There are no translations available.

Ground Floor

You don't live in a country, you live in a tongue. Homeland is nothing else than that - Emil Cioran

Actually, in a sense, maybe her departure was a good thing. I'd have all the time I needed to explore what I could have bet my dick was a smartly hidden way to the old secret base. This base - as I had tried to remind Nepta - was reputedly said to have been concealed deep inside some asteroid in the Belt during the early years of the system's colonisation; however, most accessible documents place it in other asteroids, bigger and more famous than our "third-zone rocky dwellings"; good for commerce and tourism, and for keeping the true location safe. Where the different legends roughly all agreed was concerning its founders. Although the founders, who were designated as the Cosmik Tribe, were most of the times taken rather lightly by academia and "serious" historians, especially when it came to the point - in these stories - of their sudden disappearance from all known records and the lack of any physical traces or remnants being allegedly due to them having discovered a way to put some sort of quantum teleportation, which had been the last 700 years' Grail of Science, into actual practice at the macroscopic level and actually having used it to definitely leave the solar system a few hundred years ago. There, the stories diverged once again, as some were talking of a little more than 200 years ago, when others were giving something closer to 400 years, and there were reasons for that too. Now, even if you really wanted to search for evidence of their existence and deeds, even if you were ready to spend all of your waking phases looking for answers on the solar gemgrid information network (that we call "Ginee"), you couldn't very easily find any truly definitive pieces of data about them. I knew this because on one part, that's what I had done; and on another part, I had other sources, more personal and reliable ones...

Technically speaking, I'm an orphan, since both my parents died in a crash during the events on Ganymede earlier in our current century. Yeah, by the way, we still talk in centuries, years and even hours as they are defined on our homeworld, the Earth; it's just a way to stay tuned to their time scale, even if in other - more technical and official - aspects of our lives, universal time and local times are largely used by everybody, and our *nanies* do the maths... Anyway, I arrived on this rock when I was about five years old; it was right after their death, as I was to be adopted by my mother's brother who happened to live there and who was her only family left, becoming mine from then on. My mother's brother Tanka was married to a really lovely woman named Meyem, who easily became a beloved second mother. Lossy was their son who I considered more like my brother than my cousin, and Nepta was Meyem's sister's daughter. We grew up as some kind of happy family, all in all. The thing between Nepta and I, it came quite naturally as we discovered our mutual growing bodies, but even if we had no blood in common, we always preferred to keep it secret between us, the children, just in case the elders would freak out and ask us to live apart...

I quickly understood that my uncle Tanka was the sole link I had left with the mother's side of my family, so I was constantly asking him questions about her and her life, and who were their parents, and where they'd come from, and their parents' parents, and so on. I remember the first time I asked him about their grandparents. He launched a typical: "Hooo... They were there, dude!" Well, actually they were the source of many stories in our family, because they were said to have been part of the last known bunch of people claiming publicly to be descending from the Cosmik Tribe, at least when they were youngsters. It seems to be during their lifetime that it became "not such a good idea" to claim it loud and clear. So apparently, their grandparents rarely talked about it anymore when Tanka was old enough to remember, even though he told me he successfully got to discuss numerous matters - and for endless hours, with his grandfather alone, without the rest of the family being aware of it. And well, I usually don't trust anybody, not even myself - most of the time, but most of the things I hold for truths about the Cosmik Tribe, I got them from Tanka who got them from his gran'pa, the quite timely named "Crazy Bee"... And I tend to give them more credit than anything you could find on Ginee.

For example, that's how I discovered when and why people in our flocks had begun to shorten their full names in order to go incognito in regard with their Tribe's inheritance. You see, my full name is "Pillars of Nobility", Nepta's one is "Neptune's Arising" and Lossy's "Lost in Translation"... :) And in the end of his life, even Crazy Bee was often called "Papy Craby" in Tanka's personal records, memories and words. It has been a deeply rooted tradition within our lineage to name children depending on some cosmic event happening at the time of their birth, and though I know we have a broad understanding of what "cosmic" might mean, I never could figure out what was the event in my case, and life didn't give me the opportunity to ask my parents about it... Tanka and Meyem weren't living on Ganymede anymore at the time of my birth, and so they were not particularly aware of the reason behind my naming; hmm'well, they were saying so. They also admitted they always found it brilliant, and thought it was the kind of names that was given only to great warriors to be. Bah! Maybe they actually knew something even if I doubted it, but anyway, the answers to many of my questions definitely lay somewhere in the disappearance of the whole tribe between 200 and 400 years ago, and that was my main priority; now, if I could stumble upon some clues

about my name in the process, that'd just be a pleasant bonus but I wasn't obsessed by this aspect of things.

I remember I was pondering all this after my meeting with Nepta, smoking some local hydroponic weed - nothing particularly exotic, yunno, the everyday basic stuff I was using for relaxing from my daily casual stress - laid down on my bed with Lossy, who had given up on searching for subtle ways to excuse himself again and again, and that was a true relief, at least one...! We kept talking and loafing like this all the evening, even if I was already - silently and internally - trampling about my work shift of the next cycle, about ten hours from then, and it was still the case when I finally got to sleep on all this. But sleep, I couldn't get too much of it that "night"...

In practice, when you don't interfere with an asteroid like our "lovely rocky-hood", it spends most of its time rocking and rolling among its siblings and it's more or less turning on itself in about every direction whatsoever, so you can't possibly imagine living on such a thing. However, if you attach to it a complicated "multi-modal" engines' array, and you set it up properly, you can manage to control its rotation and make it roughly regular and stable. A complex set of boosters - some orthogonal some tangential - are scattered onto the asteroid's surface, and linked together, then some interconnected software modules manage different aspects of its complete movement, taking advantage of the multi-modal nature of the engine array which allows each booster to be used - including simultaneously, for several of its elementary movements whether they be one of the 3 axes of rotation or those of translation. Now, I'm not saying this to bother anyone with technical details, the fact is I was then working as a maintenance technician on several modules and devices within this complex multi-modal engines' array, so I kinda "spoke" its language... That very morning, I was to proceed with the routine maintenance check of an orthogonal booster situated near the end of "Tentacle n°2" - 'tentacle' being the name given to the long metallic structures upon which the boosters were mounted - either in a T-shape (the vertical bar being deeply rooted in the ground and the horizontal one having 2 opposite ejection turbines for the booster), or in a I-shape (the main part of it being buried and the ejection turbine of the booster being at the top of it, with its exhaust panes sticking out above the surface), the former being a tangential booster, the latter an orthogonal one.

Tentacle n°2... That was the very reason for my trampling feet... Actually, a few days before hand, I happened to get into one of the maintenance bays that are scattered regularly along the tentacles, searching for some power tool we use in order to check the huge dampers' responses; these dampers were made to keep the booster's anchor in its intended position, even under the tremendous effects of the action/reaction forces they were submitted to, and we had to regularly make sure they were in perfect shape, cause the failure of a single one could mean the total loss of the booster. The fact is these maintenance bays had all been made on the very same template, a kind of semi-cylindrical ceiling, above a simple rectangle 8m long by 5m wide. I mean, even employees' toilets were made from the same template, although for those its module was cut in half to build two toilets out of it, each one 4m long and 5m wide, one for standers, one for sitters... That time, as I was seeking for the tool I needed, having to roam through piles of boxes that weren't properly labelled, I suddenly noticed something really weird, behind a box sitting on the lowest shelf against the back wall: the metallic edge of an air vent...

Knowing a little bit about the general architecture of the tentacles, after having been working there for 4 or 5 years, I was pretty quickly convinced of the fundamental anomaly it represented... I mean, behind the back wall of any tentacles' maintenance bay, there could only be the solid rock of which our asteroid dwelling was made... Although, as I was just about to draw that conclusion, I had a general look at the bay itself and got the sudden impression that, actually, it wasn't as long as the other bays; but this is the very moment my boss chose to call and ask me to do some stupid other stuff that couldn't wait anymore, rescheduling the maintenance check he wanted me to do at first to some future date. And this future date was the very next morning...

I knew I needed to find a way to check that vent, and still find the time to make the maintenance check on the dampers. This was a big part of my mental fumbling that evening, 'cause I was pondering the possibility of getting Lossy involved in this. Actually, he had more or less the ability to perform this damper checking procedure - if I explained to him what to do - however it was Lossy, and there was way too much at stake in my opinion to take the risk of involving him at that quite early stage in my plans...

The next morning, even if the night hadn't been very long, I was in rather good shape. I had finally decided to do this alone, I mean, I couldn't involve Lossy in this as long as I wasn't sure of what I was going to find down there. It could be nothing and I'd look ridiculous, it could be huge and then it'd be too much responsibility for his little shoulders... Now, alone meant celerity, efficiency, adaptive creativity... and that wouldn't be too easy with some boss on my back, so I jumped on him as soon as I came into the office's locker room:
- "Hey boss!" I started, "I was thinking... as I got this reported maintenance check to do in tentacle 2, I could do that before lunch while I'll be in the mood after the regular ones I got on schedule in T3 and T5, what do you think?" I asked him quite innocently (I'm pretty good at that game...).
- "Hmm... Well, if you think you can do it in time before they close the mess, why not...? Sure, kiddo!", he smiled.
- "Yeah, well that might be close, but I should make it...! See ya then guys...!" I threw out, before getting on with my job. Aha, yeah! That was beautifully executed...

Well, I can tell you I maintained T3's and T5's tentacles' engines' dampers on the fucking double that day; thing is I had a bit more work on T2's ones and couldn't take the risk not to do it, it was a long due maintenance check, and any kind of failure could happen anytime on those dampers when you left them unattended for too long. I had heard stories about such "incidents" on T-shaped engines' dampers in particular, and I wouldn't want to be in the seat of the one who hadn't done his maintenance checks on such occasions, when you got several crying families - sometimes limited to a mother and her child(ren) - coming slashing your door with stones, hammers, saws... asking for explanations, insulting you, calling you names, assassin, murderer and other bunches of such kind words... because the engine went berserk and flew off across residential areas and buildings, sending dozens of human bodies into oblivion and the ultimate coldness of space, in the blink of an eye.

Anyway, all in all I ended up stealing about 1 hour and a half for my sneaking job. A couple of minutes after finishing my work on T2's tentacle, I was right back in the same maintenance bay,

ready to remove that vent grid and to find one of those alleged tunnels leading to the old secret base of the Cosmik Tribe; I was terrified but so excited...!

What I stumbled upon was both much better and so terribly worse than a mere tunnel in the rock. In fact, behind the vent was a little space whose dimensions were quite exactly what was missing on the other side of the false back wall. And right in the middle of the true back wall of that bay, there was a metallic door... This was the "much better" part of it -the first definitive proof I wasn't dreaming, cause the "terribly worse" part was that it was closed and locked with a digital code. I was about to have a try at some typical 4 digits codes to see if it would crack it, but at about the same time I remembered that this kind of foolish attempt could suddenly deepen the pit of shit you're already drowning in... So I passed on that one; a bit discouraged I had a broad look at the electronic device handling the locking of the door, and on its left side, there was some blank slate with no particularly apparent purpose that caught my attention. I mean at first I thought it could be a boxing protecting electric wires coming out from the digital code device and that I maybe could find some way to shunt the electronic locking. Getting my hands on it to seek for some screw heads behind its face or on the sides, I unintentionally hit some button on its bottom edge and all of a sudden it clicked and simply opened the flat panel which was covering another electronic device display. This time, no numbers to type in, a simple drawing representing a right hand. I smiled, wondering to myself: "hey, what if they put some DNA markers tracing back your cellular lineage in order to determine if you can come in or not...? That would be a fucking smart and practical idea!"; and as my right hand was following the background intent behind that latest idea in order to match the drawing's spacing between the fingers before touching its surface, I had a last instant of hesitation -the natural fear of the unknown, the one that tells you that you must be ready for anything coming up, turn your body on and be fully alert- and to be completely honest I was also a bit scared to trigger some old alarm system and screw up the whole thing, but finally I pressed my hand onto it. There were a few beeps emitted by the door's device, and a relieving green light flashed on its handle system, inviting me to turn it as was indicated above it. A quick and sudden blow of air got out of the other side, I could barely believe what was happening... And yet, at some deeper level, I was believing it. I mischievously peeped into the tunnel beyond the opened door but it was quickly turning upwards and to the left, which - considering the location and position of T2 - was heading towards the general direction of the dork rift. At this very moment, I had a passing thought about Nepta in her cargo holder ship, she should have been close to Jupiter's neighborhood by then, alone in the emptiness of space, and I mentally pictured myself leaning my head against hers and whispering in her ear: I found it babe... I found it!

*

* *

*

*

*

Pills... I'm so sorry sweetheart, I haven't risen to the occasion about us, now I'm gonna disappear without a trace and the slightest chance to say goodbye properly... Basically, that was my line of thought when I began to wake up after the "incident" that ultimately drove me there, that is to say hanging up the tip of a mountain's edge, all tied up in the cords of my seat's parachute, about two dozens of meters above a lake of lava on the surface of Io, still breathing the little oxygen left in my space suit. The cords were rapidly decaying under the high temperature rising from below, and the only hope I had was that it could all happen very quick: the breaking of cords, the fall, the lava dive... But it didn't. Well, the cords did break pretty quick, but the rest was quite different and highly unexpected. First, once they broke, the fall started but stopped right away; actually, that's my fault, I recognize I had been a bit concerned by what was going on below and therefore, not that much by what was happening above. And er... above me was a ship, hovering without even a hiss sound, casting on me some greenish beam which was slowly attracting me towards the bottom of it. I had a short episode of light panic, the time to wonder about who the fuck could do such a thing in complete silence, the only noise I was hearing was the lava bubbles exploding in the deeper distance, as the ship was beginning to take its vector of ascension. But then I realised that if they had any will to harm me, they probably wouldn't bother catching me from falling... When I finally got inside it, I couldn't even hear any door closing behind me. Those people liked silence, folks...

Technically, the place I arrived in was roughly cylindrical, pretty small and bare of any kind of decorations or technical devices, to such a degree that I began to assume this was some kind of decontamination booth, which could seem like a logical engineering design solution... I was a bit worried some blown cloud of unknown antibiotic gas was going to be suddenly released to fulfill that hypothetical function, but actually what happened was so quick I barely took notice of it, and clearly after the thing ended. It was like a flash of light, but just very bright, very short and very much like with some neural devices when you realise afterwards you've just been bombarded by thousands of pieces of data you're not really sure which ones...? If you see what I mean.

Well, sorry for this breach in protocol, lads, however here I feel like I should briefly explain to you some aspects of this situation, regarding the historical context into which this particular and quite peculiar event took place. The thing is, during the couple of centuries that preceded our widespread use and harnessing of the solar system's resources, numerous science-fiction authors had written about so many alien species and an unaccountable number of earthlings were typically convinced that extra-terrestrial species were not only populating the Universe, but were often slightly obsessed by our planet and what-ludicrously-ever was happening on it, to the point of getting over there from wherever they could inhabit in our galaxy or any other one (which is not a mere difference in distances, but anyway...), and committing to pretty bizarre behaviors and operational protocols for inter-planetary contacts and exchanges, like cattle-dismemberings and cattle-all-kind-of-techniques-for-up-cutting, or yet - of course - the very popular abductions and surgical invasions into where you wouldn't know there was a hole over there before, etc. Well, in brief, something much closer to the very usual and typical blossoming imagination of the human species' brain in action, than anything actually alien in essence. Nothing to blame anyone for, here, though when the working masses finally got into space in order to accomplish the petty jobs the very first and very noble astronaut pioneers of old refused to be doing (besides, there wouldn't have been enough of those ones on the planet

anyway), most of them were ready to meet all these wonderful alien species waiting for them out there with birthday cakes, confetti, step-mothers' tongues and funny conic hats! Some were even keenly aroused by the idea of having sex with alien females (or males, for that matter). But, er... How can I put that one...? There was nobody out there, even less waiting for them.

First of all, when you think about it more than a couple of seconds, when you remember that a lot of actual ufo's witnesses of that time had in fact witnessed top-secret human ships and/or experiments, and when you have noticed how rarely the real "potentials" had actually proceeded towards any kind of true interaction with us, you are bound to acknowledge at least one thing: they might not be that much into us, if you see what I mean...? Unless, maybe, we never understood what they wanted to do, or to tell us; which is - technically speaking - not that far-fetched an idea after all, if you consider their inherently "alien" nature...

So, yeah, even some centuries later, we were pretty much in the same situation regarding this question. Most people thought other species - including intelligent and/or technologically advanced ones - were living out there, but we were probably like "little ants" to them, and had nothing - or very little - to do with them. And if you wonder how it could be that we couldn't see them more easily once living in space, you need to understand that if they could have avoided contact when circulating around or even on Earth, it was a thousand times easier to do much better than that in space. You see... space is unfathomably huge; even the solar system is unfathomably huge for a small human being's short-sighted vision and pettily-limited imagination, and our stellar system is like a tiny crystal of sand lost somewhere within the universal Sahara desert.

The booth suddenly opened to reveal a long-blond-haired and tall humanoid figure, smiling at me. I improvised some salute gesture, and began to inquire what had actually happened that had put us in this peculiar situation. I was stopped right away by a hand movement towards my mouth, and still being stared at by that confident and smiling face, I saw one finger coming towards my lips in a vertical position, almost touching them. That was quite universal communication...! Then, in this intoxicating total silence, my hand was taken very gently, and I was led towards the command and control post. Behind us the booth got thinner and thinner until it was finally reabsorbed into both the ship's ceiling and its ground, like two drops of liquid being sucked back in. Following my host's lead, I looked around and began to realise the whole ship was made of a same matter that was visibly able to morph into different elements, from technologically advanced devices to very casual things, the latest one being some kind of mushroom-shaped stool sprung from the ground up that I'd been offered to sit on. The objective of this move was to direct my attention towards a screen at which I was asked to watch. The first images shown on it were depicting the typical patterns of Jupiter's atmosphere, in front of which - in the lower right corner of the screen, I could recognize the surface of Io. My host did some finger gesture towards me, that helped me to understand these pictures were in fact those taken by my ship's external cams. I was about to ask how this could be technically feasable (our ships' information systems were said to be properly secured from any kind of undesired external access), but suddenly I noticed some kind of sagging inside Jupiter's chaotic gases, that progressively transformed into a blueish vortex out of which - in a quick burst of extremely brilliant light - the ship I was now in came out appearing to be closing on the cam's position at

very high velocity and only slowing down to regular-space-kind of speeds when the contact with my ship was practically impossible to avoid. During the very last tenth of second before a major frontal crash between both vessels, the other ship was like thrown off in an hopeless move towards the upper-right of the screen, allowing only the extremities of our hulls to touch each other, which was the obvious reason of what caused my crash on Io's surface. Apparently, the other ship hadn't sustained any damage in the encounter.

Then, we look at each other and suddenly, I felt like a wave of forgiveness urging to get out of myself, while my host - who was smiling no more - seemed to be genuinely embarrassed about the situation. I was about to explain that while being quite annoying on a practical basis, the nature of our accidental encounter was far more important from an historical point of view, and that we needed to get in contact with both our respective governements' representatives in order to prepare some official celebrating ceremony...! But then, a bit in the same way as for the wave of forgiveness, several pictures arose in my mind in a row: first I saw the ship, as if I was looking at it from a distance, against the blackness of the void, it was a beautiful ship that looked like a magnificent bird, second I saw it again but as if I was behind it, looking upon it closing on some planet, plunging into its atmosphere, and then... oh my! I recognized it; it was no other one than the Earth itself...! This last picture was slowly fading out when suddenly another packet was delivered: first a big clock with the arrows turning their ass off - but counter-clockwise - as if time itself was running out, second a very brief flash showing some kind of a runway bathed in the sunlight with a few buildings in the distance followed immediately by a third, very dark location, with some ball of blinding light coming from above and penetrating the ground as easily as if it was water, and remaining there, a few meters below, pulsating softly... I was still overwhelmed by that last sequence and more particularly wondering about that pulsating ball in the ground, when I finally realised what was actually going on, that entity was communicating with me. These pictures in my mind, it was the way they most probably used to convey their thoughts to some given individual ignoring their language, that was just er... such a brilliant ability!

I caught up my breath, and with a couple of hand and fingers gestures towards my interlocutor, I could make sure I wasn't hallucinating and that I was simply receiving their train of thoughts. My host was nodding and the big smile was back, so I guess I'd guessed right... :) Taking a short moment to call back everything that I'd seen, I seemed to understand that the plan was to get to Earth in order to do something about this ball of light - granted that it was actually on Earth that I had seen it "seeding its light into our soil"... To be fully honest, I'm not totally sure if it actually was a process of understanding that objective or more simply put, a subtle trick of my unconscious mind to convince me I undeniably was to go to Earth. Besides, the situation was making my little ass the only Ambassador of the Earth available in the vicinity, so the decision wasn't very hard to make... I looked at my host, slightly tipped my forehead downward in respectful acceptance, then opening my arms and moving them in the direction of the ship's bow, I eagerly said: "After you, friend..."

Notes

Updated on 2018.01.31 - integrating ramonskian proofreading