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SOLE

words
like falling stars
fall through my dreams
rip holes
into the fog
of memory

loneliness
without embrace
in eternal cold
and thirst
in the blaze
of my heart

hope
like light
without shadow
in the void
reflects
my soul

codex libri I, II & III
"facing the stars"

With the little time I've got left, I feel I ought to leave behind a record - something resembling a clear account of how things came to be the way they are. Not a dramatic confession, nor a history dressed up for ceremony. Just a quiet laying down of facts, as straight as I can manage, with the understanding that memory, by its very nature, tends to smudge the edges.

This isn't about heroes or villains. It's not a reckoning. The people I'll mention - if I mention them - aren't to be measured or weighed, just remembered. I'm not here to point fingers or hand out garlands. This is, if nothing else, an attempt at being honest. At bearing witness, if only to myself.

So. We begin where beginnings like to hide - in the quiet shift between one forgettable day and the next. I didn't know, at the time, that it would mark the start of anything. It was a day that arrived like any other, wrapped in familiar light and silence. But hindsight does strange things to time. That day now glows oddly in my memory, as if it had always meant to distinguish itself. As if it had always intended to stand apart.

PART I

As I opened my eyes, the ceiling above me caught the morning light in a way that always gave me pause. Not beautiful, exactly - just unexpected. The metal, worn smooth by years of exposure and occasional polish, reflected the filtered sunlight in fractured ribbons that danced lazily across its surface. It was the sort of light you might find in an old cathedral or a subterranean aquarium - soft, suggestive, wholly out of place in a room like mine. It played silently on the overhead panels as if trying to coax me gently out of sleep, or at least into acknowledging the inevitability of being awake.

I lay there for a while, suspended in that half-conscious state where time stretches and thoughts wander without much supervision. The air inside the container was dry but still held the faint tang of recycled warmth - plastic, dust, and the ghost of coffee past. Somewhere, perhaps a kilometre away, something chirped into the silence: a long, descending trill from one of the local tree-crawlers, or something pretending to be one. The sound faded almost instantly, like it regretted being heard.

There was no alarm. No pressing summons. No calamity at the gate. Just the slow, quiet insistence of morning, and the unspoken understanding that life - such as it was - wouldn't get on with itself unless I gave it a nudge.

Eventually, with a sigh that felt older than I was, I swung my legs over the side of the bed. The foam mattress released me with a faint hiss, as though resentful of my departure. My heels met the cool floor, and I sat there for a moment, elbows on knees, letting gravity pull the last of the sleep out of me.

Strictly speaking, I could have stayed put. No one would chide me for lying in. There were no schedules here, no supervisors, no waiting list of things that couldn't be nudged to tomorrow. But even in solitude, discipline has its place. It keeps the mind from wandering too far off course. Routines, I'd found, were like railings in the fog. You don't cling to them out of fear - you just know they'll guide you somewhere recognisable.

The morning light filtered through the thin, uneven slit I'd cut into the outer wall - a makeshift window of sorts, though calling it

that would've insulted architecture. The suns were already above the valley rim, casting long, deliberate beams across the interior: illuminating the cluttered shelves, the hanging tools, the half-finished projects that lived perpetually on my workbench. The dust caught the light and hung there, suspended, as though reluctant to begin the day.

Outside, the world was silent in that peculiar way only inhabited wilderness can manage. Not lifeless - just deeply indifferent. The trees, if one could call them that, stood motionless in the valley below, their bark catching gold in the light. Nothing stirred yet. Even the air seemed hesitant to move.

I rose, slowly, and padded across the container to the far corner - my wash station. The term was generous. It consisted of a square tin basin, a cracked mirror wedged between two rivets, and a cloth that had once been a shirt, long ago, before necessity convinced it otherwise.

I dipped the cloth into the water, now room temperature and faintly metallic. As I wiped my face, the chill slapped me into full consciousness. It was never refreshing. Just bracing enough to remind me I still had

a body to maintain. The water left a faint trail behind, cooling rapidly as it met the air.

It was, in many ways, a pitiful ritual. Yet it felt honest - stripped of pretense, ceremonial only in the most practical sense. There was no hot tap here. No scented soap. Just an old rag and some reasonably clean water, and the stubborn insistence that I ought to begin the day with a clean face, even if I was the only one who'd ever see it.

I took a moment to inspect the mirror. My face looked as it always did - hollowed slightly by time, weathered from a thousand days of sun and silence. A few fine lines had carved their way in around the corners of my mouth, and the creases beneath my eyes had deepened in a way I couldn't blame on sleep. The skin was still unbroken, the gaze still mine.

Beside the basin, propped up in its holder, sat the toothbrush. It was an absurd little device, far too sophisticated for its humble task. Long ago, it must have belonged to some luxury hygiene kit, back when such things were still mass-produced for tourists heading to orbit. It hummed as it activated - calm, clinical, and just faintly

smug, as though it knew it was the last piece of prestige technology I still bothered to use.

As it buzzed gently between my teeth, I wandered over to the kitchen - again, a generous label for what amounted to a table, two powered surfaces, and a mysterious baking unit I still hadn't fully understood. The unit had no markings. No manual. No indication that it had ever been intended for cooking. But it responded to my requests with warm air, a slight tremble, and eventual results that bore some resemblance to food. That was enough.

The pastries from the previous day were nestled inside. Flat, unlovely things made of compressed starch and dried fruit. They'd do. The coffee synthesiser, a bulky contraption I'd repaired more times than I cared to count, chugged obediently in the corner, exhaling bitter steam.

I glanced around. My reader was missing, as it often was. That sly little device had a habit of migrating through the room like a mischievous rodent. I'd once found it wedged into a boot. Another time, it had somehow embedded itself into the folds of my coat. Today, it turned up halfway down the ventilation shaft - don't ask. I retrieved it,

shook off the dust, and deposited it into the oversized chest pocket of my overalls. Safe. For now.

The PA chimed then - soft, unobtrusive. Its voice, now reduced to a monotone by choice rather than malfunction, informed me of a System Alert 2. I paused.

Alert 2s weren't bad news. Not thrilling, but promising. It meant a supply module had entered orbit and, for once, was intact. No fiery streak across the sky. No scavenger hunt for debris. Just an incoming parcel, whole and potentially useful. That, in itself, was enough to lift the day a few inches above average.

I tapped the sensor on my wrist to acknowledge. A gentle warmth signalled confirmation. Efficient. Impersonal. Exactly as I liked it.

Once, early on, I'd kept the PA's personality features active. It had names for things. Jokes. A tendency to ask how I was feeling. Eventually, I turned all of that off. It wasn't the loneliness I feared - it was the illusion of company. You spend enough time talking to a machine that pretends to care, and you forget how to spot the difference.

Still chewing, I walked back to the bed and reached for the wall. A thin, uneven series of etched lines ran down the metal. My tally. One for each day since the last human contact. I added a new mark - Day 622. The groove scratched easily into the surface, joining its brothers in silence.

I stood back. The tally had begun to curve. I considered straightening it. Decided not to.

And then, without thinking, I reached up and ran my hand over my scalp.

The skin was smooth, warm from sleep, and faintly dry from the indoor air. No hair. I'd shaved it all off months ago - years, possibly - out of impatience, mostly. One less thing to bother with. At first, the baldness had made me look older. Now it simply made me look like myself.

The motion was automatic now. Comforting. A reminder, perhaps, that this body - mine - was still present. Still here.

I continued caressing my bald head.

X

Noah ran a hand through his hair with the sort of careful determination reserved for situations that ought to be simple, but rarely were. The strands resisted as usual - never quite unruly, but just insubordinate enough to test his patience. He tried smoothing them down into something vaguely presentable, glancing up at the mirror to assess the results. The reflection that met him was not displeasing, though there was a faintly vexed crease forming between his eyebrows that suggested a man attempting diplomacy with his own hair.

Today mattered.

The presentation had to land cleanly - no hiccups, no surprises. Not because the board were particularly unforgiving (though they were), or because the stakes were unusually high (though they certainly were), but because this was the sort of day that would echo. The sort of day people would, in retrospect, point to and say, "Yes, that was the moment." And if people were going to point at a moment, Noah preferred it be one where his shirt was properly tucked and his hair at least pretending to cooperate.

The board liked things polished. They liked candidates who could tread the fine line between impressive and unthreatening, original but not unruly. Noah, in the mirror, struck that balance with practiced ease: clear-eyed, neat, well-behaved in his tailoring, and unremarkable in a way that suggested dependability. He wasn't flashy. He was curated. That, historically, had worked in his favour.

Somewhere behind him, Noël was being spectacularly less curated.

He was leaning against the wall with the lazy poise of someone who had long ago made peace with chaos and decided to wear it like a second skin. His hair - thick, dark, still damp from the shower - defied all attempts at containment. He was engaged in a half-hearted battle with a comb and an apple simultaneously, making little progress with either.

Eventually, he abandoned the comb altogether and shoved the unruly mass under one of his hats - a faded maroon thing with an uncertain shape and a permanent slouch. It perched at a rakish angle, more accessory than solution. Noël gave the mirror a cursory glance, nodded once at his

reflection as if sealing a silent pact, and returned his attention to the apple.

It was hard not to notice him. Noël had that kind of presence - broad features, rich skin the colour of iron-rich earth, and a certain wild confidence that made people stare without quite knowing why. There was something off-centre about him, not in a disjointed way, but in the way a planet might orbit just slightly faster than expected. A little magnetic. A little dangerous. The kind of person who seemed, quite naturally, to be elsewhere even while standing still.

"Poppa Mars gave me extra colour," he'd said once, casually, when someone asked about his skin tone. He claimed to be one of the last proper Martian-borns - womb-carried, planetside, raised under the filtered domes instead of the orbital cradles. Whether that was technically accurate was anyone's guess, but his mother had the same copper-wine complexion, and Noël's storytelling had a way of wrapping facts in enough charm to make truth feel secondary.

The truth, for what it was worth, was that very few people were actually born on Mars anymore. Not naturally, at least. The

settlements were too cautious, too refined. Births took place in orbit, under controlled conditions, where the gravity was friendly and the complications minimal. Planetside pregnancies were rare - medical curiosities at best, reckless at worst.

Noël's parents, from what Noah had gathered, weren't fond of modern systems. They'd insisted on doing things the old way - feet on red soil, lungs full of filtered air, birth the way it was "meant" to happen. Noah, whose own childhood had unfolded under the gentle protocols of the Scandi-Canadian Union and the clinical efficiency of Libri institutions, found the whole idea romantic and slightly unhinged.

Still, Noël made it look enviable.

Noah adjusted his collar again - third time now - and tried not to let the contrast bother him. Noël had that effortless, untameable charm. He didn't polish himself for the board. He didn't need to. He could waltz into a room with his hat askew and a metaphorical apple in his teeth and walk out with two offers and a personalised thank-you note.

But charm, Noah reminded himself, wasn't everything. The board liked Noël well

enough, but they didn't trust him to speak their language. Not fully. Not in the way they needed for funding discussions and resource commitments. Noah had spent enough time among them to know what they liked. Familiarity. Caution with a touch of promise. Bright, but not blinding. They liked him, because he fit.

And he hated that it worked.

He applied the final touch of grooming cream, less for styling and more for control. The scent was faintly herbal, clean. Measured. He caught Noël watching him in the mirror and raised an eyebrow.

"Too much?" he asked.

Noël grinned. "Just enough. Makes your eyes look almost suspiciously competent."

He reached over and adjusted the trim of Noah's ceremonial cape - dark blue with a modest insignia stitched at the shoulder. Mission colours. It was technically optional, but the board appreciated ceremony. A touch of theatre. And Noah had always looked unusually well in uniform.

"You look infuriatingly appropriate," Noël added. "If they don't fund us, it won't be because of the outfit."

In the background, he was collecting their presentation materials: printouts, tablets, the backup projector - more for show than need. Everything placed in a neat, orderly stack on the shelf near the door. His movements, while casual, had a kind of method to them. Even Noël's chaos had an underlying logic. He was efficient when he wanted to be.

"Got everything?" he asked, slipping the keycards and IDs into a pouch.

Noah gave a slow nod. "I think so. If I haven't, I'll bluff."

Noël offered a crooked smile. "That's the spirit. Lead with confidence, follow with data. Between my meticulous facts and your unnecessarily charming manner, we'll be fine."

He handed over the key chip. "I even booked your railcar. High tunnels. Top-deck view. Little slower, but worth it."

Noah looked at him, amused. "Is this your way of bribing me into a good mood?"

"Absolutely. And also my way of avoiding the receptionist. She keeps trying to sell me baked algae cubes. No thank you."

Noah let out a quiet laugh and reached out for a brief, one-armed hug,

ruffling Noël's hair in the process - which immediately sprang loose from under the hat like it had been waiting.

Noël squawked, mock-indignant. "Rude."

"You'll survive."

"I might not."

"You'll eat something and forget."

"True."

Noah stepped back, checked his pocket one last time, and made for the door. He paused just long enough to glance back.

Noël stood there with an exaggerated air of farewell, two fingers held up in a mock salute.

"Go knock 'em dead," he said. "Just don't knock *me* out of the budget."

Noah smiled. "Hold the fort."

"Always. Unless there's soup. Then you're on your own."

The door slid shut behind him with a smooth, magnetic pull and a quietly satisfying *thud*.

X

That day, I noticed something peculiar.

The door to my container - once merely stubborn - no longer closed properly. Not jammed. Not damaged. Just... uncooperative. It drifted slightly ajar unless pulled to with conscious insistence, like a sulky child pretending to sleep. For a structure that had endured drilling, welding, patching, and the occasional mild explosion under my care, it was oddly insulting that this should be the point at which it began to fail - *not* due to my interference, but entirely on its own.

It had, of course, long ceased to be airtight. That particular virtue had evaporated around month eight, after I'd decided a little more ventilation was preferable to suffocating quietly in my sleep. But even so, the sight of the door giving up - without provocation - left me with a faint flicker of offence.

I gave it a half-hearted kick. Not enough to damage, just enough to express an opinion. The door declined to respond. Typical.

I let the matter go. I was in the middle of breakfast prep, and there's

something especially foolish about picking a fight with a building before coffee.

The day was an unusually bright one. The valley stretched out below me like a forgotten thought, washed in the kind of light that made everything feel slightly too sharp. From my perch on the plateau, I could see the fog beginning to form - slow, creeping layers of it rising from the lowlands as the suns began to work on the frost. It was the kind of transformation I'd seen countless times before and still hadn't grown tired of. There was a delicacy to it, a softness at odds with the brutal geology of the place.

If the suns behaved - and they sometimes did - the light would soon strike the embedded crystal veins that ran like frozen lightning through the mountainside. When it did, the mist would bloom into colour. Shimmering bands of pale fire, flashing and fading in irregular pulses. A quiet performance. The planet, humming to itself.

I promised myself I'd take a proper look later. For now, I had other duties: breakfast first, then a delivery to inspect, and a trek down to check on the animals, assuming they hadn't decided to stage

another of their theatrical feeding riots. And then there was the container of plastic strips I'd been ignoring for days. I needed those strips - needed them for a greenhouse I'd been sketching in the margins of my notes for months now.

The design was, like most of my projects, born of necessity with a touch of speculative optimism. The flora here didn't behave like Earth's. These plants moved - slowly, with intention, like great leafy tectonics. No roots. No fixed growth points. They simply drifted across the terrain in patient arcs, feeding and migrating according to some inscrutable rhythm.

If I wanted to cultivate them, I had to accommodate their wanderlust. My current idea - a circular greenhouse that would gently herd the plants in a slow, looping orbit - was, by my standards, reasonably sensible. It would centralise feeding. Allow for easier harvesting. Possibly reduce the number of weekly foraging expeditions that had, until now, consumed absurd amounts of energy.

Besides, if it worked, I could grow more of the edible moss clusters, which in turn would feed the herd. A self-reinforcing

loop. Efficiency, born not of ingenuity, but of sheer fatigue.

I fetched a bowl - wooden, roughly carved by my own hand and slightly asymmetrical in a way I now found charming - and filled it with a mixture of dried grains, softened root chips, and a viscous white fluid I continued to call "milk" out of a need for semantic simplicity.

The milk was, to be charitable, unconventional.

It came from the trilobite-things - large, shelled creatures with an unfortunate resemblance to oversized insects that had taken a few too many creative liberties with their design. Their movement was a sort of rolling shuffle, and their purpose in life, as far as I could tell, was to construct clumpy dome-huts out of sand and glue. The glue, as it happened, was edible. Thick, fatty, oddly sweet when diluted with filtered water. Unsettling to think about, but difficult to ignore as a food source.

The first time I'd tried it, I'd nearly thrown up. Now, it was breakfast.

There's something comforting about that kind of acclimation. Proof, perhaps, that the mind can normalise almost anything,

given time and a complete absence of alternatives.

I stirred the bowl, the familiar crackle of dried grain muffled by the creamy substance. My spoon, uneven and slightly burnt at one edge, felt solid in my hand. Another self-made thing. Another reminder that I hadn't quite stopped building a life, despite everything.

The fog was climbing steadily now, threading its way through the gullies and over the distant rises. Soon, it would reach the slope that faced me directly, and then, if I was lucky, the suns would meet it head-on.

I set the bowl down and made for the coffee.

Now, when I say "coffee," I should clarify.

Most mornings, the coffee is not *real*. It is a convincing enough imitation - a chemical cousin synthesised from local starches and treated with just enough bitterness to fool the tongue. But today, today I had the real thing. A sealed pod, delivered two rotations ago, labelled (rather optimistically) as "medium roast, terrestrial origin." I'd been saving it. Today seemed worthy of its sacrifice.

The synthesiser - a wheezing machine that had once lived in a lunar hospitality pod - accepted the pod with a dignified hum and began its low, meditative gurgling. I could hear its valves adjusting, metal expanding under heat, the aromatic whisper of dark steam rising into the stale morning air.

I took my mug - scarred enamel, chipped at the rim - and filled it slowly. The smell was instant. Rich. Deep. Familiar in a way that bypassed language and went straight to the spine.

Outside, the fog kissed the crystal veins and exploded into colour.

I carried the mug to my usual seat: a stool made from a broken landing strut, positioned at the best viewing angle. I sat, wrapped my hands around the warmth, and took a cautious sip.

The flavour was sharp, earthy. A touch acidic. It scraped the back of my throat like a polite insult. It was perfect.

And just like that, for a moment too brief to measure, the world felt... not welcoming, exactly. But momentarily less alien.

Leaning back on my stool, I let the warmth of the coffee seep into my hands and the silence settle properly around me. The stool creaked in protest - an old friend by now, fashioned from spare parts and just unstable enough to remind me I was still alive.

The plateau stretched out in all directions, a modest kingdom of thirty metres squared, encircled by sharp drops on all sides except the southern ramp - the only civilised entry point, and even that term was charitable. My container sat stubbornly in the centre, an ungraceful relic of Earth-standard habitation design, now stained by time, dust, and a great deal of improvisation. It bore the patina of having been lived in, worked on, and occasionally sworn at.

Beyond the edge, the land fell away with dramatic flair, all jagged rocks and deceptive shadows. The sort of view you could only enjoy if you trusted your own balance and the absence of sudden gusts of wind. Fortunately, the air here was still. Almost reverent. Even the wind had learned to behave.

I'd considered installing a fence once. Nothing elaborate - just a modest line of demarcation, something to keep my distracted self from tumbling into the abyss while carrying a pail of trilobite glue. But I never followed through. Partly because I didn't fancy trusting my life to a fence built out of whatever scrap I had lying about, and partly because - if I'm honest - I liked the danger. Or, more accurately, I liked the absence of certainty. It kept things interesting. It reminded me I was responsible for staying alive. No auto-correct. No safety net. Just the ground, and me, and the long drop between.

Sometimes, when I was feeling particularly introspective - or particularly bored - I'd slide over to the cliff's edge and dangle my legs off the side. The first time had been an ordeal of slow scooting and clenched teeth. Now, it was ritual. Slide forward like a child on polished tile, inch by inch, until gravity gave a gentle warning tug. Then stop. Breathe. Sit. Let the view fill the silence.

And the view never disappointed.

Today, it was dotted with movement. Near the valley floor, I spotted several of

what I called the trailing ivy trees - though "tree" was a courtesy, not a classification. Thick, squat trunks topped with flat, wandering canopies, they reminded me of umbrella plants that had decided to become boulders. And they moved - glacially slow, dragging themselves over the rocks with creeping root structures that were more limb than anchor.

I'd once thought I was hallucinating. Plants didn't walk, after all. But this world didn't adhere to Earth's sense of decorum. These organisms migrated not by wind or wing, but by sheer persistence - growing forward at the leading edge, dying back at the trailing end, inching across the terrain like botanical hermit crabs. Their movement was subtle, but relentless.

And they left things behind.

The roots they shed in their wake - dry, fibrous, pale as bone - were the main source of nutrition for several species of equally bizarre creatures, some of which had made a habit of inspecting my container when I wasn't looking. I'd sampled the leftover root-matter once, in a bout of culinary curiosity. It was not actively

offensive. That was the most generous thing I could say about it.

More interesting were the symbiotic shrubs that produced tiny berries - bright red and glossy, growing in thick clusters. The berries themselves were palatable, almost pleasant, but I rarely touched them. They belonged, in practice if not in law, to a flock of local fauna that I'd come to regard with something bordering on fondness.

I'd dubbed them Refrigerator Birds, mostly because I couldn't think of anything better and partly because of their ridiculous biology. They were small, feathered things with round bodies and shimmering plumage that changed colour depending on the temperature. When startled - or, apparently, when mildly inconvenienced - they would inflate. Entirely. Puffing up like alarmed balloons, their internal air sacs swelling until they hovered just above the ground. With a few flaps of their stubby wings, they could rise and drift, cooling rapidly as they went.

It looked incredibly uncomfortable.

But it worked.

They fed on the berries and floated away when danger neared, drifting like iridescent soap bubbles across the sky. I'd

watched them for hours once. Never got bored. They didn't make sense, but then again, very little did anymore.

I shifted in my seat and reached for another sip of coffee. The mug had cooled slightly, but the bitterness remained. Grounding. Human.

The mist below was thickening now, lapping gently at the lower outcrops and clinging to the stones like some ancient ghost reluctant to let go. Then the suns crested the final ridge, and the light began to pour in - slow at first, then with increasing clarity. It caught the crystal veins in the mountain wall opposite me and set them ablaze.

Not literally, of course. But the effect was the same.

Brilliant bands of light refracted and split, slicing through the mist in long, diagonal shafts - pale golds, whites, blues. They pulsed gently, like heartbeat rhythms played out in silence. The movement of the light was slow but not passive. It reached.

The beams stabbed downward, vanishing into the fog with painterly precision, their shapes sharp-edged at first, then fraying into softness. The interplay

between light and mist was impossibly delicate. Like watching something both alive and sacred. A dance performed with no audience, no applause, and no need.

I remembered, suddenly, that someone had once called these shafts "God's fingers." A poetic term, if a bit dramatic. Still, sitting there with the mug warm in my hands, watching those celestial threads draw themselves across the landscape, I could see the argument.

The light didn't just touch the world - it revealed it. In that moment, the planet seemed to lean closer, not in menace, but in something quieter. Something like invitation.

It made this place, for all its strangeness, feel almost holy.

X

Noah's gaze lingered on the view outside the railcar window, his eyes following the subtle shift of shadow and light across the landscape below. The train glided smoothly along its elevated track, a silent silver arc woven between the glass towers of the campus. From this height, the view unfolded like a curated memory - familiar, yet not without its moments of wonder.

Below, the main square spread out with its usual measured precision. A slow current of figures moved through it: students crossing deliberately, faculty meandering at the perimeter, and the occasional cluster of tourists trying, and largely failing, to blend in. Noah watched them with faint amusement. The newcomers always had a particular rhythm - slow steps, heads half-tilted, as if trying to take in everything at once without looking like they were taking anything in at all.

His eyes drifted to the northeastern corner of the square, where a small group had gathered near the fountain. The sculpture - fluid, abstract, perpetually in motion thanks to cleverly embedded gravity motors - threw refracted sunlight into their faces, illuminating the uncertainty that

marked all first arrivals. Their clothing, mismatched and oddly layered, made it clear that at least a few of them had packed for adventure but not for context.

They huddled close, feigning indifference, casting glances at the architecture that arched around them. These weren't buildings in the traditional sense; they were spirals of engineered ambition, half-grown from self-repairing composites, half-built with old-world stubbornness. They curved and climbed like strands of double helix, graceful and arrogant, glowing faintly in the morning sun. The glass above the square refracted the light in strange ways - never quite the same twice - giving the underground hub a deceptive sense of openness. It was, Noah thought, the sort of illusion humanity had learned to perfect: building a home beneath the earth and then tricking the eye into believing it had never left the sky.

He couldn't help smiling. The campus always did this to him. Made him feel like he was somewhere significant, even if the feeling didn't always last. Every path seemed paved with quiet intent. Every window offered a story. Even the silence had

structure to it - like someone had planned for contemplation and left the right amount of space for thinking.

The railcar continued its slow arc through the upper network, curving between towers as it made its gradual approach toward the administrative quarter. This route wasn't the fastest, but it was Noah's preferred one. The high tunnels offered an aerial perspective that gave the campus a kind of grandeur it didn't have at ground level. From here, the sprawling ambition of the project could be seen all at once - labs, training complexes, dormitory rings, the distant vertical farms, and, far beyond the campus boundary, the great descent towers that dropped clean through the crust into the resource beds below.

Each station was like a bead threaded on a single strand, and Noah could mark his time on the campus by the stations he'd passed through.

Four years ago, he and Noël had arrived at the Incoming Dormitory - a squat, unlovely building nestled close to the shuttle port. It had all the charm of a municipal processing centre and none of the romance promised by the brochures. Their room had

been barely large enough to stand in, shared with two others at first, then just each other when the others moved on or dropped out. The corridors always smelled faintly of ozone and unwashed ambition. It had been, Noah thought now, utterly hideous. And he'd loved it.

There had been a kind of energy in those first weeks - unfocused, nervy, and unreasonably caffeinated. They'd eaten terrible food, stayed up too late, and had endless, half-formed conversations about the future. The kind of naïve certainty only youth and limited data could provide. It was also where he and Noël had bonded - not over shared background (they had none), nor similar temperament (even less so), but over mutual capability and the silent understanding that no one else quite thought like they did.

They hadn't stayed in the dorms long. After six weeks, they'd moved up - literally and figuratively. Their newer quarters had windows, adjustable lighting, and a partial view of the dome gardens. It had felt like a palace. The constant churn of the Incoming Dormitory - a blur of faces, names, and luggage with more stickers than sense - was

left behind. Some of those people had vanished into orbit, others into irrelevance.

The campus wasn't just a place of learning. It was a crossroad - equal parts academy, launchpad, and cultural petri dish. The shuttle port attached to its southern edge saw more transits than most orbital hubs. Tourists arrived in steady waves, lured by the sleek towers and curated alien fauna. Researchers came to collaborate. Officials came to be photographed.

Noah watched now as a shuttle lifted from the port platform, heatwaves distorting its profile. It disappeared into the sky in a sharp, vertical ascent, leaving only an afterglow in the mist.

"God's fingers," someone had once called it - the way the light sliced through the fog in sharp, clean beams.

He could see the name's appeal.

The train slowed at the Recruiting and Development Station, and Noah leaned slightly forward, glancing toward the tower that anchored it. A mammoth structure of steel and smart-glass, it housed the physical academies: the orbital construction teams, the habitation engineers, the biomechanics specialists. Most of the first eight floors were

dedicated to the orbital ring programme - arguably the most visible effort of Earth's expansion agenda.

The rings - giant arcs slowly forming around the planet - were ambitious almost to the point of absurdity. Sections spun at different speeds, simulating variable gravity. Others were still, dark, waiting for solar mirrors that hadn't yet been fabricated. The crew worked in unprotected zones where atmospherics were unreliable at best, and gravity ranged from fragile to punishing. Injuries were common. Completion was decades away. Morale was... managed.

Noah and Noël had once entertained the idea of joining the ring crews. Briefly. Perhaps out of curiosity. Or masochism. The idea had lasted roughly ten minutes.

They'd read the field logs. Watched the recruitment videos with their cheery over-narration and conspicuous absence of actual injuries. Then they'd read the footnotes.

Noah still remembered Noël's verdict: "Too much metal, not enough meaning."

It wasn't inaccurate.

The appeal, whatever it had been, faded instantly. The rings would change history, certainly - but history had a habit of forgetting the names of those who built the foundations. It would remember those who explored. Those who reached outward, not those who bolted pieces together under orbital duress.

Noah hadn't wanted to build the frame. He wanted to see what lay beyond it.

And as it turned out, so did Noël.

On the advice of his parents - well-meaning, well-read, and, on occasion, spectacularly misguided - Noël had once flirted with the idea of becoming a Tunneler.

He'd lasted three days.

It had begun with a carefully worded message from his mother, full of familial pride and thinly disguised pressure. "Just consider the orientation," she'd written. "The skills would complement your portfolio." Translation: We still think you're wasting your potential, but we love you, and this is us being supportive in the most passive-aggressive way we can muster.

Noah, at the time, had been deeply suspicious. The Tunnelers, for all their technical marvels and romantic mystique,

had a reputation not so much for secrecy as for a kind of well-practised omission. They didn't lie - they just told very precise slices of the truth.

In fairness, they had built an entire civilisation underground, beneath the crushing, sulphurous atmosphere of Venus. The sheer engineering involved was staggering: pressurised caverns, energy fields, deep-earth transport lines, whole cities embedded like gemstones into the planet's upper crust. They had taken the most hostile world in the inner system and carved out a home.

And then promptly told the rest of humanity to leave them alone.

Back in the early days, Venusian settlements had operated with near-total dependence on Earth for support - air, water, equipment, medicine. Then one day, they simply stopped asking. No grand speech. No flag-planting moment. Just a quiet closing of doors and a politely encrypted communique that amounted to: *We're fine now, thank you. Do not follow.*

Earth had taken it badly.

The press had dubbed it the Great Detachment. Most people just called it "that

Venus thing." The Tunnelers, meanwhile, had developed an elegant kind of plausible absence. They didn't attend interplanetary summits. They didn't take part in collective research programmes. They didn't object, of course - they simply failed to respond.

So when Noël announced he was "giving it a go," Noah had responded with a stunned, "Really?" followed by a very slow, "...why?"

The orientation seminar had been held remotely in one of the secure media halls. It had featured a recorded welcome from a Tunneler official - bald, serene, heavily filtered - and then a rather beautiful set of simulations: curved tunnels aglow with warm lighting, public baths set into geothermally heated rock, communal learning alcoves where children floated in low gravity, laughing soundlessly.

Noël had watched, head cocked to one side, chewing on the end of a stylus.

"They do make it look... nice," he'd said at one point, eyes narrowing slightly. "Too nice."

And that had been that.

By the end of the week, he'd unsubscribed from the Tunneler

communications, deleted his login credentials, and, in a final gesture of theatrical closure, flung his stylus across the room where it promptly embedded itself in a tub of nutrient paste. He'd declared it a "symbolic rejection of techno-cultured detachment." Noah had merely nodded, quietly relieved.

It was, in retrospect, a minor detour. A brief flirtation with subterranean utopia. But it had left behind a shared joke that Noah still treasured. Any time the dorm lights dimmed unexpectedly, Noël would mutter, "Ah, the Tunnelers are watching." And Noah would deadpan, "It's already begun."

All of that, though, had only strengthened their commitment to a different path.

The Scouts.

Now there was a paradox if ever there was one.

Among the student body, the Scouts occupied a peculiar social orbit. They weren't revered, exactly - not in the clean, pedestal-polished way professors or mission leaders were - but they were spoken of with a particular kind of weight. People didn't gossip about Scouts. They speculated.

They were the spearhead. The first boots - or claws, in a few cases - on alien soil. They charted unclaimed systems, evaluated planets, made contact with species whose languages couldn't be translated but could be understood. They vanished into the black for years at a time, returned with stories, sometimes with scars. Sometimes they didn't return at all.

To become a Scout wasn't just a career decision. It was an invitation to step out of history and into myth - possibly permanently.

Noah had grown up hearing tales of the old Scout expeditions. Brave women, men and diverse, wide-eyed and starlit, planting the first flag in alien dust. His childhood books had been full of them: explorers in faded jackets, boots caked in orange soil, sketching alien flora in leather-bound journals while their orbiters shimmered high above. It was all very... *noble*.

But by the time he was old enough to look past the poetry, he'd started to see the margins. The footnotes. The missing pages.

The death toll, for instance.

The early days had been brutal. Poor ship insulation. Radiation leaks. Navigation

errors. Delayed signal relays. Oxygen shortages. Food poisoning. One famously tragic case involving a fungal infection that had mimicked serotonin so convincingly it had made the crew euphoric while their organs failed.

That one had made the archives. Also the nightmares.

Still, despite everything, the Scouts endured. They adapted. They improved. And they remained the only profession on campus where both failure and glory came in equal measure and often looked suspiciously alike.

Noah and Noël had chosen the path deliberately. They wanted the uncertainty. The risk. The potential for something bigger than base assignments and published papers.

It was a strange kind of ambition - not about legacy or fame, but about becoming part of something unknowable.

They knew, of course, that their chances of becoming lead Scouts were slim. Dozens of missions were commissioned each year, but only a handful had the kind of scope they craved: first contact, deep-space charting, colony seedwork. The rest

were safer - orbital scouting, mineral verification, biosafety analysis. Useful, but dull.

Still, they trained. Endlessly. With a kind of patient defiance.

And they read. Everything.

Noah had devoured reports from past missions - every dry technical log, every redacted risk summary. He found them oddly moving. Especially the ones that ended mid-entry, with no concluding remarks. No closure.

It was those abrupt endings that stayed with him.

The ones where silence had the last word.

Some of the worst stories, Noah had found, were the ones buried in appendices.

There were the obvious examples - the disasters that made the rounds in the newsfeeds: navigational systems scrambled by stellar anomalies, causing entire ships to slingshot into the gravitational wells of unnamed gas giants. Black-box recordings later retrieved by automated drones captured nothing but static and the occasional mechanical wail - sounds that

might've been distress signals, or merely echoes in the hull.

Then there were the quieter endings. Scouts who landed on unclassified moons with no atmosphere and vanished after a single exploratory trek. No sign of foul play. No struggle. Just a last recorded image of a small, rocky outcrop and the caption:

>Promising mineral density. Will investigate further.

That was it. End of file. Their bios were updated to "missing, presumed lost," and a new trainee got their bunk in the rotation.

But the one that always came up - always, whether in hushed classroom whispers or over drinks at one of the outpost cafés - was Tarnil's World.

Noah remembered the first time he'd read the case file. It had been buried under layers of red tape and cautionary metadata. At the top, a blunt, impersonal note:

>Category 7 hazard. Biochemical. Ongoing research restricted.

Naturally, he'd clicked.

At first, Tarnil had seemed promising. A lush terrestrial analogue. Blue skies. Gravity within acceptable variance. Oxygen-rich

atmosphere. Dense forests. Surface water. Even a mild axial tilt, which promised tolerable seasons.

And then the disappearances began.

One crew gone. Then another. Then two at once. Entire outposts, blinking out like faulty beacons.

Initially, the explanations were technical. Fuel line rupture. Faulty re-entry calculations. Wildlife interference. But the pattern became impossible to ignore. Scout missions sent to Tarnil simply… stopped reporting. No emergency calls. No maydays. Just static.

Eventually, a drone was dispatched - not a person. No one was volunteering by then.

What it found was chilling.

The forests were still there. The water ran clear. But scattered across the soil were the uniforms. Scout emblems. Oxygen packs. Bones that hadn't decayed so much as... dissolved. The living quarters had been reclaimed by an aggressively spongy growth - white, fine-threaded, like fungal lace. When samples were collected, the truth became clear.

Spores. Airborne. Invisible. Intelligent? No one could say for certain. But they targeted the nervous system. Specifically the neural interfaces. Scouts who used implants - standard by then - began to malfunction like broken machinery. Confused at first. Disoriented. And then the muscles stopped responding. Breathing became optional. Heartbeats… inconsistent.

One Scout had managed to keep a journal, scrawled by hand, perhaps realising the implants couldn't be trusted. Noah had read it in one sitting. It had begun clinically - notes on terrain, vegetation, soil pH - but gradually slipped into disarray.

>Can't tell if I'm dizzy or if the trees are bending.

>Jerry said the rocks moved but they don't.

>My feet keep forgetting they belong to me.

>I wrote this. Didn't I

Her last entry was a single word, repeated three times:

>Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

They later discovered that the mycelium was part of a planet-wide network. One organism, or many acting as

one - again, no certainty. But it consumed organic matter indiscriminately. The spores weren't malicious; they were efficient. Once a body lost function, it became food. The Scouts hadn't died violently. They had simply stopped being useful to themselves before the planet found them useful for something else.

Tarnil was eventually deemed "safe" again, in the bureaucratic sense. Habitats were built on towering stilts - 150 metres above the forest floor. Scout teams now operated under rigid exposure schedules. Breathing filters. Antifungal injections every 72 hours. Even so, few volunteered for Tarnil rotations.

Too much had been lost. Too many names had become markers on a grim topographical map:

>**Bell's Clearing. Juno's Run. Sector Nineteen – Memorial Zone.**

And yet, in a cruel twist, Tarnil had proved agriculturally invaluable. The same fungus that devoured human scouts turned out to be a spectacular hydrocarbon converter. Crops flourished in bio-engineered baskets suspended above the canopy. Mycelial silk - harvested and

treated - became a leading component in medical gel packs. Industry, ever optimistic, had claimed the world as a minor miracle.

Noah had never quite forgiven that rebrand.

Samedi, they called the fungus now. After the old Earth deity who ruled over death and decay. It was meant to be ironic, perhaps respectful, but the name stuck. Samedi wasn't just a presence on Tarnil - it *was* Tarnil. It watched. It waited. It reached up, through the mist and roots, and pulled.

And every Scout knew it.

Even now, years later, you could spot the ones who'd done a Tarnil rotation. They walked with a strange kind of patience. Their eyes scanned corners with more care than necessary. They preferred quiet corridors. Avoided moss.

Some never took off their breathing masks again. Not even indoors.

X

I stretched my legs out in front of me as far as the stool would allow, flexing my ankles until the soles of my boots creaked in quiet protest. The stool gave a gentle groan under my weight - not a threat, just a reminder that I'd built it out of salvage and good intentions. I leaned back, but not too far. Experience had taught me the precise angle between casual contemplation and an impromptu visit to the gravel below.

The sunlight had fully claimed the plateau by then, spilling across the rock in long, golden streaks, warming the metal of my container walls and glinting off the rim of my empty bowl. Breakfast had long since drifted into memory, and the mug of tea I had made after the coffee was empty was now cold, tannic, and barely distinguishable from pond water and sat abandoned on the table beside me. It was a still moment, one of those fragile interludes in the day when nothing needed doing quite yet, but everything soon would.

I turned my old air mask over in my hands, inspecting the familiar scuffs along its cheek straps. It wasn't strictly necessary anymore - not in this area, where the atmosphere had proven itself sufficiently