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TRANQUIL SEA by DAVID BROOKES

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For information about the author please see the back page.

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TRANQUIL SEA

PART THREE OF THE GAS GIANT SEQUENCE

DAVID BROOKES

PART ONE: DAEDALUS

There is a side of the moon that is never seen by those living on Earth. Locked in synchronous rotation, the moon shows only its good side. From the surface of its mother planet one can see the dark spots of its dusty basalt craters. Always hidden, on the far side of the moon, is an ugly arrangement of pits and craters strewn across the unseen landscape, the grey frieze of a choppy ocean. Many of the larger craters earned grand-sounding names: Arzachel and Bel'kovich, Gärtner and Poincaré, Maginus and De La Rue.

On the centre of the far side, the crater Daedalus is spread 93 kilometres wide and sunk 3 kilometres deep into the cold surface. Despite the common misconception, this far side is not in permanent darkness, and when the time came for the Daedalus crater to transform, it was drenched in white sunlight.

Three people, encased in thermal webbing and personal energy fields only a millimetre thick, stood on the very edge of the crater, hesitating on this crucial threshold.

*

Maria had helped develop the lunar technology. The massive Karlson Enterprises funded its development specifically for this purpose. Working in conjunction with the Global Space Program, the conglomerate had rapidly encouraged the kernel of Maria's idea into full growth, and now it began to bloom spectacularly before the scientist's eyes.

She watched as her colleague and older brother, James, finished laying the traps on the very tip of the crater's curved edge. There were a hundred of the objects in all, which they called "traps" but were in fact depositories. They were cylinders seven inches tall containing their precious payloads.

'Everything set?' Maria called. She needn't have raised her voice, but she often forgot that the thermal webbing she wore under her clothes had a built-in radio.

James waved from further along the ridge. '*All set, little sis.*'

'Preparing the traps.'

She flicked a few switches on the control box she held. Behind her was the construction tower, which had been hastily put together to provide a better view of the Daedalus crater. James was climbing the ladder that would take him to the lowest platform, about a storey high. From it he would be able to look across Daedalus and observe the whole process.

Even from her current position at ground level, Maria could see how the crater had changed over the previous fortnight. The depression, which had been naturally terraced for centuries, maybe even millennia, had been ground smooth by automated machines. The little cluster of stalagmites in the very centre, which James said reminded him of termite mounds, had been knocked down. The crater was now an unbroken, sweeping disc deep-set into the grey surface of the moon, as perfect as the inside of a bubble.

All that work had been necessary for the new technology to work properly. Maria was about to find out whether so much effort had been truly worthwhile.

'*Clock's ticking,*' James said over the radio. His voice was muffled, fuzzy.

She turned back to see his face, earnestly excited behind the near-invisible film of plasma that protected him from the airless atmosphere.

'Traps are ready,' she replied. 'Hope you're all watching.'

'With our full attention,' said a second voice in her ear. It was Director Karlson, the representative of their sponsor company. It was his company that was funding the construction of the Farside Radio Lab, and one of his conditions was that he be present. He was about ten metres above where James now stood, on the construction tower's second platform. Maria didn't like him being there beside Daedalus, but even less did she enjoy having him where she couldn't see him, even at a distance. It made her anxious.

'I'm activating the process now, sir,' she said for Karlson's benefit. *'Traps warming up ... Ready to initiate the nanite flow ... Tipping the traps.'*

She pushed the button. All one hundred depositories launched. The gleaming cylinders arced up and over the crater like missiles and then tilted on their pivots, spilling out a watery black-grey substance that moved independently of the moon's moderate gravity.

A rain of quivering droplets drifted down against the curved ramp of the crater. The substance poured, rolled, swam over itself to get to the bottom of the hollow, which was a full eighty kilometres wide. Several clouds drifted directly towards the centre, actively crawling through the thin air towards their objective. It was eerily beautiful; like watching silt float down through water to settle on the ocean floor.

'Nanites moving as expected,' Maria reported. *'They're making fine progress.'*

James began to say something, but Director Karlson interrupted: *'What is the status of the programming software?'*

'No bugs,' Maria said shortly.

'How long until it can be implemented?'

'A few hours yet. We'll have better view the process from the facility.'

'You go ahead,' he replied. *'I'd like to view things from out here for now. Watch as it all develops.'*

'Your choice,' she said, and called to James. *'You coming, big brother?'*

'On my way.'

They left the edge of Daedalus. As they approached the pre-fab facility that had been their home for the last month, the nanite flow continued to move of its own volition in the vast crater behind them. Microscopic machines clawed their way to a pre-programmed location, then configured themselves into a position stored in the complicated software that each of the millions of nanites shared. As the grey layer spread across the barren stone, all of its infinitesimally small facets reflected the black sky above and the bright stars it contained.

*

'You know what I hate about this contract?' James said as they reached the outside of the facility.

'Mike Hudd-Karlson on your back every step of the way, like a damn monkey?'

'Not that. It's not being able to see Earth. We never get to see home from here. It feels the moon isn't even turning...'

'Aren't you happy I flew you here?' she said, laughing.

'Flying shuttles is easy compared to what I have to put up with. You know how homesick I get.'

As they arrived at the single-story facility the siblings stopped and looked upwards, taking in the view of the wide spread of stars. The sun was over the horizon, spreading its white light across the naked lunar landscape. It filled each of the many small impact craters with thick shadow. It was a landscape of contrasts, black against white, like the first footage of the original moon landing. Nowhere could they see the blue glowing orb of Earth; they stood at the antipode of the globe, the centre of the far side.

‘Come on,’ Maria said quietly, ‘let’s get inside.’

‘Yeah. I’m tired.’

They entered the airlock. It was a form of plasma field cool enough to allow solid objects to pass through. It kept the air within the facility whilst keeping the vacuum at bay, even as it allowed them to enter.

The interior of the place was cold-looking, sparsely decorated. All of the members of the team had agreed that the tech came first; they were a small private company that dealt in research for advanced technologies, at one time four-man strong and now only three.

Since they had been headhunted by the great Karlson Enterprises and liberally funded on several projects, the AT Group had been employed by governments around the world, particularly in the U.S., and now the Global Space Program. Although they had to endure the presence of one of the Karlson Directors, who were notorious for being a pain in the ass and dogging those that they sponsored, the group still retained the freedom to lump all of their resources into doing a good job – at the expense of luxuries.

James sometimes regretted this.

‘God, I wish we had a TV in here.’

Maria slouched on the cheap threadbare sofa and laughed.

‘I’m sure the signal would be perfect here, right in the centre of the PAC,’ she said.

She referred to the Protected Antipode Circle, which was proposed in 2005 and officially established twenty years later, when it became apparent that if a ban of certain radio transmission devices was not enforced, a valuable opportunity would be wasted. Backed by groups such as SETI, and eventually the European governments once the US followed suit, the Circle had been set up on the far side of the moon to protect it from having transmission devices built there, enabling such things as radio telescopes to be used without being hampered by other human-generated signals. That was what the whole project was about.

Maria observed her sleepy brother. He looked ready to fall asleep right there in his chair. His fist supported his rounded cheeks, which were plumped up beneath dark-ringed eyes. With the invisible energy field now shut down, his hair was free to straighten out into its usual short twists and ruffles. He would have been much more comfortable at home, Maria thought, in his king-size back at the apartment they shared. This facility would later be amended, reinforced and annexed to become the Lunar Farside Radio Laboratory, dedicated specifically to interpret and redirect the radio waves picked up by the massive dish. Until then, though, the place would remain unaccommodating.

Seeing that her brother was now fully asleep – and knowing from experience that waking him would take nothing less than a large spacecraft taking off right outside – Maria decided to proceed to the operations room alone.

Once there she found Theo Callas engaged with the unfamiliar computer systems. He was slumped in an auto-ergonomic chair with one leg up on his knee, struggling to comprehend a large, thin-paged operations manual.

‘This,’ he said, tossing it onto a computer console, ‘is utter tripe.’

‘No pictures?’ she joked, sitting in another chair and picking up the book. She didn’t bother opening it, but used it as a platform to drum her fingers on.

Theo tweaked his neatly waxed hair with the tips of fingers, perfecting a style probably ten years too old for him. He professed a great dislike for any sort of fad or fashion, but would defend to the death the right for a person to look as he chose. At forty, Theo appeared too young to possess the wisdom that he did, much of which

seemed to grow out of the trials he had faced in the past. His lined, wide Greek face seemed specially made to perfectly disguise his feelings whenever he wished to do so.

He finished with his hair and began playing with one of the screens mounted above the consoles. 'I gather everything went well at Daedalus?'

'Perfectly,' Maria replied, leaning back in the chair. 'It's been a long day.'

'How is James? He hadn't been in thermal webbing since—'

'He's fine. I've been trying not to mention it to him, but it's all so similar to last time, and it's difficult...'

'We can't always talk about our tragedies easily,' Theo said. His hand dropped from the screen's control settings, leaving the image set to a view of Daedalus and its rapidly-spreading film of nanomachine technology.

'Want to talk about it?'

'When have I ever talked about it?' he asked, staring at the screen. 'If I'm not over the worst of it after a year, I probably never will be.'

Maria had been dozing off, but now she opened her eyes. The monitors were relaying pictures from the other construction towers that had been erected further around the circumference of the moon. She could see the broad expanse of the Sea of Tranquillity, and on another screen the dark vista of one of the moon's *maria*, her namesake, which were in reality vast flat plains of fine-grained basalt. The one Maria could see was Mare Serenitatis, the Sea of Serenity. It was right beside the Mare Tranquillitatis, and together with six others they made up the features of the forward-facing side of the moon.

Maria shared an inexplicable affinity with those marks, which were made dark grey from being less reflective than the white rock around them. Although they were flat, they appeared as bottomless as a telescope tilted towards space.

Maybe there is the feeling of an echo there, she'd thought once to herself, the night after helping James and Theo erect the pre-fabricated facility. It wasn't an echo of depth – that would be proud and self-absorbed of her. It was an echo of echoes, of emptiness; it made her despair.

Jerking suddenly from her daydreams, she was shocked to see an unfamiliar figure on one of the screens. The camera was looking into one of the rooms of the facility, even though Maria was sure that all of the cameras had been set up outside. It showed one of the living quarters, a bedroom drenched in shadows, and on the bed with its feet bunching up the sheets crouched a large man, or maybe an animal. She couldn't make out any facial features between the hunched shoulders, as it was almost entirely eclipsed by darkness. All she saw was its bulky outline and the movement of its long, thick hair, shifting slowly even in the windless facility, and the blurred glare of its white-blue eyes.

She gasped at the sight of it and jabbed her finger towards the screen, drawing Theo's attention.

'What?' he said, and between looking at Theo's golden face and then turning back to the monitor, the figure had disappeared. The camera showed only the bedroom and the made-up bed, and no signs of any disturbance.

'What is it?' Theo asked, becoming fatherly. That was all Maria needed: her clingy brother on her left, and a doting father figure on her right.

She just rubbed her eyes groggily and put the experience down to a trick of the shadows. Theo laughed a little and then took the foreign operations manual off her again, trying a second time to decipher its meaning.

Quietly Maria left, telling him that she was going to sleep and that he should wake her once the nanite flow had fully completed its program. She walked past the sleeping James, but didn't stop when she reached her

apartment. Instead she checked all of the unoccupied rooms, and found that all the doors were locked. Using her keycard, she searched every one of them, but they were all empty.

Yawning widely, Maria went back to her room to sleep, satisfied that what she'd seen had been little more than a phantasm conjured by her exhausted mind.

*

His body clock was still on Earth time, and so when Michael Hudd-Karlson saw sunrise from the moon's surface he had already been awake for several hours. The morning sunlight burst over the horizon, spilling its light across the new Daedalus crater.

The sun seemed a little larger there, on the far side of the moon where he was 380,000 kilometres away from the surface of the Earth. Rather than reflecting off the pale rock, it shone and glinted over the nanite flow that had fully covered the inside of the hollow. Electrical currents sparked between billions of tiny machines, reinforcing a signal that had been created inside a computer. The signal carried the programming, which carried within it a three-dimensional image of what the flow should look like: the curved interior of a massive radio telescope. Already the dish was over three-tenths formed, ribbed at intervals to reinforce the huge metallic structure. The sun shone along each line and facet, forcing Karlson to shield his eyes.

Progress is satisfactory, he thought, and the discreet metal headset that he always wore began to punch complex patterns against the subspace molecules around him. The sequence created a signal projected towards Earth, where the other Directors would be waiting for his report. Two hundred other "Karlsons", all patiently waiting.

The Karlsons were not technically related. They were men who had worked their way to the top of the hierarchy in the Karlson Enterprises offices around the world. This earned them certain privileges, namely a piece of the real Richard Karlson II's brain tissue – or rather, a piece of his cloned brain. This was partnered with routine physio-chemical treatments that would allow each Director to become, only partially, a piece of the global Karlson entity.

This Director, whose name had once been simply Michael Hudd, had relished the opportunity to share the same genetic material, even some of the thought patterns as the great entrepreneur and philanthropist. The copper framework hidden beneath his dark head of hair allowed such communication, picking up his thoughts through his skull and transmitting them to his boss.

Satisfactory, he reported, *and exciting. The centre of the dish will soon be developed enough to begin installing the antennae and the computer elements.*

Once completed, the dish would be massive. The Arecibo Radio Telescope in South America was the biggest on Earth but this dish, when completed, would be fully 200 times as large. It would be able to not only detect radio signals from sources other than Earth, but it could be used for meteorology and radio astronomy, tracking the movements of distant stars and their growth or decline.

Content that the development of the parabolic antenna was going smoothly, Karlson climbed down the metal rungs of the radio tower's ladder until he got to the bottom, where the small surface buggy was stored. With the tip of his boot he nudged the white dust, not quite believing that he was there on the surface of the moon. He was not even wearing a suit. The thermal webbing, a kind of leotard, kept his body temperature up and created oxygen for him to breathe, so long as he let it air in the facility every few hours. A separate energy field, painted over his entire body, prevented him from being wrenched inside out by the vacuum of space. It was a strange

experience, but he'd better be sure not to transmit those feelings home. He wouldn't want his colleagues thinking that he wasn't up to the job.

*

When Director Karlson entered the facility, Maria, James and Theo were already preparing to leave.

'Where are you three off to?' he asked, closing the plasma air lock behind him.

'We're going to monitor the process,' Theo explained.

He was fidgeting and clearly uncomfortable in his webbing, which clung tightly to his skin like rubber. Its veins and valves stood out on his sleeves and neck, the only parts visible beneath his casual clothes. The liquid crystal compound that was constantly undergoing chemical reaction within the suit gradually raised his external body temperature.

'Be sure to be back before noon E.S.T.. You have data to process.'

'We'll be back before then,' Theo assured him, and ushered his colleagues into the air lock and let the first plasma field seal shut behind him.

Safely inside the small chamber between two plasma fields, and out of Karlson's hearing, Theo and James began to mutter to themselves. 'They're all the same, every one of those Director freaks.'

'Yeah. He's just like the one we had—'

Maria noted how James looked guilty about what he had almost said: *Just like the one we had on the abyssal plain.*

Five years ago, when the Karlson Enterprises conglomerate first contracted the team for work, they'd been asked to construct a safety dome over a drowned Karlson submarine in the Western Pacific. Fifty miles east of Guam and over two thousand feet below the continental shelf, the dome had been constructed. Yet, their Director at the time, Sam French-Karlson, had refused to risk his life by travelling so deep, away from the security of his psycho-neural network that his metal headset connected him to.

James, Maria and Theo had all been on that project. The only reason James held his tongue now was because of Theo. Theo had suffered the most when that disaster happened there.

He rarely responded to mentions of the incident, and this time was no different. He turned and looked out of the exterior plasma window of the airlock and clucked his tongue, no doubt preparing one of the didactic speeches he often gave during long journeys. His love of mythology and theology had given Theo his nickname – nobody ever called him Nils, as his mother did – and Maria had long grown used to his lessons filling in the uncomfortable silences.

The airlock depressurised, and they stepped through the goopy plasma field and began to hope weightlessly towards the nearest tower by the crater's edge.

'*Daedalus*,' Theo began almost immediately, '*named for the artificer of ancient Greece, father of the famous Icarus. Builder of the labyrinth in which the Minotaur lived. Creator of the wings that carried he and Icarus from King Minos' tower. The inventor of carpentry. Daedalus was one of the earliest geniuses.*'

'*Never heard of him*,' James said, and laughed at the face Theo pulled at him.

Maria was about to slap her brother on the arm for winding Theo up when both James and Theo stopped. A moment later she halted as well. She looked between them at the floor, where their attention was focused.

'What is this?'

'*I have no idea.*'

James crouched and scuffed the dark line on the floor with his energy-field-sheathed hand. White powder came away from it in small puffs, but the gritty black stripe remained solid between the grains.

'Is it stone?' Theo asked, reaching out to touch it with his fingers.

'That or metal. I can't tell through the energy field. Could it be basalt?'

'I don't think so.'

'The line circles all the way back, right around the facility...'

Maria followed James' gestures. Now that she knew what she was looking for, she could just make out the thick black line arcing out back in the direction they had come. She couldn't see if the two edges actually met behind the dark, squat shape of the facility, but she bet that they did judging from the curvature of the line.

'This is new,' she said quietly. *'We would have seen it before. We've walked by here fifty times.'*

James straightened up and went to brush his hand through his hair. The energy field stopped him doing so and his palm just squeaked over his head. Looking faintly ridiculous, he crossed his arms and sighed.

'Do you think it could have something to do with the nanites?'

'We've used them before,' Maria pointed out. *'Never had any problems.'*

'They didn't exactly perform perfectly the first time,' James reminded her darkly.

'That had nothing to do with the nanites,' Theo muttered. *'That was us.'*

Moira brushed down the shield around her lower leg, removing the dust that had gathered there. Motes, dust and sand alike sometimes got caught amongst the heated ions of the shield and the magnetic cushions that held them in place.

Stretching, she said, *'I think we'd better get to the dish.'*

'I'm going to wait here,' Theo said quietly, and sat down by the black line. *'I'll need to gather some data, figure this out...'*

When Maria and James arrived at the edge of the crater, they saw nothing wrong. The moving tide of the nanite flow was still heading towards the edge of the crater, as programmed. The dish was now over two-thirds completed. In the centre of the still-widening circle the nanites had already shut down and become dead metal, solidified into the shape dictated to them by the programming. It was a quick and easy way to build a parabolic antenna: organising millions of microscopic machines to self-replicate until they had achieved the objectives of their in-built programming.

'The von Neumann process is working fine,' James said, accessing the shielded computer at the base of the tower. *'That line in the rock we found has nothing to do with the nanites.'*

'What about the shield? Is it operating correctly?'

The dish, during the construction phase, was protected by a layer of superheated ions that used the same technology as the energy fields that protected the team whilst in airless atmosphere. It was necessary to protect the fine machinery against the lunar grit until more permanent measures could be taken.

James spent a moment flicking through the various screens on the computer. *'It's all fine. There's nothing wrong with the nanites or the plasma shield. Whatever that line is, it's not related to what we're doing here.'*

Maria grunted. *'I can't stand it when there's no explanation.'*

'I know,' he said absently, staring at the screen readouts. He'd long since gotten used to his sister's idiosyncrasies.

She tried to rub her own arms through her personal shield. *'So are we ready to install the antennae?'*

Beside the tower there was a large flat trolley, deactivated weeks ago with its huge, disassembled cargo covered in a tarp and a low-maintenance, long-term energy field. It was the pointed centre-segment of the telescope, ready to be winched into place now that the nanites had assumed their static position. She looked at it, hunkering beneath its dark covering.

‘Depending on what our illustrious Director says,’ James sighed, ‘I would imagine that we could start work tomorrow, as soon as the edge of the nanite flow solidifies. We won’t be able to get it in place so long as the von Neumann process is still—’

‘I know,’ Maria said. She knew, James knew, and above all Theo knew about the dangers of self-replicating machines. But, of course, they didn’t talk about it. Guilt rose like bile. It always astonished her how old feelings often felt more potent than fresh ones. But, of course, this was not just her guilt; it was a guilt that they all shared.

She shook her head self-deprecatingly, and began to apologise to her brother for snapping. Before she could there was a sharp spitting noise from the left, which distracted her enough to pause.

‘Did you see that?’

James looked up. *‘What?’*

‘Look over there.’

She pointed down the long, sweeping curve of the crater towards the slowly-approaching edge of the nanite flow. The edge became brighter the further away from the centre it travelled, the machines on the boundary of the ring still active and reflecting light as they swarmed. In the centre of the crater it was dark and still, but in the area where Maria pointed there was a patch of similarly dull metal, motionless as a stone, where the nanites should have been alive and active.

James hummed and checked the screens again. *‘It doesn’t say there’s a malfunction. It must be a local problem, maybe something in the rock.’*

‘I don’t think it’s that. Look.’

Although it was the lunar daytime, there was no atmosphere to obscure the stars. The pair looked up past the glare of the sun and towards the heavy band of speckled light that was the Milky Way. It was not unusual to see variations in colour reaching across the spacescape, but what Maria was pointing at were not shades of blue in a black ocean but the ghostly shimmer of a sort of cloud, almost entirely transparent, wavering high above the surface like heat-glare on a desert road.

‘I’ve never seen nebulous particles like that outside of atmosphere,’ James murmured, looking curious. ‘Is aurora possible in the vacuum?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Maria replied. She was disappointed when the glow faded, leaving the vaporous tendrils barely visible in the night’s sky. ‘I don’t suppose we’d know, having never been in space before,’ she added, laughing.

‘Where it’s touched the crater, that’s where the mark is,’ James muttered. ‘It knocked out that patch of nanomachines.’

‘Like lightning turning a patch of sand into glass...’

He brought up a magnified recording on the screen, but it offered no answers. It showed one arm curling away from the cloud, like an incandescent snake extending its body from a burning tree. Its tip had brushed against the nanite-coated crater and caused the programming to either complete its the process early, or shut down completely. The effect was the same: a dull, flat disc of metal amidst the glinting edge of the nanite-layer.

‘Want me to get a sample?’ Maria offered.

James shook his head. *‘I wouldn’t bother. It’ll pass – it’s probably perfectly normal, but we should go and see Theo to be sure. He knows about this sort of thing.’*

*

On the return journey, they saw that Theo was not where they’d left him. Assuming that he’d returned to the facility to make a report on the black line in the ground, Maria and James hurried to get back as soon as possible.

Halfway across the flat lunar landscape, Maria tripped. She landed on her face, kicking up a cloud of fine dust that stuck to her energy field. James hurried to help her to her feet, but she managed by herself before James could step across the object Maria had tripped over.

The black line had become a black wall. It was only an inch high, and partially obscured by the omnipresent white dust. In just half an hour it had risen out of the ground, apparently of its own accord. James dusted away the chalk-like covering, hardly believing his eyes.

‘This is nuts. And it’s definitely not anything to do with the nanites – this is rock, solid rock.’

‘There’s no tectonic movement here,’ Maria murmured, nursing her knees. ‘This is the *moon* for Christ’s sake. No continents, and no lava flow; there’s been no earthquake.’

‘*Moonquake*,’ James corrected, forcing a weak smile. *‘But this wasn’t caused by any tectonic movement. Look at it – it’s far too neat for that. And it’s a completely different stone to what it’s grown out of.’*

‘You’re saying it’s cut stone?’

‘I don’t know what I’m saying,’ he murmured. *‘We need to get back to Theo. And to Karlson.’*

‘Wonderful,’ she said. ‘Well, let’s go.’

They found Theo in the store room. It was where they kept the tinned food and the equipment that would later become the long-term resources of the permanent Radio Laboratory. The room was the only place where there were even work surfaces and the tools for examining the object that Theo held in his gloved hand. The UMSSO – Uncommon Materials Science Officer – looked perfectly at home with his microscope and assortment of minute implements.

He held up the Petri dish. ‘Scrapings from our mysterious line in the ground.’

‘Have you looked at the line during the last few minutes?’ Maria asked.

He nodded. ‘Yes. I had the screens focus on the area so that I could make a vid recording. I’ve noted the developments.’

‘It’s stone. Stone isn’t meant to grow,’ James said.

‘It’s basalt, just like the dark areas on the other side of the moon. At least that makes it moderately less strange, but it’s still weird. The reason the maria are all on the front side of the moon, the side that we see from Earth, is due to the pull of Earth’s gravity. It draws the less-dense minerals to the surface. But to have basalt rise out of the ground in this way, and on the far side, is doubly unusual.’

‘What’s unexpected is that it looks like a wall. I mean, with sharp, straight edges. This isn’t a natural occurrence, it’s—’

‘We don’t know what it is.’

Director Karlson entered the small, cluttered room from behind them, and moved so that he could stand where he could look into the suddenly-guarded faces of Theo, Maria and James. He had his hands in his pockets, as if attempting to appear casual or unconcerned by what must be a palpably hostile audience.

‘I’ll be making my own reports, as you know,’ he said levelly. ‘Until then, I’d like everything you find to go through Theo. Theo will make sure I’m up to date on every development. Until we understand what’s going on here, I don’t want you making any transmissions that might be intercepted.’

‘We always maintain client confidentiality,’ James said. ‘We don’t send unprotected transmissions.’

‘That’s good,’ Karlson said, smiling widely. ‘Because as your client I’m insisting that you allow my own enterprise to analyse the situation before we make any kind of public announcement.’

James gritted his teeth, making Maria flinch. Karlson was not the type to pass up a chance to put someone in his place when he showed even minor signs of objection. Unexpectedly, Karlson said nothing and left the room, satisfied that the message had been received.

‘What *didn’t* you tell Karlson?’ James asked Theo.

‘It isn’t like I had any choice but to keep him informed,’ Theo replied flatly. Like any man who considered himself an intellectual, he didn’t like to be criticized for his actions. ‘But no, I didn’t tell him everything.’

‘So what’s new?’

‘The line – or the wall, I suppose we should call it now – firstly, it was never a line. It’s a ring, unbroken and all the way around the facility. Secondly, it’s all but stopped growing at this point. Whatever phenomenon this is, it’s burned itself out and we have plenty of time to study it more fully.’

‘Will you stay on it?’ Maria asked him, and he nodded.

‘Of course.’

‘What do you know about the vapour above the dish?’

‘I’d noticed that,’ Theo said, scratching the back of his neck as he spun the chair around. Pressing his fingers against the screen on the opposite desk, he brought up some screen shots of Daedalus. They had been taken earlier in the day. Maria knew this because she and her brother were in the shot, looking up at the translucent cloud. The stars were bright above the white horizon, dulled by the distorting swirl of vapour.

‘Without a sample, I couldn’t tell you what kind of gas it is,’ he told them. ‘But considering the speed with which it approached, it will probably already be long gone.’

‘Can you take a look now?’

‘The cams are recording the basalt deposits for stock footage; that’s why we’re having to make do with the screenshot. As soon as I can I’ll make a scan for the cloud. Probably by then, though, you’ll have already set off to mount the antennae. Do you want me to come with you?’

‘James is the technician,’ Maria replied, ‘and I can help. Karlson would probably want you to stay here anyway, and find out if there’s any way to make money out of this.’

Theo nodded in agreement, leaning back in his chair and sighing tiredly. ‘I suppose you’re right. But I suppose we owe him some thanks. Without him, we would never have had the chance to come here at all.’

Maria bit her thumbnail – an old, bad habit. It was true that this was Karlson’s op, from start to finish. It made her extremely anxious to know that Karlson was no longer the biggest of her worries.

PART TWO: CHANGE OF TIDE

Maria rolled over beneath the sheets of her bed. The bedroom was sparsely furnished, the walls still exactly as they had come: plain moulded hardplastic. There was a gap for a window – no frame, just a hole – reinforced with more clear plastic and an energy shield. Through it she could see the black expanse of the galaxy. She lay on her side for a while, staring outward.

There is no sky on the moon, only space, she thought.

Without an atmosphere Maria couldn't wake up to a blue sky, and she couldn't see fluffy cumulous or looming, grey clouds. She felt dislocated, and a little sick. The mornings were just not the same. She was wondering how long it would be before she wouldn't be able to deal with it any more.

Even though it was about seven o'clock at home, it was still very dark on the centre of the far side of the moon. Soon the satellite would swing around the planet and be fully illuminated by the sun. By that time, Maria hoped to be installing the antennae into the dish.

Listening to her own breathing for a while, she thought about getting up as she drowned in a terrible feeling of loneliness. When she was a teenager she or James would climb into the other's bed during the night for company. Of course after a certain age that arrangement suddenly became undesirable to both parties, although secretly Maria missed it. James had always been a comfort, a steady presence in her life. Without him, her years would have been a shiftless as a nanite swarm, never finding rest.

She heaved herself out of bed and began to shower in the lukewarm water of the cubicle adjoining her room. All the strange events of the previous day came to her at once. In hindsight they seemed suddenly normal, and at the same time too bizarre to be true. She'd gotten used to the odd behaviour of her cold, airless environment.

She decided to save her water allotment for later, and have a bath then instead of a shower now. She dried herself with the biggest towel she could find. It was new but cheap, rough on both sides. Her outfit consisted of the thermal webbing stretched beneath jeans; most days she didn't bother with a blouse or T-shirt, just the webbing covering her like a long-sleeved swimsuit.

She found James running an inventory of his tools in what they had come to think of as the lounge.

'Did you sleep in here again?' she asked him.

He looked up blearily and nodded. His hands continued moving, mechanically sorting out his array of tools. Each of them was specifically designed for one obscure task or another, along with the usual screwdrivers and pliers.

'Why aren't you using the apartment?'

'The beds are lumpy as shit.'

He looked like a liar. He looked like he was frightened, avoiding her gaze for as long as she held the silence that followed. Maria almost asked, *Did you see something? What did you see?* But she couldn't construct a sentence in which those words didn't sound stupid, and so she said nothing at all until James looked up again. He clipped his toolbox closed with a snap.

'All set,' he said quietly. 'Let's go.'

The black basalt wall was still there, looking maybe a few centimetres higher. Neither sibling could tell for sure, but neither was in a mood to talk. They stepped over it, being careful not to slip on the energy shields that now encompassed their entire bodies. Maria tried to shrug off the feeling of claustrophobia that came from the low oxygen intake; if she breathed too fast or too deeply, the object clipped to her belt couldn't keep up its supply. And, if it broke, the shield would dissipate and the issue of oxygen would become moot; she would implode in the vacuum.

It was a long, quiet walk to the Daedalus site. Just as Maria began to wonder if she'd done anything wrong, James said, *'I don't feel too good this morning.'*

'Didn't sleep well?'

'I didn't sleep. I'm worried about what's happening here, and I'm worried about our binding agreement with the Director and his associates. If something serious happens...'

'We aren't the first people to do work on the lunar far side,' Maria pointed out. 'There've been other construction crews, research teams, miners ... There'll always be accidents, but I don't think anything serious will—'

'Just don't forget about the abyssal plain.'

Said as though she would ever be capable of forgetting.

James was already accessing the computer console to bring the antennae out of its storage position. Pulleys and electrically-powered wheels drew the tarp from the dish's centrepiece; another set began to lift it, first vertically so that its pointed tip was aimed at the stars like an accusatory finger, and then up into the air to be carried at least partway towards the midpoint of the dish.

The derrick raised and then rotated around the tower's scaffold. The heavy spike of the antennae swinging sedately in the zero-G. Once it had rotated 180 degrees, the derrick's arm began to extend until it looked as though it was about to topple, before James lowered the arm and made sure that the magnetic cushions were in place beneath the antennae. They would allow he and Maria to push the heavy apparatus all the way to the centre of the colossal disc, a distance of fully forty kilometres. Luckily the transport system was motorised, and the magnetic fields would do most of the work for them, pushing and pulling with invisible limbs so that it moved itself in the correct direction.

'Now comes the hard part,' James said, scowling. *'The manual labour.'*

'We'll have a quiet day, take it easy. Karlson won't be able to complain so long as we get this thing in place by sundown. Let's go and prep the buggy – I don't fancy walking all the way.'

An unexpected flare of light forced her to shield her eyes. She hadn't seen any sign of the gaseous vapour they'd spotted the day before, but now the waving tentacles of gas were visible again, moving sinuously through the air from high, high above, toward the surface of the dish. The tentacles were not pointed solely at the disc, but also to the tower and, Maria saw, were stretching towards the facility.

Directly above them, a dual helix of translucent tendrils spiralled slowly above where Maria and James stood. From the centre of the vast clouds were sparks of bright light. As if the vapour were liquid petroleum, the gaseous cloud seemed to ignite from within. Shifting, coalescing strands of red-orange light looped and knotted around each other like a tangle of evanescent cotton. Each strand pulsed in and out of sight, sometimes gleaming bronze and sometimes the smouldering red of coals. The strands of the cloud somehow neither coalesced nor clotted, but moved as if alive, filling the space above the four kilometre depression of the crater.

'Jesus Christ,' James muttered.

He moved back instinctively, perhaps like Maria concerned that the bright vapour would burn them. As it was, they were caught up within the cloud's circumference and perfectly unharmed.

'I don't care what anyone tells me,' he said, *'that's not normal.'*

'We obviously can't continue with the installation,' Maria said, running her hands through the streams of light. She thought that she could see familiar shapes – the contours of a face, the striae of a leaf's skeleton, and other organic formations – but was unable to affect their movement in any way. A million jewels of floating ice confirmed her assumption that there was indeed vapour amongst the nebulous mass.

As entranced as she was, it was hard to ignore the sudden staccato beating of her heart. *'This could be damaging the machinery...'*

'I'll get it re-covered,' James said, and set to work immediately on the tarpaulin.

Even as he spoke, something altered within the luminescent depths of the vapour. Maria was suddenly aware of just how large the cloud was, and how far its trail reached. They stretched up and away from the moon, curving past the sun towards the far end of the solar system like the distended tail of a comet. It reminded her of a trail of bubbles stretching through the darkness of an ocean, fragile amidst crushing obscurity.

The flash of light was accentuated by an ear-splitting sound, and then something streaked out of the vapour on a vein of smoking light. The object crashed into the face of the crater, kicking up a huge plume of pale dust and debris. Spinning pieces of shattered grey metal spun past Maria, threatening the seal of her energy shield. Drifting sheets of particles lifted in agitated paths towards the heavens.

James crouched behind the console, screaming *'Fuck!'* at the top of his voice. Maria, entranced by the fading light that had shone moments before the impact, hadn't had time to duck and cover. She stared in disbelief at the pit in the side of Daedalus.

'I can't believe this,' she muttered, but her first thought was, *What the hell are we supposed to do here?*

'I'm calling Karlson,' she said. Eventually, Karlson answered. The line was full of static interference.

'Yes?'

'We have a problem here. Is Theo watching that vaporous disturbance above Daedalus?'

'We're both here now with updated images,' Karlson replied. *'Is anybody hurt?'*

'We're fine. I can't speak for the equipment though – and our big new dish has a big new hole in it.'

'Come back to the lab for now.'

'What about the impact site?'

'Leave it.'

She hung up. James was looking at her expectantly. He said, *'The impact site is on the outer curve. We go right past it on the way back to the facility.'*

Maria smiled and nodded sideways at the sleeping two-seater buggy, which was parked between the legs of the construction tower.

'All right,' she said, *'let's take a little trip.'*

*

The buggy jerked and bounced over the uneven landscape. Some of the numerous smaller craters were the size of manhole covers; others were as huge as Daedalus, which would take two hours to cross in the little surface

buggy. Without an atmosphere to help burn up smaller meteoroids – there is no such thing as a meteor on the moon – and everything from a pebble to a mountain made a hole in the moon’s battered farside surface.

It took fifteen minutes to drive around the outer rim of Daedalus to the vicinity of the new impact crater. From the very edge they could see the hole: it was about twice the size of the buggy, and there were cracks and fissures through the metal of the dish for a further hundred feet each way. Whatever had struck the dish hadn’t been very large, but it had been travelling at some speed.

‘*Should we go in there?*’ James asked tentatively. ‘*It’s so close...*’

Maria looked warily at the bright, shifting vapours that were suspended in the space above the crater. They were not exactly like the corona of a sun, but they bore similarities, namely the brightness and colours. Most strands were golden with threads of vivid blood-orange, but some were sandy brown, and through the centre of it was a heavy frayed rope of vibrant red.

Against her better judgement, she said, ‘Let’s go and take a look.’

Even through the solid metal, which was three inches thick, the object had punched a hole deep enough to be an elephant’s grave. But it wasn’t the hole that Maria and James stared at; it was the object that had created it.

It was just a long, grey, muscular *thing*, dead if it was ever alive. At one end was what could have been a tail; at the other something that might once have functioned as a mouth. There were no sensory organs or limbs. It looked like a seven-foot fluke. Although it looked organic there were no fluids leaking from the broken form, and no disgorged tissue.

‘Is that ... an animal?’ Maria asked slowly. ‘A life form?’

‘*If it is, it must have come from Earth,*’ James replied. ‘*Look at it. Are you kidding? There’s no way that developed autonomously from Earth.*’

‘I’m not too worried about that right now, actually. It’s too big to move, we’ll just have to leave it for now. None of us are biologists. Let’s just get back and let Karlson deal with what to do next.’

They hadn’t even stepped out of the buggy. As James started it up, something else struck the satellite dish, not thirty feet away. Almost fully deafened, both of them were thrown forward over the buggy’s rollcage, tumbling from the vehicle as it bucked. White dust fell over them like plaster, coating their fizzing energy shields. Partially blinded by the dust, Maria reached out so that she could get to her feet, and saw that there was a shard of metal embedded in the side of her right arm, where it had been exposed from the offside of the buggy. It had not punctured the flesh, but was sitting firmly in the energy field like a bullet embedded in a Kevlar vest.

‘*James!*’ she yelled, but he couldn’t hear her. The mics were thick with static, and there was a solid wall of white dust between them.

Her breathing thinned noticeably; her shield was leaking air. Only infinitesimal amounts, but it was leaking the air that she needed to breathe, that she would die without, and if the metal moved or if the gap widened she would be exposed to the vacuum and burst like a swollen tomato.

Before the panic really set in, her brother lurched out of the dust cloud and took her hand, and they were running away from the second impact site. Something else had crashed into the disc, the second in a series of bombardments that was continuing all around them, crash after crash. The things didn’t just land in the dish, but everywhere beneath the vapour cloud. Maria saw one of the sinuous flukes, twisting through the air in front of them, creating yet another pit on the rutted landscape. More dust rose silently into the air, the only noise they

heard was carried by the vibrations running through their feet as they half-ran, half-jumped away from the deadly hail.

It was not a full quarter-mile to the facility, but it was close. By the time it was in sight they were exhausted. They were still being bombarded. The things were falling sporadically, some back at the construction tower and others further ahead, nearer to the Farside Lab.

They could barely see the building. It was blocked by a tall black structure. It took Maria to process what she was seeing. The basalt line was rising out of the ground like a wide, curved tooth. It was already beyond four feet high.

'Run,' Maria yelled, but there was only static in her ears, furious white noise blocking communications and addling her thoughts. 'Run.'

They reached the wall, crashing against it like shells borne on waves. One of the falling flukes smashed into the side of it twenty feet away, but the wall remained undamaged. The flaccid grey body just hung over it like a wet stocking.

The wall was not so high that Maria couldn't hoist herself up, but there was a throbbing in her arm above where the piece of shrapnel had slammed her energy shield, and it made her arm weak. Moving desperately, James helped to heave her over. She could feel the wall rising beneath her, a slow reef-like growth.

They fell over the other side and landed in lunar dust. More falling creatures slammed against the wall. They crouched, allowing the impossibly-rising wall protect them against the onslaught.

James was hammering on her arm. He screamed behind his energy shield and jabbed with his finger at the ground.

There was a thin layer of water over the rock, mixed in with the chalky surface dust of the moon, to form a milky liquid. The ground was not wet, but becoming liquid itself; the whole area was turning sludgy. The rock was phasing into liquid beneath them.

Move, she thought, standing and making a break for the lab. *Move, move move move!*

James was behind her, having let go of her hand so that she could run freely. He, like her, was up to his calves in sloppy fluid. It was like running through liquid cement or sea-drenched sand; Maria struggled to drag her feet through the deepening mire. Further impacts happened all around her. She began to shed tears in her desperation, urging herself forward. This should have been a safe job. She should not be fearing for her life on the cold side of the moon.

The air within her energy shield got thinner and thinner; she was asphyxiating and all the while she could only think, *it's an ocean, it's an ocean*, and envisioned how she would sink further and further into the ground until she was submerged, then swallowed, and then caught in a thick, gritty undercurrent until she was eventually crushed by the little moon's liquid core...

The front airlock of the facility was open. Theo stood in the doorway, half-out of the shimmering plasma field with his arm outstretched, beckoning frantically. He spoke into his radio, but the words were not being transmitted.

Climbing to the top of the cloying sludge beneath her feet, Maria forced her thighs to power long jumps, employing the low gravity, and was soon within reach of Theo. James was right behind her, white liquid dripping from his boots. Theo grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her inside; James fell in beside them, and Theo slammed the outer door shut and activated the second energy shield, sealing them safely inside the facility.

*

‘I think we’re under-qualified,’ Theo said, looking out of the window.

The energy field swam as he pressed his hand against it, its powerful magnetic fields cool and pliant. Beyond its barely visible distortions was the transformed surface between the lab and the crater. It was no longer a gouged uneven surface, but a flat expanse of thick grey liquid. It might have stretched as far as Daedalus itself. The black basalt wall had grown rapidly since the first impact, and its growth hadn’t slowed or stopped. The circular wall had taken ten minutes to rise, curling inwards as it went, until the entire facility was encased in an unyielding black dome. It had closed directly above them, leaving them in almost total darkness. This it did in total silence.

James was by the window, discussing the problem with Theo. Maria sat on the uncomfortable sofa, picking at its plastic cover as she listened.

‘This must have been organized somehow,’ James was saying quietly. ‘This is obviously not a natural occurrence. It must be connected to the work, somebody who wants Daedalus for something else.’

‘You’re talking about sabotage,’ Theo said.

James nodded.

‘On the moon?’

James puffed out a lungful of air, out of ideas. For a full hour they’d debated the possibilities over hot drinks, but now those drinks were consumed or abandoned, Maria’s stone cold on the table by the sofa. She could still taste the tang of unwanted coffee on her upper lip. She knew that she couldn’t stomach even a mouthful of the stuff right now.

‘What’s Karlson’s opinion?’ she asked quietly.

When Karlson had heard the story, Maria had been in her apartment seeing to the bruise on her arm from the shrapnel, which thankfully hadn’t broken the skin. Although it had been lodged in the energy shield and was releasing air, the shield had repaired itself once she’d reset it. The power box for it now sat on her bed; she felt that she needed some time away from it.

‘He told us the same as before,’ Theo replied. ‘We don’t send any transmissions. He said it wasn’t even worth conjecturing about; he’ll sort it, he said.’

‘Course he will,’ James said sourly. ‘Don’t the Karlsons sort everything?’

‘The dome,’ Maria said. ‘Do you want to know what I think?’

‘No,’ Theo said. He and James already knew what was coming.

‘We know, Maria. We talked about it when you were in your room.’

‘We never talk about it.’

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ Theo said.

‘Don’t you think it’s odd that this dome looks exactly like the shell we constructed on the abyssal plain?’

‘We agreed that *nothing* happened,’ Theo snapped. He yanked his hand away from the window and it retained the shape of his palm and fingers for a moment. The imprint then slipped away like a memory.

‘Maria...’ James said softly. ‘We don’t need—’

‘So who else knows about what happened back then?’ she pushed, sitting up straight. Her arm throbbed as her blood pulsed harder throughout her body. ‘Nobody. Only Simon. Not even the Karlson who was with us knows what really happened. Not *how* it happened.’

‘Maria,’ Theo warned lowly.

‘And now we’re here,’ she continued, regardless. ‘The three of us. And there’s a shell trapping us here that’s exactly like the shell we built. The shell that broke. And, what? We wait for Karlson to tell us what’s happening?’ James said it. It’s sabotage. And the only one who could possibly—’

‘That’s enough,’ James said firmly, sensing the anger building up within Theo just a few feet away. Maria noticed it as well, but she didn’t care. She was tired of keeping things hidden, but of course James was right. That was enough.

*

She dreamed through the night, one of those dreams that lasts a second in the waking world and an eternity in the mind of the sleeper. At ten o’clock E.S.T. her head touched the pillow. A little over two hours later her imagination conjured images of the pale lunar vistas turning to pulp in all directions, beneath a purple sky shot through with icy blue meteorites. The black wall undulated between her and the laboratory, cutting her off. On the other side, the white rock was now a kind of shallow lagoon, the milky waters semi-translucent. The rippling waves smoothed to show what they contained: a miniature submarine resting on the sandy seabed just a few feet down.

There were creatures like miniature aquatic monkeys swimming around it, barely visible. Four of them circled like birds around the crippled sub. They were building a wall out of material too fine to see properly. After a moment, the material began to build itself, and became a growing black shell. The hole in its centre shrank and shrank, obscuring the sunken submarine. Three of the little sea monkeys swam out. One of them hesitated. The shell began to solidify at its roots, turning from living liquid to solid dead metal. The fourth monkey was caught in the flow of the closing shell. It washed over the monkey like tar. Then it began to harden. The air was crushed from the tiny ape’s gills. Its body followed, mangled like damp paper. Life fled the microscopic creature; Maria saw it like thin orange vapour, curling upwards through the water. Then the water rippled, and the scene was lost, and the dream ended.

She woke at 12:15, cold and drenched with sweat.

*

At the time Maria began to dream, Director Karlson was hard at work. He hadn’t slept since he woke at six o’clock E.S.T. that morning, eighteen hours earlier, and he didn’t anticipate rest any time soon.

For ten minutes he’d been waiting for a response to his initial report, which he sent via subspace to the primary headquarters in Chicago. The headset did half of the work and the intuitive, scientifically-unexplainable connection between every executive in the Karlson conglomerate did the rest.

Michael Hudd-Karlson wondered if the cloned brain tissue that had been expertly stitched to his own grey matter really connected him to the others. Could science work that way? Or was it more than science – something innate to life, the genetic link that is often spuriously demonstrated by identical twins and close relatives? It could reach back much further than humanity, through the ages to when man’s ancestors inhabited the trees, and to before that when their limbs were webbed and oily, and prior to even that. Multi-cellular cohesion, back to when life had a single undivided source. Living quantum entanglement. If that was true, everybody was connected in a fundamental way.

He rubbed his eyes. *What strange thinking.* It was probably attributed to his lack of sleep, but he often wondered less about the extra brain tissue than he did about the bit that had been cut out to make room for it.

There was a thrumming sensation behind his eyes now, as though he had a headache coming on. He often suffered from migraines, but this was different. A curious sensation, one that he had long grown used to: pseudo-psychic transmissions pulsing through the space behind space. Earth had a transmitter, so his colleagues' response was strong and clear as it developed in his mind:

Primary report received. Possible enterprise opportunity. Personal safety priority – take care.

These foreign thoughts materialised in his consciousness like shapes appearing in clouds. As they did so he looked out of the window. It was dark, because the dome eclipsed them all. The fire-coloured vapours were still suspended just off the ground. He guessed that parts of it were still outside the dome, stretched towards Daedalus.

Carefully he prepared an update for his colleagues. He needed to inform them of the closing of the black wall over the top of the facility, and the way that the ground outside the front doors appeared to be liquid now, putting an end to any notion of trying to break through the dome.

Before he could transmit, there was a second inbound burst of information from HQ. Karlson reeled from the strength and unexpectedness of it.

Phenomenon known. Source is outer regions of solar system, possibly Jupiter.

Karlson balked. The fact that the Directorship was familiar with the vaporous cloud, and that he hadn't known about it, concerned him deeply. Of course, it was possible that the reason he hadn't been kept informed was that he'd been on the moon and was a touch out of range of the usual broadcasts. If this was a recent development, he would probably be out of the loop until he returned home. When he did, the frequent broadcasts meant to synchronise each of the Directors would fill him in.

Still – Jupiter?

He began his return transmission, including a request for further details to be sent if possible.

Report receipt acknowledged, he began. He was about to close his eyes to help him concentrate, but a spark of light close to the ceiling caught his attention.

It looked like a firefly, pulsing with electric blue luminescence. The more Karlson looked at it, the harder it became to identify its shape. It beat like a tiny heart, in and out of existence as though there was a grey veil across reality that Karlson had only just learned to see through.

More lights unwound like ribbons from a hidden source. These were of many colours, but they were on the blue end of the spectrum, anything from forest green to the warmest shade of violet. The ribbons streamed out of the air. As Karlson turned, he couldn't see their source; then he realised that they were streaming from him, as though his mind were a tap. Ocean blue, sky blue, blue like forget-me-nots. Seaweed green, lime green. Threads of green-yellow, like fresh leaves at the turn of autumn, wove actively through the effervescent flow. Amongst them were characters of the alphabet, some generating a faded tapestry and some strongly-formed in the foreground. There were words there, sentences reeled from his conscious and subconscious mind.

The Director raised his hands and grinned as the lights played through his fingers. The room flooded with colourful light, as though he were in the centre of an intangible fireworks display. His grin parted to release a full bodied laugh, and the laughter was mirrored in the incandescent spume.

*

'Say that again,' Maria said, sitting up.

They were in the lounge, she and James and Theo. Theo turned from the window and repeated himself.

‘It’s raining,’ he said. He was quite pale. ‘Come and take a look for yourself.’

Maria and her brother joined Theo by the wide, glassless window. They didn’t touch the energy field for fear of distorting the view – and what a view it was: that miracle Maria had never expected to see. It was raining outside. Heavy droplets fell from the dark inner ceiling of the dome. They splashed into the liquid stone that had once been crater-riddled ground. Ripples began to form, syrupy and slow.

‘I’m cracking up,’ James muttered. He shook his head and then tried to support it in one hand, as though his neck had given out. ‘I’m going nuts. This is it.’

‘I want a sample,’ Maria said. ‘Theo...’

‘We don’t know what it is. And unless you want to swim out from under the lab’s awnings, nobody’s going out there.’

‘What do you want a sample for, anyway?’

‘I want Theo to analyse it,’ Maria said. ‘Compare it to the basalt rock. Maybe the substance of the dome is breaking down.’

‘I’ve already made a decision, and now would be a good time to bring it up,’ Theo announced. ‘If the dome isn’t breaking down, if we really are trapped in here ... then I’m going to send a message back to home base on Earth. We’re working under Karlson, but he doesn’t own us. This is serious.’

‘I’ll back that,’ James said.

‘That’s fine,’ Maria said testily, ‘but it won’t help us now, will it?’

‘Actually,’ James replied, ‘I have an idea.’

*

When Maria and James returned to Theo’s office with the sample, Theo leaned back in his chair, which adjusted itself to the new pressure, and put his hands behind his head.

‘I was convinced you’d fall head-first into that sludge outside,’ Theo said. ‘Did you really hang out of the window with a cup?’

‘You should have seen me,’ James said, which Theo knew was his sarcastic way of saying, ‘*Thanks for the help.*’

Theo had left James and his sister to work out the particulars for themselves. Upon returning to what he called his office – the tiny space of the storeroom and all of its resident clutter – he’d had the fourth in a series of dizzy spells. For three hours he’d struggled to keep awake, despite having had a full night’s sleep, and he’d nearly fallen down once. Throughout the morning he’d had to steady himself against a wall or railing whilst his head swam, lasting for ten seconds at a time. During those moments his vision went completely grey, blotting out everything but his thoughts and memories, the lonely horror of which was massively magnified.

Theo was surprised that James had brought him the sample; Theo obviously seemed apathetic to the others, although nothing could have been further from the truth.

Maria handed him the cup. It was a red mug with the Karlson Enterprises logo printed in yellow on one side: a slanted KE represented by dozens of tiny, interlocking cubes. The logo had always reminded Theo of the two hundred Karlsons around the world, stitched together by those headsets and their shared cerebral tissue.

‘This is all you got?’

‘I was leaning out the window on my knees,’ James reminded him. ‘If Maria had let me go, I’d have fallen in. I didn’t want to be hanging there any longer than necessary.’

‘Sure.’

Theo didn’t want to add the apology that came to him reflexively. In an evidently hostile environment, James had gone beyond the call of duty demanded of him by his position as a technical supervisor. Asking for more would be a gross display of ingratitude.

Inside the cup was a viscous black fluid. It had a high surface tension and was very reflective. When Theo jabbed it with a sterile temperature probe, it sagged thickly beneath the pressure.

‘Well, it obviously has a different state of matter, and probably a different phase ... You know, I’m not a geologist. Or a physicist. You know that, right?’

‘Of course we know it, Theo,’ Maria said, visibly troubled. ‘Just tell us what you can. Even if it can’t help us get out of here or finish the job, it could lead to other advanced technologies, right? Isn’t that what we’re all about?’

‘Maybe you and the Director should get married,’ James joked, but Maria wasn’t in the mood.

‘We just need to know everything we can about what’s going on. I don’t want to be here. Do you? I can’t be trapped in this place. I can’t—’

She never finished. Theo watched as she backed herself against the outer wall, becoming more agitated. Then, with the full weight of her back pressed against the wall, she vanished.

The wall and the shelves attached to it rippled momentarily as she passed through, like water when a stone is dropped into it. James dashed forward before Theo understood what was happening. Her brother’s hands pressed against the wall – very solid – and he frantically called out to her via the radio mic.

‘Maria! *Maria!*’

‘She doesn’t have her radio with her,’ Theo said quietly. ‘She didn’t have her shield battery...’

And now she’s outside. Theo felt himself rise from his seat without actually willing it so. A strange sensation blanketed his body, numbing his thoughts and senses. Fuzzy borders slid around the edges of his vision, narrowing his field of view. He saw James checking that his energy shield was in order and running to the door, intending to exit the laboratory to find his sister, who was now undoubtedly dead. He didn’t get far; the very fabric of the room was altering, and the thick reams of cables that ran around the corners of the room rippled into life. They lashed his arms and back, repelled by the energy shield but sending him into a stumble with the sheer force. Theo tried to blink light back into his vision but he felt as though he was receding into his own flesh. He was conscious just long enough to see cables winding around James’ arms and yanking him bodily into the air, and heard the pop of bones being dislodged from their sockets.

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PART THREE: ALL HELL

As Maria fell through the wall, she felt coldness and then a sudden pressure inside her, pushing outwards. Her organs shifted like eels inside the barrel of her ribs. It was a disturbing sensation, but although she was breathless and all at once in pain, her mind seemed thoroughly detached from her body.

She was falling backwards, and she could see the exterior of the facility looming up in front of her, and above that the thick darkness of the dome. She could see no stars, no celestial light at all. The only illumination was generated by the laboratory and the long tendrils of red-orange vapour that had managed to permeate the black dome. The impossible black rain fell vertically towards her.

And then she hit the ground, and it was like porridge, and she was sinking and she couldn't move. The liquid stone took her into itself, folding around her body. The darkness of the dome disappeared; the glare of the lab's external lights was shut out. She was submerged.

She drew in air. The pressure eased, although there was now tremendous pain in her ears, as though her eardrums had burst. It was possible – more than that, likely. She was lucky to be alive.

Maria struggled to understand her situation: falling through thick liquid rock that, despite the darkness, still glowed white around her. Breathing air where there was no air. Alive when she should be dead.

Instinctively her hand reached for the box that would activate her energy shield. She was used to having the small device, which could generate strong magnetic fields and pump the plasma between them to protect her from the vacuum, but now it wasn't there; she'd taken it off to rest. When in the lab, she had no use for it.

Voices began to resonate in her head, frightening her. There were echoes of memories, snatches of songs that she thought she'd forgotten, and numerous fragments of recent conversations:

Traps are ready, hope you're all watching—

Mike Hudd-Karlson on your back every step of the way, like a damn monkey—

When have I ever talked about it? If I'm not over the worst of it after a year, I probably never will be—

Just don't forget about the abyssal plain—

—And then she could feel large hands groping at her from all angles, pulling and pushing in every direction. The substance that she inhabited became foamy, like rushing water, and she sank faster. Now she could no longer tell in which direction she was being pulled. Her body spun through the white froth, and in each little pocket of air she thought that she could see dark faces peering at her, wide-eyed – every eye was bright red and surrounded by vapour, and rotating slowly like the body of a great storm.

Breath was not coming easily now. She struggled to pull air into her lungs, which felt as though they were expanding again. A dense ball of pressure was building within her, threatening to rupture her. And then, just like that, she was back in the laboratory, her clothing sopping wet and her skin freeze-burned and scathed ... but she was alive.

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James found her lying very still in one of the corridors, her back pressed against the cold wall. Her clothes were shredded, as though she'd been attacked by huge cats. There were abrasions on her face and arms. Her hair was a gloopy, unsightly mess twisted into a wet point behind her.

'Maria...'

He staggered towards her. He wasn't in such a fine state himself, lashed as he had been by the snake-like cables in Theo's makeshift office-cum-laboratory. Eventually he'd been able to wrench one arm free from their grasping coils, yank the scalpel Theo had been using earlier from his untidy desk, and stab at the rubber coating of the wires that were slowly constricting around his left arm and chest. He hadn't been able to cut through them – the blade of the scalpel was ineffectual against the filigrees of pro-copper metal beneath the rubber – but they had recoiled like worms from its sharp steel blade. Once free, he'd turned briefly to call upon Theo, but the man was gone. James hadn't stopped to call for him.

His intention had been to run around the outside of the building, but he hadn't needed to go that far. Now he was kneeling beside Maria saying, 'Little sis? Little sis...?' and getting no reply.

He thought she was dead. He had no idea how to perform CPR or any other resuscitation manoeuvre, and so when she moved unexpectedly as though surfacing from a deep sleep he was both astonished and relieved.

'Thank God,' he said, and hugged her tightly. 'Are you all right?'

'I guess so,' she said dopily, rubbing her eyes. Dry flakes of blood came off against her hand, from the tiny cuts across every curve of her face.

'How did you get back inside?'

'I ... don't know. Where's Theo and Karlson?'

'I don't know.' He hugged her tightly and said, 'Come on. We need to find them. I think it's about time we got the lander ready for relaunch, don't you?'

'My eyes hurt.'

'They're a little red. Come on, I'll help you stand.'

'There's no point in trying to ready the lander,' she told him, leaning against his shoulder whilst he put his arm around her. 'We're trapped inside the dome. What happened to you?'

'I'm okay, it's nothing. Have you seen Theo?'

She shook her head. Her hair was stuck together in clumps, and it dripped with milky water when she moved.

'I'm going to prep the lander anyway,' James told her. 'The moment this dome falls, I want to be ready to get us out of here.'

'What makes you think the dome will fall?'

'I don't really ... but it bears more than a slight resemblance to the shell we built on the abyssal plain, don't you think? And you remember how that one held up.'

'Just ... don't talk about it,' she said.

'We've spent *twelve months* not talking about it!'

'Forget it then,' she grunted, feeling bruises develop all across her back. She wondered if her passage through the incorporeal wall had damaged her body in some hidden way, on the cellular level. 'Karlson can't know about that, or we'll go out of business ... Theo won't hear any of it...'

'Theo needs to let Simon go and have done with it.'

'He did,' she said. 'That's the problem.'

They came to a portion of the corridor that had widened to join with the lounge area. Warm light streamed through the window to their left, the glow from the vapours. A shadow passed back and forth through the rays, drawing their attention.

'What the hell is that?'

Maria shielded her eyes against the light, and the silhouette that flew in front of it.

The dark shape had huge wings that beat powerfully against the vacuum. Although any wings should be useless without an atmosphere, these appendages carried their owner as though they inhabited the clearest of skies. The animal was large, at least man-sized, but apart from that they could make out no other details until a few moments later, when the flying shape passed to within them.

The luminescent vapour brought out the colouring and details of the figure: it was a man, arms outstretched, his legs bent beneath him. The rain pelted his head and back, and streaked down the glossy feathers of his wings as they beat against each other.

‘Who is *that?*’ Maria asked, in awe.

‘No idea, but it won’t get very far until the shell breaks. It’s flying ‘round in circles.’

‘I always wanted to fly like that. It looks like an angel.’

‘Clumsy for an angel. Do you think it’s Theo?’

Maria rubbed some congealed fluid out of her eyes. What she really wanted was a shower, but she could still remember the feeling of having her throat clogged with lumpy syrup and couldn’t bear the thought of more water.

She said, ‘We could use the cams on the construction towers to get a close-up, maybe...’

‘If we want to go back to the tech room, we’ll need to turn around. And frankly I want to see what our good Director has to say on the matter.’

‘You’re the boss, big brother.’

‘Let’s find you somewhere to lie down.’

The lounge area was cold, even though the radiators were too hot to touch. It was as though the movement of air had stopped entirely within the facility, and all that was left was a block of immobile molecules refusing to pass on the warmth.

Maria dropped onto one of the sofas, in which she’d spent more time over the last 48 hours than she had in the three weeks since they arrived. She felt that she’d needed much more rest since the moment the gaseous, almost-invisible cloud had appeared above the site of the parabolic antennae. It was as though each inexplicable experience cost her an increasing amount of energy and now she was burnt out, like the scorched dead areas in the metal of the colossal dish.

From the sofa she could see out of the window. The flying man was still there, looping around and around the facility. He came around every twenty seconds or so, going from left to right each time. He had his left arm stretched out to touch the dark inner wall of the dome, as if feeling for weaknesses. The rain fell heavily against his white feathers. His right hand caught the droplets every now and again, and he brought them close to his face. Was he tasting them, or talking to them?

The more Maria watched, the more she believed that the soaring figure was Theo, granted the power of flight via some obscure magic. However he had earned his wings, she knew that the glowing cloud was the source of his newfound abilities – somehow, it was the cause of all of this.

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When Karlson answered James’ radio summons, he said that he wouldn’t be able to discuss the problems in person. He was occupied in the tech room, sitting in the auto-ergonomic chair that still held Theo’s shape, documenting the feeds from the cameras stationed outside the dome.

‘We’re both injured,’ James told him. ‘We need to talk about this.’

‘*We are talking, aren’t we?*’ Karlson’s voice replied.

‘The situation won’t fix itself!’

‘*I don’t suppose it will,*’ Karlson said, and cut the line.

Fuming, James slammed his fist against the wall and growled through his teeth. ‘I’m going to see him.’

‘Don’t bother,’ Maria said tiredly, ‘he’ll only feed you more bullshit.’

‘He needs to realise that it’s our *lives*—’

‘He *already knows!* You know what the Karlsons are like – all of them. Every one is the same as the next. It was a Director that gave us that order on the abyssal shelf, and it’s a Director that will ruin our lives a second time.’

‘You know as well as I do that it wasn’t the Director’s order that killed Simon, little sis.’

‘Just leave Karlson be. He’ll only make things worse.’

James was adamant that he would talk to the representative of the company that funded this job, who had hired their services and was now trapping them in a situation that was genuinely life-threatening. He was about to march out when Maria stopped him, and directed his attention towards the window.

‘Look,’ she said.

The rain shower had developed into a storm, filling the vacuous dome with sheets of wide, dark droplets. There was no pooling on the ground; the chalky liquid drew the thrashing rain into itself, making it disappear. Rivers of moisture ran down the curved interior of the dome, wide and voluminous enough to be seen as far away as the laboratory.

‘The dome’s melting,’ James said quietly.

‘I think it just looks that way.’

‘Where else is the rain coming from? We’re completely enclosed.’

‘A lot of impossible things have been happening here.’

‘Theo,’ he said, and they moved closer to the window.

He must have been thinking the same as Maria, that the flying stranger was indeed their Uncommon Materials Officer. Theo was beating his impossible wings hard, flying upwards in an ever shrinking circle as the top of the dome approached. His fingers were stretched out to their fullest, scraping against the side of the smooth stone wall. The torrential rainfall battered him from above, drenching his white feathers with black oil. His clothes were soaked and pressed against his body. In the vacuum, his whitening hair drifted in all directions about his strained face.

‘Isn’t there anything we can do?’ Maria begged of James, but he only shook his head.

‘I tried getting through on his radio, but it isn’t receiving calls. He must have it switched off, or it’s been damaged.’

‘What does he think he’s doing?’

James could only watch as the pale light between the facility and the wall dimmed with the worsening rain. The space was thick with falling water and Theo was almost completely obscured, merely a pale shape darting between the blankets of rain.

Maria’s eyes were drawn to the floor between her feet. A small, round black mark had appeared there, like an ink stain. She looked up, and saw similar discolouration spreading across the ceiling.

‘James!’

The rain was coming through the ceiling. There were layers of insulation and sensitive technologies between the outer roof and the inner ceiling, but they had never been intended to protect against anything other than vacuum and condensation. The perfect seal must have broken, and now the cloudy liquid was leaking into the facility.

‘Step back.’

James took her hand and led her away from the creeping damp. Beads of water dripped onto the floor. It quickly became a trickle, then a stream, pattering onto the floor with faint clouds of steam.

He pushed the balls of his palms against his eyes. ‘What the fuck do we do now?’

‘Get your energy shield on.’

‘It’s on.’

Outside, Theo was making another pass. He could barely be seen through the storm, but it was clear that he was losing height. His hands were over his ears, as if trying to block out sounds. His wings beat erratically and he spiralled towards the ground. Maria cried out and rushed towards the window, in time to see Theo plunge into the rippling surface of the landscape. There was a series of sluggish concentric rings and some spinning droplets, and Theo was gone.

He broke the surface only once, gasping for breath in an airless space, and then submerged completely. He was gone.

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They were not granted time to grieve; although Maria harboured the hope that, just as she had, Theo would materialise somewhere safe, she knew that James did not share her views. When a man choked on liquefied stone and then went under, he was dead, and that was that. She guessed that James’ primary concern was for his sister; she still felt exhausted from her own ordeal, and could barely keep up as James led her through the short, many-cornered corridors of the facility.

Murky water dripped in every room and passageway. As it hit the ground around them it hissed, as though each droplet were corrosive. With their energy shields active, neither sibling felt the touch of the black rain, but they did see the shapes that shimmered between each puff of steam: faces, tiny bodies, and words formed visually in the vapour. Every face was identical, and every word was the same name: *Simon, Simon, Simon*, the deceased; Simon Callas, Theo’s son; Simon Callas, who had been there on that other job in which the then-experimental nanite-flow had moved more quickly than Theo had anticipated, engulfing his son in a tide of tiny, unthinking machines as they constructed their shell beneath the water.

Maria’s dream rushed back to her: the tiny monkey-men swimming around the sunken submarine, her subconscious mishmash of memory and random information. She saw Simon being crushed to death as the nanite-flow solidified around him, half his body encased in the dead metal. Theo had Simon by the hand as the flow had solidified, attempting to pull him free, but fear of being consumed had made him pull back and hesitate. And then, as the shell broke, Maria saw Simon’s body become lost in the backwash of the ocean.

She and the others had said nothing; not she or James, not Theo, who was now a childless father and – in his mind – a killer. The Karlson Director who had accompanied them had been in a separate craft, safer and closer to the surface of the ocean. He hadn’t witnessed the accident and knew nothing about it.

Maria stumbled and covered her face with her hands, moaning. James spoke quietly in her ear: ‘Come on, little sis, don’t worry. We’re going to find a way out.’

‘No,’ she murmured, ‘no we won’t...’

‘We will. Come on, we will. I’ll get us out of here.’

‘It’s Simon, it’s—’

‘I know, I know.’

‘Theo—’

He took her elbow again and ploughed on, surging towards the tech room where Karlson probably still sat. Maria imagined the Director sitting straight in his chair, watching everything on the monitors, making silent observations and beaming them back to Earth with that headset of his.

They burst into the tech room. There was no water falling there; the room seemed protected, at least for now. The chair was turned, facing the computer consoles. Maria was struck by the memory of her speaking to Theo in this room two nights ago, when he had complained about the operations manuals. Today, the chair was empty. Theo was gone. And Karlson wasn’t in the room.

‘Director,’ James said into his radio, with remarkable patience. There was no reply.

‘Director,’ he called again.

The line remained silent.

James checked the box that held the power supply for his energy shield. Maria saw him checking the connections.

‘We can’t leave the facility,’ she said. Her voice sounded weak in her ears. ‘There’s nowhere to go.’

‘We have to try.’ He seemed desperate, his shaky fingers examining each tiny switch and dial on the box. ‘If we’re not quick then the water will get in, and this place will fill up like a well. We’ll drown.’

‘James, it’s no use...’

‘The nanites; we’ll use them to form a bridge, and they can deconstruct the dome...’

‘We don’t *have* any more nanites. We brought all that we needed, and then we used them. They’re all gone.’

‘I’m prepping the lander,’ he said resolutely.

The small craft was connected to the southern wall of the facility via an umbilicus. The tunnel was narrow, and within its thin cylinder both of them were very cold. Just an inch to either side was pure vacuum, as well as the bright feelers of the vapour cloud that continued to fill the dome. With their shields active, they walked through the cylinder trying not to think about it. Where it would normally have been supported by the stone outside, the umbilicus now sagged alarmingly in the viscous fluid, as though they were using a rubber dinghy as a bridge. Somewhere below them was Theo’s body, his lungs packed full. Maria tried not to think about that, either.

The lander had been cramped with four passengers. It had felt like a road trip on the journey from Earth, with Maria piloting and Karlson beside her, Theo and James in the back seats playing travel games. Now it felt like a flimsy, empty box. There were dark stains on the roof and sides, but no moisture had yet leaked in. The computer said that it was fully sealed; it was also giving a proximity warning, showing a CG image of the obstruction. It showed not as a dome, but as a sphere, all around them. It cut through the liquefied lunar landscape below, and there were no gaps or holes.

‘Karlson,’ James was saying into his mic, ‘we’re leaving. I’m going to see just how solid this wall is. You have five minutes of prep time to get here before I take off.’

They hadn’t expected a reply, but there was a crackle of static and Karlson’s voice sounded in their ears: ‘*I’ll be right there. Two minutes.*’

The line was cut from Karlson’s end.

The roof of the lander was almost fully grey, and continued to darken.

‘He’d better get here quickly,’ James said needlessly.

Maria increased the O2 supply on her supply box; she was feeling faint. ‘How do you expect to get through the wall?’

‘I’m going to try to break through,’ James replied. ‘I’ll push forward until something breaks – the wall, or us.’

She nodded. There was no choice on the matter. Either they forced their way out, or they stayed and drowned in the inexplicable black rain. The dome would not open for them, and the rain would not stop – in fact, it was getting worse. Elongated droplets blew at angles in wind that could not be truly there. All that they could see through the front screen of the small craft was a flurry of rain.

‘*I’m in the tunnel,*’ Karlson said, and entered the lander craft a few seconds later. He sealed it closed behind him, and disengaged the umbilicus locks. ‘Are we ready to ditch this dive, or what?’

‘Fearing for your life, Mister Director?’

‘New orders from home,’ he said. ‘Fly.’

‘The rain’s getting in!’ Maria said suddenly, straining to lean away from a black trickle of fluid that had leaked from a wall-mounted control interface.

‘Almost ready,’ James called. He had to move his hands quickly; droplets were falling in front of him and he didn’t want to find out first hand if they really were corrosive.

A bright light flared in front of them. The vapour cloud looked like it was undergoing a second ignition, but there was no flame or further bursts of colour. The cloud just seemed to thicken, like blood thickens as it collects around a wound, and some vapour trails extended as others were drawn inwards. The vapour pulsed twice, and a twist of deep red-orange appeared in the centre, a colour so vivid and rich that it was sickening. It formed a circular vortex in the centre that spun around itself, giving the illusion of physical depth. The red spot curled around the outer edge of the cloud: *a seeking eye*, Maria thought. Behind it was a thick twist of almost solid light.

‘Ready!’ James shouted. The static had returned to their earpieces, interfering with the radios. ‘Maria...’

She repositioned herself in her seat, took control of the yoke, and felt her flight training return to her. Even though she was weak in her limbs, she drew from a reserve of private strength that she didn’t know she had. The craft wrenched itself out of the white mire where it had been partially submerged. More black droplets of rain hissed through the hull and dissipated against her energy shield as the lander lifted upwards on powerful jets.

The readouts were still giving off proximity warnings. James called, ‘The cloud’s reading as a solid object!’

‘More objects within the cloud,’ Maria said. ‘It could be more of the things that fell from above the dish...’

‘I don’t care what the readings are,’ Karlson snapped. ‘Get flying!’

‘The cloud’s expanding,’ James warned. ‘Maria, don’t—’

She didn’t hear him. There was a shriek of white noise in her ear, and then a confused babble that sounded like a poorly-tuned commercial radio. There were words hidden beneath the noise; she felt Karlson slump

forwards into the back of her seat, crying out with his hands against his head, fingernails nipping around the thin metal rings of his headset.

‘What’s it doing to him?’ she cried.

‘Nothing! He’s transmitting – I think I can hear it!’

‘Karlson ... What are you—? Karlson!’

The red glare outside continued to throb, releasing waves of subspace pressure that were theoretically intangible, but resonated with something at the base of Maria’s spine, uncomfortably insistent. Again she was subjected to thoughts and images, words and snatches of distant song. Perhaps these were crossed wires, some rare instance of the subspace communication interfering with natural space. Or maybe it was the phenomenon that she suspected, that she knew was the cause of all this, speaking to her in an arcane language her body and brain were not equipped to decipher: the cloud itself.

The face of Simon Callas stitched itself into the forefront of her mind, a living screaming face at the front of, or perhaps behind of, everything that she saw. Her wide eyes and frenzied mind were interlaced, confused by sensations she didn’t understand, and then she saw that poor Simon was in the vapour, constructed by it but not part of it, and that same phantom was connected to his father Theo, who in turn had been sewn into the ethereal non-substance of the red-orange cloud, a ghost.

Then there was an arrow, blindingly bright like a sliver of steel. It lanced through all of it, through every confusing and distracting image and sound, through Maria’s mind and the vapour both. It sliced through the material of the dome, the outlandish growth of basalt from the lunar maria, the dark and disturbed oceans on the opposite side of the moon. Those oceans had been drawn inwards and expelled to form the shell, and now the shell was cracking. She saw Simon and Theo together again, woven into the light that was now parting to let them pass, splitting like a wound. She saw herself with them, her face like she’d never seen it before in any mirror: it was restful, perfectly serene, for the first time ever.

Karlson grunted in the back of the lander. Maria was too dazed to allow herself the added distraction of turning around to look. She concentrated on moving the craft forward, surging through the vapour and the red spot in its centre. The lander burst through the blinding light. Everybody grunted as the little craft caught against the new crack in the basalt wall, shaken like seeds in an empty tin can. Then they were free of the dome completely, soaring through the outer edge of the vapour cloud, and then—

Darkness. Stars blinked way back in the night-time, like embedded crystals. The light of the vapour was behind them now, as was the reflected sunlight that glanced off the lunar surface. All Moira could see was the darkness of space, and it was magnificent.

Everything was quieter. The eerie sounds had vacated their heads. Moira hadn’t realised until then just how much background noise that bright phenomenon had been making. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth.

‘The shuttle’s on the nearside,’ James was saying.

‘I know.’

‘Thank God. Thank God. Once we’re aboard we can open comms with home...’

‘I know.’

Karlson grunted. He was rubbing his face like a sleeper that had just awoken. He released a long groan and said, ‘Jesus Christ, I hope there’s some aspirin on that shuttle.’

‘There is,’ Maria said. She was planning on taking some herself. ‘And the second we’ve docked you can begin explaining what happened just now.’

Behind them, the light was receding. The vapour cloud was still there, but it was mostly obscured by the dome. The drifting tendrils waved out of the crack like seaweed under water. Maria took them further around the moon, towards the smoother, more familiar nearside. The red-orange glow flared like a sunset just as it hit the horizon, and then it was gone. The lander swept smoothly towards the area of space where their ride home awaited.

‘When I get back to corporate HQ, I’ll be able to give you some answers,’ Karlson said groggily. ‘I know as much about all of that as you do.’

‘That was you who split the dome,’ James said. Maria thought his tone sounded accusatory, but she was just glad that they were away from it, whatever it was.

‘Yes...’ Karlson replied tiredly. He was very pale. ‘Maybe ... I don’t have a lot to say right now. It might have had something to do with my headset. I think all of the impossible things that happened, I think *we made* them happen.’

‘*We* did? You’re full of shit, Karlson.’

‘I’m serious. You think I couldn’t hear you, when you were talking amongst yourselves? Your faces, when you saw that the wall was becoming a dome? Theo had the most insight. Perhaps something to do with his deceased son. The dome, the water, the wings ... Those disasters were special orders, weren’t they? Tailored just for you people, and your dirty little secrets.’

‘You’d better shut your mouth,’ Maria warned lowly. She didn’t take her eyes off the viewscreen. ‘You don’t have the right to talk about that. You never will. And if you hadn’t guessed, you can forget about us ever going back there to finish the job. And we’ll be keeping your advance.’

The Director only laughed. ‘You do that, with my blessing. Just be prepared for an appointment at our headquarters in a few days. We’ll be wanting some answers of our own.’

The white moon seemed to rotate beneath them. The landscape of crowded craters began to smooth out, levelling off just as Earth came into view. It was blue and cloud-washed, its atmosphere seeming to glow. It rose into the sky; they were passing over the nearside of the moon now, where there were no more basalt maria. The darkness of the oceans were gone, the shadows lifted from them like a spell. Everything felt much lighter.

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