of a soldier with a person who obviously knew more about the entire mission than I did.

IV

"Mr. Radol, I think that we cannot resolve the problem!"

"What do you mean *we cannot*, Igor? That's our fundamental task! That's why we are here!"

"… but, Sir, if we had just a bit more time… I mean… a few hundred years, then we would be on the brink of a solution. This was too fast. We have not succeeded. We simply cannot succeed."

"Listen, Igor," said Radol calmly, "There is surely something we can do to shed light on the situation …in essence… I'm not interested in the fact that you have encountered a problem, I'm interested in the solution to that problem… in essence, I don't have time for anything else. You know that these several years that we have left until we reach the G-planet are the best and only thing we're going to get. An opportunity will come around in 500, 1,000 years… who knows? Perhaps never again. Try to focus. Have Section Y stop freezing capsules and move into this sector. We have slightly more than four years. We've resolved everything so far and all the records have been entered. We simply have to do the best we can."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Radol. I understand. We'll start work immediately. But…"

"No *buts*, Igor! Focus and do the best you can. I want the first results in a week."

Radol turned around resolutely and left the laboratory. The

light from the adjacent room blinded Igor and he covered his eyes, waiting for the door to close automatically. The laboratory shimmered in a bluish light, interrupted sporadically by a white line that came from beyond the glass on the opposite wall, where the other engineers were freezing live ammunition. Igor walked over to the computer, leaned back in the chair, peered into the microscope, and started typing without looking at the keyboard.

The option *ready* turned green on the display and Igor pulled back from the microscope. He pressed a white button on the table and spoke in a drowsy voice "Senior Director Igor Janezs speaking! Attention Section Y! Attention Section Y! Staff meeting in one hour in the Conference Room. Cease capsule freezing and make your way to the Conference Room. Attendance mandatory."

He switched off the computer and breathed a sigh of relief. Raising his hands slowly, visibly tired, he started massaging the grayish skin above his temples. He thought about resting for a few minutes, but as soon as he closed his eyes the problems started piling up like a field of impure energy where he couldn't make out the particles, so he got up sluggishly and went to the cabinet at the end of the room. The sliding door of the cabinet opened and the light inside it softly illuminated Igor's face.

He took a pill from a box and swallowed it.

He was calm for several seconds, eyes closed and head raised.

The laboratory sounds slowly relaxed him while the contents of the pill flowed through his bloodstream and relieved the symptoms of fatigue. He opened his eyes. He needed a chamber! He needed a chamber! A chamber!

He just about ran across the entire laboratory, like a silhouette in a black and blue uniform moving through the darkness. He went outside and continued on straight toward the chambers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been there, but he knew that this was the last time he would refresh himself before the great mission. Which would last for days. Last for days. He would not sleep for days. For days. He was used to that.

He felt the full power of the pill doing away with his worries and making him serve. Only serve mankind. Mankind. The mankind that he loved. Man – whom he no longer resembled.

The room was becoming brighter, his thoughts fresher, his movements balanced. He didn't need to rest. He needed to work, because the G-planet was close. Too close. Very close. Close. Time-wise – unbearably close. He would focus all his knowledge on solving the problem. A problem that could destroy the entire two-thousand-year effort! He would in fact solve it! He would solve it! He had decided!

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The chamber had a great effect. In a way it regenerated the body as it took it away. Through his eyelids he could see small particles penetrating his very being. He placed his hands on the handles that inserted the microprobes under his nails, changing their opacity to the dark red color of blood. He felt relief after the initial three minutes, while the entropy increased at an accelerated pace… Finally. The anti-entropic regeneration effect relaxed his muscles, liberating his thoughts from the shackles of the problem, and he drifted into a state called *stasis*.

Igor was 67 years old, but he didn't look it. According to

bioinformatic standards he was in the prime years of his research career, at the halfway point of his lifetime. They lived longer than ordinary people, whose life expectancy had lengthened to 90 year on average; bioinformaticists lived to be 130.

No more – no less.

Stasis represented an artificially created bliss only for people who could feel it. Through his eyelids he watched swarms of particles and understood their effect. Initially it was very slow, so slow that he could actually make out each one individually – and even count them. Later the swarms sped up and merged, creating a stable cloud of indefinite color. The cloud enveloped his entire body, permeated it and consumed it, until the body was no longer visible.

He gazed at the occasional flare and became increasingly relaxed as his cells regenerated. The number of artificial protective cells, which were created to reduce the need for UV radiation, was increasing, and it looked like the muscles followed their change with their pulse. It was a soft pulse, like a massage, which was pleasant, restful, relaxing and guided the spirit and body to Tibetan ecstasies; so mild and serene that he started fervently thinking:

Genomic phylostratigraphy is a wonderful method. Initially there was the problem of a genome without origin, and then we determined it by force, attached the origin and made it our own. Genes are created constantly, throughout the entire history of evolution, but to create a reverse evolution is truly an achievement. Through the centuries our scientists have been shaping a story in order to leave enough knowledge and scientific power, technology and an abundance of information to take advantage of this moment… where I… made a mistake. Perhaps a fatal mis-

take that is engraved, recorded in places that I cannot reach, either mathematically or experimentally. With all my being I tried to eliminate the degeneration of the process by performing several thousand simulations – always with the same outcome. Always with the same outcome. Outcome. Failure!

Billions of traces left by the genomes have been diligently recorded, outlined into a wonderful theory that had, has, one single purpose – to prevent destruction. To prevent failure. The traces were rare, unclear, incomplete, diverse and obscured. The maps that we developed were increasingly complex, larger, numerically almost incomprehensible… until now. Until the moment before I began to serve mankind, and I was supposed to, I am supposed to, place the last brick in the enormous wall that is reverse evolution. Because we actually know what will happen. We know when it will start to happen. We know the opportunities that exist for us to direct all events precisely as we want them, as we believe. As we believe? We believe? In God.

While we have been taking the principles of autophagy for granted for centuries, my mistake was concealed deep in the existence of the gene. I didn't want to consider it in the beginning, when I first spotted it less than twenty years ago. It has been twenty long years, and they have left their mark on me, and filled my soul and body with a mosaic arranged by science. Was I lazy, postponing the resolution of the problem? A problem that loomed over the project like a dark shadow, and now with every passing second was eating away time, obliterating the possibility of it being solved? I still remember the first day of my recruitment into the bioinformaticists, and my first look at the preliminary results of previous studies. I was astonished, devastated in an instant, thinking that I would never reach such a level of creativity, con-

verted into mathematics. I transcended this in three years and became head of the laboratory. Even though he would never admit it, Dr. Radol stopped understanding me somewhere in the fourth year, and I was using formulas, coming up with new ones, and patching holes in existing theories. According to my calculations, during the time that I headed the laboratories, bioinformatics made three times as much progress as in previous generations. I rarely used the chamber. I didn't need it. When I realized the quantity of data that I had to process, and the time that I would spend processing it, I started to use regeneration more often; not in order to live longer, fearing for my life, but in order to live long enough to be around for what lay ahead, because I had already detected the solution back then. To live long enough, at least in cryogenic chambers. To live to see what happens in five years. It became my mission. My obsession. Obsession. My fundamental task.

The task before us is a responsible one, and perhaps even too complex to be solved in such a short period of time. Then perhaps… ? But what if we solve it? What will we do then? The mission of the bioinformaticists ends in success. Applause in Zed's *square, over by Proxi. We bow. And then what?*

I questioned the purpose of all this for days. There is a purpose and it is universal, irreplaceable, stable, constant. For five more years we will play the role of the most important humans since the beginning of time. On the old planet they would have called us heroes. Heroes who sacrificed themselves for the wellbeing of others, but there is a mistake. How do we save these Others if we know that there is a mistake?

The chamber increased its effect, leaving a sweet taste on the palate, which appeared after every session. Igor had com-

pletely forgotten about it, and it relaxed him even more, bringing an unconscious smile to his gray face. In an instant he came up with the flowchart and planned the work of Section Y down to the last detail. The quiet sound of the end of the radiation meant that he could open his eyes. The door beeped. It opened. The mist dispersed and the cloud of particles was sucked into a well-concealed opening at the bottom. Igor stood at the door with a smile on his face. Polished and gray, skin tightened. His red cheeks had only just started to hurt. The pain would last for hours, but it would eventually stop. He looked at his fingers. Standing naked, he took a clean white uniform from the opening in the metal wall. While putting it on he thought about the upcoming meeting with Section Y and the remaining time that he had to prepare his speech.

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They were already seated silently in the completely white Conference Room, arranged in two rows, with their backs to the door. They stared blankly ahead trying to grasp the importance of this summons, the tenacity of the laboratory leader, but most of all their minds were clouded by one question: What was more important than the work that they were doing at the moment?

Igor briskly entered the room, making them twitch in apprehension when he shattered the silence, returning them to reality and focusing all their attention on him. Eight bioinformaticists watched their leader slowly approach the podium, carrying a small D-tablet. Before he climbed the first step on his way to the stand, he stopped and looked at them amicably,

changing their expressions from concern to interest.

"Colleagues! Peace be with *you*."

"Peace be with *you*," the room resounded in a soft voice.

"I see that there are only eight of you. Where is the ninth member of Section Y?"

A young lady, whose age was indeterminable, rose in the second row, placed her hand on her chest, bowed and spoke politely. "Our oldest member was sent to the chamber, Sir. Dr. Radol ordered it personally."

"I hope that he will be joining us later," Igor answered, polite in return.

He bowed, holding his hand on his chest, and the lady with the gray face and blue eyes sat down silently and merged with the seven. Igor smiled and gracefully crossed the several meters to the podium. A curious silence came over the room.

"On your D-tablets you can see the course of the calibration process to date," Igor started out.

They looked down at their knees, where each of them had a D-tablet. Igor continued. "As you can see for yourselves, there is an error that we must eliminate before we approach the G-planet and the mission commences. We have slightly more than four years to try to find a solution. The simulators are available to us the entire time, and simulator No. 3 has been moved from the incubation facility to the laboratory. We now have three simulators." He paused for a moment, as he had been taught during his training on how to convey information; it was good to let the audience, as they say, chew the given information. "And we will work in groups. The groups will consist of…" He raised his head and scanned the different-colored uniforms that revealed who had which function in Section Y.

"… an engineer, a bio-technologist and a bio-programmer. That's how you'll be grouped, regardless of the affinities that you have for each other. From the dossier I see that you have been together for 56 years." He again slowed down the pace of his presentation, allowing them to ponder the importance of these 56 years for the entire story. Then he concluded for them, "…which makes you the section that has been together the longest, so it is logical to conclude that you are the most experienced and best section that we have on the *Zed* at the present time… and that is the essential reason why you've been assigned to me."

A tall bio-programmer raised his hand.

"Yes?" Igor asked.

"When do we start?" he asked.

"At once. The calibration of the time span has just finished, and the antimatter wake has been on stable propulsion for several hours. We will have no shortage of energy."

He frowned and looked at the clock, which had been installed for symbolic reasons when they left the home planet. The tall man nodded in approval and looked at his seated colleagues. His dark, sunken eyes saluted Igor and the entire process of eliminating the error.

"Very well, Sir. We will start the preparations immediately, if you have finished," said the woman.

"Study the D-tablet well. My research is a little more complex than what you are used to."

Their thoughtful gazes confirmed his words as they looked at the D-tablet displays and nodded. It was clear that there was something new in the entire work, in the entire purpose of this work. Igor waited for them to gather their first impressions, as

befit the laboratory's leader, expecting a barrage of questions. Not a single one was asked. Clarity was the expression on the faces of the eight. Igor calmed himself and breathed a sigh of relief. He opened his mouth to say…

"Please forgive me for interrupting the meeting, Leader."

The face of a pale clerk appeared on the display of the D-tablet in Igor's hand. "You have an urgent call on a private secure line. The authenticity of the code confirms orders from Dr. Radol."

Igor looked at the tablet in surprise, then at the eight associates.

"Very well," Igor answered in the direction of the D-tablet. "I'll take the call in the command room."

He switched off the tablet, and addressed his associates without changing his expression. "Study this while I take the call. Try to get to the core of the problem – everything is marked. We'll start as soon as I am finished."

The eight stared at the tablets and started flipping through the data in silence.

Igor had already left the conference room and entered the blacked-out command room. He sat down quietly in the armchair, switched on the large crystal holo-monitor in front of him and with a focused gaze caught the shape that was being created by a multitude of photons of various colors.

"Peace be with *you*, young man!" spoke an old man with a bass voice on the other side. Igor could make out short curtains behind the armchair that the man was sitting in and its frayed armrests. Something in this greeting hypnotized him. Before he opened his mouth and returned the greeting, he noticed an elderly woman pass behind the armchair, carrying a plate of

warm cookies. She went around the armchair and placed the cookies in front of the old man, then took him by the hand and smiled at the camera shyly.

"Peace be with *you*, Sir," Igor replied politely.

Silence filled the room. For several seconds the old man sized up Igor, his eyes alternating expressions of pity, fear, respect and disgust.

"How can I help you, Sir?" said Igor, interrupting the silence.

"Help me?" the old man smiled. "You can't help me, young man. I didn't call you to help me."

Keeping the smile on his face, the old man reached for a cookie on the table in front of him.

"I don't understand, Sir… why then did you…"

"I know that you don't understand, Igor," said the old man, cutting him off. "You will understand soon enough. You see," he took a bite of the cookie and continued with a full mouth, "it has been exactly sixty years since the last time I saw you. Sixty long years, Igor. Do you remember?"

Igor swallowed the lump in his throat and an unfamiliar warmth came over him. He could have described it as a panic attack, because his palms were sweating and he started feeling cold. He couldn't explain that paradox. He started trembling. His entire life he had been devoted to only the North Wing, only the project, only mankind, but now… Somehow everything made sense to him after this question. The trembling stopped, but his voice trembled, like a broken tuning fork.

"Father?!"

"Yes, son."

"But how…?"

"There are protocols in the world outside the North Wing, protocols that sustain humanness, because we still have to live like people," said Igor's father calmly and took a sip of his drink. "We are allowed to contact *you* only once after you leave. That is why the security code is authentic and approved by your superiors."

The old man smiled again, which had a soothing effect on Igor. His memories were faint and nothing specific was wakened in his mind, just the occasional flash feeling, a twitch – perhaps curiosity. He tried to dig way back to his childhood, to the time when he was seven years ago, but he couldn't; he didn't want to. He could feel nothing about the time before he joined the North Wing. Now this old man was asking him for a casual chat, and a casual chat would be the pinnacle of abstraction that has no purpose. He remained polite and wary, even though the entire situation had put him unprepared before a *fait accompli*. Anger was stewing inside him, but he remained calm, listening to the voice. The anger was because he was wasting time on insignificant things. *Be honest*, he thought.

"I don't know what I should say now, Sir."

The old man laughed out loud.

"They did a good job on you, there's no doubt about that!" He caught his breath, calmed his laughter and continued. "There is nothing that you are supposed to say, Igor. We are allowed to speak a few more minutes."

He took a deep breath, and became serious. He looked at the elderly woman next to him and continued. "You know… I thought for a long time about what I would tell you when we got to this point. I didn't know how you would react when you saw us," he pointed towards the elderly woman. "This is your

mother. She suffered the most when you left. However…"

Igor remained seated and silent. He was already visibly disturbed. The nine were waiting to go to work. The error must be corrected. There was less and less time. Father and Mother didn't understand that. They couldn't understand it. They couldn't grasp it… they couldn't…

"We never did learn what it is exactly that you do in the North Wing," said his father, interrupting his thoughts. "We speculated for years; we are still speculating. We meet people, here on the Civilian Deck, who have just sent their child to *you*, they speculate… We never found out. We believe – we have to believe – that it is something important, something that will become apparent soon. Something tells me that it has to do with the planet we are approaching. But it is uninhabitable… So I'm speculating again."

The story about the uninhabitable planet has been well planted within the Civilian Deck. Psychology played an important role in the preparations, Igor thought to himself. *If they have convinced the oldest people, like the two in front of him, then the others are just collateral victims of this critical lie.*

"I cannot discuss that, Sir," said Igor in a serious voice.

"I don't want you to talk about it either. I just want you to hear what I have to say to you."

He paused and took a deep breath. His eyes welled up with tears. They didn't run.

"Life is long, Igor. Perhaps too long for people whose child was taken from them just because he was smart, ahead of his peers, advanced. Tomorrow I will ascend to the bliss that I have been dreaming of for years. You have to understand that life without a family – regardless of how exciting it might be – is

worthless, failed… But to have a son your entire life just a few meters away from you and not be able to see him or speak to him is an anguish that I would not wish on anyone. That is why I ask you to please remember your mother and me. We believe that within you there is still a part of the love that we gave you for only seven years – the seven best years of my life, and I will turn ninety tomorrow. Remember that, Igor… and try to feel it."

Empty talk, thought Igor. *Insignificant information*.

"Is that all, Sir?"

"Yes, son. That is all. We love you."

The photons disappeared in an instant and a void filled the holo-monitor.

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"Why didn't you tell him, Mel?" said the elderly woman wistfully and sat down almost soundlessly on the worn-out recliner next to her husband.

"He wouldn't have felt anything, dear. You saw him… for God's sake…"

The old man covered his eyes with his hands and started weeping quietly. A teardrop trickled down his forefinger and moistened the elderly woman's lips as she kissed his salty hands.

"It's alright, Mel. We knew it would be like this."

Mel exhaled and straightened up, lowering his hands. He wiped away the moisture beneath his eyes as he took a deep breath. He tightened his face as much as he could, forcing himself to forget his feelings, driving courage into his soul like magic.

"I know, I know. Anyway, it's over now, but… for God's sake… He is completely deformed. His hands, fingers, the movements of his lips, skin… and his eyes…"

He smiled, and started twirling the cup that he still held on the empty armrest.

"He had your eyes, dear, your beautiful green eyes, and now… I couldn't see a single feature that would link him to us."

"I saw that the moment when he appeared on the screen… that second. That's when I turned away. I couldn't watch."

She passed the back of her hand over Mel's face.

"But Mel, he is still our son."

"Yes, our lost son."

The elderly woman got up and stood in front of the old man. He couldn't get up on his own. She offered him her hands, and he accepted them. He swayed slowly, and like a precise robot, slowly coerced his body to lift out of the armchair. He stood next to her. She took him by the waist, and placed his right hand on her left.

"When are the doctors coming?" she asked him tenderly.

"In less than three hours."

He rested his head on her shoulder, more out of weariness than need.

"My life has been both heaven and hell, my darling."

"I know, Mel. Mine too."

He raised his head with great difficulty, and then looked into her green eyes.

"I leave you unwillingly, but it is time. It's been enough. The way I look at it, ninety years is both too little and too much for everything we've been through."

"What will I do without you, Mel? Seven more years…" she

wept quietly with a tender smile on her lips.

"You know the rules, dearest."

He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

The elderly woman took a deep breath, focused her eyes and transformed her voice into a youthful one.

"Ready, young man?" She smiled with moist eyes.

"I don't know what you've prepared for the last dance. I hope it's something good."

The old woman issued a command loudly and the music started.

Their bodies swayed gently to the rhythm of the song that brought tears to their eyes. It was quiet, cheerful, and at the same time wise and bold. They knew all the words. About the horse that lost its herd at sunset, and later became a mustang and ruled the mountain. *Lullaby for My Son*, is what it was called. It was Igor's favorite song as a child. He never went to bed without it.

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For a long moment Igor stared at the void where the hologram display of his father had just been. Something had stirred within him, something that he did not understand, something foreign to him. He wanted to forget this event immediately, knowing that it would take him away from the concrete solution that he must find – not try to find, but find.

Suddenly a banging noise disturbed his thoughts and he saw a shadow behind the glass of the command room. A blurred figure was banging on the glass door with all his might, so fiercely that Igor thought he would break the glass.

He quickly rose from his chair and passed his hand over the lock. The door slid open.

A man about twenty centimeters taller than him, with sideburns down to the bottom of his ears and wide shoulders, looked him darkly in the eyes, then sized up Igor's entire body a moment later, without concealing his expression of disgust. The man's blue eyes were blurred, yet calm, but his uncut hair and messily groomed eyebrows, looking like cacti in the laboratory, left the impression that he did not have exemplary personal hygiene habits. It was only then that Igor noticed the uniform of the Order and wanted to say how inappropriate and against regulations it was to knock on the commander's cabin, but the giant beat him to it.

"I barely found you in this damn maze. Callan Brenna," said the man and saluted. "I'm reporting for duty and… I was told that I'm the ninth member of some Section Y…" He stopped for a moment, watching Igor's distraught expression. "You know, the one keeping the damn log."

V

I chose nine from the crowd of quasi-trainees, noble families, citizens with some special qualities, or without them, convicts without self-control and brats who think that everything can be solved easily, without any sweat, effort or wetting your pants.

Some were thrilled by the choice – some not, but I had to do what was expected of me so I chose those who were best prepared at the given moment, regardless of their will, desire or current antipathy towards us, Members of the Order. It wasn't an easy task at all, because all those chosen had great responsibility, and mine – the designated MotO –was even greater, since my colleagues and I were expected to build up the bodies of these youngsters within a shorter time than the regular training that each of us had undergone. They were expected to be decisive, swift, deadly, and perhaps a little nervous, because of our job description. They kept inquiring about the progress of the training process and the methods that we were using to train them – as though they didn't trust us and as though anyone who could doubt - was in fact doubting. Most of all I hated when the bioinformaticists visited the regular lectures that we held for the cadets, and the way they corrected all of us lecturers, and gave their opinions on certain issues, and changed the entire methodological system that the nineteen of us had developed the day before. The bioinformaticists were always a

pain in the ass and I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I would pull that sleazy Igor's teeth out the first chance I got. He, praise the Stars, would be my superior for another three more years and then some.

As I said, my training started when I was older. I also explained why, but I must repeat it so that all those listening to this recording will be fully informed about the stupid situation we were getting ourselves into. Basic training lasts approximately 130 months, and only after successfully passing the final exam in the simulation hall do you get a pin with a black shield cut by a gray lightning bolt. I never liked that symbol because lightning is some bygone, or dare I say, ancient past, and shields were bygone and ancient even when our Home Planet existed, while it was alive and bathed in sunshine, with abundance and prosperity… It's complete nonsense, I say, that today, after 2,500 years, we wear something over our hearts that means absolutely nothing to anyone.

My nine recruits were: Boris Sekul, son of a cook on the Civilian Deck – a pleasant kid with the ugly habit of biting his nails – until they bled so much that he couldn't hold his finger on the trigger. He wasn't too smart or shrewd, which contributed to his possible success as a MotO – he didn't complicate things, he followed orders blindly and didn't do anything on his own; he was the right profile for being accepted into the Order, even though a little willfulness would serve him well, but I didn't encourage it, nor did I desire to do so – ultimately, we are all the makers of our own paths and careers. If he didn't want to be proactive, didn't want to stand out, make important decisions before he heard them from his superiors – then that was his path and I would do my best to prevent anyone from

getting in his way. In brief – a likeable, dense kid with a good family lineage.

Then there were the three equally-spaced Johnson brothers – Dick, John and Jack; belligerent kids with a developed sense of humor. I read somewhere that as children they had undergone an ancient initiation rite and become Dogons – it was a customary practice, as it is today, to revive old cultures so that we would never forget where we came from and what our origins were. According to some ancient records, their family probably had something to do with this African tribe, and the three of them were deeply immersed in the old traditions. Perhaps all that would have been funny, and could have been understood as a type of education that members of tribes, clans, peoples underwent – from Asia, Africa, America and all the former continents – but for Dick, John and Jack the Dogon initiation entailed a whole lot more. They strongly believed all the teachings and let everyone who laughed at them know that mocking the *po tolo* beliefs was a painful and bloody affair – so all those who had done so stopped and started avoiding the trio. I even caught myself biting my tongue at one moment and not saying anything when they started talking about the Home Planet as an inert star system. Good guys – full of faith, hard-working and dependable. I was glad to have them with us.

Alfonso Grck and Raul Conte were classic examples of wasted youth and the audacious habit of "always being right". I stamped that out in the first weeks of training, but they couldn't help themselves, and they always had something to add, comment or criticize. I thought several times of discharging them and replacing them with someone else, but then I gave up on that idea since I had no intention of going through everything

again with two new guys. Somehow they eventually learned to control themselves and in most cases they kept their mouths shut, but they remained totally irritating, and even if they said something smart and sensible, others would reject it, since they were used to their constant bullshit.

I have no words for Ian Polanski. I really didn't know where the kid came from or who his ancestors were. Even though he appeared weak and pathetic, pale and fair-skinned, he was one of the toughest kids I'd ever met. He was always silent. Come to think of it, the only thing I've ever heard from his was "Yes, Sir!" and a few more official expressions. He did everything impeccably, accurately and precisely. He was always present and accounted for, as the expression goes, but never expressed what he actually felt. He was tough; stubborn and flexible at the same time. There was no need to repeat or suggest things to him. A good MotO. Really good. Just thinking of that kid gives me the creeps. There was something ancient in him, primeval – something that I didn't understand, something creepily honest in his eyes, and only the Stars know that I loathe such guys. For the time being he was on our side.

Buddhika Jayarante was the only woman in my group. Nosri had all of three, which was uncommon, even for the Order. We called her Jaya for short, and she didn't mind. She was appointed the *prima* in my group, which could be described as the sergeant major in the old records. This was not due to her femininity, which was kilometers away from any femininity that I would have imagined, but because of her determination and commitment in the simulations that we carried out. I couldn't believe that she had been accused of battery – until I met her. Anything anyone thinks about women thinks wrong until they

met Jaya. There is no tenderness, not sympathy, no compassion, no forgiveness – actually, she behaved like the best damn soldier, precisely how a soldier should act. Her commands were appropriate and timely. Her instinct was almost irrational for any man. Jaya was a MotO from head to toe; her small stature was only a warning to stay away from her rage. A genuine petite bomb that could go off at any moment – she reminded me of myself when I was her age. She was and remained my only candidate for *prima*.

And finally, my ninth member… I intentionally left him for last because there is too much that I have to say about him. His name was Matias Pollard and he was a direct descendant of the first captain of the *Zed*. It wasn't up to me to judge whether maintaining Pollard's lineage had been moral or humane, but something inside me tipped the scales and I chose this kid of suspicious morale only so that I too could be part of the incredible history of one of the great families on the *Zed*. Matias was a strong and sturdy lad, with incredible observation skills and fast reflexes. Perhaps he was a little too rough and ready, but it wasn't up to me to doubt the genetic predispositions of each cadet. What intrigued me most about him was precisely the way he behaved with the other cadets. His stance was so clear and cold that on several occasions I wanted to say "Sir" to the little son-of-a-bitch, and I barely prevented myself from doing so. His gaze was penetrating, striking and there were no games between the lines. He very clearly showed what he thought and worst of all – he first pointed out his own mistakes, and only then those of others. When I paid more attention to him during the simulations, I could clearly make out his commanding trait, which his blood hadn't lost even after several centu-

ries. A genuine fucking little captain. I couldn't believe my eyes, but damn it – I still pulled him out of the Correctional Sector; he had been accused and convicted of rape. Some things are set in stone. I wasn't there to change things for these bastards, but to make them the best possible MotOs as quickly as possible.

Back in the year 715 of *Zed*'s travel, Captain Pollard's lineage was interrupted. This, however, was not because of an uprising or a revolution – it had already been well established which family was in charge of what, and which backup families were in charge if something happened to the primary family… I mean, everything is laid down very plainly in the Code, and I have no intention of quoting every individual protocol – even if I could do so, because I can't forget the cursed thing.

The captain, then the tenth generation, was exposed to radiation, and his family – two daughters, who kept their last name for a while ensuring clear domination over the other families, took command of the magnificent intergalactic cruiser. It wasn't written anywhere that a woman could not be captain, and after several centuries of male management change was even desirable. Therefore, back in 715, for the first time in the history of the *Zed*, a woman commanded the ship. Her career as captain lasted more than thirty years. She was Pollard's older daughter, because the younger one, at least that is what the records show, found peace and serenity in the family life of a same-sex marriage with her best friend, and they adopted several children, so all the responsibility fell to the older sister, who boldly headed the *Zed* for thirty years, as I've already mentioned.

The daughter was called Lisa and she had one son – who had a mental disability. He suffered from a rare disease that still

hadn't been named, and had something to do with the necrosis of the bone tissue and brain cells. He lived only to the age of seventeen and died an agonizing death. There was no successor since the Pollard lineage could not be maintained. That is how finally, after nearly eight hundred years, for the first time the method of modern autophagy was implemented, assisted by increasing the levels of sestrin and spermidine in the stem cells that we had been successfully extracting from all living beings for centuries. I don't know much about that. I know only that *autophagy allows cells to sustain themselves and replace damaged mitochondria* – and that *when mitochondria get old, they produce very high concentrations of reactive oxygen or free radicals, which can lead to tissue damage. However, the principle of modern autophagy ensures that the autophagy process, which neutralizes aging, allows for the replacement of 'old' and defective mitochondria with 'new' mitochondria.*

How?

I have no idea how medicine functions on the *Zed*. All I know is that I don't understand anything and that there are lots of chambers, gelatinous pools, electrodes, simulators and artificial blood (which is actually yellowish, because it is produced as a mixture of stem cells and some type of self-regenerating electric proteins). The least clear to me is – and this is morally questionable – how one produces spermatozoids from the cloned stem cells of a long-deceased captain, from which spermidine is then extracted, allowing for the successful preservation of that cell over thousands of year.

In brief – this complex cloning process, whose purpose eludes me, and all that babble about a simple DNA sample, fall into primordial quicksand and are increasingly complex as the

transformation reaches its peak.

What is amazing in the entire story, and also demonstrates the persistence, i.e. stupidity of the human race, is that people cloned in this manner did not have a well-developed immune system, and sometimes it seemed that all the illnesses of the world targeted precisely such offspring. It was not unusual for a disease to develop in a cloned specimen, and I cannot remember a single one that lived longer than twenty years. The cloning process was repeated for years and was perfected over time, but the cloned children still fell ill at kindergarten age and lost battles with the most malicious diseases that I have ever heard of. Even though the *Zed* was a sterile place and all bacteria had been killed long before our time, some still found a way to materialize again and spread fear and terror among the cloned people. However, come to think of it, evolution has its course and it's not a good idea to mess with it. The rest of us were immune to small bacteriological skirmishes, and the few tumors – malignant as well as benign – have been successfully treated for the past two thousand years.

When the renewal of Pollard's genes ultimately failed – and that took more than a hundred years – the role of permanent captain family was taken over by the Kolas, who had been running the ship for already a century as the first backup family. It was natural for things to proceed this *natural* way and no one had any objection to the fact that the members of the Kolas family were mainly homosexuals who maintained their lineage artificially, with the bioinformaticists choosing suitable surrogate mothers for them. After four generations, i.e. nearly 220 years, the husband of the incumbent captain, Ivanov Kolas, attacked the first officer, who was suspected of having an

affair with the captain. Since this was also proven to be true, and the captain admitted it just so he could return to his long lost love – the Kolas family forfeited its place in the command hierarchy and put an end to its tour as commanders of the *Zed*. Because of them and those like them, the Correctional Sector was opened, where to this day they clean different dirty corners, make beds for a few credits and live like old rats on some transoceanic sailing ship.

It was natural for the Kolas family to be succeeded by the Wilson family, a proud old family whose actions had indebted the *Zed* for several generations. They have been in command to this day and they haven't made a single mistake. There have been both men and women, I mean, in the ranks of the captains who have commanded the *Zed* over the course of all these years. The current captain is only a copy of all those we bowed to and kept clear of, because everyone on the ship knows that there is no screwing around with the Wilsons.

But let me go back to the young Pollard. After a thousand and some years they did in fact succeed in eliminating all the negative effects that accompanied the cloning process, with overtones of evolution. This happened less than fifteen years ago, and I said "*téigh trasna ort féin*" to all those who saw the beauty in it. Well damn it, I didn't see anything other than a bunch of ghosts who had been resurrected in some unnatural manner and filled the *Zed* with their ugly mugs. It was the same with Pollard. He was the first successful clone of the first captain, but without any indication that he would ever become captain. He was raised in the strict confinement of the Correctional Sector, buttered up with all the sleaze of human greed, sexuality, aggression, and pathetic, low, very low moral values.

Still I took that damn kid and now, like a vigilant shadow over his shoulder, I watch over him more than over the others, and I pray to the Stars that he doesn't do anything stupid and unpredictable. Ultimately it is I who will be screwed, and the pride that I feel as a Member of the Order will be forever forgotten, while the other below-average-intelligence Brennas will run around the Correctional Sector, trading their medical credits for orgies at the House of Leisure. A wonderful future awaited me if the kid screwed up.

***

The attack formation that we were rehearsing was my idea. Someone once told me that it is the heart that wins the battle, not the formation or the strategy. I piss on that statement. There is nothing bold in a soldier's life. All you need to do is keep your mouth shut and follow orders, and if the commander knows what he is doing too – then it is only a matter of time until you emerge triumphant from the conflict.

That morning I was looking for Susan because I hadn't seen her for several months, but no one knew where she was. When I stepped into the laboratory her entire team was acting strange, to say the least. There was something suspicious about their answers, which were neither smart, nor stupid, nor were they concrete – they were simply answers concealed in words that meant nothing, at least not to me. I waved them away and started toward the North Wing for the Section Y simulation so that I could properly retell everything into the phonolog, which I guarded as though my life depended on it. I tried to talk to the captain, but it was impossible to reach him. It still wasn't

clear to me why everything wasn't simply recorded using all the cameras that we were equipped with, because keeping an audio log was not only difficult and painstaking, it also required a lot of time, which I was wasting talking to myself.

I didn't understand the simulation at all, so I just memorized every sentence and tried to put together the best version of what I had seen. An hour later I was already on my way to the simulation capsule where my recruits awaited me, but before that I had to stop by my cabin to retell everything that I had observed.

Simulators 1, 2 and 3 were in operation the entire time. Their irreversible series lasted less than an hour, but the simulation time was slightly more than half a million years. I didn't fully understand Igor's explanation at the end of the simulation: *genetic structure breaks through the probability when scaling and ceases to be functionally dependent on the temporal parameter, and it is necessary to stop its urge to erode the calibration of any other. It was as though it was struggling to survive by not allowing the genome to improve in the transformation. The experiment was a failure and we will have to break through to the next step if we intend to create anything that is worth jeopardizing human lives, meaning those who will carry out this mission. The next simulation will last more than seven hours, i.e. three million years, and by that time we will try to eliminate these errors in the genome using a significant quantity of anti-entropic fields, which should slow down the destructive functions of each of them. If we have a fifty percent success rate, in two years we will achieve significant progress and finally eradicate that natural impetus for mutual destruction.*

And as I said – I didn't understand it at all. I put away the

phonolog until the next recording session and rushed to carry out the final battle simulation for my cadets.

***

All the cadets were already locked in their simulation pods, setting up their own configuration as they saw fit and receiving orders for the battle that we would soon be facing. Only my pod was empty, so I stepped into the egg-shaped capsule, which closed with a hum, leaving me in complete darkness for several seconds. Thousands of blinking lights came on in an instant, and I covered my eyes and felt a dull pain when light flooded the interior of the pod. It took up to several hours for me to get used to my normal surroundings after spending time in the North Wing, because the bio-freaks did everything in dimmed lighting. I managed to shake my head and focus my sight. I popped a new E-pill, which had been produced only a few weeks earlier, and I was fully focused on the mission that would determine the course of the entire training. It was the final test for my group, under conditions similar to those that awaited us down there. Although… I still didn't fucking know what exactly we would be doing when we landed on the G-planet, but one thing was for sure – we would be shooting.

I informed the recruits that I was in position and ready. On my command they all switched on the simulation. I put on my helmet and pulled down the visor. The rounded pod created a three-dimensional image of a desert landscape, and the smells that were released inside it were intense and mesmerizing. Clean air, the likes of which I had never experienced, slightly blurred my perception, so I switched on the visor,

which shined pale-green, interlacing the space with a series of grids and coordinates, emphasizing the small cross-shaped gun sight, precisely in the golden ratio of the entire frame. I felt heat. The temperature was increasing significantly, mimicking the conditions on the surface; the simulation was being born, but still hadn't completely crystallized. It took the computer several minutes to set up all the calculation-based predictions. I didn't even try to understand how it worked, I just waited.

In less than a minute nine figures appeared in the frame, all wearing paratrooper uniforms, in full gear, with body armor, helmets, polished silver boots, combat accessories for water and oxygen, carrying heavy backpacks and three types of weapons. The weight of the equipment was also calculated so realistically that I felt absolutely everything that I was carrying in the simulation. The artificial gravity within the pod was precise at the microlevel and was different in different areas of the pod, faithfully adjusting for the weight of the gun, machine-gun, handgun, backpack… It was difficult and I was loving it. It really felt like we were there.

The simulation began.

The wind blew dust into my face, and even though I knew it wasn't real - I felt sand in my teeth. Visibility was low, and the nine recruits were disappearing in the clouds of dust several meters in front of me. When I finally reached them, I gestured for them to follow me, and we hurried to a large rock that rose several hundred meters into the air. We finally found shelter from the wind and looked at the landscape on the far side, where it was calm.

The soil was as red as blood. In the distance we could see a mountain range so realistic that I could see the white snow-cov-

ered peaks and feel the cold breeze blowing at an unnaturally low intensity on this side of the massive rock. In front of us was a clearing with scattered dry bushes rolling around, carried by the wind, and several hundred meters further the clearing ended in a chasm that I assumed was a riverbed. I ordered a *diamond* formation and reached for my gun, which was hanging over my shoulder. The recruits unlocked their weapons and did the same.

The wind was slowly dying and it seemed to me that even the computer had concluded that in a formation simulation it wasn't that important for the weather conditions to make our lives difficult. It was now easier to walk, even though the sand still stuck to the visor and tasted like iron.

The diamond formation was a defensive formation, and since we hadn't encountered any targets, I ordered an open X-formation, which was purely for the offensive. The transformation was instantaneous and I saw my *prima* take up position in the center of the X, indicating with her hand where each person should be standing. We reached the chasm and realized that it wasn't a river that had created the canyon, rather the clever computer had separated two mountains with a ravine that was several kilometers deep.

"Fucking shit," Jaya growled.

I was the first to jump into the abyss, firing the thrusters at full strength and taking advantage of the gravitational acceleration, which was two degrees weaker than on board the *Zed*. I had no trouble getting down, and the speed didn't exceed 60 kilometers per hour. Above me, like angels of old, but with armed guns, the recruits buzzed around, giving thumbs up to confirm that everything was alright. The ground was rocky and dusty,

and we could hear the sound of a river or a large stream. The simulator also created a light mist, but for some unknown reason it disappeared when the last recruit touched the ground.

We deployed in a V-formation and neatly crept up to the slope at the end of the rock that we were walking on. The smell stopped here and I immediately felt the slight metallic odor of the cabin I was in. The readings were stronger and faster, we were getting closer to the *shadows* – that's what we called them, since we didn't know exactly what they looked like. We knew that they walked on two legs, were slightly over 150 centimeters tall and were as fast as animals.

This mission was supposed to last only five minutes – three too many if you asked me – because one group had to be more than 75 percent more efficient than the simulation and the actual duration of the process. I hoped that the recruits were well-prepared and I prayed to the Stars for everything to go as planned, because I couldn't bear another second of lectures by the bio-freaks. I had to note mistakes at any cost, correct decisions, allow them to use their own heads and guide them to the right decisions and orders. I let Jaya head the assault and like a true *prima* she dashed after the first shadow, disappearing into a crevice beneath the mountain. We all jumped after her in a rehearsed zigzag formation, communicating only using hand signals. Jaya walked several meters in front of us and waded across a small stream that cut through the rock. The sound was metallic and it bothered me a little that I couldn't immerse myself completely in the simulation, but damn it, you do what you have to do.

We walked through the crack, while the cliffs towered over us. The temperature dropped significantly and my visor started

to fog up, but just as I was about to turn on the stabilizer, Jaya issued the order for us to do so. I was as proud as a father of his brave daughter.

The shadows passed overhead, along a cliff that we certainly could not climb, but Jaya continued on as though she hadn't noticed them. We had to follow her and have full confidence in her decisions, otherwise…

Two shots ricocheted off the rock in front of us. Jaya raised her hand, signaling that two shadows were down. We finally came out of the small canyon and into a rocky clearing, which looked like a round corridor at the foot of rocky mountains. Holes in the rock hinted as to where the shadows had gone, and Alfonso and Raul signaled toward the biggest one. What geniuses!

Then it started. They surrounded us on all sides and Jaya order to fire at will. I took down four shadows just while I got my bearings, and trusted that my pupils had succeeded in taking down as many. One shadow leaned over the young Pollard and he jumped to the side, as fast as lightning, taking down that shadow midair, as well as another one standing behind me.

Dick, John and Jack had already entered the cliff and I could see just the flashing of their gun muzzles and hear grotesque laughter and screams. Those damn Dogons really had no self-control. Boris had Jaya's back, while Ian stood on a mound and just like in a video game cut down the shadows as soon as they appeared from the several gaps that we couldn't cover. I was damn proud of my kids.

Then we were interrupted by a strange high-pitched sound and I found myself in my pod, drenched in sweat, still trying to figure out where I was. The number fifty appeared on my visor,

flashing green. I looked at my watch – two minutes and seven seconds. I was damn proud of my children.

The hatch opened and the recruits screamed and shouted, hugging each other and patting each other on the shoulder. When I came out they rushed to greet me, but they didn't come close, but saluted and whistled instead, screaming and producing sounds I'd never heard humans make. I looked up toward the glass observation cabin and saw two bio-freaks leaving without saying a word – they were obviously pleased with what they had seen. There would be no brainwashing and explaining; there would be no lectures on the importance of our mission; there would be no narrow-minded views and disgust over what the Members of the Order had created – and we had created fighters who could take on anyone they come across; there would be no meetings with the bio-freaks, for a few days at least. I told them to take off their helmets and put down their guns. I announced hectoliters of white crap. I looked up and saw a bio-freak listening to my words in disgust, but there was nothing he could do to prevent us from getting piss-drunk. Everyone who got through the simulation in under three minutes had seven days of additional leave.

I was so proud of my damn children.

VI

I've already said that I like it when the alarm sounds. The planet was damn close now – less than a year's travel – so there was no need for any unnecessary alarms. Even though I'd been roused from my sleep, for a fraction of a second I thought that it was actually a malfunction, but then I felt that my ass was floating around in the dark and that I couldn't touch the bed beneath me. I waved around like a madman until I finally realized that I wasn't dreaming and that I was awake, as awake as I could be. I switched on the lights with my voice and saw that the entire cabin was a fucking mess and that all my things, clothes, pills, pistol, covers and a number of credit cards were floating weightless, along with me, around the entire space and shimmering in different colors, reflecting the orange lamp. I cursed – brutally, but it didn't bother me. I tried to reach for my clothes, but my hands thrashed around like they weren't my own, and the clothes floated away from me as though they had a will of their own. It takes a person a few minutes to get their bearings when they are weightless – it takes MotOs only seconds. Yet I still cursed because this had not happened in my lifetime. It did in chambers and simulations; once we were even weightless for several weeks so that our muscles would start to atrophy and we would get digestion problems – that was in our youth; at a time when there was no damn G-planet, secrecy and haste – a period of complete dedication to the Order, but

now…

First I thought that something had pierced the *Zed's* hull, destroyed the shield, torn the sails, and that now the pressure of space and low temperature were tearing apart everything that stood in their path, but I was alive and breathing, the temperature was normal and most importantly – I was conscious. I grabbed my clothes by pushing off with my legs and hanging upside-down, but zero gravity doesn't recognize the word *upside-down*, and it takes the brain more than a minute to get used to the correct up-down orientation.

How did I get dressed? I haven't a clue, but somehow I pushed off and came out of the cabin, with the intention of finding out what had happened. The corridor was amuck with floating people – in this part of the deck it was mainly MotOs so it was a quiet veering through the air, accompanied by laughter and with coordinated movements that you could only see when dealing with well-trained professionals, accustomed to functioning in weightlessness.

We all immediately rushed to the simulation chamber where the thrusters for our suits had been stored after the exercise the previous week. The handguns that floated attached to our waists did not appear powerful enough in the event that there was crap we had to deal with – we needed the pulse guns. We used the thrusters under normal conditions and they could sustain acceleration that was up to four times greater than gravity, and could lift a person weighting a hundred kilograms up to a hundred meters in the air – they were perfect for weightlessness.

Within seven minutes we were like an ancient swarm of bees leaving the hive. Two-by-two, we floated in the direction

of the noise that was now clearly audible, but didn't come from our wing. We travelled most of the distance by pushing aside confused civilians who got in our way and who were searching for their inner ear and spun around for minutes after we bumped into them, making incredible figures, like a stumbling acrobat.

The lights flickered highlighting the alert so we zipped upwards, following the cries, which were getting louder. The staircase was blocked with people entangled in their own limbs and those of others, trying in vain to get a heading towards their cabins and the safety of their own abode. Our flying became a nightmare. We couldn't clear a way through the mob even if we wanted to by force, so we chose a different route – taking the elevators *up*. I prayed to the Stars that they weren't out of order, because otherwise we would face a route several kilometers long, around from the other side. The noise was coming from the Command Deck and it was our duty to get there as quickly as possible.

The call that came through our helmets next was sinister, full of mystery and dread. The voice of Pilot Kovalsky was distorted and full of haste and some unspoken urgency.

"Would the Members of the Order please report immediately to the Command…" he said and fell silent. Even the noise in the earphones went silent because someone had switched off the microphone. Someone had switched off the relay, and the humming that is specific for an open frequency disappeared instantly.

We all pushed our thrusters and scudded towards the great elevator doors. Only about ten could get in – the elevator usually held twenty people, but MotOs in full gear are twice as

wide – there was no other choice. I looked behind me and at the end of the corridor and in the flashing lights I could see my novices struggling with their thrusters, obviously unused to flying through the narrow corroders. Nevertheless, they were behind me and I could count on them.

I paused, going low so that others could pass above me, and bumped into Nosri, who waved at me. He was leading his nine troops and arming his gun as he explained something to them on the fly. I went down all the way to the ground and stayed put for several seconds. Jaya called me on the narrow bandwidth, which was separate for each team, and I rose up to lead my young and eager tiger cubs.

"It looks like it isn't a joke," I said.

"We still don't know what we're dealing with, but I received a strange message on the channel meant only for MotOs."

I opened the gas valve on the thrusters and pulled the visor from the collar over my face, which connected to my suit at the neck, making a characteristic locking sound. I was flying at a speed of 60 km/h, but was falling behind the others. I had to wait for my kids because it might still be an exercise, and I'd get screwed for nothing. Rules are rules, *damnú air*, and you have to know at every moment where your place is and with whom you're supposed to share the same shit. Teams were supposed to eat shit together.

The elevator was online. We were the fourth group in line to go up to the Command Deck. I didn't know what awaited us so I ordered everyone to switch to lethal charge on their pulse guns, and explicitly repeated that they should listen only to me. You never knew when one of these youngsters would crack and start shooting at someone who was only an insignificant threat.

A threat needs to be identified, isolated, its weakness determined, and then - eliminated. In this order and no other way. This isn't something that you learn – you're either born with it or you aren't, you either have it or you don't. Well, I couldn't explain that to them; to me it was like taking a breath when going under water. The seconds passed and finally it was our turn.

The elevator doors closed with a thud. We switched on the magnetic fields on the soles of our boots, so that we would be standing upright and facing the right direction when the doors opened.

"What do you think happened?" asked Boris, glancing at all of us.

"It's some shit," Matias said brusquely. It appeared that he actually found all this entertaining. Raul and Alfonso clutched the guns in their hands and nervously played with the safety. I was about to tell them to stop messing around, because in the end they wouldn't know whether the gun safety was on or not, when Ian calmly placed his skinny hand on their guns and looked at them with his piercing eyes – they stopped immediately.

"You can't hear the noise in the elevator," said Jaya.

The three brothers stood at the door, but I doggedly pushed them aside, insisting that I be the first into the potential chaos. They didn't resist much, nodding and standing right behind me.

"No one opens fire without my signal, or I'll tear off you arms and shove them up you asses," I said patronizingly, like a true sensei. The silence on the kids' faces was acknowledgement of my words, and the lump that Raul swallowed dispelled even the slightest doubt about whether what I had said was a

joke. The kids believed my words and knowing that was enough when going into battle. The quiet humming indicated that we would be stopping, and the absence of inertia once again emphasized that nothing had changed in those several seconds and that weightlessness still governed the *Zed*. The doors slid open and someone's blood splattered my visor.

***

It is difficult to describe what happened in those several minutes. Just replaying it is odd, because in battle a person doesn't notice insignificant things, and you act instinctively and reflexively. In my case it was different. Oh, how many times I've wished that it wasn't like that.

I opened fire and stood as steadily as possible so that the kids could deploy in a diamond formation. The magnets didn't work on the corridor floor because someone had switched off the magnetic field. It immediately became clear to me that we were dealing with an attack on the Bridge and an attempt to take over the *Zed*, because no one in their right mind messes with *Zed*'s magnetic field while it's traveling at a full speed of 19 Pollards. The corridor was narrow, and our diamond was a little distorted because its flanks slid silently along the walls, tripping while dodging the bullets that spewed over us. One MotO (I later learned that it was Musa) floated lifelessly above the elevator, his blood splattering us as we came out. What we saw was total chaos.

The corridor was rather cramped for the first twenty meters, then widened as it approached the Bridge. The area in front of us connected all the command rooms and was fifty

meters wide, stretching equally far. There were toppled cabinets at the end of the room, but arranged in such a way that they leaned on each other so that the weightlessness would not budge them. There were forty cabinets; I counted them after the few seconds I allowed myself time to close my eyes and assess the situation.

Everyone coming out of the elevator was an easy target. These targets used to be called sitting ducks, because that is exactly what they looked like with their thrusters, and all those sitting behind the tightly packed cabinets did not have a very difficult job taking us out, like in a computer game.

There were three teams of MotOs in front of us – together with their kids – who were deploying as best they could under the given circumstances. Standing behind them I had to pay great attention not to shoot anyone with the pulse gun, killing them with friendly fire. I ordered a *zig-zag thrust*, because that was the only thing possible – any other formation wouldn't make any sense – and I pushed off the walls with my feet in order to quickly reach the chamber where the fighting was going on. The kids did the same, some hopping, dodging, bouncing up and down, some left and right, but everyone avoided the charged projectiles, staying alive.

The wide chamber was in flames. Fire in zero-gravity is one of the prettiest things you can imagine, but this time I didn't have time to enjoy it. Everything was full of fireballs that quickly faded, one after the other. Susan once explained to me that fire in zero-gravity actually pushed warm air away from itself, equally in all directions, and that it enclosed itself in a sphere that doesn't allow new air to get close and sustain the flame. Fire burns quickly, intensively and beautifully. Here the fire-

balls had taken up just about all the space in my field of vision, and the extinguished ones were being replaced by new ones, more powerful and more dangerous.

We finally entered the room and didn't stop shooting. I heard rustling above my head and turned to see another team of MotOs coming out of the elevator and opening fire on the people wedged behind the cabinets. We now had to watch out for charges from both front and behind, and the ones that ricocheted off the walls were especially tricky.

After a few seconds I sought shelter by a pillar on the left-hand side. All my kids were on the other side of the room: some behind a pillar, others lying behind the fastened armchairs and tables, which thank the Stars, could not float away. I peered out and looked toward the opposite end – I still couldn't quite make out the attackers. I had to get at least another twenty meters closer, so I took to the air and pushed the thrusters to the maximum. I nodded to Nosri, who was also sheltered behind some crates, and he started firing charges in front of him like crazy. At that moment none of the MotOs were in the line of fire – they were behind cover. As far as I could count – there were six bodies floating, plus the wretched Musa, far away, next to the elevator. Someone had apparently switched off the elevator too, because the MotOs had stopped pouring out. In a way this was a relief because the chaos around us had started settling down and only sporadic flashes jangled my nerves. Everyone was firing at the cabinets on the opposite side, as I rushed through the fireballs, which would go out in an instant, but they burned me through my suit and I got second degree burns on my ankles and left hand. I finally ducked behind another pillar. I was thirty meters from the attackers and could see them clearly. Several

lowlifes from the Correctional Sector in dirty shirts – without suits, without helmets – were tied down to the bottom of the corridor leading to the Bridge. They couldn't get inside, but it would be only a few more minutes until whoever switched off the magnetic field and elevator also overrode the commands for opening the doors to the Bridge. Then everyone would be screwed because who knew what they would do to the *Zed*.

There were eighteen of them that I could see, but several flashes to my right confirmed that there were several more and that they were well-concealed. It was bad because I couldn't go forward or back, and peering out of my shelter meant certain death. Fucking bastards.

"Put down your weapons!!!" I screamed from my cover.

I didn't even know how they could get any weapons because the CS was kilometers away from any weapons store. They might have had homemade shivs, but no one would dare take the Bridge with blades. I mean, no one in their right mind would dare to try and take the *Zed* because that was punishable by death and ejection into space. To this day that had never happened – these guys were writing a new chapter in history, but they had made a big mistake.

Laughter erupted behind the cabinets. I could hear them chuckle and curse.

"Come and get it, you stinkin' MotO!!!" one said.

"We're waiting for you, pussies!!! Where are you!?" another future corpse added.

"Nosri?" I switched the frequency on the helmet.

"I'm here, Cal," he said bitterly. "How do you want to fuck them up?"

"I have an idea, but you have to cover me."

"Just give the signal…" he muttered something in Russian and switched on the wide bandwidth for all the Members of the Order.

My kids were holding out well. I leaned against the pillar, looking at them. All it took was my word and they would all soar toward me – and perish. I had an idea and I wanted to try it.

Perhaps I wasn't the most intelligent bastard in the world, but when it came to fighting and survival, I liked to think of myself as being an unrivaled son-of-a-bitch.

Each room on the periphery of the *Zed* had a decompression hatch. That was how you killed bacteria, viruses, and from time to time the room was decompressed so that the mechanism wouldn't malfunction. Since we were on the Command Deck, the decompression hatch was about twenty meters from me, on the opposite wall.

In order to get to it I had to glide across open space. A good forty meters of unprotected space, without a single pillar, box or any damn thing that I could use as cover.

"Screw that!" I muttered through my teeth, but the minutes were passing and the safety of the *Zed* was at stake.

"I'm going for the decompression hatch, Nos!" I said into the wide bandwidth so that everyone could hear me.

"You're insane! There's no way you can make it…"

"Screw it, Nos, there's no other choice… it's either them or us. Just put on your suits and be ready.

"Lieutenant Brenna?" Jaya came on.

"Roger, *prima*." My voice could have cut a diamond.

"I volunteer for the assignment! I mean…"

I wouldn't let her say anything stupid, even though it was

normal for a *prima* to offer to replace a superior. But I didn't feel like someone who should be replaced, nor did I want to come across as being a pussy.

"Fuck their mothers!!!" I screamed and soared towards the opposite wall.

The charges started cutting down everything in sight. I caught two in the leg within the first ten meters, but the suit held up. I felt warm blood trickle down my leg as the protective suit took up the gap that the charge had made. The entire room thundered with such intensity that I thought my eardrums would burst. I couldn't see anything in front of me except a shower of flashes, and the course that I held was the one I remembered and I prayed to the Stars that I would not be a second too late. By some miracle the other charges missed me, and my MotOs were now already in airborne positions, firing at anything that peered out from behind the cabinets. Even though I couldn't see them, the flashes came from different heights, which meant that they had deployed properly and were covering me as best they could. A thump convinced me that I was off course and was several meters further than I wanted to be. I had reached the wall alive and well – slightly injured and burned, but under the circumstances I would call that damn healthy. The decompression hatch was within reach. I broke the safety glass with my gun and pulled the lever. The air hissed and suddenly I couldn't hear anything anymore. The damn bastards from the CS didn't have the suits that we did and the vacuum, which was creeping into all the pores of the chamber in front of the Bridge, was a worse enemy than I could ever become. The silence was deathly. Even the flashes stopped, but the convicts were firing from everything they had, so you

could see the charges wrap the space around them, but without the flames.

The seconds passed in slow motion. The charges shattered space on all sides, and it was obvious that the enemy's gunfire was becoming disorganized. The sons of bitches had another twenty seconds of consciousness because my suit confirmed that the vacuum had filled the entire space. All the MotOs were behind cover, waiting.

And then the shooting stopped. I rose and painfully approached the pile of cabinets. The scene that I will describe is not at all pleasant to hear, but my job is not to be pleasant but precise.

The convicts were unconscious. I couldn't repressurize the chamber instantly – it would have taken more than five minutes. The pressure was down and even though I was in a suit I felt my body get stiff. My suit was still in one piece, but in the places where I had been hit it couldn't equalize the pressure quickly enough. Blood was rushing toward the surface of my entire body, and I literally felt my skin stretch to its breaking point. The protective suit was closing the pores, but it was a thin on, slightly damaged, and provided exactly that much time – two to five minutes – for the person wearing it to get to safety and escape death. I was having the most painful erection of my life (caused by the pressure, not by the excitement) and in this condition, praise the Stars disguised by the suit, I approached the passed-out convicts who were floating around, tethered to the floor, slowly swelling up. Water vapor was collecting in their bodies, doubling their volume. I knew that their heartbeat was slowing down, their circulation was stopping, and the blood pressure in their bodies was dropping. Their hands were

getting countless boils, some of which burst like soap bubbles. They didn't have any necks because the size of their torsos and heads had become equal, and they kept on swelling. Then the vapor started escaping from their bodies through their mouths, noses, genitalia… They were spinning in zero gravity – in silence, like released balloons coated in blood plasma. Some of them had open mouths, but when a person is unconscious they don't scream, and even if they do scream – the vacuum doesn't allow the agony to be heard. Some of them – I counted ten – seemed to have held their breaths when they realized what I had done. They were the first to die, because ruptured lungs killed them within twenty seconds. Perhaps they fared better than the others who were squirming in the agony of death by vacuum. I would never know. The saliva in their gaping mouths boiled, escaping in the form of bubbles that floated in zero-gravity, breaking up into smaller and smaller bubbles, sticking to the ceiling. Their shirts split at the seams, exposing pink skin –greatly stretched skin. Then I heard a thump. Decompression was slowly but surely restoring normal pressure and forcing the vacuum from the room. In another two minutes I would have ended up like them. It took a few more seconds for me to remove my helmet, which was choking me. My body was relaxing, compacted under the force of the greater pressure, and that erection of mine was finally over.

But I was still floating, and I still had burns on my legs – still in the agony of pain.

"Threat eliminated," I heard Nosri say, noting the lower frequency noise in the headphones, meaning that we were using the *Zed*'s broadband.

"Roger!," said Wilson. "How is Brenna? Brenna, can you

read me?"

"Yes, Captain, I read you. Not bad, just…" the cut across my chest was horrific, so I bent over as far as the suit would allow me. My wounds were not innocuous, and in the rush of adrenaline I hadn't even noticed that I had been shot in the left side of my chest.

"We saw everything on the cameras, Brenna. In a few minutes we'll open the doors to the Bridge. We have to wait for the security codes. Then we'll switch on the gravity field. Just take it easy. We've already sent the medics to pick you up. You deserve some rest and a commendation."

"Ahh, I… I mean… *Cac, cac*…" I said, trying to sound as levelheaded as possible, even though my thoughts were somewhere else. When the captain finished, I knew that I looked worse than I thought and that my entire suit was drenched in blood. The pain was too great, the noise in my ears unbearable, my back was tingling, and my legs were getting hot – I think that I cried out in pain before passing out.

***

They kept me under anesthesia for three days. Waking up was unforgettable: agonizing, too bright, painful and suspiciously real. I foggily remember Anna saying some incomprehensible prayers over me, while her lips stretched the length of the room, and her mouth opened like she was going to swallow me whole. My eyes must have really been wide with fear for her to run her hand – which looked like a squid's tentacle – over my sweaty forehead, telling me soothing things, which awoke in me the worst childhood fears and made me dread the reality

of everything that was happening. When Anna finally slithered like a snake out of the cabin in the medical sector, a pale white-haired gentleman with pulsating catlike eyes entered the room. He muttered: "Thank you!" and ran his long nails along my torso. There was no lack of pain – the piece of shit was touching the wound – and I screamed. At that moment an entire circus of freaks rushed to me, some of them flying around the room like punctured balloons, touching me, attaching new strips on my body, hissing like eels on dry land. I didn't understand a damn thing. I hazily remember that Carmen stopped by and showed me a small plant… A moment later the plant was talking to me and was very chatty. I was amazed as I looked into this small flowerpot and the plant spread its leaves and analyzed my overall condition. What a talker, I thought at the time, while trying to communicate with it in a language that I thought was the language of plants. My throat hurt and felt dry and scratchy when I tried to speak, so I was quiet and tried to communicate with my eyes.

But Susan didn't come by. Nevertheless, I did recognize several guys from her laboratory while they stretched their faces making grimaces – it was odd that their skin didn't return to its original form, so they greeted the doctors deformed as they were, and they in turn… It was like it didn't bother them that they looked like poorly drawn children's sketches. They would just pass by them and smile, almost without noticing them. I was tired as a dog and I couldn't gather one damn thought, say one damn word, move one damn limb – I even had a catheter. I barely fell asleep, in fear and sweat, still looking over my shoulder to see whether any more freaks would peer into my room. I think that I chewed on the pillow.

***

I woke up clearheaded and as hungry as the whole universe. Images still vaguely flashed before my eyes, and I wasn't sure whether they were just dreams. The doctor came in – this one was normal – and gave a heartfelt laugh.

"Lieutenant Brenna, finally!" he exclaimed.

He cordially removed the catheter and asked me whether I could hobble to the toilet. After I answered affirmatively, he helped me up and directed me towards the bathroom. I was finally alone, but the incredible dizziness almost knocked me to the floor. I barely managed to grab the faucet to keep my balance. I didn't even think about peeing after that, so I lied that I had and went back to bed with a full bladder.

I was getting better by the hour. I ate everything that they brought me and drank tens of liters of liquids. After eight hours I was walking on my own – I could even bend down without blacking out. A three-day coma can really mess up a guy six ways to Sunday.

That day my kids came to visit and they gave me a good laugh, and in the evening I took off the gown that the doctors had given me and put on my uniform. The new skin on my legs had almost healed, only the pain in my chest remained. I didn't have any scars. I didn't feel sick and I wanted to leave the hospital complex and soak my wounds in white crap, down a few C-pills, and everything would be better. I leaned over, my strength restored fully, and read the display that flashed above my bed: *Lt. Callan Brenna – left lung removed. Implant stable. Lung function 90%.*

Then I sat back on the bed and took a deep breath. The

air had a metallic taste, and I thought about how the computer pretending to be part of my lungs was being powered by who the hell knew which part of my body. I burst into hysteric laughter and scattered the medics carrying injections who had probably come to sedate me.

VII

Purple light, barely enough to fall within the visible spectrum of the human eye, filled the laboratory located high on the North Wing platform. Several silhouettes walked with measured movements around the platform, covering the several meters between three simulators that made a sound that resembled mumbling.

It was calm in the laboratory; anxiety count not be read on the faces of any member of Section Y, and as Igor sat in the control room he read and monitored all the data that his assistants were obtaining. Images were passing quickly on an adjacent monitor and with an experienced motion of his hand he stopped the recording and took a better look.

It was the first official recording that had been brought back by the three photo-probes from the category G-planet only moments before. The star that the planet revolved around had been clearly visible and the brightest in the sky for several weeks now, and the estimated time of arrival was less than three hundred days away.

"Stop," said Igor, and the footage stopped, focusing on a figure covered in hair, half-erect, with extremely large eyes set in extremely deep eye sockets. Igor looked at the picture long and hard; he didn't notice that Radol had come in and was standing next to him.

"So this is our future," said Radol calmly.

Igor jolted in surprise and rose from his chair.

"Mr. Radol, forgive me, I didn't…"

"Relax, Igor. I'm as curious as you are. I would like to have more time to study them, learn more about them: what they eat, how they live, how they raise their young… Those gatherings that we discovered back in the early days might indicate that we're too late. If they *have* developed any form of beliefs or religion, our mission has failed and who knows how long we'll have to wait for another opportunity to come along."

Radol sat down in the chair and looked at the monitor streaming the simulation data.

"And this?" he nodded toward the diagrams.

Igor looked at the monitor more closely.

"The situation is better than usual. We have succeeded in isolating the degeneration to some extent, but for some reason there is still wavering in the structure."

"You mean degenerative?" asked Radol, running his finger along his gray temple, wrinkling the skin.

"No – purely evolutional. It is as though natural selection exists at this level too. Up to 3.7 million years everything is fine, but as time goes by it becomes increasingly unsustainable. Some genes literally destroy the others and completely take over the simulation. I really don't know how to eliminate it."

"Where, or when, does the greatest deviation occur?"

"Well, I… I'm not sure…"

"You're not sure, Igor?"

"Well, you know, the system isn't deterministic and it is subject to chaos. Mutations occur depending on what the initial conditions were, and we simply cannot seem to repeat them."

"Approximately?"

"We've analyzed all past measurements and have concluded that we can manipulate the process every 3.7 million years, so this means we have a problem, because every 200,000 years the measurements become rather chaotic, since during that period they intersect with the 3,000-year megachaos curves, and they don't appear on a regular basis, so they are difficult to predict. Actually, the smaller the number of years, the greater the increase in chaos and all our genetic structures want to even out…"

"It sounds like some twisted law of conservation."

"Exactly, but we have another three hundred days, which is enough for several simulations and corrections. By the end of the mission we expect to reduce the chaos to only two percent, and that is more than anyone could have predicted at this moment."

"I am actually very pleased, my young pupil," said Radol.

Igor hated when Radol talked down to him, but he never wanted to show it. He stared at the data that constantly filled the monitor and nodded.

"I'm still not. We have to do better! First thing tomorrow I'll try to restore the entire genetic structure to the beginning, to see where we went wrong…"

"Slow down, Igor," said Radol calmly. Even though it wasn't befitting bioinformaticists to touch, he placed his hand on Igor's shoulder. "This is more than we had hoped for. Any more digging through the problems only creates new ones and creates a loop. As an excellent mathematician you are well aware of this. Take what is being offered and perfect the simulations on this level. Two percent is ideal under non-ideal conditions. You know very well that we did everything we could in such a

short period of time."

Radol stared Igor hard in the eye.

"That's an order, Igor!"

"Yes, Sir," said Igor in confirmation and bowed his head.

"And now," Radol said almost cheerfully, turning toward the paused recording of the being from the G-planet, "what can you tell me about the creature that we are looking at?"

"Well… Nothing special… I mean… yet."

"Hmmm," Radol muttered. "It seems we'll have to wait for the fact-finding team to confirm or disprove our suspicions. Everyone has to be ready by then, and the propaganda about non-settlement must be clear and aggressive. I think we caught the full attention of the Members of the Order with this incident up by the Bridge."

"Yes, Sir, but I think that it will be exceptionally difficult to conceal information while we are on the planet. Especially from the MotOs. How will we get them to turn a blind eye and not talk while onboard the *Zed*?"

"Leave that to those who deal with such matters," said Radol, deadly serious. "We haven't squandered our 2,500 years in vain, and I mean – in all fields. No one has ever entered the North Wing because long ago orders were clearly issued to all the captains. Our mission, regardless of how much it appeared that it was to preserve mankind, isn't only that, and you are quite aware of that."

"Yes," Igor quietly remarked. "I'm afraid to even think of what would happen if humans were to settle on this planet."

"Just like every time up to now, there's not much philosophy or anticipation, but this time it will be different."

"Except…" Igor started to speak, but Radol interrupted him

immediately. "The diseases alone that we could bring to this planet are sufficient a risk for the plan to fail. We are immune to several common diseases, and we don't succumb to them anymore." He looked at Igor, while numerous reasons crossed his mind why most bioinformaticists had never set foot outside of the North Wing, enjoying the benefits of the quarantine. "Of course, not us, I mean the people. Even though with certain measures, we too can avoid several of the bacteria carried by the people outside of the Wing."

He was thinking of the briefings that his assistants held regularly for the civilians and soldiers, left to the filth and terrible stench. Sometimes one of the bioinformaticists would pass out, unaccustomed to the harsh smells of the outside world. Sometimes, however, as was the case with Lieutenant Brenna, they had to endure and permit contamination of the otherwise sterile area, granting him access to all the facilities in the North Wing. Later, after the lieutenant had left, they would disinfect and sterilize the space. The captain was not aware of this, let alone the lieutenant. In their opinion he was the last person who should be permitted near them or to take part in experiments as important as this one.

"In essence," Radol continued, "this is such a great mission that it exceeds any scope that we can comprehend. In our essence, in essence, is man as an individual who is acting for the benefit of the collective – similar to what they teach the Members of the Order. And yet, man is auto-destructive in his efforts to gain recognition of his individual achievements… We are full of vanity and volatility, envy and suspicion of criticism; we are actually prone to criticizing, but not specifying and resolving the problem. I don't know exactly what would

happened if all the people on the *Zed* settled on the G-planet. My convictions speak against it, and I would strive with all my being to avoid that scenario, I mean," he gave Igor a significant look, "you know what our orders are. Therefore, we have no choice but to lie, to lie so insolently and nauseatingly for the wellbeing of the human race. The people on the *Zed* must never learn that the planet is inhabitable, because the number of these creatures is slightly smaller than the number that is critical for survival. It could happen that they are the weaker caste of humanoids and that reptiles or who knows what might take over their world. We *must* act quickly and promptly. The atmosphere is suitable for sustaining life. The latest gravitational acceleration indicators measure 9.79 m/s^2.This means that the planet is not only suitable for life, but is also similar to our Home Planet that we have forgotten after 2,000-years of traveling through the galaxy. The Members of the Order will be briefed next month, and we will use all our psychological and sociological powers to convince them that we are actually right to send them on an *excursion*, because it is precisely *they* who maintain order on the *Zed* and they need to let off steam release. I know," he smiled, showing several mauve teeth, "the story isn't the most credible, but it is the best we've got, and more importantly – it is so simple that the Members of the Order will accept it without a second thought. You saw for yourself that the state of emergency roused reflexes that they haven't had for years; how they resolved that crisis in front of the Bridge – they even sacrificed themselves to save the ship and the crew. They have within them that little humanity that has been lost in the generations of citizens and commanders. They have military honor, and that is a rarity, because for thousands

of years people have had nothing to fight for. They are our solution, because even though the mission is something completely different, using the Members of the Order this way will give us exactly what we preach – peace and serenity onboard the *Zed* and peace in the minds of the Members of the Order once this madness is over, and we cease to be important. Once the North Wing is shut down, the only thing remaining will be the *Zed* and the living dead, awaiting the unfathomable."

***

Simulated night. Tranquility spread to all parts of the *Zed* and calmly awaited the morning frenzy and immense glow of a thousand lamps replacing the long-gone sun, brought by the first strokes of day of the astronomical clock – which had been precisely calibrated 2,500 years ago and never stopped working.

Somewhere at the end of a long corridor on the Command Deck, a light was on. It wasn't a bright and shining light, but intimate and barely noticeable, just enough to light up that corner of the corridor, and just a few steps away – the source of that light came from the captain's cabin.

It had already been two months since the incident on the Bridge and Callan Brenna had fully recovered – both physically and psychologically. He was patrolling the Bridge that night, just like he did every eighth night, as defined by his shift. He chased people out of the corridors and hurried along those who were in the way of the little worker androids diligently cleaning everything that humans had soiled during the day. He could stand for hours watching the wonderful dance of robots

of different sizes, amazed by their agility and precision. Perhaps this was because part of him had been replaced by a robot that breathed for him, taking from *Zed*'s atmosphere a quantity of air proportional to what the right half of his lungs drew in. It was never completely clear to Callan how it did this and how it managed to make such calculations. He had become aware of the fact that the machine was profoundly connected to his metabolism at levels that he wouldn't understand – even if he wanted to and was able to.

But the robots had finished their shift long ago and the *Zed* glistened once again, just as it had the day it left the Space Station *Esper*. Everyone was down for the night except the MotOs and the pilot, as well as the crew in charge of correcting the trajectory and thrust control. All other functions necessary for the unimpeded operation of the *Zed* were controlled by the ship's computer, which was neither extremely intelligent nor artificially intelligent. The computer was precise and sturdy, safe and relentless in its calculations, but it redirected all functions other than controlling the ship's basic operations to other computers. These computers along with the ship's computer comprised an intricate network that could be fathomed solely by the creator of this intergalactic giant, which had been traveling the expanses of the Milky Way for 2,505 years at speeds inconceivable at the time to any scientist on the Home Planet. But this did not bother Lieutenant Brenna as he approached Captain Wilson's cabin, following the light at the end of the corridor and the soft mumbling.

At first it seemed that the captain was talking to someone in his quarters. Then, as the lieutenant got close enough, he heard the actual conversation – but the voice answering the

captain's questions also belonged to the captain, just distorted, trembling, coarse and shifted in phase. Callan paused two meters from the partially opened door – the door was activated by a sensor, but it was now raised about ten centimeters from the ground. A familiar smell filled his nostrils and he felt a slight thrill, but he snapped out of it because the product of fermented berries from Proxi and pure white artificial fruit gelatin – which the citizens called WC – was not permitted on the Command Deck. And just as a distant explanation of its manufacture whirled through his head along with and an odd notation of its addictive property in medical charts, listed just below the B- and C-pills: C_2H_5OH – he heard a voice from the cabin.

"Who's there?" roared the captain.

Brenna straightened up and replied from the corridor "Lieutenant Brenna, Sir. On routine patrol."

Several seconds of silence.

"Come in, Brenna, you crazy son of a bitch!" growled the captain. Callan approached the sensor, but the door didn't move.

"Hold the button," said the captain in the other, warped coarse voice. "I've switched off the automatic mode."

Brenna placed his hand on the palm-sized button and the door started to open slowly. He was cautious, not knowing what to expect, since the captain never talked to him that way or in such a tone. The door opened vertically for ten long seconds, and the smell of WC grew stronger. He could finally see the captain. He was slumped in an armchair with his eyes closed. His feet were high up on the desk and in his lap was a half-empty pitcher of WC. Callan entered the room and stood

on the blue command line.

"Lieutenant Brenna reporting, Sir," he said while saluting respectfully.

"Cut the crap, Brenna, and get off that damn line!" the captain ordered in a drunken voice. "Sit down somewhere… anywhere," he gestured around the messy cabin.

Callan noticed several broken pictures, a wrecked globe of the Home Planet lying in a corner by the door, three digital disks stabbed by a knife and stacked on top of each other like shish kebabs in old movies; several thousand reports scattered over all the furniture in the room – some half burnt – and what surprised him the most and was etched perhaps most clearly in his mind was the captain's seven-point star – removed from the lapel of his uniform and wedged deep in the aluminum table right in front of the captain's ashtray.

"Sit, Callan… White crap?" he held out the pitcher to Callan.

"No, thank you, Sir. I'm on duty, you know…"

"Fuck duty, Brenna! And take a swig! That's an order!"

Since there were no glasses, at least no intact ones, Callan scooted closer to the table, took the pitcher of WC and took three large gulps from it.

"You see?" said the captain with the distorted voice, which after more than a liter of WC had become the only voice in which he could communicate. "Give that back and sit the hell down, you crazy son of a bitch!"

If anyone else had talked to him that way, they would already be hanging upside down, holding their bloody teeth in their hands, but Callan did not seem to be bothered by what was coming out of the captain's mouth. It might have been be-

cause the captain, in addition to Nosri, was the only person on the entire sailing ship that Callan thought could harm him. He feared him a little and never hid that fact.

"Yes, Sir," he moved some debris from the armchair across from the captain's desk, sat down to the sound of breaking glass, and sighed.

"Callan Brenna…" the captain started pointedly, "…I never thanked you for the courage you showed…"

"Yes, you did, Captain. At the hospital…"

"That's crap, Brenna!!!" he shouted. "That wasn't damn appreciation, that was duty and protocol!" He tilted the pitcher and sent several voracious gulps sliding down toward his belly. The mouth of the pitcher proved to be too large, so a significant amount of the white liquid spilled down the captain's chin, soaking his unbuttoned uniform.

"Yes, Sir!"

"Don't you 'yes, Sir' me, damn it!" He suddenly flung the pitcher aside, shattering it into a thousand pieces, as millions of droplets dispersed throughout the room. Callan frowned. Even he had limits when it came to the captain.

The captain propped himself on the table and looked at him. With a significantly lower voice, almost a whisper, he continued, waving his finger. "Don't you 'yes, Sir' me, you son of a bitch!"

"Captain, can I do anything for you?" he asked as calmly as possible.

The captain looked at him with piercing eyes. He wanted to say something, but he fell silent and leaned back into his comfortable recliner. Callan was silent, and the moments of silence that followed were the most uncomfortable experience he had

ever had.

"Orders, acknowledgements, commands, protocols…" the captain started, "all that is crap, Cal. For years I've been following orders left by our predecessors; I split hairs about following ship protocols; I emphasize even the smallest violation of the structure and resolve it in line with the records that are older than the ship itself." "Look at this," said the captain as he pressed a key on the keyboard on the table and a display two meters wide and one meter tall appeared on the wall. Sounds of the ocean filled the room, and the distant cries of seagulls were like what nightmares are made of. Ball's Pyramid was fast approaching, in a point of view shot, and the camera flew over this natural wonder only a few meters from its peak. A moment later the magnificent peaks of Renon filled the entire display, their golden-brown colors inspiring awe and admiration. The recording continued to show the valleys of Ireland, the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, Niagara Falls, Victoria Falls, the pastures of New Zealand, and magnificent Stonehenge in southwest England. Sounds, noises, shapes, waters – everything just like in a fairytale. Callan had long ago seen footage from his native Ireland, but it had not given rise to emotions as it did now. There was something ancient and holy in these recordings, something conscious and disturbing. The birds, fish, animals that passed in front of the camera had been dead for two and a half millennia; the families caught by the camera lightheartedly washing their hands in the waterfalls – hadn't existed for centuries, and their atoms had dispersed in the flash of the planet's disintegration, and had been orbiting Venus as a ring for several years now.

"All of this disappeared in an instant," said the captain,

breaking the tension. "Everything disappeared in a few years, and we are the only ones remaining who can testify to that. But all of that is crap, I tell you, because we aren't witnesses of that time – we are fucking lab rats living with false memories of the Home Planet. And now we are so close…"

The recording ended and the wall went back to its bluish color. The captain stared blankly, looking for some dot that only he could see. Callan was confused, but he remained collected even though he didn't know what to say. The little psychology that he had learned from regular sessions with the ships' psychiatrist – a decade ago – convinced him that this was a moment when he had to let the captain do the talking and that he shouldn't do anything to interrupt that. It wasn't long before the captain turned to Callan, his eyes sparkling with pent up tears – one of which slid down his right cheek.

"I don't think I have the strength, Callan… to see this through. There are too many lies… I start having a meltdown at the very thought of being so close, but so far. The star has already increased the temperature of the hull by several degrees, and we won't be approaching the planet for another seven months. It's wonderful and warm, full of life and hope, but… not for us, Cal… Not for us… I don't know what you think, or what the MotOs think… Our task… Ahhh, screw that!!!" He slammed his fist on the table and accidentally turned on the recording, which started playing again the large display, filling the room with the sound of the ocean.

"It will take another thousand years to get to the next star if the bioinformaticists improve the propulsion system. You know, they've had a fucking solution for acceleration for years, but they' won't give it to us until we've left this God forsaken

place. Fucking unbelievable!"

Callan was visibly upset and started looking around the room. He had never liked the bioinformaticists and hearing something like this gave him heartburn every time.

"What I want to tell you, Cal, is not just the babbling words of a drunkard, nor is it the need to complain to someone who doesn't understand – I'm telling you so you can write this in that fucking log, so coming generations and descendants…" he stopped and wiped his teary eyes, "…will know that I didn't have the strength to command the ship when it was the most important - that I broke down. For God's sake, the planet is right in front of us and we can't settle on it… We can't settle on the damn planet and that is eating me up more than anything else. On the other hand, humans are more humane than we thought, but the people on the *Zed* will never know that. They will never know how much humanity there is in this mission, how much sacrifice, how many people's destinies have been put at risk just for it to be completed."

The captain fell silent and continued staring at the large display with his glassy gaze.

Callan frowned again, trying to contemplate what the captain was saying. He understand almost nothing because the orders were very clear: *Members of the Order must be deflated and the recruits assigned to them must be balanced. Members of the Order are guardians of the peace onboard the* Zed *and only their peace can get the* Zed *to its destination. Their mission will be motivation for generations of Members of the Order to come. Only a balanced and devoted Member of the Order can be a good Member of the Order* - everyone onboard the *Zed* knew that. All of Nosri's paranoid fears about the captain wanting

to get rid of the MotOs had been quickly forgotten when they heard the final briefing by the bioinformaticists. This detour and approaching the only star that they had come across was aimed at ensuring the internal peace of the MotOs. People are human - he understood that, because no one was crazy enough to desecrate the evolutionary biorhythm of a G-planet. This was deeply embedded in the conscience of every citizen aboard the *Zed* - especially the MotOs. People were not evil beings, although they might have been long ago, and it wasn't normal to destroy an entire planet and completely destroy its natural development process just so a few thousand people could settle it. This was as clear as radiation in the antimatter reactor. He was still contemplating the captain's words, and as he continued, he started to doubt the entire story that had been told. Still, the MotOs were *the ones* who maintained the peace on the sailing ship; they were *the ones* who ensured the unimpeded research work of the scientists who would improve their travel and accelerate their voyage; they were *the ones* who would lead mankind to the complete development of the hibernation chambers, where they would all be placed in hibernation and would finally have a chance to reach their desired destination. And that is why Callan considered it normal for them to land on the planet; for them to feel soil and dust under their feet; to finally know why they had to be the devoted servants of ancient orders and the long arm of every captain; to vent their anger and frustration as they had recently in front of the Command Bridge, but not with blood - rather with special bullets that the bioinformaticists would produce for them that were not lethal, but stunned and were completely harmless to any creature. He needed this type of conflict; the type of conflict that was at last

not simulated in the pods where everyone was protected by safety protocols. He needed a battle where the opponent could fight back, maim, and even kill – that was a risk that he embraced with great enthusiasm. Nevertheless, something in the captain's sobbing was gruesome and serene. He saw a spark hanging on the captain's tongue, but he did not dare spit it out in front of Callan. That moment proved that Captain Wilson was in fact a captain who would be difficult to replace when the time came. He was loyal to something that Callan didn't understand, but this was enough for him to think that something stank and that the entire mission was actually something a lot bigger, something incomprehensible and different. His head slumped as he realized that he might never learn what it was.

***

"The plasma for the bullets has been perfected, Leader."

Igor ran his hand across the display on the desk and it turned off. Over his shoulder he looked at a petite gray woman holding a closed glass box containing a transparent bullet with glowing blue plasma inside it. In two months time it would be loaded in the MotOs' pulse guns on the surface of the planet. He reached for the box and took it, and the petite member of Section Y turned on her heel and with unwieldy steps – typical of people who are seated for fifteen hours a day – she left Igor's office.

He played with the box in his hands for a long time. Small air bubbles slid around the core of the transparent bullet every time he flipped the glass case. Suddenly he snapped out of his thoughts and quickly placed the box on the table. He activated

the narrow band frequency to the lab with his hand.

"We need a minimum of 300,000 rounds," he said forcefully.

The bioinformaticists in the laboratory below him, dressed in sterile clothes with protection over their mouths and noses, just raised their heads and nodded in unison. Igor walked up to the glass wall on the far side of the office and looked down.

Eight members of Section Y were moving with precision around the laboratory where three time simulators had been installed, each the size of an average cabinet. Inside them the centrifugal chamber was spinning the last samples and sending data to the numerous displays spread out all around the room. He knew that in a few hours the simulators would be removed from the laboratory and that he would never use them again. "What's done is done," he thought.

The skillful technicians graciously handled the electronic pipettes and filled the bullets. Each time they pressed the top of the pipette they would interrupt the electrical circuit and allow a certain quantity of material into the transparent capsule. Ultimately they would be replaced by a machine, but for a few more days they would have to manually install photo probes into each round so that the person firing the bullet would always get precise information on whether the target had been hit or not. The guns had also been redesigned while the young cadets were being trained, and each of them had a small sensor that read at the speed of light the results sent back by the photo probe: bullet trajectory, confirming or denying the hit, ballistic corrections and finally – the injected dose. Igor had been wondering for five years already whether this method would be optimal for carrying out such an important task. Throughout

history there had been ideas and various attempts for the entire action to be carried out without using troops and weapons, but the prevailing fact was that due to a number of aspects – humane, psychological and technological – this type of implementation was always used. He had a burning sensation in his chest. For the first time in seventy years he was truly satisfied. For one immeasurably brief moment it seemed that he was trying to smile, but this was something that he could not control. Happiness was mixed with concern, because two percent of the entire chaos still remained buried deep in the blue plasma. The time simulators predicted ways that the chaos would manifest itself and this was something that the bioinformaticists had had to accept, whether they liked it or not. His chest was still burning. He looked at his hands. He hadn't looked at them like that in five years. They were completely pale, the nails dried up and gray. His hand started trembling and the pain in his chest increased. Calmly, like a hundred times before, he walked over to the small cabinet and took the pill that increased his feeling of happiness. He took off his clothes and went into the chamber in which an intensive purple light was shining, announcing the imminent transition to the electromagnetic spectrum that no human could see. Needles were inserted under his nails and he gave in to the bliss of anti-entropic therapy.

VIII

I stared at Proxi for several hours. I was soothed by the fact that the damn S.O.B. had been planted by a hand that was living on the Home Planet. Tended, placed on the square on the Civilian Deck, it looked like a space monster with all those branches growing haphazardly from the warped trunk. The conditions within the clear plastic were mountain-like, and the temperature never went above ten degrees Celsius. Sometimes they simulated wind to strengthen its bark, caused artificial rain, snow – they did a bunch of shit just to provide living conditions for it - the only living representative of the Home Planet. Its name was *Pinus longaeva*, originally from the White Mountains of California. The sapling planted on the *Zed*, just before it departed from the Space Station *Esper*, had been an object of adoration all these years. Still, the old geezer had outlived everyone who had ever traveled on this giant, and the way things were going – it was only halfway through its lifespan. As far as I was concerned, an eternity would pass before it died and dried up. Even though it had never been proven that trees were conscious, I could have sworn that it was laughing at all those who tried to grasp its past. "*Ní mórán thú*," I growled and spit precisely on the plaque with the inscription of its name – *Proxi*.

I must say several facts into the phonolog: we are counting down fourteen days until the descent. The researchers, includ-

ing Anna, are going down three days before us. I pray to all the Stars that there are a bunch of illiterate monkeys down there.

We are orbiting the category G planet that still no one has named. We just call it the G-planet and no one is even trying to think of anything better, sharper, more powerful. It is as big as the universe and its appearance inspires awe in each of us. But after exactly twenty days of being in orbit, few people stop at the observation gallery, located on the Civilian Deck, to look at the blue-white pearl that we are orbiting around.

I was present when the computer spewed out the value of the velocity that the *Zed* must maintain to remain in orbit around the planet. The bio-freaks discussed certain approximations that I didn't understand. In any case, it appears that *the cube of the number 1.61625*10^{-35}, divided by the product of multiplying 2.17644*10^{-8} and the square of 5.39121*10^{-44}, has an error and is not as stable as it was assumed and that escape velocity is a requirement for precisely measuring the conditions on the planet*. This number is very important, as I understood, and it required seven days of repeated measurements in a vacuum, where the influence of the gravitational force was limited solely to the planet and several shuttles, the *Zed*, and whoever was carrying out the measurements. Names such as Henry Cavendish, Jeffrey B. Fixler, Gregory T. Foster, Jeffrey M. McGuirk and Mark A. Kasevich, and their error, were mentioned throughout the discussion, so they decided to carry out an experiment and let the *Zed* use the old calculations and adjust its heading and speed as it orbited around the planet. Fucking hairsplitting for several days, while I was standing around, cost me a lot of nerves so I ran to get the new E-pills, which have a faster effect, and I downed several doses of white crap just to

calm myself.

After that I went to find Susan. Once again no one knew the whereabouts of the girl who I honestly wanted to see, and I almost longed for her company. It had been four damn years since our last encounter and I was already beginning to dread that something had happened to her. I flipped through the obituaries from the past several years and I didn't see her name, but the fact that 560 people had died in a period of four years made me bitter and a little concerned.

That's when I went to the Civilian Deck and stood in front of Proxi. The observation gallery was about twenty meters behind me: glass streaked with tiny wires that project the image from a camera mounted on the exterior of the *Zed*. I once thought that the *Zed* had a glass wall, but spending so much time with those who know about the space anatomy of ships had disillusioned me, and now I knew that I was staring at a display attached to a meter-thick hull, which insulated us from the chilly temperature of 3 kelvins outside the *Zed*. Now the temperature outside varied from 172 kelvins to 380 kelvins, depending on how far in orbit we were from the star that the G-planet orbited around, and whether we were in the planet's shadow or exposed to the star's raging heat. I approached the observation gallery without any difficulty, unlike during the first several weeks of our orbit, since now there were no crowds, and I truly enjoyed the view.

Exactly ten ships circled around the *Zed* at regular intervals, expelling bluish combustion trails and skillfully avoiding the artificial gravity rotor and retracted sails. There was no fire in the thrusters because it couldn't survive in a vacuum, rather the combustion product spread from the thrusters in the form of compressed smoke, with very sharp and regular edges, and

disappeared seconds later. It seemed as though the pale smoke froze and disintegrated in the process, and that the thrust propelled the ships on a circular trajectory.

These were the Order's ships. Every centimeter of area was being checked so that we could get to the planet and return to the *Zed* alive. Nothing was being left to chance, including the sites where we would land. It was decided that we would be spread out across the planet. Some teams would be on opposite sides of the G-planet, 10,000 kilometers away from each other. As far as I had understood, the probes had indicated several groups of goggle-eyed creatures on the planet's surface, and each step of our game plan was being precisely defined. Sometimes I found it suspicious that such an undertaking was being carried out solely to calm and provide release for the Members of the Order. Something had been screaming in my head since that odd encounter with the captain. Three days ago I ran into him in the House of Leisure, but he didn't seem to notice me. He passed by me, nodded vaguely, and the very next moment was in the embrace of the four best women in the known universe. I enjoyed one, then another, until I ran out of credits. I might have read shame or contempt in the captains eyes, but I didn't know who for: for me - who had listened or for himself who had talked nonsense. In any case, what happened that night in his cabin remained our secret. But I had a growing suspicion and every day I tried to figure out what he had wanted to say. On the other hand, he might have chosen precisely my shoulder to cry on because I can't grasp anything abstract; I cannot produce conclusions based on deduction or induction; I cannot coherently define a problem because I lose it as soon as I come across the first obstacle and I give in to opiates. I don't

know, damn it. In any case, I hadn't understood a thing and he could return to his routine, having satisfactorily gotten everything out of his system. I felt really screwed and used.

I stayed on the observation gallery long enough to see another scientific shuttle head off from the *Zed*, accelerating into its own orbit around the planet in order to take measurements again, all with the aim of keeping the *Zed* in a more stable stationary orbit. We were spending a lot of fuel constantly adjusting the trajectory, and even though I didn't understand a damn thing, Igor muttered something about the *Zed's* huge inertia and cancelling it out. Of course, the sails had been retracted during the first days after we stopped, and now they were being mended and meticulously restored using new materials that the bio-freaks had produced in the past five years, so we were only using the antimatter drive. When the MotOs go down, the sails will be installed and reassembled. The task will take 67 hours – after which the MotOs will return to the *Zed* and we will continue our voyage to the stars.

***

I was at A.D. again, and I was on my third round of white crap when my tiger cubs joined me.

"Peace be with you, Lieutenant Brenna," said Jaya, speaking for the nine of them.

"Peace be with you, kids," I said and downed the shot.

Bob was already pouring ten new glasses, and just as though he had been programmed that way – he replaced the smaller glasses with larger ones, so that he wouldn't have to refill them as often. At the time I believed that androids also had a human-

oid breaking point, and I could swear that sleazy Bob had one too.

Nosri parted the group and leaned his elbow on the bar next to me. No one looked him in the eye or said anything. Nosri was not at all gentle. My kids had learned all the tricks of the trade – it was forbidden to look a senior officer in the eye because it implied a challenge. It was something like with the ancient beasts on the Home Planet, only we had been those beasts. If a recruit were to make a remark, in an instant he would find himself picking up his teeth with broken fingers and apologizing. I was satisfied, and the kids moved apart to make room for the man in the E-minus suit.

"Tovarish," Nosri nodded and downed the first glass in front of him, without any concern for the fact that it wasn't his. Bob now refilled eleven of them.

"Hey, Nos! How's it going?"

"Better and better, get it?"

"We're all trembling a bit with that fever, aren't we?" I said almost mockingly.

"I can't wait to kick some ass down there. I don't care who they are or what they're like, just let my feet touch the ground," said Nosri with some strange excitement. "You know, I almost ruined everything back then… Because of my stupidity. I almost told the captain everything to his face. Had it not been for you I would probably be in the C.S., kissing those dickheads' asses. Thanks, Cal!"

He hit me on the back so strongly that he almost knocked the air out of me. I had never seen Nosri so excited. Almost all of his paranoia had disappeared the day we learned the true reason for our training. It simply wasn't him and I didn't like

that. And then it hit me!

It was like someone's finger had turned a page in my brain and started looking for benignly insignificant reasons for me to stay onboard the *Zed*. Something was weird at that moment. There's that feeling when you forget something and it hangs over your head like an axe until you remember it; there's that feeling when you don't finish a meal that you've started, or when someone interrupts you while you're eating, like someone took part of your personality; there's that feeling that you have something important to do, but nothing can help you remember what it is, and the only thing that reminds you that you've forgotten something is the huge knot in your stomach; and then there's the feeling that I had at that moment. It was as though the cloud of Nosri's paranoia had not ceased to exist when it left Nosri, and now it was creeping into me. I could bet on my life that something wasn't right. I could bet on lost Susan that something was not as it should be and that it was fucking jumping up and down in my subconscious, but it could not break through the barrier and show itself. The feeling was strong, perhaps the strongest feeling I'd ever experienced – a feeling of betrayal and lies, a feeling of punishment and contempt, a feeling of misery and envy – a feeling of distant death in the near future.

The young Pollard leaned his strong torso on the bar and spun his glass.

"Everything is ready, Sir. We're ready to go," he said loud and clear, and everyone else nodded in approval.

"Already?" I said a bit foolishly, coming out of the state that had overcome me.

The oldest Johnson pushed up his uniform sleeves, flexed

the muscles in his arm and he thundered:

"Protocols clearly warn that we must be ready at least seven days before departure. We don't want to leave anything to chance."

Everyone downed their drinks together. Bob "reluctantly" poured another round.

"What do you think, what awaits us down there?" asked Jaya and in her eyes I saw a childish curiosity and longing. Nosri grinned silently.

I didn't know what to say. We had done the training exercises together and I knew as much as they did. But students' old tendency to idealize their teacher proved to be true. All of them actually saw me as a prophet, a messiah, oracle, ancient deity, supreme teacher and mentor. I was none of those, because of the three things that were always on my mind: pills, alcohol and sex. The little life that I did have in the meantime was peppered with a combination of nerves, anxiety and madness. I couldn't explain that the Order was in my blood and I didn't have to make an effort to do things my own way. By some crazy coincidence, everything that I did was in line with the Order's protocols, but it was something inside me, in my being, in my subconscious… Ah, fuck it, I don't know how to describe it. The things that I didn't know I absorbed along the way. Because since I was a "photophobe and something" – I used it, abused it whenever I had the opportunity. I maintained a professional demeanor and genuinely acted like I knew what I was doing, but in the eyes of my recruits even the mistakes I made were intentional, cautious, carefully planned with the aim of teaching them better. I was in a situation where no matter what I did, I simply could not fail. I guess that was the first impression.

After that everything was easier. But confronted by silence and expectations, I kind of froze. *What awaits us down there?* What, in deed? I leaned back and poured a large amount of WC into my stomach, without any intention of letting it burn my palate. I slammed down the glass and jolted a moment of attention out of the damn kids.

"Freedom!" I said at last triumphantly, and they patted me on the shoulder, shouted and started ordering white crap like crazy. And once again I was their sensei, leader, the unbeatable bastard who protected them and led them into battle. In my own eyes I was an old goat: they had cut off my horns and kept showing me things in the North Wing that I could not comprehend. In the eyes of my kids I was everything that I would never become. I was everything that I hated and that I fought against. I would never be a hero from the stars who saved mankind, no, there was something bigger in the entire story. I would never be celebrated on the deck of the *Zed* and give speeches written for me. Perhaps I should calmly accept all that and play the cards I was being dealt, but the feeling of being cheated swelled inside me like cordyceps fungi and I decided that in the coming days I would be only Callan Brenna: a fucking "photophobe and something" and a lieutenant in the Order on the intergalactic Sailing Ship *Zed*, and all that for one simple reason – I was sick of guys who didn't want to die for the truth.

The alarm sounded and I heard my name.

"Lieutenant Brenna to the Bridge! Urgently!!! Lieutenant Brenna to the Bridge! Urgently!!! I repeat: Lieutenant Brenna to the Bridge! Urgently!!!"

I jumped up and headed for the exit. I swallowed an A-pill

for sobering up and a B-pill for coordination. To be honest, the letters swayed a little from all the white crap, so I took another one, on the run. I might have gotten the pills mixed up because a few seconds later my body felt like it was on fire. My artificial lung was pumping like crazy, I could barely catch my breath, and a moment later I was covered in cold sweat and my left cheek was numb. I stood in front of the elevator for at least ten seconds. The symptoms subsided and everything went back to normal. The cold sweat was replaced by warm sweat, and the temperature seemed to go up suddenly, making my ears pop. Oh yes, I had gotten the pills mixed up. How did I know? I stepped into the elevator and took a deep breath. My ears were on fire. My blood was boiling. I remembered every damn moment of my life, I remembered every feeling and urge, but I swear to the Stars – when I combined these three pills into some horrific blend – I was angrier than ever before in my life. As angry as a black hole!!!

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The first thing that Igor felt after he left the embrace of the *Zed* was blood rushing to his head and his chest swelling. Weightlessness was the last thing he wanted, but this was precisely what existed inside the small shuttle. He was strapped into the seat and he rolled his eyes. His nose was congested and he tried to clear it with all his might, in vain. He rubbed his nose with his hand when he felt his face was slightly swollen, and then he turned quite serious, not wanting to succumb to space sickness so quickly. The bodies of the bioinformaticists were in many ways much more delicate than those of ordinary

people.

The measurements that he was planning to take were crucial. He had to precisely locate the colonies of goggle-eyed creatures so that the Members of the Order could land as closely as possible and carry out the plan. The calculations for the orbit that the *Zed* oscillated in were off, so attempting to get more precise data on the gravitational constant had become the priority for this stage of the mission.

If they were to use the old calculations, it would take the MotOs more than a hundred hours to get back to the *Zed*, which meant that they would have less than five days to meet the quota that they were given – 50,000 confirmed hits, with females accounting for at least 40% of the hits. Psychology was responsible for the other side of the equation: if the MotOs were absent more than three days from the *Zed*, the probability of a clash between the citizens on the ship – caused by jealousy, envy, intolerance and the knowledge that most of the MotOs were on the planet – would increase to 40%, which was unsustainable and unacceptable, so the optimal 67 hours necessary to complete the mission was the priority, and consequently – a new, more precise trajectory was necessary, which would make this possible.

The measurement shuttle could carry three passengers, but Igor was alone this time, which was not in line with any of the ancient protocols for leaving the mother ship. Specifically, back in the early days of man's conquest of space, it was common for a minimum of two astronauts to leave the mother ship, because accidents happened in airless space – due to equipment failure as well as human error – and so additional security was always required for solo work in the harsh conditions of space. But

millennia had passed and over time man had started considering the vastness of space his home, knowing outer space much better than firm ground under his feet, and it was logical for the paradigm principle to suppress even the little remaining respect towards the huge parent of all of space and time.

Alone in the well-lit cabin, slightly woozy from the first symptoms of space sickness, Igor calculated the distance at which he should start his measurements. The shuttle slowed down at 20,000 kilometers from the *Zed* and only 6,000 kilometers from the edge of the atmosphere of the G-planet, and the gentle light of the egg-shaped pod that could easily hold two people, traveling towards the atmosphere, indicated the beginning of the measurement process.

The closed pod had almost all the recognizable elements of an experiment that had been devised and carried out 4,000 years before on the Home Planet. But iron balls were not being used now, rather a concentrated light that could measure values shorter than the Planck length; primitive wires were not being used to connect the balls, rather a thin, barely visible carbon fiber, so strong that no man could break it; and up at the top of the irregular cone, a photo-probe was measuring the rotation and playing the role of a torsion balance, and it transferred all the data via shortwave to a sensor that was connected to Igor's computer. It wasn't easy to curb the impact of gravity on all sides, but the bioinformaticists had calculated that this way, at this distance, at least the influence of all the extraneous parameters affecting the results would be reduced.

The first data started coming in after a few seconds. The speed of light and manipulation of its structure significantly speeded up the entire process. According to the indications,

Igor would not have to stay this far from the *Zed* for more than half an hour, because all the preparations for such a sensitive task had been devised and perfected over a great many years.

He watched the flashing displays and monitored the scales obtained through the readings. Everything proceeded as they had predicted. The shuttle hovered peacefully in place, using small antimatter thrusters, not allowing the spacecraft to get too close to source of the force that would irreversibly pull it into the atmosphere and crash it on the planet. But as it often happens, people overlook the obvious and spend all their strength, knowledge and energy on things that are more complicated than old instruments that have been tested a thousand times. Less than five minutes later, feeling nauseous from the worsening space sickness, Igor noticed a sudden shift in the trajectory. It wasn't a terrifying hair-raising speed, an observer from the *Zed* would not even notice that he was moving in any direction or deviating from the set trajectory. But when Igor glanced at the antimatter fuel cell bay, his gray forehead started sweating. The fuel cell was almost empty, the thrusters could no longer keep his shuttle at a safe distance, and the G-planet started pulling him towards its ice-covered polar cap.

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Only I – of course *I, I, I* –could carry out this damn rescue mission, because they wouldn't let anyone else near the bio-informaticists. This gray puffed up fucking slob hadn't check the fuel cell status, and that was Rule No. 2 in the Space Flight Manual. Rule No. 1 was *Announce your departure to all superiors and confirm authenticity with the code*.

I cursed and spat and roared while I put on the fucking spacesuit, standing in the shuttle dock. I had to put it on then because there wasn't enough room in the shuttle. So I spent the entire trip gift-wrapped in a hermetic suit. Two technicians held the massive suit and checked the instruments on it, so I wouldn't end up like that damn asshole who was floating toward the G-planet and probably terrified of the view of the polar cap. If it were up to me, I would have left the son of a bitch and continued on without him. But Members of the Order serve the captain and the captain serves the bioinformaticists. What a way to end the day.

When they attached the helmet and finally completed the check of the entire suit, I walked to the shuttle where two pilots were already standing by. Next to them was a backup fuel cell that I would gladly shove up Igor's ass and let him sparkle with that antimatter glow as he burned up in the atmosphere. The tight helmet muffled my curses, but not enough, and the pilots looked at me in fear and skillfully moved back, allowing me to bundle myself in the cargo bay behind them. Someone shouted "good luck" to me, probably one of the technicians who had helped me with the suit, and I barked "*Focáil leat!*" and "*Póg mo thóin!*" and disappeared into the shuttle.

I was fucking mad! I could feel my blood pressure go up. I was probably beet-red in the face and my eyes wanted to pop out of their sockets. And while I was talking to the captain I almost grabbed him by the neck and asked him about the other night – who was I kidding – I hadn't listened to him at all when he gave me the orders a few minutes ago. If there had been a single bio-freak nearby – I don't know how it all would have ended. But I found the strength not to split atoms and I only

heard what seemed important: *Igor, fuel cell, replace, manually.*

The shuttles were not designed to dock with each other and there were no decompression tubes like those in the cheap Sci-Fi movies that we watched when we were kids. I had to go outside and manually open the hatch. Of course, I had the help of a small electrical signal that would equalize the air pressures near the hatch, otherwise, if the hatch were to break away and hit me, I would find myself flying toward the planet along with Igor.

There was enough time. At this rate Igor would be touching the atmosphere in forty hours, because the pull of the G-planet was accelerating him very little. It had taken us a good four hours to get under way, and it would take us only five hours to reach him.

The pilots didn't speak to me the entire trip. During the first several minutes, while we were separating from the *Zed*, they even tried to establish some type of communication, but I was too irritated to answer anything coherent. I just cursed and growled inarticulately. Oh, how I wanted to break something, but the limitations of the boxy suit only increased my irritation. The suit was tight and I was hot, as though I was sitting next to the reactor. I always wondered whether spacesuits were proof that even after three thousand years of space conquests, man was still not capable of producing something comfortable. The tube on my penis pinched me and the vacuum around my ass was a real nightmare. White crap is a laxative, that's all I'll say. Taking the suit off some eighteen hours later would be quite disgusting.

When we finally got close enough to see Igor's shuttle clearly, it was just a blurry silver floating speck of technology, illu-

minated by the distant G-star. The temperature was still bearable, only 333 kelvins, and it was supposed to remain that way for several more hours, until the star came around the planet and incinerated everything in sight.

We were rapidly approaching as I put on my helmet and tightened the last fasteners that gave a hydraulic squeal. The pills were not letting up. I knew from experience that their effect lasted 48 hours, and the effect of the combination seemed to be at its peak. The shuttle of the fucking bio-freak was a slightly larger speck and I could see several hatches with weak light shining through – it appeared that the piece of shit was not sitting in complete darkness. We were only 5,000 meters away. I prepared myself.

I took a step back in order to make room for the large glass door to close hermetically, and having grabbed the antimatter fuel cell, I started equalizing the air pressure. The fuel cell was heavy as hell when I carried it on the *Zed*, even though it was no larger than my forearm. Now it was weightless, inducing me to smile briefly.

I was physically separated from the part of the craft where the pilots were located and all the noises slowly faded as the space filled with vacuum and low pressure. The pilots could see everything that I was doing. One of them came to the door and gave me an inquiring thumbs up, gesturing that everything was alright, I guessed. I responded with the middle finger, so he turned around and nodded. Suddenly the headphones started buzzing.

"Lieutenant Brenna! Can you read me?" said the pilot, turning toward me.

I gave him a look that let him know I heard him and that

he should finally explain what I would be doing when I got outside.

"We will pass the shuttle…" the pilot started, "… and we will start descending on its course. When we reach its speed, only then should you open the door. We will let you know. Attach the safety line to your belt!"

I attached it.

"The line is three hundred meters long. We will approach the shuttle and be five hundred meters in front of it. When the line is under tension we will slow down slightly so that the shuttle starts closing on you. Now attach the fuel cell to your belt!"

I attached it.

"Don't make any sudden moves because inertia will take you in an undesired direction. Be completely calm and leave the rest to us. If everything goes the way it should, you will simply be pinned to the shuttle… I believe right in front of the hatch. Get ready! Pressure equalized! Speeds matched! Open the hatch on my mark – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, now!"

I opened the hatch and saw a crowd of stars. The pressure was slightly higher in the cabin and the difference expelled me from the craft silently and slowly. I was tethered to the line that started to unwind quickly.

Perhaps too quickly for my idea of an excursion into space. At one moment I wondered whether something might get tangled, but the very next moment I didn't give a damn if it did get tangled. It unwound confidently and easily – I was already a hundred meters out. Igor's shuttle was coming up fast.

Thoughts rushed through my head as I looked at the small hatch. I'd been stationed in the North Wing for five years and

in those five damn years none of the bio-freaks had said hello to me or did anything decent for me. My head was throbbing. I was their on-duty nuisance and they ignored me whenever they could. On one occasion, or was it several, once again I hadn't understood any of the things they had presented while looking at the digital disks and checking Simulator 2, so I foolishly asked for someone to explain what I was looking at, so that I could enter the data more faithfully in the phonolog. Igor approached me with his absorbent eyes and the voice of a broken computer and said "Lieutenant, no one here doubts your dedication to this mission, but the reason that you are here has nothing to do with your intelligence. Unfortunately, you have the rare gift of eidetic memory, even I have no clue why nature gave you such a precious gift, but that is a fact and I have to accept it. Also, it is a fact that *you* have to be here until we reach the G-planet, so that you can record in the ship's log everything we are doing in the North Wing. Although reluctantly, I have to accept this too. We have work to do here, and what we are doing exceeds all the spheres that your imagination can possibly reach, therefore – accept the fact that you are retelling what you have memorized and don't try to understand the issue. You are a scribe here and nothing more. I hope that I've made myself clear – or do I need to simplify the explanation that I just gave *you*?"

Then, as I watched Igor's shuttle getting bigger and bigger – my blood started boiling. I admit that for a moment I imagined something going wrong and I could not save the little gray shit. But the captain had been clear "Saving him is an absolute priority!!!" he said. And I would save him, I had made the decision.

I tried to forget all the hours spent in the North Wing and all those conversations that I entered into the phonolog with anal precision. Indeed, I had never attached much importance to anything that I said, and I would fall asleep instantly. I had a clear conscience and lucid mind. My entire being was focused on the proper training of my recruits and honing their game so that they would make better MotOs. My entire effort was precisely aimed at creating better drills and simulations. I gave giving everything I had for the fight, strategy, battles, weapons… I completely excluded the North Wing from my standard daily routine – I didn't forget because I simply couldn't forget. I was busy with run-throughs, giving advice and precise reports, achieving harmony within the group, reflexes and warrior logic. And when it had hit me several hours before, the seed of doubt was planted and now I was almost certain that someone wanted to draw attention away from the true purpose of this mission. Someone had done all that damn psychological math and gotten the Order out of the way. Furthermore, they had included it in creating a mystery called *the most important mission in the history of mankind*. Scenes from the laboratory flashed in my head: Simulator 1, Simulator 2, genesis, autophagy, entropy, anti-entropy, chambers, simulations, chaos, initial conditions, capsules, plasma, gun ammunition…

I was only about twenty meters away from Igor's shuttle when I felt I was being drawn slightly backwards. The line that I was tethered to went taut, not allowing me to float back toward the shuttle that I had come out, by changing direction and inertia. I could touch Igor's shuttle with my hands and then I felt the magnetic cups on my gloves attach to the fuselage. I was exactly beneath the hatch.

I did everything slowly so as not to botch the procedure. I removed the panel next to the hatch and activated the switch that closed the glass door behind Igor inside the shuttle and equalized the pressure within the cargo bay. I counted to twenty. When the green light came on, I pressed the lever and the hatch slid open. I slowly lowered myself in headfirst, and several seconds later, when I had grabbed the handles and secured myself inside the shuttle, I released the tether, which escaped back into space. The shuttle door closed and a dull hissing sound meant that I could remove my helmet. "I'm in," I told the pilots over the helmet radio.

***

"It's about time you got here!" said Igor arrogantly, as only he knew how. "You're fooling around and late, and so much depends on these measurements!"

I listened to his words in astonishment, because I was still in shock from being in open space, and my thoughts and doubts about the entire story. I simply couldn't believe what I was hearing. But I was calm.

"*Thank you* would be enough," I said and handed him the full fuel cell that I removed from my belt.

Igor looked at me blankly. His face was swollen and his eyes were even more sunken than usual. But his skin was tighter, clearer, younger. His hands trembled uncontrollably and his pupils clearly had all the symptoms of space sickness. But, I swear to the Stars – he looked younger.

"Thank you?" he said and snatched the fuel cell from my hands. "You take too many liberties, MotO! Remember, you

are here because you have been spending time with us for the past five years. And what you see remains stored deep in your memory. If by any chance this was to be documented, you would have been summoned even earlier. Do you understand? You were not supposed to see this part. And now, help me remove the empty fuel cell."

Unwieldy as I was in the spacesuit, I went up to the control panel and pulled a lever. I might not have reacted, because it was obvious that the bio-freaks were unable to mimic human emotions, but just as I twisted the empty fuel cell I heard "Stupid MotO," and then all I saw was red.

I pushed him lightly and he floated three meters into the cargo bay and there his head found a tank of pure oxygen. His blood was dark red. I returned the empty fuel cell into the socket and grabbed the full one, which was floating in the air between us. Even though I didn't know how to fly a shuttle, I knew how to switch off the communications so I pressed a button and stopped the flow of signals to us and from us. We were neither broadcasting nor receiving anything – we were a dead point in space hurling towards the atmosphere of the G-planet.

"What… What are you doing? You stupid…"

I reached him in a second and threw him off balance, but this time I grabbed him by his damn gray neck and launched myself together with him toward the control panel and pilot seats. I shook him off under the seat and I grabbed the other one.

"You… You… You have to replace the fuel cell… You have to… We're going to crash…"

"I don't have to do anything, you damn son of a bitch!" I thundered at last. "The guys in the other shuttle will be power-

less when they see that we're still falling toward the planet, but they won't be able to do anything except get out of the way."

"But…"

"There's no *but*, you sleazy bio-freak. I read off the instruments that we have 47 more minutes until we reach the point of no return. Once they've reported to the *Zed*, they can only confirm that we're in trouble. No one can reach us in time, and I doubt that you can wrestle the fuel cell from my hands. I've switched off the coms and they probably think that we're in even bigger trouble. No one will ever suspect a *stupid* MotO of killing the head honcho of the most important project. And that is exactly what I will do if you don't start talking!"

"Talk about what… I don't know what you mean!" said Igor, gasping.

He was crouched under the control panel, holding on to the seat mount, trying to stay out of my reach. A drop of blood floated in front of my eyes.

"Listen, Igor… I know that the entire damn thing is a lie and that there's something bigger going on. Don't make me pull it out of you with my fists and my laser knife. Oh, look, this seems to be something important."

I switched off the main navigation instrument. The few thrusters that were still powered up now stopped. I didn't know how to calculate it, but the 47 minutes that we had left until we hit the atmosphere were probably cut in half. I was sure that Igor knew by exactly how much.

"Don't do that… I beg you… I have to carry out the measurements… I have to collect the data from the probe…"

"Either you tell me what's going on or you keep it a secret and we'll end this story together. To be honest, I was getting a

little sick of the *Zed* and I don't give a damn about burning up in the atmosphere. Come to think of it, if I were to choose a way to die – I couldn't have chosen anything better. Speak!!!"

Then Igor burst into tears, real baby tears that he had kept deep in his bosom all these years. He was nodding, but the little shit wouldn't let go of the mount.

"I can't, Brenna… I can't…"

I breathed a sigh of relief. So, I was right. There was a bigger picture to the entire story.

"Oh yes you can, you bet you can... Because if we don't get back with the data that is so important, and on top of that without the main fucking scribe – who knows what's going to happen to the mission. Speak!!!"

The planet was coming up quickly. On the monitor it looked like we were falling rapidly. The shuttle that I had come on had already moved out of the way and everyone onboard the *Zed* was probably aware of our situation. Even if I had scared Igor, that was nothing compared to what the image of the rapidly-growing planet did to him.

"But…" said Igor, so I kicked him once more out of spite.

"Here's what we'll do," I began. "You tell me everything that you know. I replace the fuel cell and we go back. We'll return as heroes who experienced the rare excitement of a space adventure. That is to say – you will be the hero, and I will be your savior. I'm a soldier, Igor… You know what the word of a Member of the Order means! I want to know because it's eating me up. I want to hear what's going to happen down on the planet. But most of all – I want to hear what will happen when we return to the *Zed*! Those are my terms, and what happened here – that I will take to my grave."

That was a lie, because the captain had ordered that I log everything that happened. Who am I to second guess the captain?

Igor looked at me and wiped his tears. He stared through me for a long moment, and then glanced briefly at the monitor and the planet that looked like it was within reach. I was waiting for him to break, because no matter how much they knew about the psychology of human beings, they would never know what the breaking point was, and Igor was reaching his right now.

"Alright," he said finally. "Just replace the fuel cell so I can collect the data."

With one swift motion I removed the old fuel cell and replaced it with the new one. I switched on the navigation and opened the communications. At least four different channels were screaming inside the shuttle.

"Now you tell them that we've fixed the problems and are coming back," I said peacefully. "… and then you have five hours to tell me everything that you know, unless you want to experience decompression without a suit."

His gray face turned pale and – I swear to the Stars – it was pulsating.

IX

The transport craft had been in the atmosphere of the G-planet for almost an hour and was adjusting the approach vector according to the data that had been provided. It was larger than the standard shuttles and could hold twenty fully-equipped Members of the Order. In this modified ship, the group of ten people was slowly adapting to the gravity of the planet that was taking them under its wing.

In addition to the two pilots who would be staying aboard while the group explored, there were also two Members of the Order – Carp and Huan. They were the only ones who had weapons with lethal rounds and several flash bangers for intimidation. Carp and Huan were the lucky ones who would be the first to set foot on the new world of the G-planet. Carmen headed the team of biologists who were to take samples of everything they encountered and bring back as much information as possible to the *Zed* in a mission that would last only six hours. Her assistant Sacha, who held a Ph.D. in microbiology and geology, had dark skin, almost black, and was thin and extremely tall. His calmness instilled everyone with a dose of extremely needed self-confidence, and he himself did not show any signs of excitement. Also running around Carmen was Mayril, who was trying to read from the tablet that Carmen held in her hand. The short and delicate blond girl of Scandinavian origin had turned twenty-three last month, but

her dedication, aspiration and desire had led her to the point where she was taking part in the adventure of the first descent. She was a hard worker and that was why Carmen had brought her along. The other three were clerics of the three most popular religions on the *Zed*. Anna was a Catholic priest who had been struggling with depression for years. Ham was a Muslim imam who headed the largest congregation on the *Zed* – even though the majority neglected religion. There were more than three hundred believers in Islam and as such they represented the largest group. Ham had an athletic built because he had dedicated his entire life to the faith and sports, and his bald head only completed his image of gracefulness. And McLister, the druid leader, who had come on this voyage only because his religion was the oldest one known to man. Records about the goddess Danu indicated that the entire Druid faith was actually the first civilized religious movement on the Home Planet. If there was anything to discover that was related to ancient cultures, he was the person who would certainly identify it. He was blond and short, and his nose, all snub and small, was lost on his large face.

"I'm adjusting the approach vector," said the pilot. "Control, do you read me?"

"We read you loud and clear. Corrections sent. Three minutes to touchdown."

"I see a rise in the southern part of the jungle. Current altitude 4,000 meters. Estimated distance from the Rock?"

"Distance exactly 2,090 meters. Unfortunately you will have to go through the jungle to the clearing."

"Roger, Control. Commencing landing sequence. Current altitude 3,089 meters. Out."

"The sky is clear," came Captain Wilson's voice from the *Zed*, and the craft started its descent.

***

The ground trembled. A cloud of red dust was kicked twenty meters into the air. For the first time in history, man had landed on an alien planet.

The ship's short metal landing gear was barely visible from the flames pouring out of the antimatter thrusters. The nearby treetops came alive in the artificial wind. The cloud of dust obscured the view of the newcomers' ship and it was impossible to determine how many eyes actually witnessed the first landing. From what they knew about the G-planet they could say with certainty that any animal –except the primates – would forget that landing within moments, because at this level of development animals learn in generations, and so far not a single generation had encountered humans. The hissing stopped and the dust started to settle. The ground became calm. The hydraulic door on the ship screeched for an extremely long moment and two Members of the Order, holding guns to their shoulders, were the first to step onto the ship's large ramp, which gently touched the red soil. Their suits made them twenty percent larger than they were, and they were big men. Dust particles were still falling on the visors of their helmets.

"Left, all clear!" said Carp.

"Right, clear!" Huan confirmed.

They walked down the ramp in their heavy boots and finally dug their heels into the dry dusty soil.

"I'm not reading anything larger than a rat within a thou-

sand meters," said Huan and turned toward the doors of the ship.

"The atmosphere is suitable for breathing. All readings are within normal limits," said Carp.

"The honor is all yours!"

Huan turned toward his colleague who, with a skillful move of the hand, pressed the lever on his chin. The helmet clicked and he detached it from the rest of the suit without hesitation. He took a deep breath.

"Fucking incredible," he muttered while exhaling.

Huan also removed his helmet and let it slide down next to his feet.

"Oh, yes! Fucking, my friend."

The MotOs' removed helmets were an invitation to the other members of the expedition to come out from the safety of the ship and finally breathe in fresh air after spending their entire lives in a confined space with artificial living conditions.

Carmen moved first and paused on the ramp. The cool pleasant morning air filled her nostrils. The G-star warmed her face. The smells that reached her awoke inexplicable feelings about the ancient, almost forgotten world, from which they had all originated. She closed her eyes and let her senses awaken. The cool air caressed her skin. For the first time in her life she felt fresh, unrefined air, full of smells, bacteria, dust… "Wonderful, indescribable," she thought.

The others in the group came down the ramp enthusiastically and commented on the beatitude they were witnessing.

"Allah is with us! This is wonderful," said Ham.

"Only the honorable Queen Danu can produce such smells," said McLister.

When they came off the ramp and touched the dusty soil with their hands, it was finally clear to them that they were on another world. The soil had a powdery texture, but was lively, light and soft. The small specks disappeared from the palm of the hand in an instant, carried away by even the slightest breeze. They squeezed the red dust with soiled hands and ran their fingers over the small stones left behind. No one felt like collecting data, measuring or exploring; they all sincerely wanted to feel the unexplored world with their entire being, and for the first ten minutes that is what they did.

After the first impressions, several magnificent statements that no one recorded, several curses and three prayers – they looked toward the Rock in the distance.

They were standing on a rise surrounded by jungle. The red cliffs that they needed to reach were more than two kilometers away from their current position, and what separated them from the cliffs was a giant jungle standing guard, howling with a thousand noises, bathed in light from the G-star; it had never been explored, investigated or mapped. A complete unknown to mankind, but also a challenge, which all of them in the group were more than willing to brave.

To the left the jungle was cut by a huge gray mountain massif that cast a shadow on the entire forest valley. It was about ten kilometers away. They could only guess what lay beyond the mountain. To the right of the rise that they stood on the jungle gave way to low vegetation, ending in low grass that was barely discernible from this position, appearing as an endless green carpet scored by the tributaries of a great river. The river did not have a name – yet. Their trek led straight through the dense jungle. The lush treetops were broad and dense, and

the largest of them went up as high as twenty meters. The tree trunks were twisted, thin and interweaved like wooden braids, but fashioned with such mechanical precision that each individual tree was a solid construction.

Carp and Huan broke the silence and walked several meters down the slope toward the jungle.

"That's the direction," said Carp, looking at a small device on his left wrist. "The path is clear until we get to the jungle … I don't know what's beyond that. I'm reading many intertwined plant species. I won't lie to you – it will be difficult."

"We should get going," Carmen pointed out, while tightening the waist strap on her large backpack.

Anna nodded, and the others started lifting their equipment and checking the devices that they would be taking with them.

"May Allah help us," Ham said.

They started down the gentle slope towards the great jungle, leaving the ship in the clearing. The two pilots came out onto the ramp and no one found it odd that they did not express the desire to set foot on the newly discovered planet. They simply waved and shut the door behind them. The ramp retracted into the ship and the hydraulic screeching stopped.

Several kilometers away red cliffs towered above as though they did not belong to the green landscape beneath them. The natural color contrast – red and green – looked surreal, but the awe had passed and the group now faced the task that was why they had been sent on this expedition.

As they approached the jungle, the soil turned from dust and sand to rock and clay. It took them more than an hour to reach the edge of the huge vegetation. Descending into the

valley, the humidity reached almost 100 percent and the temperature increased by several degrees. Huan stopped several meters from the immense greenery. From this perspective the jungle looked endless, and the great mountain and the huge plains scored by rivers were no longer visible. Only the jungle remained. Immense, unpredictable and dense.

"Damn, it's hot enough to drive you crazy!"

Sacha knelt down, scratched the moist clay with his nail and smelled it. He then reached into his backpack and took a piece of soil with polished tweezers, and skillfully placed it into a shiny test-tube.

"It will take us years to completely understand the geology that has led to this. The smell is unusual, but I think that I can smell a large quantity of sulfur. That means…"

"…That the red rock is hiding its small, dark, volcanic secret," said Mayril, interrupting him.

"Precisely, and that explains such dense vegetation."

Sacha stood up and turned toward his colleagues.

"Don't worry. There won't be an eruption today," he said with a smile. "And from this we can see that there hasn't been one recently. I estimate that the last one was several hundred years ago."

"Alright," said Anna. "It's high time we finally step into the jungle. Huan should go in the front and Carp at the rear … and please – stay on the path and stick with the group. Who knows what awaits us in there."

The group stepped into the jungle in silence. The light of day decreased by several luxes. The terrain was difficult but passable. After a few meters the temperature rose again and the air became thicker and heavier. From time to time it was

almost like it vanished, leaving them gasping. The humidity was unbearable. After walking for five minutes they were drenched in sweat. They stopped often and briefly, looking around while they drank water. The jungle was extremely quiet – even though it had not seemed quiet before they entered it – but full of life: bugs, small reptiles, rodents, there were many animals that resembled squirrels. Large butterfly-like insects in a myriad of colors dominated the thicket and no one could figure out how they could fly through such thick canopies.

Tree roots protruded from the soil, extending up to twenty meters from the trunk. Each tree trunk looked like an octopus with thousands of tentacles thicker than a person's arm. The group made its way by trudging the soft ground through the piled up leaves. There was no trace of any larger animals. Awkwardly they leaped over and hacked their way through the unexplored jungle. Only the MotOs and Ham cleared the obstacles with ease and it seemed that they actually found this impassability to be fun.

"Just keep it up a bit more…" said Ham at one moment. "I just hope that there will be more of these roots… Look how smooth they are, but the traction is excellent. I can climb up as much as I want… look…"

The others were quiet. Sweat burned their eyes and bodies. An occasional plant would scratch them with its defensive thorns, but those with yellow flowers resembling bat wings were especially unpleasant. The pain was instantaneous and strong, but harmless. Carmen and Mayril collected leaves as they walked and picked fruit along the way. They placed them skillfully in small vials and stacked them in hermetically sealed boxes. They planned on studying them later. They often ex-

pressed regret that the plant cells probably held many remedies, but there was no time to stay longer. Orders from the *Zed* were clear and no one questioned them.

Finally, after an hour and a half of walking through the dense jungle, they started to see light on the far side.

"The Red Rock," said McLister, gasping for breath, and gave everyone a well-meaning smile.

Everyone felt relief when the big red rock started replacing the green growth, and with every step they were closer to escaping the claustrophobic embrace of the jungle. Joy and relief were visible on their faces. Tension gave way to exhilaration when they came out of the jungle and stepped onto a huge rock shelf. Brown bushes with small leaves were growing here and there in the cracks.

The Rock took up the entire view. There was nothing as dominant as a one-hundred-meter tall cliff that extended for tens of kilometers in both directions. They stopped to catch their breath. The slight breeze dried their sweaty clothes and faces, and they gave in to the moment, breathing in the fresh air.

"That was hard," Huan commented.

The rest of the group had already sat down on the rock shelf, stretching their legs and removing debris, thorns and dirt that they had accumulated while passing through the thicket. Carp stepped aside and radioed First Pilot Hertz onboard the transport craft. "Hertz, do you read me?"

"Yes, Carp, I read you. Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine; we're just a little tired. The jungle is a fucking bitch… But… We need to send the photo-probes in a radius of ten kilometers. We have to be sure that there are no

big surprises."

"Alright, I'm deploying them." The radio clicked. "No, there are no significant irregularities. I'm reading several primates, but of significantly smaller size. It appears it is a different species. I think that they aren't an issue as far as security goes, but you should be careful. I'll continue sending out the photo-probes every five minutes and I'll report what they find."

"Thanks, mate. Carp out."

He turned to the group and waved them on.

"Let's go people! We don't have all day!"

Carmen took the first step.

"We'll go with Huan to the western side of the Rock. I'm reading several subspecies of *Solanum panticulatum*, perhaps we can use something for a new type of pill. Mayril should go with you, and one of the holy persons with us."

The others nodded and Carp lifted his gun onto his shoulder. While passing by Mayril, Sacha said:

"Coms might be down when you go around the Rock. I'm reading a lot of known metals deep in the Rock. I think that it will interfere significantly with the short waves."

The two groups nodded.

"The rest of you – follow me!" shouted Carp.

Ham, Anna, Mayril and Carp started out toward the left side of the great cliff. They had to cover several hundred meters to the first small gorge where the bioinformaticists had registered large groups of primates carving grooves into the Rock. Everything indicated a shrine, religion, frescos. The pilgrims had to investigate the Rock, but they also had to pass through the gorge and the three hundred meters to the first such place. The wind kicked up and brought the smell of unfamiliar flow-

ers and fruits from the nearby trees. The rock shelf continued on for kilometers and connected to countless tall rocks that were neatly stacked against each other, like building blocks. Some were rounded, some were jagged, some completely flat. The landscape resembled the ancient Grand Canyon, only in this case the plants growing in the cracks were different and significantly impeded their progress. But it was easier to walk here than through the jungle. The small canyon lay ahead of them. The Rock had collapsed in this place, creating a passage between two boulders wide enough for an entire freight ship to pass through. And before they went behind the rock, Anna looked at the other group about two kilometers away, carefully choosing their path. She felt uneasy and muttered a short prayer, but stifled the bitter feeling that she might never see them again.

***

"They're so cute," whispered Mayril, looking at two goggle-eyed youngsters playing next to a puddle of water on the rock about fifty meters away from the group. Ham was visibly nervous as he crouched behind a small boulder with the others. "What do we do now?" he asked. "If youngsters are here… ahhh… You know what that means."

"Don't panic, Ham" said Anna. "The Rock is two hundred meters that way," she pointed left in the direction of a dark red cliff that was quite different from everything that they had encountered. "If we're careful they won't even notice us."

But just as she spoke, one of the youngsters stood up on two legs and turned toward them. It raised its chin high and sniffed

the air, nostrils flaring.

"The wind," said Carp through clenched teeth. "We're standing fucking upwind."

The primate cub started walking toward them. It wobbled gently and kept sniffing. The group pressed against the rock, hoping this would hamper the young primate, but it was already too late. Standing on two legs it mumbled quietly and gestured with its front legs – or were they hands, and peered over the rock looking at them up close. Anna stood up.

"It's pointless. Get up. Let it see that we're not a threat."

They all rose and Carp uttered a juicy curse. Mayril stretched out her hand toward the youngster.

"What are you doing?" said Ham harshly.

"Let me! Don't you see how cute it is?"

The youngster stood almost two meters away, looking at them with its big dark eyes. Its fur was sparse and almost gone on its shoulders and knees. Its nostrils were wide and the skin on its face was smooth and also hairless.

"It doesn't look at all like a monkey," said Anna, bewildered. "It looks so…"

"…damn human," Carp added.

Mayril took a step forward and the youngster stopped in its tracks.

"Look, don't be afraid. Come, little one… Come, I won't hurt you."

Over its shoulder she could see the other youngster, who had stayed by the puddle, anxiously watching everything that was happening. It too stood on two legs, staring motionlessly at the strangers with its arms by its sides.

"Come, little one."

She offered her hand. She could already feel the radiant heat from its body on the tips of her fingers. She could almost touch it, but she didn't want to do so until the little creature touched her first.

"Come on…"

"Just be careful…" said Ham.

The youngster first sniffed Mayril's palm, then gently gripped her with its hand. Its hand was soft and warm, slightly moist from the water it had been playing in only moments earlier.

The first contact between people and a being from another planet took place under unusual circumstances: with an armed and ready gun, in silence, in the presence of Christianity and Islam, and the inability to communicate.

The youngster suddenly lost interest in the group that watched in silence as it wobbled away on two legs. It returned to its friend, who had already turned away from them, and resumed playing in the puddle. A moment later they were splashing away, completely unimpressed by what they had just experienced.

Carp lowered his gun.

"Leave them. Let's go!"

They walked in silence the remaining meters to the cliff that they wanted to investigate so much. It was large, but not bigger than the others that surrounded it. Anna was the first to touch it. She ran her hand across its surface, as though caressing it. It was soft to the touch, moist and somewhat coarse.

"This is clay," said Ham. "And what is…"

Everyone looked up and saw millions of holes in the clay cliff. The holes were not large enough to fit a human hand, but

there were visible traces of blows and stone dust on some of them. Someone wanted to get what was inside the hollows, by force. They took a better look at them – they were about ten centimeters apart. Carp hit the rock with the butt of his gun.

Instantly millions of birds flew out of the holes, producing an unbearable noise. The group ducked to protect themselves. Mayril even screamed.

"Damn birds!" shouted Carp.

"This is not a shrine like we thought…" Anna continued, crouching to avoid the flock of chaotic birds. "… this is… a feeding ground!"

The birds scattered in a second as though they had never been there in the first place. A deadly silence came over the gully. The group rose up and looked around. There was something strange about the silence. It was too quiet.

"They used rocks to get to the eggs and the birds," said Anna.

"It appears so," Ham confirmed.

They looked up at the magnificent sight of the dark red cliff above them for a few more seconds.

"We should go inform the others," said Carp.

A low growl made them turn away from the cliff. Six goggle-eyed adults stood a meter from them. They had bloodshot eyes and quickened breaths. There was something very aware in their eyes – something beastly.

They were shorter than humans, but their shoulders were as broad as a MotO's in full gear. The muscles of their powerful bodies were throbbing. The first one was the pack leader. He got quite close to Mayril and shrieked ferociously. Drool dripped from his canines, soaking the fine sand on the rock

shelf. The other five primates repeated the shriek in sync. The gorge had become a nightmare for the first explorers.

"No! No! We don't want to harm you!" shouted Ham, raising his hands in front of him.

"Calm down, Ham," said Carp, holding his gun aimed at the large male. "If they wanted to kill us they would have already done so."

"I hope you're right," Anna muttered. "What now?"

"Fire a flash banger. That should scare them away, and then… Then we run toward the transport craft. I don't think they're alone… Hertz, do you read me?"

The silence in the speaker confirmed their fears: the EM waves could not get through the rock. The males froze. The strongest one took a step toward Mayril. She trembled. Mute. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Mayril," said Anna said. "Don't move. Keep still and don't look him in the eye. Mayril. Close your eyes."

The male's nostrils flared and he took a deep breath. Silence reigned. He sniffed her all over, and she cried. Tears rolled from her closed eyes. She made an eerie sound of sobbing mixed with disgust.

It took just a fraction of a second for the large male to swing his powerful hand and slash Mayril's throat. Blood gushed onto the red rock. The others started screaming while Carp fired a flash banger. The six primates quickly scattered, dragging the lifeless body with them. It was like a rubber doll leaving a bloody trail behind it. They made their way around the tall cliff, jumping along the lower protruding spikes in the rocky landscape. Within seconds they had disappeared without a trace.

"Mayril!!!" Anna shouted, tears flowing uncontrollably

down here dirty cheeks. “Mayril!!!”

Ham was in shock and he shook his head in silence, as though wanting to deny what he had just seen.

“Move it!!! Damn it!!! Move!!!,” shouted Carp. “We can’t help her!!! She’s dead!!! Move it!!!”

He dragged Anna and Ham, shaking them out of shock. They had to run and warn the others. They had to reach the transport craft as quickly as possible. The wind carried a cry, a beastly shriek – which was followed by a multitude of shrieks by unbridled beasts. There were far more of them than they could have assumed. They ran quickly, without looking back. They ran past the puddle where the youngsters had been playing, they passed through the small gorge. Anna screamed and cried uncontrollably in rage and anguish. Ham was pale. He didn’t make a sound.

The wide rock shelf separating them from the jungle was vast and clear. Frighteningly empty of cover. Carp turned as he ran and saw several primates skillfully jumping over smaller boulders and enter the jungle several hundred meters from their position. But they had to go through the jungle. It was the only way. The sound in his headphones confirmed that the coms were back online. “Hey Carp, it’s Hertz! What’s going on? I’m getting thousands of readings!”

He didn’t have time to explain.

“Open the door when you read our signals fifty meters away, but stand on the ramp with guns. Do you hear me? Under no circumstances are you to open the door until you see us!!! That’s an order!”

“I read you loud and clear!”

Then they heard shouts. The other group was running to-

ward them. They were not missing anyone.

"What the hell is going on!?" shouted Huan on the run. "What the hell!?"

The groups joined up. They were at the entrance to the jungle.

"Where is Mayril?" Carmen asked, panting. She had a finger-length cut on her cheek and she was bleeding.

"They got her," Carp said. "She's dead."

"Oh, my God!"

A terrifying roar made them shiver. The primates were close.

"They went into the jungle," said Carp. "We have to be careful. I don't know how many of them there are."

"Fuck this!!! I'm loading lethal charges!"

"Wait, Huan! The captain was clear!"

"Yes, but these beasts are killing us!"

"We are under orders, Huan. We cannot kill a single one. We accepted the responsibility; you know very well that we could have refused. Leave the flash bangers."

"Fuck me if this makes any sense!," said Huan in anger.

"We have to move," Sacha added. "I feel them watching us."

They ran into the jungle. There was no time to make their way slowly through the thick foliage, so they pushed through savagely. They ran quickly. Carp led the group and Huan held up the rear.

Something was following them closely, running twenty meters parallel to them on either side. They heard heavy breathing and the sound of heavy feet running. There were thousands of feet and no one wanted to even guess how many primates were hunting them. Dense vegetation. Prickly branches. Muddy

ground. Slippery ground. Thick branches. Impassable tunnels. Intertwined sharp leaves. Thorns. Hidden puddles. Soggy humus. Scared little animals. Insects. Rotting branches. Stinking fruit.

"These are fucking predators!," shouted Anna as she ran. "Fucking, fucking predators – not civilized beings!"

A flash banger went off. Everyone stopped instantly. Huan was not at the rear. A long moment later they heard a twisted human scream – then silence.

"Move it!!! Move it!!!," shouted Carp.

They could make out the clearing through the tangled tree trunks, yet they knew that the slope that awaited them would be the most difficult obstacle. Footsteps and heavy breathing were all around them once again. They didn't see anyone. There was only growling and the stomping of fast feet. Branches swayed all around. The foliage danced to the rhythm of their pursuers. Finally – the clearing and the great climb that led to the transport craft.

They started climbing up the loose soil. The ground gave way under their feet and crumbled as though it had a mind of its own. Ham was the last one. He was hobbling and holding his leg, which was bent unnaturally and dragging by his side.

"Hurry up!," shouted Carmen.

"I have an open fracture… I can't!!! I can't!!!"

Carp turned around and started sliding down toward Ham. On his way down he set the charges to lethal.

"Come on, you damn son of a bitch!," he shouted at Ham and grabbed him under his arm. He dragged him up the hill.

The primates came out of the forest and were now slowly catching up to them. They knew that the humans had nowhere

to run. The growling was replaced by screams with strange frequencies. It was as though they were communicating among themselves using tonalities. Carp was pulling Ham. Ham was screaming in pain. Carmen, Anna, Sacha and McLister, who was somehow the fastest, were already three-quarters up the incline. The primates got closer. Anna turned to look at the bottom of the hill and saw a youngster gnawing on a tender female hand. Its snout was bloody. The male nearest to them – the one heading the hunt – also had a bloody face and hands – or were those his forelimbs? He was climbing quickly and was only ten meters away from Carp and Ham. Anna screamed and threw a rock at the male. She missed by a whole two meters.

Carp turned around and shot at the ground in front of the large male. Captain's orders were still a priority for him. The male stumbled and slid back several meters. He paused, giving Carp several precious seconds. The top of the hill was near. Sacha and McLister descended several meters to help Carp with Ham. Carp fired several more bursts in front of the horde of several thousand red-eyed primates who were gaining ground unstoppably.

Hydraulics screeched and the primates stopped in their tracks. The craft was opening up. Pilot Hertz stood at the door, gun in hand.

"What the…"

Carmen was the first one up the ramp, then Anna. The primates were just a meter behind the trio carrying the unconscious Ham. Hertz fired another flash banger. The foursome rushed onto the ramp and the door closed. Several blows, most likely rocks, echoed throughout the ship. Everyone lay panting in the cargo bay.

"What the hell?" said the other pilot from the cockpit over the speaker. "There are thousands of them and they are all around the ship. What should I do?"

"Let's get to the *Zed*," said Anna, still in tears, but seemingly the only person with the strength to respond. "Ham is seriously injured. We have to hurry."

"But the goggle-eyed are beneath the jets… The orders clearly state…"

Anna looked at mangled Ham and her colleagues, lying bloody at the end of their strength. She thought of Huan and her Mayril. Then she remembered the cute face of the youngster gnawing on Mayril's hand.

"As far as I'm concerned, feel free to roast the sons of bitches!!!"

The ship roared and rose up, leaving the hilltop bathed in the stench of burnt flesh.

X

She was a strong mother. Fearless, daring, aggressive enough to defend herself from all those who wished to harm her and her youngster. Males would go out of their way to avoid her – with the exception of the strongest ones, and even they approached her with caution.

The Great Eye that Gives Life had almost gone behind the tip of the distant mountain and the golden-orange valley was teeming with members of her species. It was always a sign that the feeding had ended that that they would soon be making their way toward the cliffs, toward home – toward safety. The large beasts, even the fast and more dangerous ones, were always lurking when the Eye was not shimmering in the great expanse above. But it still was not time to leave, and the berries, fresh and sweet, slid effortlessly down their throats. She ate less and her cub ate more. She knew that it was the way it should be, so she protected her cub from curious eyes and hid it in tall grass. She diligently supplied it with handfuls of blue fruit.

A while ago – even though she could not determine how long, it had been between the first morning feeding and the present – a male had tried to take her cub. The males considered male cubs to be a threat and the source of possible future conflicts. They could not see far into the future, but in two or three years the young male would be demanding his place in the pack, and by some invisible communiqué this would come

to the attention of all the males who were in their prime at that moment.

She repelled the attack and defended her youngster. The male had earned a large gash under his eye and several on his side. The male was now in a nearby tree, calmly chewing on the remains of some other cub, one whose mother had not been strong enough or brave enough to resist and defend it. This was why she was vigilant and growled at anyone who came within ten meters of them. No one from her pack was looking at him – except her. Every now and then she would go downwind and sniff his every move. Even though he looked strong and powerful, she could not know that he had stored her scent in his memory as a warning and that he would never go near her again. Primates learned the hard way.

The valley stretched all the way to the jungle: low shrubs, tall grass and several trees with large crowns that grew irregularly and cast shadows during the great heat of the afternoon. In the opposite direction the great cliff towered over them, and beneath it, in the distance, orange sand swirled in t sporadic gusts of wind. The clearing was poorly visible from the spot where she was grazing and picking berries, partly because of the trees and vegetation, and partly because the Great Eye was shining in her eyes.

Several intensive flashes high up in the sky grabbed her attention. She could not count them, but the noise that they produced sounded like the harbinger of heavy summer showers. She drew her youngster to herself.

The others from her pack, along with those from other packs, looked up at the sky. They were no longer picking berries or eating. The thunder became louder and the flashes dis-

appeared. The roar was deafening.

She looked up at the sky expecting to see the great floating mountains that carried rain, but there was nothing in the sky – just the pure blue color of summer twilight.

Something was suspicious. Her animal instincts were infallible. She could sense rainstorms and thunder an entire cycle in advance, which gave her enough time to find shelter. Her receptors would recognize the sudden drop in pressure, but this time the air had not changed, there was no drumming in her ears, her body was not trembling, there was no premonition of rain – yet there was thunder.

The youngster raised his head and looked around. By now several members of her species had started walking in the direction of the sound. She recognized some of them as being from her pack. She cried out to them in vain – the noise was too loud for them to hear her.

She stretched her neck in order to see over the bushes and leaned to the side to see what was going on beyond the sparse trees in the clearing. Almost all of them had left the feeding ground. Several females and the large male on the thick branch still remained; he was looking off into the distance, covered in blood.

Suddenly the noise turned into a howling sound and the wind kicked up from that direction. Smells filled her nostrils – odor she had never smelled before; they were sharp, pungent, bitter – her neck tightened under their intensity. She clutched her youngster closer to herself and the hair on her back instinctively stood up, sensing an unfamiliar threat.

That was when the great mountains started descending toward the sand. Several large boulders hovered above the clear-

ing and produced an unbearable roar. But the large boulders did not look like boulders. They had hundreds of spikes, a flaming fire beneath them, defined edges and an unbearable stench. Caution turned into fear, fear into instinct, and instinct into maternal instincts.

She grabbed her cub and threw him onto her back with one powerful move. He held on tightly, revealing that this was not his first time. She knelt down, growling. All of the packs were already near the flying boulders. She could not explain why everyone was walking in that direction when she sensed danger. The boulders filled the sky, then the horizon, then the clearing. Huge clouds of dust were kicked up the moment they touched the ground. They looked alive, aware. Her eyes jumped to the great jungle.

The Great Eye that Gives Life was already hiding behind the mountains and the jungle started coming alive. Fleeing deep into it was pointless because large beasts lurked there, beasts that had taken her male and two youngsters two mating cycles ago. She had had to flee up the cliffs behind her – toward the den.

In the distance the dust was settling. The primates stopped for a moment. Then the boulders opened their great mouths and dropped their offspring onto their territory.

They walked like them, but they were twice as big. Their skin was unlike anything she had seen before and their heads were rounded. With large steps they quickly covered the distance between the clearing and the feeding ground. Several members of her pack got dangerously close to the big gaping mouths. They stood petrified, looking in the direction of the two-legged beings. The beings had an extended arm on either

side – and they were inexplicably large. She growled again. The youngster grabbed her fur even more tightly.

A loud screech pierced the air and she heard incomprehensible voices. The beasts were communicating between themselves, producing a roar that deafened her with its high frequencies. They moved like a pack of bloodthirsty dogs and surrounded all those who approached them. None of the primates were at a safe distance any more. Even the large male had come down from the tree, leaving behind mangled pieces of the cub he had just devoured, and started out toward the strange beasts. A screech pierced the air again. Bright flashes blinded her. Thousands of fireflies blazed from the extended arms of this new species. And there was no rain.

The first primates started falling in the red sand dust. Instinctive panic came over them and some started unsuccessfully to flee. The beings produced a sound that made some of the primates hold their ears and convulse in the sand. The summer twilight had become ominous. The extended arms reached anyone who tried to jump onto a rock or get close to them; they also got to anyone who started withdrawing up the cliff toward the den. They fell with loud roars and howls. In an instant one entire pack lay motionless in the clearing, while others were scurrying around. She was still watching, trying to grasp why only she felt fear. She saw several strong males fighting back by throwing rocks that bounced off the hard hides of the strange large beasts. Several beasts stumbled and fell, but they rose quickly and showered the males with lights from their extended arms. The wind shifted in her direction and brought the smell of glands excreting fear. She could feel the panic of her species and abnormal agitation. The great beasts were ap-

proaching quickly and were already at the edge of the feeding ground. One of them, the largest, had already stepped onto the grass and cut down the big bloodied male. He fell without a sound and did not move. The mother finally turned around and started running. She always fled better on all fours. The cub clutched her neck, and the smell of the huge beast intensified.

***

She ran without looking back. She felt that the beasts were at her heels, but in several big leaps she was at the Rock and started climbing up the cliff. She pushed several members of a neighboring pack in front of her and shoved an unfamiliar cub. It fell from a height of five meters to the ground and did not move. No one approached it as a dark red stream flowed from its mouth, soaking the rocks. She paid no attention to the cries of members of her species and skillfully crossed several huge natural steps created by the rocks, jumping with precision over the sharp edges of the rocks. The scent led her to the den. She heard loud cries and several deafening screeches while two fireflies broke off pieces of the rock that she was using for shelter. The cub let out a sound like a yelp when a piece of stone shard hit him. She growled and calmed the cub on the run. The youngster realized he had to be calm because this was crucial to the balance with which his mother dodged the flashes and climbed the steep cliff. He buried his head into the fur on his mother's back and turned off his sense of sight –concentrating solely on holding on firmly and calmly, while his mother knocked down another large female who was in her way, clear-

ing a path to safety.

The mother turned around to see several males still fighting back. On the left side a large beast lay motionless and a female was smashing the smooth head, exposing beneath it another one very similar to theirs. The beasts also had eyes and ears, but they were covered in thick skin that protected them from the force of the blows dealt by the bravest ones. The beast was bloody and motionless. The great female hit it again and then once again to make sure that the beast would no longer get up. As she struck it she did not realize that two other beasts were approaching her. As she rushed them she fell – realizing too late – and now she lay convulsing in the dust at the foot of the valley, tens of meters beneath them.

The battle intensified, but the mother did not feel the need to take part, she had to get her cub to safety. There were only a few more obstacles. She covered them without difficulty, clearly faster and more agile through this terrain than the beasts. She reached the top of the cliff and crossed a small pass, then climbed a nearby lower rock and jumped over several small boulders on her way to the valley on the other side. She felt exhausted, but she did not even consider stopping. Soon she saw the great tree next to which she was born, next to which was a half-buried rock and a cave that was shelter, safety, the den – peace. She lunged forward with her last strength, but going down in a hurry was much more dangerous than climbing up. She could still smell the other beasts. The smell was getting stronger.

Several of the beasts started flying around like birds with lightning coming out of their backs. They soared high into the air, reaching a height where no one could harm them. They

flew in unison, aggressively, like her pack when it was on the prowl, like the wolves that hunted them. She jumped onto the loose soil and sank her claws into the sand. Better friction meant greater speed. She was tired. The beasts pelted her with flashes from the air, and several primates fell around her. Peaceful. Tranquil. But they had a scent. They were not dead. The others were running. They ran along with her toward the shelter beneath the big tree, which was now very close. Her guard was up, but she was gasping heavily, drawing air into her lungs with difficulty.

Suddenly the cub let go of her and dropped lifelessly into the dust, into the grass. He hit his head on a small stone and his face plunged into a bush. He was not moving. In one immeasurably short instant she grabbed the youngster's limp body and used her teeth to throw him onto her back. She had to hold him with one hand – or was it a foot – while running on her three remaining limbs. The cub was barely breathing, but he had no other signs of life.

She turned around one last time and saw that the beasts had now reached the ground and were again running after them, releasing lightning from their extended arms. The bolts looked like swarms of bees, only deadlier, more dangerous – more ominous.

The den was close and she already felt the smell of her home. She also sensed the several individuals who were already inside. There was no time to drive away all those who were not members of her pack, but her instincts told her that she had to do so. With a single bound she reached the entrance to the cave and growled loudly. Several females, two males and three cubs immediately left the shelter and passed by her with their heads

hung low. As she watched them leave, they were mowed down by bolts of lightning and lay in the dirty growth at the foot of a big tree.

She entered the cave and several members of the pack that had not gone to the feeding ground looked at her anxiously. They all moved aside and she sat down in the deepest darkness. As she breathed heavily, she smelled several scents that she had never smelled before. The beasts were approaching the rock and the cave. She looked at her cub. He still lay stunned, with a scratch across his forehead. Another wave of scent hit her because the wind had changed direction, bringing the smells of the surroundings into the den. That was one of the reasons why this very cave was her home. She could sense prey hundreds of meters away and kill it quickly and quietly.

This smell was different. It was perplexing, because this beast did not smell like the others. She realized that it was the largest beast, the one that had pursued her from edge of the feeding ground. The sounds died down and she heard only the subtle growling of the members of her pack, tightly packed together in order to protect their alpha female. The running around outside stopped. Suddenly they heard the sound of rocks sliding. A high-pitched screeching tore through the cave and that was when she recognized the roar that they produced when they came out of the flying boulders. The odor got stronger; it might have been the strongest she had ever smelled. First she saw a shadow, then a strapping leg standing at the entrance to the cave. The beast lowered its head protected by thick skin through the opening and peered inside. It pointed its extended arm at the pack. The only thing she could do was let go of her cub and rush at it with her last strength, to defend them. The

growling other members joined her in attacking the beast. She saw a flash and fell over the bodies of her already fallen subjects. The beast had beaten them after all.

XI

Nosri leaned over the small cave and fired the entire clip into the dark. “Fucking bitch,” he said into the helmet microphone while I jumped onto t nearby rocks and shot the sons of bitches that had managed to avoid the first strike wave. They were as fast as the wind. My biomechanical lung was finally coming in handy, because I could run longer than the others. It was nothing like what we had prepared for in the simulations so I had to use all possible and impossible reflexes to be able to hit them at all. After Nosri’s hits, my display flashed only several hundred confirmed targets. All the guns were linked, ours on this side and those of the Members of the Order on the other side of the planet. The recorded hits reached our displays at the speed of light, so we knew exactly how many targets had been hit with a delay of less than half a second, and how much more *work* we had. When we reached the final number and assessed that it was safe, the guns would be switched off and we would head up, to the *Zed*.

We had lost two MotOs and five rookies. The sons of bitches litter were actually very good at throwing stones from great distances. All it took was for you to lose your balance and several of the goggle-eyed would be all over you.

The tally of our injuries: two were minced meat, three had succumbed to internal bleeding, and two were in the infirmary – despite all their broken bones, they were strong enough to

curse the hairy mothers and the filthy habitat of those who had sent them there and taken them out of the battle.

My kids had held together impeccably, and handing them out placebo pills, which supposedly quickened their reflexes, increased their adrenaline, and made their entire bodies more alert than ever – turned out to be a first-rate letdown. They were crazier than ever and no one could prove to them that they didn't feel any different. Those damn children!

The air was pungent but fresh. Several of the goggle-eyed disappeared from the clearing when we approached their feeding ground, and some of them –according to those who were in charge of making such assessments – curiously approached our landing site. They were easy targets during those several seconds of surprise. They quickly realized what was going on and started fleeing in a frenzy. My shooting was accurate. I didn't want to miss, even though we had more than enough ammunition. The knowledge of Huan's death – with whom I was least of all close – fueled my passion for revenge like never before. My head was in turmoil from everything that had happened during the previous days. Nevertheless, I didn't want anyone to realize that I knew what was going to happen when we returned to the *Zed*. I suppressed my feelings as much as I could, downed that combination of pills that I could not forget, and once again I was mad at the whole universe. My thoughts were filled with images of Huan, Carmen's distraught face, and a picture in the square next to Proxi of that young, pale girl who had ended up as a side dish at someone's feast. I couldn't allow anyone to doubt the righteousness of our actions. I ate shit, but I did this best when the going got tough.

Several minutes later I had to switch on the thrusters and

follow the vermin up a tall cliff. They climbed like spiders in old documentary films. I don't know how many I hit while I flew over the cliff, but it seemed to me that I was shooting them like clay pigeons.

We drove them behind the rocks. Nosri was pursuing a female with a cub who seemed to be the fastest one in the entire confusion. Along the way, while I was collecting my thoughts, I counted 829 goggle-eyed running away on our side, while 117 bodies lay on the red sand that was already starting to cover them, carried by the wind. As far as I had understood, it would be 48 hours before they started waking up; different, more dangerous, more decisive, with an idea.

The goggle-eyed were faster than us. Worst of all – they knew every meter of the landscape. We were making our way around by feel, simulations and some bloody instincts that we had as people – MotOs. As soon as Nosri stood up I waved to him to come back. He was a good three hundred meters away. We had to regroup and split up. That was the only way that we could complete this cursed *most important mission in the history of mankind*. I called Jaya.

"Jaya, report!"

"The damn beasts have scattered." She sounded short of breath and pissed off. "We have readings north of this position! We barely have a clear shot! We have to surround them somehow! We're not accurate at this distance!"

"Roger, Jaya. Keep your position and wait for me to join up. Call in the team. I'll be there in ten!"

Just before Nosri got close to me I fired several shots in the direction of the ass of a big old male. He was slow and had not gotten far, only two hundred meters. I missed by an entire me-

ter, and my smart gun immediately announced a ballistics correction based on the target's thermal signature. I could always use this, but the gun was not that smart – it didn't distinguish between friend and foe. There were no MotOs here, just hairy vermin without a bit of self-respect. The old male was still running away and turning around like mad. He suddenly stopped and roared in my direction. It was like he knew I was gunning for him. There was a flash near his chin and he fell like a drunken hooker. I cursed with delight and spat on the dry ground. Nosri shouted in delight.

***

Night fell quickly, like a guillotine. We went around the cliff and followed the readings. The goggle-eyed were not very smart – we were tracking thousands of them within a three-kilometer radius. One would expect the damn hairy things to flee further into the brush on the other side of the mountain, but no - it was as though they were waiting for us to get close and take their scalps.

The temperature dropped as quickly as the night. Stars were shining above us, and for the first time in my life I saw what a sky sprinkled with stars looked like. It wasn't at all easy to stop myself from looking up at the sky as I ran around blasting thermal signatures that peered out of various holes. It was so beautiful and only then did I understand all the sorrow and grief, disappointment and disdain on the SS *Esper* two and a half thousand years ago as they abandoned their disintegrating home.

I led my team. My group went west of the cliff and climbed

up a twenty-meter elevation and went right along the slope. We saw the space between two mountains like it was on the palms of our hands. Beneath us the clearing was dotted with trees and low shrubs. We could see our breath so I ordered the heating turned on in the combat suits, allowing us to spend less energy keeping our muscles warm when we encountered a large pack. Only half the job had been done. The display flashed 23,090 – the MotOs on the other side of the planet had had better luck. They had struck a gold vein and obliterated it. We had to sniff around.

Several goggle-eyed were hiding in the caves beneath our feet. We had no trouble driving them out into the clearing and mopping them up. It was just like we had practiced. I counted only seventy hits and I finally I stopped. It was cold and we needed to rest.

"Nos, how's it going?" I said into the helmet microphone.

Several seconds of silence ensued. Nos and his group were several kilometers away from our position. Three other teams had gone east, two had gone north, and only one remained by the ships – to clear the area.

"Ah, messed up, *tovarish*. There isn't a bloody atom here," said Nosri sharply.

"We'll light a fire and wait for dawn," I said. "These maggots will pop up sooner or later, and in this position we are on their path to the river and to the feeding ground. Drag your asses up here!"

"You're right, Cal! And I'm getting hungry. Nosri, out!"

Jaya posted a guard at the edges of the gorge. "Just in case, God forbid," she said, and the great Dogons volunteered to take the first watch. I think that Ian slept like a baby. Pollard

stared nervously into the distance, and Boris, Alfonso and Raul greedily scoffed the vacuum-packed meals. I fired my gun into the wood we collected just before Nosri appeared with his team. He had lost one recruit just after they deployed from the transport ship, so I didn't want to ask him too much. A shroud over his eyes, pale circles under his eyes, dirty clothes and several drool spots from hand-to-hand combat with the hairy assholes, only proved that he was on the brink of rage and that he was having a difficult time controlling it. He sat down next to me and chewed mechanically in silence.

I don't know how long I kept staring at the open flame. The fire crackled. If I had ever wished for something, it was at that moment – I wanted to stay on the G-planet and not leave until all the stars in the sky had gone out; I wanted to gaze forever up at the open sky and smell the wonderful scent of burning wood – the scent of fire. I wanted this to never end and for something wonderful, unpredictable, mystical to happen. I wanted us to be invisible and for the *Zed* to never find us. I wanted this air forever in my lungs and the friends who surrounded me – I wanted a life. I know it sounds pathetic, painted by the quasi-charm of a shitty poet; I know that it sounds grotesque coming from my mouth, but at that moment, really, I wouldn't have traded places with anyone - not even for a thousand worlds full of Houses of Leisure.

The planet became completely calm, like shallow breathing. It wasn't the silence of the grave, but a living silence full of unknown sounds. We had been warned about the large and fast beasts that were not in large numbers, but one could never be too cautious. They gorged on the goggle-eyed, so we thought that they might like us too. We posted guards on both sides of

the hill and prayed to the Stars that an ogre didn't come our way. The signatures were stationary for now and there was nothing larger than us within a circle of several kilometers. It was my impression that all the noise and commotion during the evening had scared away even those whose testicles were bigger than my helmet. We were safe – and would remain safe until our return.

I stared at the fire for a long time, long enough to feel its warmth on my face and for my thoughts to drift into idiotic ecstasy. I was startled by a voice: "Lieutenant!"

It was Jaya. She had just returned from guard duty, all pale with huge dark circles under her eyes.

"Yes, Jaya!" I said quietly, and my voice faded into the sea of sounds around us.

"You said that I should remind you of guard duty… Well, it's your turn, Sir."

She sounded tired and drowsy, as though the entire world had crashed onto her shoulders and she alone had to bear it. I really felt sorry for my damn children. They had given so much down there, and it was my duty to allow them a little sleep. Dawn was hours away. The goggle-eyed were inactive.

"Right away, Jaya!"

I stood up and clapped her on the shoulder in a fatherly manner. She took my place and fell asleep in a second. *Damnú air*! She had a clear conscious. She wasn't tormented by nightmares to come, like I was. It was only then that I realized that everyone who wasn't on guard duty was asleep. The fire had had a hypnotic effect on me and I hadn't noticed when Nosri had fallen asleep and started drooling on his E-minus suit. He could keep going for three whole days at full capacity with-

out recharging; the fourth day he was a little slower and angrier, and on the fifth day they would be carrying him like a slaughtered pig, while he cursed all those who had lived before him and who would live after him, imaginary as well as real. He slept like a baby, obviously dreaming of the kid he lost – minced meat – because he gripped his gun tightly.

I walked over to the edge of the hill and sat down on a rock. The fire looked like a dot in the sky from here, even though I was only eighty meters away. I armed my gun and stared into the darkness.

It was pitch black. The planet's natural satellite was on the other side – invisible. An occasional fast-moving shadow could be distinguished flying overhead. The damn birds were huge – slightly smaller than a human. Down in the clearing I could hear the wind blow. Pebbles hit the cliff beneath us, sand struck the ground like grains of rice in a bowl, and the cold breeze cooled my fire-heated face. There were no clouds, only stars and the endless sky. I tried to find the place that we had come from: our place, our home, our Sun. Even though I remembered all the charts I had ever seen – they all looked different from this perspective. Then I remembered something that Igor once said, "An object greatly depends on the subject observing it." It was true – I couldn't recognize squat. But I knew that our Sun was out there somewhere, laughing at us with its solar flares, but also weeping because it hadn't been nourishing anyone for millennia. Mars had always been a dead planet and would remain so, and ultimately – it had been our only chance. What beautiful irony was screwing up the Sun, burning itself up in vain. And now, light years away, it was alone – hooked up to a respirator.

Suddenly I was overcome by exhaustion. Perhaps the fresh air was to blame, perhaps all the adrenaline that I had excreted during the first attack – I don't know. I closed my eyes and fell into a deep sleep. And I was on guard duty.

***

I was awakened by silence. It was still dark. It was unnaturally quiet and I immediately felt embarrassed because I had fallen asleep on guard duty, like a rookie. I looked toward the fire; It could not be seen.

Who knows how long I had been asleep. I got up and stretched my back. It was still unnaturally quiet. No wind. No birds. No sounds from the various small animals that crawled beneath our feet. Not a voice. I wanted to call out to someone on the narrow band, but I realized that I had left my helmet next to Nosri – another rookie mistake.

And then there was a smell. It came from the darkness. For some reason the stars had disappeared from the sky in the direction I had last seen them – at eye level. It was pitch dark. I tried to sharpen my eyesight. And then I thought the sky was moving, swaying, shifting in unnatural waves. It was still quiet. The smell was unfamiliar to me – pungent, foul and repulsive at moments. It came in gusts, like when someone with bad breath is breathing down your neck. The sky was swaying, but slowly. I still wasn't able to come out of my slumber, but something had started to burn uncontrollably within me. It was caution, an instinct that Members of the Order are born with. The alarm for fear and action. I wanted to shout out and call out to anyone by the extinguished fire, or anyone on the other side of the hill,

but I didn't. It was foolish to panic for no reason. I felt someone watching me. I swear to the Stars! I felt hundreds of eyes on me. They were penetrating and painful. But I still couldn't see anyone. And then, I don't know why, I moved several steps to the side. When I changed my perspective it seemed to me that something had flashed, but so weak that I could barely make out the white color of the flash. But it was there in front of me, whatever it was, blocking my view of the stars. "What the hell?" I muttered. I took another step, this time toward the extinguished fire and my sleeping comrades in arms. There was no flash, but I heard a sound - first quiet and deep, then loud and clear. I pointed my gun into the darkness and fired. The flare revealed my worst nightmare. Several goggle-eyed stood only a few meters away from me, watching me, baring their teeth. I had no idea how long they had been standing there while I slept. I sent out the photo-probe from the gun and got a reading – several thousand signatures, and they were all less than a hundred meters away. We were surrounded.

I started running toward the group by the fire, shouting furiously. It was finally starting to get light and I could see hundreds of goggle-eyed simultaneously taking up positions at the foot of the hill. Daybreak was still far off. The G-star was hours from coming up, but there was enough light for me to make out shapes.

"Contact!!! Contact!!! Contact!!!" I shouted like a madman.

Several flashes confirmed to me that the goggle-eyed were also attacking the opposite side of the hill. The guards there were not asleep. "Contact!!! Contact!!! Contact!!! Damn you to hell!!! Contact!!!"

Then a salvo of projectiles started flying past my head. I saw

Nosri running toward me, firing like crazy. He held his gun in one hand and my helmet in the other. I never doubted his friendship, but now I was prepared to set up a religion worshiping him. Being without a helmet was like being without a dick at an orgy. These hairy assholes were very precise when they threw rocks that were only slightly smaller than a human head.

I heard steps behind me. The sons of bitches were fast. They gasped for breath and growled at the same time, producing a horrific cacophony. My lung was pumping air; it was competing with the *original* lung, increasing my total lung capacity. I started loving the damn implant even though I often felt less than human, knowing what they had put inside me. Now everything performed the way it was supposed to and gave me exactly what I needed – speed. I so wanted to switch on the thrusters and take off into the air, but it took them about thirty seconds to reach full capacity – I didn't have those thirty seconds.

Nosri was within reach. Just like in a relay race in a sports arena, he started running up to me, holding out my helmet. I thanked him on the fly, put on the helmet and fired behind me without looking. As soon as I connected the helmet to the suit – and thank the Stars it was partially automatic – I heard Pollard junior screaming in terror "Boris is dead!!! Boris is dead!!! Cover the flank! They got Alfonso!!! Jaya, cover the flank!!! Damn it, cover the flank!!!"

The kids were twenty meters in front of me. I could barely make out the hairy pouncing silhouettes and my damn kids fighting back. Jaya was in a kneeling shooting position and taking down the sons of bitches one by one. And they kept coming and coming, as though there were an endless supply of them.

"We have to get off the hill!!!," I said sharply into the microphone. "We're surrounded!!! We have to get off the hill!!!" Confirmation responses came from all sides – both from Nosri's kids and my own. I heard shouts and banging, creaking and growling, rocks tumbling and mysterious noises, a bunch of inarticulate sounds and cries, sighs, swearing, curses… We made a circle, pushing our backs up against each other, and looked for a way out – and the way out was on the opposite side, over where Nosri's guys were located.

There was a horde of goggle-eyed between us and them, but there were still fewer than on the side where I had come from, so we started fighting our way doggedly down the hillside. The pack was catching up to us at a horrific speed, but they were cautious. I held up the rear as we advanced meter by meter, knocking dozens of hairy assholes onto the dusty ground. I turned around just when they caught up to me and a male, mouth gaping, grabbed me by the shoulder and threw me to the ground.

I was lost for a moment. Something hit me over the head with such force that my eardrums almost burst. They were all around me and all over me; they were panting in my visor and hitting me with their hands and rocks; they tugged at my arms as though they wanted to amputate them; they bit my legs through my suit; they jumped on my torso and tried to reach my neck with their canines. For one infinitesimal moment I wanted to give in and give up, to once again thank the Stars for bringing me to this beautiful place, for giving me the opportunity to feel the wind and see the stars as my ancestors had seen them, for smelling fire and seeing flames, and finally – for allowing me to be part of this fucking most important

mission in the history of mankind. For another infinitesimal moment I realized that I was a Brenna, and that no one messes with us; I was a bloody Irishman in a damn wasteland in deep space, bursting with muscles and armed to the teeth; I was a pissed off Member of the Order from an intergalactic sailing ship and the pride of mankind from time immemorial. And then, for a third infinitesimal moment, I imagined my great-great-to-the-twelfth-degree-grandfather sitting in Bantry Bay, smoking a pipe, without any clue as to what those bearing his name would be like. He looked westward, toward the open sea, trying to understand the size of the world. I have no idea how I got up and how long I waved my arms and legs. Several of the goggle-eyed were stunned. I could see the surprise in their eyes. Only then did I make out the yelling in my helmet: Nosri, Jaya, Ian, Pollard were screaming hysterically because I had fallen to the ground. I didn't stop swinging. I threw my gun behind me and started breaking necks. They snapped like the kindling I had used for the fire. One, two, three, four, they just kept falling and I didn't give a shit that we were not allowed to kill or injure them. Leg, arm, finger, neck, snapping, breaking, broken ribs, I took a rock. No! – I took a rock from the hands – or were they the feet – of the strongest one among them. He only managed to make a growl when I smashed his skull and in half and he dropped into the horde that kept on coming. I stayed in the clearing. Corpses piled up around me. I learned firsthand what it meant to be mentally incompetent.

I was having difficulty breathing. My heart was pounding and my rage could only be cut with a diamond knife. I bent down to pick up my gun and ran after the other Members of the Order who had already reached the slope and were clearing

a path to level ground. I was bloody, torn, battered. No one said a word when I reached them. Nosri's eyes were filled with tears of rage. We just looked at each other and turned around – toward the largest pack that I had ever seen.

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Less than three hours later all the goggle-eyed lay motionless; fifteen minutes after that the guns disarmed because we had met our quota. We were finished, empty shells of warriors. Carp's team came to our aid only minutes after our decision to kick their asses. Huan's guys, who were now commanded by Sergei, arrived five minutes later. We had lost seventeen guys and four girls. I lost Boris, Alfonso and the oldest brother, Dick. The brothers were inconsolable and I had nothing to tell them. I patted them on the shoulder, and they straightened up and saluted me - they had become real damn MotOs.

The G-star was in its zenith and it was getting unbearably hot. I was broken, not so much physically as psychologically. I vaguely recall the trip back to the ship – something that is unusual for me. Only fragments of some dull conversations, without any sense or purpose. My head was full of all kinds of crap and questions to which I didn't have the answers. I took an E-pill and could barely swallow it down my dry throat. The transport ship was waiting for us. The *Zed* was waiting. The following day was waiting.

Several times I looked at the medical team closing bags containing the lifeless bodies of these young men and women, placing them in freezers, chatting lightheartedly as they worked. But I didn't have the energy to react. I didn't have the

words to speak. I was as empty as an unused condom.

The ship's ramp was down. Several MotOs were already sitting inside, out of the heat and waiting to move out. I sat down in my seat. I didn't look at anyone, didn't say a word, didn't make a gesture. Nosri sat at the other end of the cargo bay, staring at the floor. I was sure that he was thinking about the three young MotOs lost in the battle of our lives. We too had lost three. The kids were devastated, but proud.

We sat like that for more than an hour, until everything that could contaminate the planet was collected. We had to remove even the smallest piece of evidence that we had ever been there. The bio-freaks had prepared machines even for that. And the planet…

The planet was bright golden. The G-star had spread its tentacles, outlining even the smallest outcrop in the distance. Once again there were no clouds, and the blue sky awaited the future. The jungle swayed to the east, all vast and unknown. I thought that I could touch it with my hand. Beyond it the river meandered and turned past the magnificent mountain into some unfamiliar area. My helmet beeped so I connected only the headset and perked up my ears. It was a special frequency – the captain's frequency.

"Priority One Command," said the captain. "Report to the Bridge as soon as you return to the *Zed*. After inspection you are to be assigned to cryogenic chamber 244. Priority One Command. Captain Wilson, out."

And that was it. There was no turning back now. Igor's words, spoken that day in the shuttle, echoed in my ears. Those fucking bio-freaks! And what he told me… *Damnú air*!

While we were on the planet, all the citizens of the *Zed*,

on all three decks, received a sterilizer through their food and water. Conception was a thing of the past and no female would ever become pregnant again. All the pregnant women with fetuses younger than twelve weeks would have a miscarriage. The North Wing would be shut down, and the bioinformaticists were to be voluntarily euthanized – with the exception of a few. I didn't know the details, because Igor didn't know them either. The captain and crew would not be able to keep this from the public for long, which is why they needed the young troops that we had been training. It would be fifty years until everyone lost their battle with life, because the hospital didn't work anymore and there were no drugs for standard diseases. The *Zed* faced the threat of total mayhem. But the Members of the Order were there to preserve *order*. They were honorable and they would never go back on their word or command. We served the captain obediently and unquestioningly. This was why the cryo-chambers were in good hands – as long as there was at least a single living MotO on the *Zed*.

We, the *lucky ones* who went into the cryo-chambers, were given a second chance. As soon as the *Zed* discovered an inhabitable planet our reanimation would begin. The bioinformaticists had calculated everything, and worked on it for 2,505 years – so there shouldn't be any problems. If nothing else, I would finally see Susan, because I had learned that she was the head this entire project… and yes – she too would be put in suspended animation. The new drive had been installed in exactly 67 hours. We would travel at speeds faster than any human ever had. What a *nice* thing to know.

And the mission… I mean, the *most important fucking mission in the history of mankind*… It was over. It had been car-

ried out and drenched in the blood of twenty-one MotOs and a thousand and something citizens of the *Zed*. A steep price?

What the bio-freaks had created bordered on pure genius. Insanity, however, also borders on genius – I don't know where that bloody border is. We used their ammunition. We used their guns. By some crazy calculation *we* had performed a miracle. The ammunition contained genetic codes. The genetic codes of all mankind. A reversible process, an entropic process, genesis at the highest possible level. The gene had been programmed and had now been released to develop on its own. We had sown the seed.

We had implanted our genetic structure into the goggle-eyed. We had implanted everything we ever knew about the past, the present and the future, but an error had sneaked in. Igor told me that they could not contain the chaos that appeared after a series of genetic permutations, and the genes themselves would naturally destroy each other. They could not understand why or how; they could not comprehend why the genetic structure of the Asians was at odds with and clashed with the genetic structure of the African people; they had no idea why some of the genes overpowered the others, and following the law of survival of the strongest, they dominated and destroyed all those who stood in their way. They did not know quite a bit, but they still sowed the seed and let it develop on its own.

The genetic code was programmed and precise – that they knew. Once it was in you, you started to change, understand, think in inconceivable ways. You started to use articulation, body language, tools, choose your food, choose your company – do everything that we had done for several millennia on the

Home Planet. The gene was deadly precise and programmed. These fifty thousand goggle-eyed had become a field where the gene would mature and leap through future millennia. Over time things would become clearer to them; over time their confused notions would transform into thoughts, and then into something unimaginable for the primate species; over time they would develop speech – exactly the same speech as on the Home Planet; they would develop family and feelings; they would develop art and culture; they would develop the ability to create and support a family; they would develop a sense of home – their own and those of others. The goggle-eyed would become us!

Three million years from now, the great ocean will be called the Pacific, the smaller one - the Atlantic. The continents will have been named without people ever realizing how they were named and who had named them. The races will have names, and they will be divided into yellow, black, white and red. The rivers will be called the Missisippi, the Sava, the Volga, the Amazon; the cities will often change names; the capital of Japan will be Kyoto and then Tokyo, which will have previously been called Edo; pirates, ferries, aircraft carriers will sail the seas; space stations will explore space and carry people through its vast expanse; science will follow the same course. From Einstein, Dirac, Planck, Tesla, to Fleming, Prelog, Koch, they will all be reborn again and they will again explore this beautiful universe. Artists will be born, daring and brazen, genial and warped; musicians, painters, singers, writers… But there was an error… And it will be repeated.

The genes destroy each other. The genes can't stand each other. Great wars will be fought over faith and possession;

wars will be fought for power and love. Dictators will fall, new governments will emerge, the world will go from prosperity to chaos in only a few years. There will be the hungry and the poor, the evil and the damned, and once again there will be fascism and misery, murders and genocide, crying children, mothers, fathers. Because they could not avoid the error – it was in the genome. There will be power, there will be helplessness. People will hate each other and love each other again, and behave like nothing had happened. They will survive the nuclear war and the nuclear winter; they will survive the fucked up atmosphere and the melting of the polar caps; they will survive viruses, which they will give the same names that our ancestors gave them. They will fight diseases – for some there will never be a cure, for some there will be – and they will be proud. They will survive pestilence and religious strife. They will believe in several gods… and for this they will go to war and perish. The gene is programmed. The gene is inexorable.

And the planet…

The planet will always be there for them, even when no one notices it. It will quietly complete its revolutions, heat up and cool the poles, blow at the equator; raise the sea levels and provide life for all that did not get a genetically programmed structure. The planet will try to maintain the balance by producing countless species of plants and animals. It will be there for them even when the worst individual nightmares come true, and when the most wonderful hopes of the dreamers come true. It will be there, waiting. It will be waiting for someone to finally notice it and for that someone to finally realize what they have on their side, who is on their side. The planet will wait for them to realize this, in solitude and in silence. It will caress the shores

with the seas, shift tectonic plates, only occasionally showing its rage, but also its endless love for those that it nourishes – those that it cherishes.

The gene is superior. It contains exactly everything that anyone ever needs to know about everything. And you… goggle-eyed sons of bitches. You lie there in the dust and have no idea of the opportunity you have been given. You're not even aware of what you have been given, and what has been taken from us. Treasure that gift! Treasure it like nothing you've ever treasured before! The gift is worth billions of lives, billions of fates and tears. If there is anything immeasurable – it is precisely the treasure that you have been given. Protect the planet! Protect the planet, damn you!

And call it Earth! *Damnú air*, call it Earth!

The End

Slavonski Brod, April 28, 2012