

SUCCESSION

Red had never seen anything like it. The planet looked monochrome—the grass was ashen, the water inky, and the air dressed in ribbons of smog. She had seen dead planets before; usually they appeared to be imploding and collapsing simultaneously, but never one as grim. Here, decay occurred in a crescendo and moved further into complete and utter emaciation.

Three sharp raps on the door forced her to break her trance, and she turned from the window.

“Red!” Nephus called, “Meeting in the conference room, now!”

She heard his loud and heavy footsteps as he moved along the hallway. She was always amazed that he could express his curt and stern personality in his movement. He repeated the statement two more times, once greeted with a cacophony of insults. The engineer hated when her sleep was broken. With some reluctance, Red adjusted the blinds then left her room.

Upon their successful landing, the crew made alterations to the spaceship to transform it into a dwelling that would accommodate their multifarious needs. The conference room was the first new addition, built outward toward the lake. When Red walked into the room, she selected a seat near the large window so she could stare at the enormous body of water. It held a great deal of mystery for her, the sparkly cape of a magician awaiting the moment of revelation and the echo of the crowd when the dove was revealed. She wondered what swam beneath it. Unfortunately, the suits they had brought along could withstand the atmosphere

but not an expedition into the deep. She supposed that, for this trip, the lake would remain unexplored.

Lotus entered the room, and sat down on Red's right. Nephus sat beside Lotus, and tossed her distrusting glances. When Yellow, Tiger, and Bear, arrived, Yellow took up the seat on Red's left and Tiger occupied the seat next to Nephus. Bear remained standing. He was their leader, a figure of awe and expectation, but he began to speak only after Tiger encouraged him with a smile.

“Okay, I trust you are all rested. I am going to start recording in a little while, but I want to make sure we’re all prepared. Two simple rules—address a crew member by the alias they have chosen and please, *please*, remember your own.” Bear shot Lotus an exasperated glance. She had changed her alias three times throughout the interplanetary voyage. After switching on the recorder, he sat down beside Tiger. “This is the crew of *The Walrus*. We are a group of conservationists who travel to neighboring planets in the hope of reviving dying ecosystems and repairing environmental damage. We have journeyed to the third planet in our elliptical galaxy, called Earth. Nearly a million years ago, Earth sent out a disk called The Voyager Platinum Record, extensively studied by the crew, which contained information relating to the ecosystem and culture on the planet. This disk was intended to be the planet’s obituary, an indication of all that had transpired. Although it is unclear what caused the populace’s fear of death or what has terraformed the planet into one of desolation, a brief observation of the nearby surrounding area indicates that there may not be life on this planet. Still, it is our hope that we might be able to make the environment habitable. I am called Bear, named after an animal who lived on Earth a very long time ago. In the primary language of their people, I would be referred to as a climatologist. I am here to study Earth’s climate, understand the needs a healthy ecosystem might require, and work toward making the climate conducive to growth. I am commander of *The Walrus*.”

He looked to his left, and nodded to Tiger.

“I am Tiger, named after another animal who lived on Earth. I would be referred to as a doctor and a psychiatrist, one who heals the body and one who understands the mind. I am here to ensure the optimal functioning and wellbeing of the crew.”

“I am Nephus, named after an insect of the ancient Earth. I would be referred to as a botanist, one who studies plants. I am here to investigate Earth’s plant life, assess their nutritive and additional functions, and develop methods of reproduction.”

“I am Lotus, named after a plant which once bloomed on Earth. I would be referred to as an engineer, one who builds and innovates. I am here to service the needs of my fellow conservationists, creating instruments that might make the planet habitable.”

“I am Red, named after a color of Earth. I would be referred to as an anthropologist, one who studies Earth’s primary populace who once occupied the planet. I am here to investigate the planet’s population, and provide insight into the nature of these creatures.”

“I am Yellow, named after another color of Earth. I would be referred to as a zoologist, one who studies animals. I am here to investigate Earth’s animal life, and provide balance to the food chain.”

“We are the crew of *The Walrus*,” Bear remarked, “and we look forward to exploring this planet.”

#

The suit was yellow with red stripes, and the crew of *The Walrus* wore them with strong-fibred gloves and boots. The suit’s helmet was clear, conformed to the head of its wearer, and the built-in air-filter depleted the need for an oxygen tank. When Red walked to the waterside and looked at her reflection, she thought she looked alien and out of place. She

felt out of place here. There were a few monuments which had survived, but they were simple pillars and did not carry much insight into the population who had once occupied Earth. Mostly, Red spent her days exploring with Tiger or just waiting for someone else to find something interesting.

She was about to return to *The Walrus*, when Yellow made an interesting remark.

“There’s something down there,” she said.

Yellow knelt at the edge of the lake, and peered down. Red moved to her side, and understood what she meant. The lake wasn’t as dark and obscure as she had originally thought. Although slightly murky, tenebrous caverns, grey pebbles, and an armada of seaweed were easily visible.

“Plant life,” Red replied with excitement. “*Thriving* plant life. Nephus will be ecstatic.”

Yellow looked at her. “No, I think there’s something down there. Something animate.”

Red knelt beside Yellow, and leaned forward. The crystal protrusion of her helmet, mimicking the contours of her nose, was close enough to touch the surface of the lake. She squinted, concentrating on each shadow as she attempted to unveil the truth. After a few minutes, her finding was obdurate. The water did not stir with movement and she could not discern any figure wistfully swimming about, yet something curdled within her. Instinct perhaps, like the rising of a meerkat to sniff out predators, warned her to keep her distance. Red was certain that there was something in the water and it was watching them.

Yellow stood up, and laughed. “Maybe I’m just being paranoid, interplanetary travel and sleep deprivation can have some truly remarkable effects. Still, I’m going to take a

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sample of the water and have a water chemistry analysis done. That might reveal whether the lake is a habitat.”

Yellow had not convinced her of the lake’s abandonment, and Red waited for her to collect samples before escorting her back to *The Walrus*. The sun was setting.

#

There *was* something in the water. She was Epsilon. Mythology would name her and her kind as mermen, but she was nothing as quaint as those old stories. Although she bore a slight resemblance to Earth’s human population and displayed many behavioral characteristics of whale species, she most resembled her ancestor—Acanthodes bronni. She was long, nearly three meters, and covered in silver, cubicle-shaped scales. Her eyes were enormous pale orbs which allowed her to see color and illuminated her way through the maze of caverns underneath the lake. Her feet had long ago fused into one large fin and there were smaller fins on her stomach, spine, and arms. Gills along the sides of her neck constantly moved, filtering the water which entered her large prognathous mouth. Unlike her ancestor, her teeth were sharp and she did not care for krill.

Epsilon swam to her shoal. They were in a cave, chomping on the bony carcass of some dead thing, and their eyes lit their supper with a nacreous glow. Before they could see her, they knew that she was nearby. They deciphered this in the vibration of the water, as each of their tribe moved with their own unique signature. When Epsilon opened her mouth to speak, bubbles popped out from between her thick lips, but that did not matter. Their communication was via sonar.

There are things above the water, Epsilon said to the shoal. *Yellow creatures with stripes across them, who walk up there. They can breathe it, they can stand it.*

Impossible, Beta replied. *It burns us, it will burn them too.*

No, she insisted. They do not cry out as we would. They can live there.

That is irrelevant, Alpha remarked. When Alpha spoke, they all quieted. Can we feed on them?

Yes, Epsilon said with some excitement. They come close to the water's edge. They do not know that we are here, but we must act quickly before they do.

Alpha, Beta began. We-

Let us go, Alpha interrupted. That place has forced all life into the water. Our families did not need to fight for food when they were alive, but we must. The krill is nearly gone and larger fish with it, soon we will have nothing but the seaweed and it was the seaweed which killed our families. We must take what comes our way. Yes, it may burn for a second, but we will be well-fed for months. Come now, let us see these newcomers.

#

After forcing Lotus into a chair in the healing station, Tiger slapped an ice pack down on each arm. Tiger's expression was one the engineer knew well. It forbade you to speak and, if you lacked the sense enough to keep quiet, would become blisteringly inimical and many colorful maledictions would follow. Although Lotus was incredibly intelligent and astute, her one downfall was her mouth. Silence was a rarity for her, and her words were often accompanied by cataclysmic bouts of arguing and fighting. Her brother, Nephus, nearly drove himself to exhaustion running after her with fire retardants.

Lotus attempted to proselytize her. "I know I've placed a great deal of physical, intellectual, and emotional strain on myself. I've worked diurnally since we've arrived, and it's bound to take a toll, but look at all the progress I...we've made. All I'm missing is Nephus' data. After receiving it, I can alter the machine's computations to accommodate for

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an atmosphere conducive to botanical growth. When all the data collected have been synthesized, the machine will be operational. In one hour, that small machine at the top of the hill will cleanse a portion of the surrounding atmosphere. One hour! That's impressive, right?"

"Yes," Tiger conceded. "Unfortunately, given the rate of the physical, intellectual, and emotional, strain you've put on yourself, you'll be too overworked to operate the machine. I'll have to strap you into this chair for immediate rehabilitation. What's that Earth saying? Monkeys can operate typewriters. Well, Lotus, anyone here can push the start button on your precious machine."

Lotus looked appalled. "No, not *anyone*! This is a delicate machine, and it calls for a delicate touch. Can you imagine Nephus, with his clumsy hands and dirt-covered fingers, operating it? I would break both my arms...and both of his, to see that that doesn't happen."

"No need for anything that drastic."

They turned around, and saw that Bear had entered the room. He approached the chair, and looked down at the engineer. Lotus smiled at him, hoping that he would indulge science. Although he spoke with supplication, he could not be disobeyed, but his argument was not one she had expected.

"Tiger's right, you need to slow down. The entire conservation effort relies on the optimal functioning and mental state of the engineer in charge of the machine. There can be no mistakes. One erroneous input can damage such a delicate atmosphere, worsening the chances of the planet's resurrection."

"But-"

"Get some rest," Bear said, "or I'll have Nephus operate the machine."

Lotus was prepared to repudiate their recommendations, but shook her head and stood up. Crossing her arms across her chest to hold the icepacks to her biceps, she stormed out of the healing station. Her irritable mumbling was audible along the hallway.

Bear took her place in the chair and waited for Tiger to attend to him. Despite the large grin on his face, one which always charmed her, Tiger remained resolute. Her examination of him was not gentle. If he didn't have a scar before he got into the chair, he'd have one when he got out.

Bear took her hand. "Listen, I—"

"You're working them too hard," Tiger interrupted. "If Lotus' machine manages to cleanse the atmosphere a little at a time, this planet will be able to live again and this crew will make history. As commander, you will be heralded and you'd get enough funding to continue the conservation effort, but you need to remember that conservationists aren't immune to toxins, poisons, the bite of animals, acid rain, or exhaustion. You need to let them rest, and, if required, force them to."

"I just did."

"If I didn't walk up to that hill and see Lotus on the brink of collapse, would you have?"

"All right," Bear conceded. "I will demand they work cautiously instead of quickly."

Tiger scrutinized him, but he tossed his head to the side and exposed his jugular. On their planet, it was a sign of submission. Power over the commander meant nothing to her, but she enjoyed the small sign of home. She missed it, and it made her sad to think about how long it would be before she saw it again.

Bear looked at her with concern, and she kissed him once.

#

Kneeling beside the lake, Nephus grabbed hold of the instrument beside him. It was a long rod with a clamp on its end. With expert navigation, he inserted the rod into the water, maneuvered it toward nearby seaweed, and engaged the clamp. When he withdrew the rod, he had a complete specimen. The holdfast, the part of the seaweed that anchors it to surfaces, was large and hard to the touch. It was amber in complexion, speckled with grey, and looked like strange honeycomb. The stipe, or stem, of the seaweed was thick and remained undented even though the clamp chomped down on it. There were numerous air-filled bladders to keep the stipe and fronds afloat. The undulated fronds and blades themselves were weathered, as though a few creatures had sampled them. It looked no different than any other seaweed Nephus had tested. Still, it was a thing of magnificence.

Nephus adored plants more than anything else he had ever come across, including Lotus. Maybe not Lotus, but she was *very* troublesome. Throughout the galaxy, beyond science, culture, and language, plants were the expression of life. There was nothing so soft as the surface of a rose petal, nothing deadlier than the quick movement of a venus flytrap, and nothing so welcoming as the shade of a large tree on a blazing noon. He knew, as soon as they had arrived on Earth, that this planet had life or the potential for it. He heard it from the whisper carrying along the grass, and now he saw it in the flora of the water.

He turned his back to the lake to store the seaweed into a sterilized container. Nephus spun around when he heard the splash of water, accompanied by an agonizing wail. A creature lay on the ground before him, and its skin was on fire. He moved toward it instinctively, hoping to be of assistance, but the creature sprung up and clamped its jaws on his throat. Nephus fell backward, his mouth opened to scream. With horror, he realized that it was dragging him into the lake.

#

Red walked toward the laboratory, hoping for some company. She had spent the last hour watching *The Voyager Platinum Record*, and was incredibly distressed. She needed to know more about Earth's lost populace. They seemed so intelligent, so full of promise, and she wondered what might have happened to them. All around *The Walrus* were signs of tremendous damage, but no one could decipher what had caused it. War or asteroids, she suspected.

When she entered the laboratory, Yellow was at her workstation and bent over three sheets of paper.

“What is it?” Red asked.

Yellow turned around. “Results from the water chemistry analyses. It appears that the water is far less toxic than the atmosphere, but contains a great deal of excrement which indicates many different diets and, most likely, many different species of animal. I believe that, after the atmosphere proved too hazardous, Earth's surviving organisms adapted for aquatic life and migrated to the water where they began the construction of their unique habitat.”

Red smiled broadly. “So, there's life on this planet after all.”

“Definitely,” she replied.

Yellow picked up a file, attached the results from the water chemistry analyses, and then set it back on her workstation. Her fingers caressed a thick book beside a framed photo of their home planet. This book contained information about every creature who had lived on Earth. She wondered how many of them had survived, how adaptation had changed their

appearance and physiology, and, most of all, how long it would take to get proper suits so that she could explore the lake.

“Hold on,” Red remarked suddenly. “The lake is an aquatic habitat, which means something surveyed us on our last trip there. Something intelligent enough to keep out of sight. Nephus has gone to collect seaweed specimens, and he’s *alone*.”

Yellow stared at her, then sprinted out the door. Red followed.

Nephus was not there, but there was blood nearby, his instruments were damaged or upturned, and the ground was nearly drenched with water. When Yellow moved toward the edge of the lake, Red reached for her arm, but it was too late. A creature jumped out of the water and bit down on Yellow’s arm. Yellow screamed, slipped in the mud, and skidded onto her back. The creature began to tug her toward the water.

Red, noting that the creature was a mermaid from numerous Earth mythologies, stumbled forward and clutched Yellow’s free arm. Yellow screamed between the two of them, while they pulled at her. The mermaid became more frenzied, and then looked at Red. Red thought she saw something in the mermaid’s eyes, familiarity amidst a lugubrious and hungry expression. Yellow kicked herself free from the mermaid, and hurried away. She was nearly safe, when another mermaid vaulted from the water. It bit into her left calf. The first mermaid grabbed hold of her right. Yellow was torn from Red’s grip, and her screams were siphoned by the lake when she was pulled under.

Red ran toward the edge of the lake, but did not dive in. Yellow’s crystal helmet was cracked, her eyes were wide open, and she was dead. The mermaids dragged her further down, returning to the solitude of the caverns and the crunching of bones in the dark. Red sprinted toward *The Walrus*.

Epsilon swam into the cave, and looked around. The only remnants of the newcomers they had dragged underwater were their skins, which were unpleasant and carried no nutrition. Beta's jaws still moved, sucking all the blood and juice from the male's bones. Epsilon felt disconcerted. The newcomers were strange. Their eyes and faces sparkled with agency and intelligence, and they fought for each other like they were a tribe. She had never experienced prey like this.

Now what? Beta asked. The second newcomer has escaped, and will surely alert the rest about our presence here. They are unlikely to come near the lake now.

We are well fed, Epsilon replied. We don't need to devour more.

We must, Alpha said. His eyes fixed on the newcomers' skin. I know exactly how.

#

Lotus calibrated the machine according to the preliminary data collected by Bear and Yellow, and cursed Nephus for his stalling. Compared to the work she had done in the short space between now and their arrival, he was very far behind and an impediment to their conservation effort. The machine operated when two conditions were fulfilled – the dial needed to be turned all the way to the right and the handle should be swung perpendicularly until it rested in a vertical position. Lotus touched the operations with affection. It was a marvelous machine, *her* machine, absolute and infallible. Not only designed to accelerate the process of photosynthesis and ozone reconstitution, but would emit gases conducive to growth and climate stabilization. She could not wait to engage the process.

From her figure, sunset created a long, wraith-like shadow, which stretched out across the grass. With some reluctance, Lotus decided it was time to return to *The Walrus*. There were two ice packs waiting beside the door, but, thankfully, Tiger did not accompany them.

She liked Tiger, but her maternal affection was very constricting. When Lotus reached for the icepacks, she noticed something strange.

A trail of blood led into the conference room, where a figure was face-down on the floor. Although she could not see his face, Lotus knew it was Nephus. His suit had a clover stitched into the bottom of his right leg. Nephus heard her come in, turned around, and began to crawl toward her. There was blood all over his suit, and its protuberance made her believe there was more inside. He had been wounded, perhaps gravely. Lotus fell on her knees beside him, turned him onto his back, and screamed. She was Beta's now.

#

Red burst into *The Walrus*, and saw Tiger hurry toward her. She collapsed into Tiger's arms, crying and gasping simultaneously.

“What’s wrong?” Tiger asked.

“Mermaids in the lake,” Red answered. “They killed Yellow. Maybe Nephus too.”

“Red! Pull yourself together and be clear!”

“Yellow discovered that the lake is a habitat for aquatic animals, and that they might be intelligent. I reminded her that Nephus went to collect specimens, so we decided to assure ourselves that he was all right by going there. He was missing, and blood was everywhere. A mermaid attacked Yellow before we could return to *The Walrus*, it pulled her underwater and killed her.”

“If Yellow is dead,” Tiger remarked, “then who is that?”

Red looked behind her. Crawling across the plain was a perversion of Yellow, a creature within her suit. The anthropologist did not need to get closer to know the truth. The mermaid was coming for them.

“It’s not her,” she pleaded to Tiger. “Please, believe me. It’s not her.”

Tiger scrutinized Red for nearly a minute, before she nodded.

“Go get Bear. He’s in the healing station.”

Red sprinted away. Tiger waited on the threshold, her eyes fixed on the suited monster as it made its way toward *The Walrus*. She neither locked nor closed the door. Although she would trust Red with her very existence, interplanetary travel had multiple effects on the mind. When she was certain the figure was not Yellow, but this *mermaid* Red referred to, she would bar entry. For now, she waited. Tiger did not notice that something was crawling toward from the direction of the conference room.

#

Bear rushed to the door, Red close behind. His heart seemed to implode against the confines of his chest, when he saw two figures drag Tiger toward the lake. She was unconscious, bleeding, and did not have on her suit. Before he could run to her, Red grabbed his arm.

“Stop,” she said. “I’m sorry, Bear, but Tiger is dead. Without a suit, the atmosphere is deadly. Look, she has already grown stiff.”

Bear shook her off. “I won’t let them have her.”

“Bear,” Red pleaded, “don’t go. We need to engage the machine, then we need to leave.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her harshly. She realized now that he was gone, nothing more than a vessel for his anger.

“They killed Tiger,” Bear said. “Yellow and Nephus are also dead, and Lotus is missing. Survival is not for them, Red.”

Bear abandoned her to *The Walrus*, and pursued the mermen. When he reached the lake, they had already submersed with Tiger. Without hesitation or fear of death, Bear dove in after her. For a second, just before he hit the water, he heard Red shout his name. Then, his ears were filled with splashing and the surge of water as it closed over him.

#

Red stood in the shadow of the machine. Behind her, three creatures exited the lake and began to crawl. She thought about what Bear had said. The mermen had killed most of the crew, and she would certainly die soon. She remembered images she had seen on The Voyager Platinum Record. Shots of men and women with enormous weapons, airplanes with bombs, desolate land and acidic water. These images were placed on the disk as a warning to invading forces, but were far more horrific than their creators could have predicted. They showed a species clothed in blood. Something else entered Red’s mind. She thought of pristine oceans and green fields, laughing families, and colorful festivals. Large, hungry eyes. A choice needed to be made, and she had very little time to make it.

Without hesitation, Red decided.

#

Epsilon moved slowly in the water. Her stomach bulged and she was sated. This feeling was unfamiliar, but *everything* felt unfamiliar now. The suits had been discarded, they were very heavy to move around in and very difficult to maneuver underwater, but she longed to be above the lake again. Ignoring the vibration from a nearby cavern, one which told her that Alpha had returned, Epsilon swam to the surface. Although hesitant, she reached out her hand and winced. To her surprise, the atmosphere did not scorch her. Curious now,

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Epsilon raised her head out of the water. Still, she remained unharmed. Even when she sprang onto the ground, her skin did not singe. She looked around her, and noticed that her surroundings were different. The grass was vibrant, the earth softer and damper, and the sky clear. Bright sunlight refracted off her scales, causing rainbows to spring up around her. Epsilon watched the sunrise and wished for company.

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