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APHELION

Ever since we first gathered under stars we couldn't name, we've told stories. Around fires, at the edges of settlements, with hands still calloused from the day's work. We told them to pass the time, to chase away the dark, to explain the things that refused to be explained.

Travel has always drawn stories out of us. The further one walks from home, the more the stories seem to reach back - like a tether. A way of holding close what was left behind. On long roads, across water, under foreign constellations - the stories changed. They grew teeth, or wings, or silence.

And when the walking became drifting - and the drifting turned to slinging - the stories did not stop. They changed shape again. Told not around fires now, but under dim lights in recycled air, over warm protein in cold hulls. Told to keep sane, or to remember, or just to make sure someone *heard* you speak.

The further we flung ourselves - between stars and systems, between anchor points and memory vaults - the more these stories began to stretch, like wire gone taut. Some snapped. Some curled back inward, warping. And some... held.

The truth of them hardly matters anymore. Not in the usual way. A story is truer than its parts when it keeps someone warm - or awake - or home, even briefly.

And so, the old habit remains. We still gather. Around mess tables, under flickering light, during power drift, after burns. And we talk. About the things we've seen, and the things we maybe only remember. About the ones who vanished between anchor points. About laughter in the static. About what might be waiting past the edge of mapped space.

Not all of it is real. But that's never been the point.

Stories, like people, travel. And some of them return.

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ANCHOR FALL

Roen arrived the way storms sometimes did in that part of the plateau - not unannounced, precisely, but quiet enough to go unnoticed until he was already inside the perimeter. The sentry logs would later show that the sensors had marked a presence crossing the exclusion line half an hour before the shift change, yet no one had thought to query it. Not because of negligence, but because, on mornings like that, the plateau itself seemed to breathe in a kind of gentle complacency.

The morning was unusually clear, the air brittle with the kind of light that felt polished rather than warm. Ground frost lingered in thin white blades along the eastern roadways, and the solar sleeves had not yet unfolded across the outer panels. They gleamed, dormant, like the wings of sleeping insects. A minor systems check was in progress - routine diagnostics, verifying surface temperature gradients and atmospheric flux - and the console dutifully logged the same small inconsistencies that

appeared every day. No one paid them much attention anymore. The technicians joked that the plateau had its own sense of humour: a landscape that argued with its instruments but never meant any harm.

He came walking in from the low hills, from that direction where the soil grew pale and dry, cracking in the cold. His boots bore no dust, as though he had started his journey from within the settlement itself rather than beyond it. A standard field coat, faded into a shade of disciplined grey, draped neatly about him. No bag, no visible ID tags, no companion drone. Just a man of retirement age with the kind of untroubled bearing that made him look simultaneously harmless and important. The sort of face one thinks one has seen before-in a corridor, perhaps, or in the reflection of a transit window - without ever being sure.

At the intake post, he gave his name plainly.

“Roan.”

No title, no serial, no qualifiers. When prompted for origin, he hesitated - not from confusion, but as if retrieving something from a great distance. "Here," he said at last. "Or nearby. I was stationed at Anchorfall during fifth rotation."

The intake clerk, a young man of pragmatic temperament, nodded without comment and began the registry search. The system churned quietly through several screens' worth of archived identifiers, the blue progress bar crawling like an indifferent insect across the display. Several Roens appeared - two engineers, one meteorologist, a systems interpreter - but none matched his biometric data or declared assignment. When informed of the discrepancy, the visitor only inclined his head.

"That's not unusual," he said, in a tone that carried neither complaint nor surprise. "But I should still be in there."

The clerk considered asking for clarification but thought better of it. It

happened sometimes, after all. Particularly with the older records - before the Archive had undergone redundancy re-encoding, before the collapses, before Anchorfall began synchronising its backups via long-pulse braid. Entire batches of personnel logs had been misplaced during those years. Lost identifiers weren't common, but neither were they a reason for concern. Bureaucracy, like geology, allowed for small discontinuities.

He was issued a temporary station ID-orange band - the sort assigned to transient technicians, minor consultants, and the occasional out-system visitor awaiting record merge. The band granted limited access to the public concourse, communal housing, and supervised entry to first-tier Archive terminals. Roen accepted it without the faintest trace of discontent, fastening it to his wrist with the measured precision of someone accustomed to such procedures.

In his lodging request, he asked specifically for the North Quarter. The clerk informed him, apologetically, that the North Quarter had been decommissioned several years prior after the structural fault. The foundations had sunk unevenly, and the whole district was now sealed.

"Right," Roen said quietly. "I thought it might've been."

He did not ask where else he might stay. He did not ask when it had happened. Instead, he accepted the alternative: a pod unit facing the inner promenade, a narrow habitat bay that overlooked the memorial trees and the shallow light wells beyond. That evening, those who crossed his path recalled later that he greeted them by name. Not warmly - his tone was even, deliberate - but with a practised familiarity that made them question whether they had, in fact, met him before. A few assumed he was a visiting relative of someone in maintenance or research. Others

shrugged it off; the station often hosted older men from the outer settlements.

Only one person - a child, passing him in the corridor - mentioned something stranger. The man had asked whether the old well still had a cover.

The child had blinked and said there had never been a well in Anchorfall.

~

The Archive had no formal protocol for atmospheric anomalies. It wasn't built for surveillance, after all. Its purpose was gentler, more academic: a repository of memory, of process and precedent, concerned less with the movement of clouds than with the continuity of knowledge. But the system did flag inconsistencies - quiet things, mostly. A dissonant reading in the climate mesh, a data point that refused to converge with indexed consensus, a timestamp that failed its checksum without cause. It was meticulous about

such details, as if the act of noticing might one day amount to understanding.

The first of these appeared the morning after Roen's arrival. A topological render of the southern ridge - one of the standard survey references used in half a dozen departmental briefings - had been silently re-versioned. The Archive did not announce this. It never did. The change was discovered, as such things often were, by chance.

The Recorder, engaged in routine calibration, noticed a fractional shift in elevation markers: the ridge line had moved downward by a few metres, an almost imperceptible sag in terrain where none had existed before. A buoy beacon, once catalogued near the eastern plateau lip, was missing. One of the maintenance hatches on the northern escarpment had simply ceased to exist, excised from the map as though it had never been installed.

The Recorder initiated a differential trace. The command

returned instantly, cleanly, and with unsettling simplicity: no prior version available.

They tried again. Same result. The system, efficient as ever, displayed the polite neutrality of a machine certain of its own integrity.

That afternoon, while reconciling reference materials for the next induction cycle, the Recorder encountered a second irregularity. An old contact photograph - part of a training module for junior analysts - had been replaced in situ. The image, familiar to anyone who had passed through Anchorfall's education stream, depicted the first-wave landing on the Floral Moons. Two suited figures, half-lost in glacial mist, stooped to examine the frozen flora beside a slope of chemically stilled soil. A textbook moment.

Except that now, it showed three.

The third figure occupied the edge of the frame, half-obscured by the telemetry mast. Blurred. Indeterminate. A trick of compression, perhaps, or a

bleed-through from a corrupted duplicate file. And yet - the more one looked, the less accidental it seemed. The posture of the third figure was wrong: standing too upright, too central, as though the image had adjusted itself around their presence rather than the other way round.

The Recorder flagged the anomaly, appended a brief note - *possible phantom reconstruction* - and moved on. Their remit was not investigative, not exactly. Their task was to curate access, annotate drift, reconcile cross-references between public and restricted nodes. They did not interpret. Interpretation was for committees, for those authorised to decide what counted as deviation and what merely counted as time's gradual forgetting.

But still, the pattern was there. Subtle. Persistent.

Two additional files appeared later in the day - old maintenance logs, both long since purged during

scheduled memory sweep. Their content was ordinary enough: resource inventories, component tallies, cycle reports from the days before Anchorfall automated its own logistics. What was strange were the timecodes. They bore rotational anchors that didn't correspond to any known cycle. Years that never occurred.

The Recorder dismissed it, outwardly, as a timing fault. Possibly a relay hiccup from the last sync. Anchorfall lay far enough from the braid's primary node to suffer occasional decay; transmission packets sometimes folded back upon themselves like bad echoes. Deep memory was prone to such recursions. Bit-rot, drift, recursive header fragmentation - the language of failure was familiar, comforting even. And yet the discomfort lingered.

The Archive didn't usually make new mistakes. When it erred, it did so with dignity - with predictable artefacts, traceable causes, elegant flaws. This

was different. The errors were too recent, too unambiguous, too strangely human.

Later that evening, when the Recorder reviewed the system's nightly self-check summary, they noticed a single new entry in the log:

USER: ROEN - ACCESS GRANTED
(TIER ONE).

No accompanying request ID. No trace of administrative authorisation. Just a clean, verified entry.

The Recorder stared at it for a long while, then did what all professionals eventually learn to do when the inexplicable intrudes upon routine: they marked it *pending clarification* and closed the terminal.

~

He wandered.

Not aimlessly - not quite - though there was a looseness to his route that suggested he wasn't looking for anything so much as verifying that it was still there. A subtle difference, but one

that showed in his pace. He walked not with the distracted momentum of a tourist, nor the urgency of a man on duty, but with the careful curiosity of someone measuring the edges of a dream he half remembered.

Roan moved through Anchorfall like someone returning after many years to a town that had changed the colours of its signage, shifted its centre of gravity, and quietly rebuilt every corner of every street while pretending it had not. He seemed perpetually on the verge of recognition. The names came to him easily - too easily. He referred to buildings that no longer stood, storage towers dismantled before most residents had even been born. He spoke, almost conversationally, of the western transit loop that had supposedly been sealed after the floods, though no record of such floods existed in any Archive tier.

More than once, he mentioned wings of the Archive that no one had ever heard of - north galleries, subterranean chambers, an entire

“memory court” that, according to his recollection, had housed something called the Continuity Table. When he spoke of it, he did so with the calm precision of someone recalling the location of a familiar object in a familiar room. Those who heard him assumed he meant something else - a metaphor, perhaps, or a misremembered name.

One morning, while the mist still clung to the upper walkways, he asked a food stall operator what had happened to the mural on the retaining wall by the lifts - the one that had once depicted the sling array schematics in blues and rust-reds. The operator blinked at him, polite but uncertain. The wall, they said, had always been blank.

Roan thanked them quietly, nodded once as if the answer confirmed a private suspicion, and went on his way.

Later that same day, he helped a child to their feet after a minor spill near the water catchment tanks. He steadied the small arm, brushed off a scrape, and

addressed the child by name before either the parents or the child had spoken. The parents, mildly startled, asked how he knew it. Roen's answer was gentle, almost wistful.

"They used to visit the Archive," he said. "Liked the smell of old paperprint. Some children do."

The mother smiled uncertainly, assuming she'd misheard him. No paperprint had been used in Anchorfall for over sixty years.

Roen didn't ask questions. He simply stated things, as though reciting from an inner register whose authority was beyond dispute. There was a steadiness in him - a dry, almost dust-soft certainty that made contradiction feel impolite. Occasionally, he would pause in front of ordinary things - the edge of a corridor, a door with a damaged handle, a disused antenna node long stripped of its wiring - and close his eyes, head tilted fractionally, as if listening for something distant. Something that replied, but only faintly.