

The Great Migration

Til Janocek woke before his alarm as he always did. He stared up at the ceiling of his pod, enjoying the brief moment of repose he allowed himself every morning. He closed his eyes. He breathed in as deeply as he could. When it felt like he couldn't possibly suck more air into his lungs he breathed in even deeper. Then he exhaled every bit of it. He opened his eyes, shot up to a sitting position, and threw his legs over the side of his bed. He dismissed his morning alarm and set another one for an hour later. He performed his morning exercises while his coffee pot, on a timer, filled the pod with the exquisite aroma of Colombian coffee beans. The beans were grown in actual Colombian soil, shipped all the way from Earth. It was very expensive coffee. It was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself, and then only rarely. Most of the time he settled for coffee beans grown in the defrosted soil of Terra 9. But it was a special occasion. It was the final day of the Great Migration. He was finally being deployed.

He turned on his shower. The entire pod vibrated as its pipes began to draw in ice from the outside world into its water heater. The water heater did little more than melt the ice. Til couldn't remember the last time he had taken a hot shower.

The lights flickered for a moment, giving Til a minor heart attack.

"Odi?"

"Yes, Til?"

"Are we on backup power or are we still on the grid?"

"We are still connected to the grid."

Til breathed a sigh of relief. It was not a good day to lose power. The pods were powered by underground cables which connected them to the nearest Command Center. Each individual pod had a small backup generator which ran on battery power should the connection to the Command Center ever be lost. If the connection was lost for more than an hour the Technician living in the Pod would have to make his way to the Command Center. The backup generators could technically power a Pod for two hours. Which is to say it could heat a pod to the bare minimum temperature needed to keep a human alive. After two hours were up, the Pod would quickly become uninhabitable due to the cold. Since he was stationed in the Border Zone, losing power wouldn't be as dangerous for him. The temperature outside was slightly warmer due to its proximity to the Summer Region. Nonetheless, it was not a situation he wanted to find himself in.

After Til was done showering, he pulled on his bathrobe and walked into the kitchen, the warmest room in the pod. Calling it a room was generous. Pods were round, 10 by 12 feet temporary housing units dropped in the frozen tundra of the Winter Region. They were divided into four sections: kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and living room. Dividers could be pulled from the wall if the Technician wanted to separate them. In practice the only sections worth separating were the kitchen and the bathroom. The kitchen because the extra machinery generated a modicum of heat that could be trapped by the dividers. The bathroom because on the off chance that a Technician had visitors, they might want some privacy.

Til poured himself a cup of coffee. He cradled the mug in his hands, savoring its warmth. He took his first sip. It was remarkable how much better the coffee tasted than the everyday grounds he used. He didn't consider himself to be a connoisseur, but the difference was unmistakable.

He opened his refrigerator and pulled out the last of his eggs. As per his instructions, he had eaten through most of his food without replenishing his supply. All he had left were three eggs, a frozen dinner, a banana, a tablespoon of butter, Colombian coffee, and salt and pepper.

In four short hours he and the rest of the undeployed members of the Expeditionary Force would be traveling into the dark side of Terra 9 to start the process of powering up the last of the dormant Command Centers. He and Haggard had the furthest to go. Haggard's station was roughly thirty miles past his. The plan was for Til to ride with Haggard to Command Center L30 and then Haggard would continue on to Command Center L31. It was a long ride from the border to L30. Haggard was notoriously grumpy. That didn't bother Til.

Til cooked his eggs in the last of the butter. He seasoned them generously with salt and pepper. He debated about whether he should throw the salt and pepper away but decided to leave them in the pantry. Someone would eventually use the pod again. He assumed that salt and pepper could be unfrozen.

After breakfast he packed what few belongings he had and tossed his bag by the door. Any additional supplies he might need had been delivered to the Command Center the day before. He put on his thermals then pulled his insulated jumpsuit on over them. He drank down the last of his coffee while prepping his spacesuit. The oxygen levels on Terra 9 were low in comparison to Earth, though still high enough to make the air breathable for a human. Trees could only grow in the Summer Region of the planet. Spacesuits, though they provided additional oxygen, were primarily used in the Border Zone for protection from the cold.

Odi informed him his spacesuit was ready just as his second alarm went off. He shut it and hurriedly put on the suit. He opened the door and stepped into the decompression chamber. It was unnecessary on Terra 9 but the pods were multi-purpose. They did serve as a welcome buffer between the living quarters and the frigid outdoors. He sealed the inner door to the pod and turned to the outer door. He pushed it open and stepped outside.

His pod was situated on an icy vista overlooking a large valley full of repurposed oil rigs, mining Petrakraft, which was essentially the fossil fuel of Terra 9. It burned even more efficiently than its earthly counterpart. It was Terra 9's primary export.

There was a unique form of berries, unimaginatively named Winter Berries, grown in the Summer Region which, somewhat ironically, fetched a higher price on the market than Petrakraft. The berries were highly prized by gourmets throughout the colonies, but especially back on Earth.

Til sat down in his steel lawn chair, not bothering to wipe the ice off it. He gazed out beyond the valley to the sun, shining down on the Summer Region. From where he sat it was a perpetual sliver of light on the horizon. It looked like the last light of sunset, a sunset frozen in time. In half an hour it would finally set for the first time in a hundred years. Richter 1, a dwarf planet, would pass by which would alter Terra 9's orbit just enough for it to rotate almost exactly 180 degrees. By the end of the rotation the Summer Region would be facing away from the Eicher Galaxy's Sun. The Summer Region would

grow cold and dark. The Winter Region would start to warm. Foliage, similar to the evergreens on Earth, would slowly but surely re-awaken in the light of the sun, and the Winter Region would transition into the Summer Region. Given the distance from the sun the Summer Region was never all that warm, but Summer Region sounded cheerful, so the denizens of Terra 9 stuck to the name.

The warming, or transition period, took too long for humans. Temperatures in the former Winter Region remained too low for people to live in normal housing units. The oxygen levels would also drop dramatically as the plant life on the dark side of the planet died off while the plants in the former Winter Region began to grow again. This was why the Expeditionary Force traveled into the Winter Region ahead of the Great Migration to power up the Command Centers. The people needed a safe place to live while the planet's temperature and oxygen levels rose enough to support human life.

Command Center L30, Til's post, was home to one of the largest dormant arboretums in the Winter Region. He was proud of this, even though he had no control over where he was assigned. As the oxygen levels dropped across the planet, reserve tanks would be used to ensure there was enough air to breathe in the living quarters. Personal oxygen tanks would need to be used in the Command Center Commons, where the shops and grocery stores were housed. The in-house Arboretums would eventually produce enough oxygen for the entire Command Center. Not long after that the oxygen levels on the planet would rise enough so that humans could venture outside without a tank.

Five years, give or take, was all it took for the planet to re-adapt to the change in its axis. It was nothing short of miraculous. It only happened once every hundred years. Technically every hundred and three years. To be a part of it, to be an instrumental part of the Great Migration, was truly an honor.

Til recalled listening to his great uncle Jan tell stories about venturing into the Winter Region to power up a now discontinued Command Center, L40. L40, at the time, was the farthest Command Center from the Summer Region. Uncle Jan dropped off five different Technicians on his way to his station. Roughly four miles from L40 his land rover suddenly died. He was too far out to get any help, so he had to walk the rest of the way. As a child Til never questioned his uncle's story, until he got older and learned that it was impossible for a human to survive outside in the Winter Region for that long. After learning this he smiled politely whenever Uncle Jan told the story, but he assumed Jan was exaggerating, that he was taking some liberties to make the tale more interesting. That is until he came across the account of Uncle Jan's voyage in a history book. When officials retrieved the stalled land rover, they logged the distance from L40. It was 4.38 miles away. Uncle Jan had walked an impossible distance and lived to see his name in the history books. Til envied his uncle. He wanted to be remembered as well, though he hoped for something less dangerous.

Til thought back to when he had announced he was going to join the Expeditionary Force as a Technician. Uncle Jan was delighted. His father was furious, in his understated way. Til would have preferred his father to yell and curse when he was upset, rather than to stare disapprovingly with those cold, blue eyes. His father's eyes could crush Til's spirits more thoroughly than his cruelest words. Til wasn't the only one who felt that way. Premiere Janoczek's piercing stare was well known at Central Command. His father of course wanted him to become a lawyer, and then perhaps a politician just as he had done. But for Til there was only one occupation on Terra 9 that meant anything, especially when he realized that he would be in his mid-thirties when the next Great Migration came around.

He took in his surroundings. It was astonishingly beautiful. He had made the right decision. He had never questioned it. His father never spoke of it, though it was likely he still disapproved. It didn't matter. Til was happy.

He glanced at his watch. It had been more than half an hour. The sun still hadn't set. Confused, he tapped his watch. It must be broken. He thought about stepping back inside to check the time, but he was worried that if he did the sun would set in his absence. He couldn't miss it.

"Odi?"

There was no response. He was out of range of the network. He stood and carefully walked backwards towards his pod, still facing the sliver of sunlight. He repeated "Odi" into the darkness until the AI finally responded.

"Yes, Til?"

"What time is it?"

"It is 7:47"

Same time as his watch. Til was worried.

"When was the sun supposed to have set?"

"At 7:42. Five minutes ago."

Ruth Gibbons sat in her seat, respectfully listening to Ms. Vickers as she always did. Ruth was the star pupil in all her classes. For this she was hated by most of her classmates. Excellence has, and always will be, despised by the majority. Still, when tests came, all her classmates clamored to sit next to her in the hopes of cheating off her. Ruth had tattled on them once many years ago. This had resulted in horrendous bullying. Since then, she had never told on any of the cheaters. After all, what did it matter if the average GPA went up in every class she attended.

Ruth was twelve. She was several grades ahead already and hoped to graduate when she was sixteen. No need to remain in school any longer than she had to. There was no value to be found there outside of learning, and they were clearly starting to run out of things to teach her.

Ms. Vickers was telling them the story of the first Great Migration. Scientists had observed Terra 9's axis and rotation for fifteen hundred years, starting shortly after the colonization of Terra 1. When they had confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt the planet's unique rotation, they set out for Terra 9 and began the process of building the first Command Centers in the Summer Region. The Command Centers served as housing centers, greenhouses, and arboretums.

After the first hundred years when it finally came time for the planet to rotate, the colonists flew off world to live in a space station that the Federation had temporarily loaned to them. Once the planet had finished its rotation, the colonists flew back down to the new Summer Region and began the process of building new Command Centers.

When one hundred years had passed, the colonists prepared for the very first Great Migration. It was a time of great excitement. The people were nervous too. Even though they had observed the planet's rotation for almost two thousand years, there were some that were still afraid the planet wouldn't turn.

"Which could lead to an extinction event," Ruth added internally.

And so, bright and early on the first morning of the first Great Migration, the Technicians made their way into the Winter Region to start the process of powering up the dormant Command Centers. A few days after that the colonists all left their houses and boarded the convoy that would take them to their new home in what would become the new Summer Region.

Ms. Vickers paused her lecture for some class participation.

"Who was the first Grand Premiere to call it the Great Migration?"

The class was silent. Ruth waited. Ms. Vickers surveyed the class. Eventually she turned to Ruth, signaling it was okay for her to answer.

"Grand Premiere Gilroy McElroy"

Ruth had always thought his name was funny. It rhymed.

"Very good Ruth. Gilroy McElroy was the Grand Premiere during the second Great Migration. How many Great Migrations have there been?"

The class was silent. Ms. Vickers decided to answer for them and skip the follow up question.

"There have been eight Great Migrations. Tomorrow will be the ninth. How will we know when the planet's rotation has begun?"

Ruth didn't wait this time, "When we wake up tomorrow and it's dark."

"Correct. Tomorrow morning, the sun will set for the first time in one hundred and three years."

Every once in a while, Ms. Vickers included the three.

"So, I hope you will all wake up bright and early to watch this truly historic event."

"The only sunset we'll ever see in our lifetimes." Another of Ruth's internal comments.

The bell rang. A charming holdover from past days, dating all the way back to the schools on Earth. Ms. Vickers was very good at timing the conclusions of her lectures. Somehow her final words always coincided with the ringing of the bell. She added another parting comment as the class rose in unison and began packing their books.

"I'll see you all in the new Summer Region."

As Ruth waited for the cluster of students to squeeze themselves through the door, she thought about the new Summer Region. Calling it a Summer Region was generous. For all practical purposes it would be uninhabitable for another five years, give or take. They would all be trapped inside the climate-controlled Command Centers watching the world slowly warm through triple-plated glass.

After the majority of her fellow students had successfully filtered their way through the door, Ruth stood and began collecting her books. She smiled and waved at Ms. Vickers, who responded in kind. She waited for Marjorie, the last of her classmates, and incidentally one of her favorites, to walk through the door before she stepped out into the hallway. Jimmy was waiting.

Her heart quickened and her palms started to sweat. Jimmy had expressed an interest in her, even though he was fourteen and she was just twelve. Ruth had always scoffed at her older sisters when they became interested in boys. Hitherto, boys had seemed like a complete waste of time. When she went up two grades and the boys got older, she realized that some of them possessed a modicum of maturity. Most of them were still insufferable. But there were a few she both liked and respected. And then there was Jimmy. He was more mature, more kind, and more intelligent than any of the others. She had also learned a few things about herself since their mutual interest had become impossible to ignore. For instance, she hadn't realized how much she liked brown eyes.

She clutched her portable to her chest and approached him. He was staring at the floor, his eyes vacant. He sensed her approaching and looked up. Something was wrong. He smiled at her. But his eyes, which she loved so very much, were sad. Her heart fell. What was wrong? Was it something she did? Was it something she said? Had he fallen for an older girl? She was just a child after all, and though he was also still a child, looking at it objectively, that didn't mean that he wouldn't be drawn to a girl who was closer in age, or to a girl who had, and she blushed at the thought, filled out. Maybe he was sad because he wasn't sure how to break it off, and he didn't want to hurt her, because he was kind, unlike the other boys. That was why she liked him after all. A half dozen unhappy scenes played through her head in the seventeen steps it took to reach him.

"What's wrong?" She heard her voice ask.

He sighed, "I just found out where they're moving us to."

"They sure took their sweet time. Housing's kind of important. You'd think that would be the first thing the Migration Committee would tend to."

"Yeah, there were about sixty other families on the list today."

Ruth nodded. She looked up at him expectantly, partially relieved, knowing whatever he was sad about was related to his housing situation and not to her.

"We've been assigned to L30."

Ruth's heart fell for a second time.

"You're L27, right?"

Ruth nodded, "Yeah. Completely different school district."

"And one hundred thirty miles apart."

She looked up at him.

He sighed again, "I looked it up."

They had officially been going out, in secret, for three months. All at once they had been forced into a long-distance relationship. She hadn't told her family about him either. She assumed her parents, particularly her mother, wouldn't approve of her having a boyfriend. She was only twelve after all. She begrudgingly understood why they would have reservations. Especially since he was fourteen. The revelation would probably spark another failed attempt at the birds and the bees conversation. She already knew all about sex, or at least what it was. Tracy at school had told her. Regardless, both she and Jimmy would be stuck in housing units over a hundred miles apart for five years. Given the fact that they currently only lived ten miles apart she had assumed they would be moved into the same, or at least closer, Command Centers. Five years was a long time for anyone. Five years for Ruth was nearly half her life. She would be seventeen and out of High School by the time she saw him again. Realistically speaking, she didn't know if their relationship could survive that long without seeing one another.

At some point her eyes had trailed their way down to the floor. She looked back up at him. He was staring darkly into the distance. His look scared her. There was a touch of fatalism in it. Fear gripped her. Maybe he *was* going to break it off. He sighed again and looked down at her. His eyes softened.

"We'll figure something out."

He nudged her foot with his own. They hadn't allowed themselves any public displays of affection. They didn't want to draw their classmates', or their teachers', attention. He had held her hand once, on a field trip to the Border Zone. They had sat in the back of the bus. When their mutual friend, Josephine, had fallen asleep, he had seized the opportunity, and her hand. They were both wearing space suits, so it wasn't all that exciting.

The bell rang. They smiled sadly at each other. It was a Wednesday. Neither one of them would have another free period that day. There wouldn't be any time to see each other again before they had to catch the bus home. Once they were home, they would both be too busy preparing for the trip the following morning to sneak away. This final stolen moment in the hallway was the last time they would see each other in person for who knew how long. They lingered for as long as they could, looking at each other, not saying anything. She pulled away. She walked to the end of the hall and turned back to him. He hadn't moved. He lifted one hand and waved. She smiled, then turned the corner. She stopped in the bathroom and had a little cry in the last stall before going to class.

On the way back home, she sat next to Josephine, who talked excitedly the whole way back about the Great Migration. She was thankfully oblivious to Ruth's unhappiness. Ruth had no idea how she would respond if Josephine had noticed and asked her what was wrong. Ruth's stop came first. The friends said goodbye. They would be traveling in the same convoy and moving into the same Center, so there was no real sadness in their parting.

Inside her home, everything but the bare necessities had been packed. Her mother had labeled everything very carefully for the moving team. After the house was vacated the moving team would come through and move everything to their new home. Or rather temporary home. After five years of living in the L27 Command Center they would finally get to move into their own housing unit. She already couldn't wait. The intervening five years were going to be a nightmare.

At dinner, her mother noticed that she was sad and asked her what was wrong. Ruth replied that she was nervous about the move. Her mother told her she was nervous too. Her father offered some words of encouragement. Her sisters and brother spent the whole meal on their portables.

After dinner, her mother and father ran through the final checklist. Everything except what they needed that night was packed and ready to go. The Central Authority supplied every family with a set number of moving boxes for everything that wasn't furniture. Anything that didn't fit in the boxes was to be thrown away. Ruth's family didn't have much by way of possessions. In fact, they had ended up with too many boxes. A neighbor had asked if they could have the extras. However, sharing boxes was prohibited and each box had a barcode on it unique to each family. The neighbor then asked if they could bring over their surplus items so that Ruth's family could pack them. Ruth's mother, being the good citizen that she was, refused. She had no intention of enabling her neighbor's hoarder habits. Naturally, the neighbors were upset by this. Neighborhood dynamics had since been rather awkward.

Ruth's parents walked through each room. Opening every built in drawer (all storage spaces were built in on Terra 9) and every closet. They counted every box. They made Ruth and her siblings check and double check their bags for the transition time. They needed a week's worth of clothes for both the trip and for the time they would have to wait for the moving team to bring their belongings to them. Only the specially marked boxes would be brought to the housing unit in the Command Center. Everything else would be placed in storage. The instructions from the Central Authority were very clear.

Once Mr. and Mrs. Gibbons were satisfied that everything was in order, they sent their children to bed. They all had a big day tomorrow. Ruth had first dibs on the bathroom. She shared one with her brother Henrick. Henrick took an obscene amount of time to get ready for bed. Ruth didn't know what he was doing in there. She didn't want to know. Tracy had told her what teenage boys do in the bathroom. Ruth wondered if Jimmy ever did that too.

When she was finished getting ready for bed she walked back to her bedroom, banging on Henrick's door as she went. It was the agreed upon signal that she was done. She turned off her light and pulled her portable onto her lap. Jimmy was already in their virtual meeting room. They talked for hours. They talked as though it wasn't the eve of their departure. They talked as though it was just another day. They finally said goodnight a few hours before Ruth had to wake up. She could take a nap on the way to the Border Zone.

Ruth turned off her lights and very quickly fell into a deep sleep. She dreamed about watching the sunset with Jimmy. Somehow, in the haze of sleep, her subconscious recognized that she would never watch a sunrise or a sunset with him. This was an experience they would never have, so long as they stayed on Terra 9. This made her feel sad, even in her sleep. This change in her mood was perhaps why her dreams took a turn for the worse. The morphean landscape shifted, and she suddenly found herself deserted in her home. Her family had moved into the new Summer Region and had left her all alone. The moving team was there, but they refused to take her with them. They only transported people's material belongings after all. Transporting people was not part of their contract. She would have to speak with the local Magistrate, who had long since moved into the Summer Region herself.

Ruth woke suddenly in the middle of an argument with the moving team's foreman. She glanced at her clock. It was forty-five minutes passed time for her parents to wake her. Alarmed, she leapt out of bed and rushed into the living room. Her family was huddled around the television, which her father had

apparently plugged back in. Their eyes were glued to the screen. The tension in the room stopped Ruth in her tracks. The volume on the television set was low. Multiple people were talking at once, or rather shouting. Somehow, she could tell it was a press conference. Neither her parents nor her siblings noticed her. A lump of dread formed in her chest and slowly spread throughout her body, until there was no room for anything else. She turned and looked towards the living room window. The curtains were drawn, but she could see the unmistakable evidence of light pouring in through the cracks. She walked to the curtains and pulled them apart just enough to slip through them. She stood next to the window, the curtain at her back, separating her from the rest of the living room. She raised her hands and placed them on the cold glass. The sun was shining brightly above. Something was seriously wrong.

Morgan Raskin stood in the back corner, sketching the room for posterity, paying careful attention to the lovely Evelyn Tzu. He listened to the worried murmur of the reporters, jotting down a few overheard comments. The night before the last wave of the Great Migration was a bit of a party night. No one in the room had expected to wake up to the sun shining down on their sleeping burrough. There were quite a few hangovers in the room. Morgan pitied them. Being afraid and sober was bad enough. Being afraid and hungover, and perhaps still a little drunk, must be intolerable. Evelyn was composed as always.

He felt a presence at his elbow. He turned and found Stanley looking over his shoulder.

“Good likeness.”

Stanley was, of course, referring to his rendering of Evelyn.

“Mother always said I missed my calling when I became a reporter.”

“What calling is that? Artist?”

“Something like that.”

Stanley scoffed, “Terra 9 never had any use for artists.”

“I’m not from Terra 9.”

Stanley scoffed again, in a great exhalation that sent a cloud of coffee breath into Morgan’s face and up his nose. Morgan’s stomach churned. He turned away and breathed in deeply from a patch of slightly cleaner air. When he turned back, he found Stanley lighting up a cigarette. He offered one to Morgan who immediately accepted. Improved cancer screening and treatment had long ago made smoking a harmless habit. Since then, smoking was ubiquitous.

“So, what do you think? Is the Great Migration off?”

“You seem very casual about all this, Stanley.”

Stanley shrugged, “Doesn’t affect me all that much. I’m not from Terra 9 either.”

Morgan felt a surge of anger, which he quickly stifled with a long draw on his cigarette. He had never liked Stanley. He tolerated the bohemian galoot largely because of his steady flow of off-world cigarettes and booze. Terra 9, though replete with vices of its own, had never produced any which could

live up to his refined tastes. None within his price range that is. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Morgan, like so many off-world reporters regarded Terra 9 as a depressing, industrial ghetto, he still had a certain fondness for it, and more specifically for its people. As such, he found Stanley's cavalier manner regarding the morning's events to be offensive.

Stanley continued, "If worse comes to worse I'll catch the first flight back to Terra 6. My assignment here's almost over anyway. No skin off my back."

Morgan wanted the conversation to be over. Or rather, he wanted Stanley to shut up. Evelyn cast a quick glare over her shoulder at them. Apparently, she had caught a snippet of what Stanley was saying. Evelyn had been born and raised on Terra 9. It was her home. Beyond that, if there was any sort of impending crisis, she didn't have an easy way off world like he and Stanley did. Nor did her family. Nor did anyone she loved.

Morgan, quiet but hoarse, "Enough. This could be very serious. Frankly I find your attitude and your comments to be wildly inappropriate."

Morgan stole a quick look at Evelyn, hoping she had heard him. She had not. Stanley caught his glance and, assuming Morgan's whispered outburst was less than genuine, simply shrugged and smiled to himself. When Morgan had finished his cigarette, Stanley still offered another, and Morgan still accepted.

After several more minutes of waiting, the Grand Premiere stepped out and approached the podium. This was a bad sign. The Grand Premiere never attended press conferences. Morgan and Stanley had often mocked the title of Grand Premiere to each other. It sounded silly and antiquated. The Grand Premiere himself was a figure of ridicule among all the off-world correspondents. As he walked up to the podium, stooped by worry and responsibility, Morgan felt guilty for all his many jibes at the man's expense.

Morgan started his camera, a small floating device that he took with him everywhere. A device he personified to a certain extent. It was his constant companion. He had had many one-way, late-night conversations with it as he walked the streets of Burrough 1, the Great Burrough, the home of the Central Authority. Morgan turned a page in his journal and marked down the date and the occasion for the conference. He, along with the entire room, looked expectantly at the Grand Premiere.

He began, unceremoniously, "Early this morning, Richter 1 passed by us, as expected. But, as all of you can see Terra 9 did not rotate. Which... defies everything we know about the gravitational pull of the passing planet, and everything we have observed for the last 2600 years."

There was a long silence. Evelyn raised her hand. The Grand Premiere nodded to her.

"How does this impact us?"

"We don't know yet. It might just mean we'll be living comfortably in the same Summer Region for the next hundred years. It could mean that there is a secondary cause to the planets rotation that we are not aware of which might... Occur unexpectedly."

"What happens if it does... Occur unexpectedly."

The Grand Premiere did not respond. The room was silent. He didn't have to reply. Everyone knew what that meant. In a week's time normal housing units wouldn't be able to keep warm enough to keep their inhabitants alive. The new Summer Region would not have warmed up enough to maintain life. If the Command Centers weren't all up and running than it would lead to massive loss of life. If mishandled, the Great Migration, or lack thereof, could be an extinction event.

Evelyn, unprompted, "What are you going to do?"

The Grand Premiere hesitated. Then every reporter began asking questions at once. The room devolved into chaos. The Grand Premiere tried to shout over the crowd to no avail. He wasn't saying anything particularly reassuring anyway. He just kept repeating, "we're working on it!"

Stanley leaned in and shouted to be heard over the din, "I'm leaving tonight, Morgan. I'll leave you my keys if you want some of my stock."

After several minutes of trying to quiet the reporters, the Grand Premiere did the worst thing he could have possibly done. He hung his head and walked off the stage. The din grew even louder. Morgan shook his head in disgust. Every household on Terra 9 was tuned into that press conference. Now every household knew that there was no plan should disaster strike. Now there would be panic, a rush to the transports, chaos.

Stanley, reading Morgan's mind, "Thank God we have private ships."

"You'd better move fast Stanley. They might rush the private transports too."

"Aren't you coming?"

"I'm going to check out your stash first."

Stanley shrugged. As promised, he fished the keys out of his pocket and handed them to Morgan.

"You know, Stan. It's possible nothing will happen. We might just have another hundred years of summer."

"I'm not taking that chance. If something unexpected happens, do you really think they'll mobilize fast enough to save these people's lives?"

"All but the most remote Command Centers are already up and running. Most of the people have been moved. It's just a matter of moving the rest of them."

"You know as well as I that they can't run Command Centers indefinitely in the Winter Regions. Even with Petrakraft, facilities that size will start to shut down in the cold. They're going to have to move people back to the Summer Region. What if the planet rotates then? They can't move 100 million people that quickly. They're already cutting it too close with the current system in my opinion. Not to mention it takes a long time to shut down or power up a Command Center. This planet was never meant to be anything more than a mining colony."

Morgan had no comeback. Everything Stanley had said was true. He looked out at the room of reporters, conversing loudly with each other. They all had much to say but were at a complete loss as to what to do. All the cameras were still rolling. The people at home were experiencing the same terror

and confusion. It could be that it was all for nothing. It was entirely possible the planet wouldn't rotate. It might never turn again. It was also possible the planet would rotate the next day.

He wondered what the headlines would be in the afternoon editions. He wondered what the talking head news anchors would say. He wondered what he was going to write for the Terra 5 Gazette. "Human Life To End on Terra 9. Maybe. Everything could be fine." If the stakes weren't so high, it would almost be funny.

"Morgan... Morgan." Stanley repeated his name several times before Morgan snapped out of his reverie.

"I'm leaving Morgan. Before the panic sets in. I suggest you do as well."

Morgan turned to Stanley and spoke in a near whisper, "I'm going to stick around for a bit."

"Why?"

Morgan couldn't say for sure. In some respects, he thought staying was a gesture of solidarity. He really did care about the people of Terra 9. But that wasn't the reason. It wasn't the *only* reason at any rate. Something about the fatalism of the whole affair attracted him. The potential for doom was strangely alluring. If life did end on Terra 9, he wanted to be there when it happened. Regardless of what happened to him. There was no point in telling Stanley any of this. So, in response to the question he merely shrugged. Stanley shook his head and left.

The rest of the off-world reporters had long since left. Morgan hadn't seen them go. They had probably bolted when the Grand Premiere had unceremoniously walked away from the podium. Slowly but surely the rest of the journalists departed. Each one glanced at him accusingly on their way out. They all knew he could leave at any time. Morgan responded to their glances with what he thought was a blank stare. He didn't know what the appropriate expression was, so he tried not to have one. Evelyn was gone too. In the end the only two people remaining were him and Fuller Van Buren. Fuller was seated in the middle of the room staring blankly forward at the empty podium, seemingly oblivious to Morgan's presence. All at once he bowed forward, buried his face in his hands, and wept. Morgan immediately pulled his pad back out and began to sketch the weeping reporter. When he was satisfied with his drawing, he left the room as quietly as he could.

Morgan stepped outside into the sun. His camera floated alongside him at eye level. The AI that operated the camera would save anything of interest for him to watch later. The streets around the Central Authority building were relatively clear. It wasn't until he drew closer to the sky port that he began to see evidence of the panic he knew would follow the disastrous press conference. The streets were packed with cars. The roads had essentially become parking lots. People were rushing in between the parked cars towards the sky port, toting what few belongings they could carry.

Morgan found the nearest entrance to the elevated walkway, swiped his card, and climbed the steps up to the first level. He walked in the direction of the sky port. The walkway did not connect with the port, so it was remarkably clear. Morgan had expected at least a few people to forget this and still try to use it to get in. As it was, the only people on the walkway were there to observe the crowd, just like he was. He walked several blocks all the way to the end, as close to the sky port as he could get. He pulled his pad out and began sketching. His camera floated in the air next to him, its lens trained on the

people below. The footage was going to be excellent. He felt like a vulture, but that was his job after all: reporting on and cataloguing human fear and suffering.

The port force fields were repelling anyone who didn't have the necessary clearance in their biochip. No ships were being boarded yet. They were stalling on general admission until they'd gotten the VIPs off world. Off in the distance Morgan saw the Grand Premiere's ship rise slowly up into the blue-gray sky. He started to tell his camera to record it, but it already was. He would send the footage to his supervisor as soon as the ship escaped the atmosphere. His bosses would love it. "Grand Premiere deserts his people at even the possibility of disaster." He'd have to work on the headline.

Morgan stayed for an hour or so, then decided he was hungry. He wondered if any restaurants were open or if all the restauranteurs were down in the crowd, waiting to board a ship, leaving everything behind.

"It's strange isn't it," said the stranger next to him.

"What is?"

"We don't know what's gonna happen. Everybody immediately assumes catastrophe but... the planet might not turn."

"But it might. And thanks to the Central Authority, there's no contingency plan."

The stranger shrugged, "I learned a long time ago not to rely on them for anything."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Got me a shelter. Just big enough for me and my family though."

He quickly added the second comment, eyeing Morgan suspiciously.

"Don't worry, I won't try to break in."

They watched the crowd in silence. Morgan nodded to him in parting and started off in the direction of his favorite café. A block away he saw the lights were still on. This was a good sign. The streets below were empty now. He found an exit, descended the stairs, and stepped out on the pavement.

From a distance he saw a feminine shape seated outside on the patio. His pulse quickened when he saw that it was Evelyn. Maybe she could use some company. It could be the end of the world. Then again, it might not. Roughly ten feet away she spotted him. They locked eyes. Neither she nor he turned away for the rest of his short walk to the café. He stopped next to her table.

"Why are you still here, Morgan?"

"I like it here." This was only partly true.

"Nobody from off world likes it here. Most people from here don't even like it."

"Well. I guess I'm an exception that proves the rule. May I join you?"

"Be my guest."

Morgan sat down. A moment later a robot waiter appeared and took his order: black coffee and Winter Berry cobbler.

Evelyn, sipping her own coffee, "I haven't had Winter Berry cobbler in years."

"You're welcome to have a bite when it comes. Everything's up in the air. I didn't know if I'd have the opportunity to have it again."

"You know what makes Winter Berries so good?"

"It's the psycho-active component, isn't it? It lights up whatever part of the brain is in charge of taste and all that."

"Yeah. It also causes the brain to release some extra serotonin. It's basically a drug."

"But the effects go away so quickly it could hardly be considered harmful."

"It might shock you to know that I think most substances popularly considered to be drugs are harmless. The poison is in the dose. I do wonder what Winter Berries would taste like if they weren't psycho-active."

Morgan shrugged, "I imagine they'd still be quite good. Though I also imagine the demand for them wouldn't be quite as 'high'?"

Evelyn shook her head, both amused and annoyed, "You're so funny aren't you?"

"I'm a man of many talents."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to waste your talents. What else are you good at?"

Morgan's mouth went dry. There was a faint air of suggestion in her voice and in her eyes. He was rescued by the arrival of his coffee and cobbler. The robot started to leave but Morgan called it back.

"Waiter? Another fork please."

The waiter immediately pulled a second fork out of the pouch that hung around its mechanical waist. Morgan took it and handed it to Evelyn. The waiter lingered for a moment, and then left when its programming assured it nothing else was required of it.

Morgan pushed the cobbler towards Evelyn. She looked up at him.

"But the first bite is always the best."

Morgan shrugged, "All the more reason you should have it."

The cobbler was in a small chafing dish which kept it hot even in the cold air. Evelyn carefully dug her fork into it, trying to capture the perfect ratio of berry and crust. Steam rose from the cobbler carrying the intoxicating aroma of the berries within. Morgan wondered if scents could be psycho-active as well. Evelyn closed her eyes and took her bite, chewing it slowly and thoughtfully. She swallowed. Her eyes opened slowly.

"It's even better than I remember."

Morgan insisted they split the cobbler evenly. Evelyn told him she felt a little guilty accepting it, but in the end she didn't argue. The conversation ebbed and flowed naturally. He and Evelyn had barely spoken prior to this chance encounter. He was surprised how comfortable they were with each other. Perhaps it was the potential end of the world. Morgan wondered if she would have been so willing to accept his company if imminent death wasn't a very real and immediate possibility.

During a lull in their conversation Morgan took in their surroundings. It was remarkably peaceful. He knew just a few blocks away it was chaos. He wondered if they had finally opened the port for general admission. No doubt the price for tickets to the Inter-Planetary Waystation had skyrocketed, making escape prohibitively expensive. There was only so much space on the Waystation anyway. It was never intended to house people long term. He hoped the management at the sky port was communicating with the Waystation, otherwise people might buy tickets off-world only to be sent straight back to Terra 9. Turning people away from the station wouldn't be a matter of cold managerial indifference. If too many people were in the station the oxygen scrubbers wouldn't be able to keep up with the carbon dioxide. In which case the people who left would have exchanged potential death and all the existential dread that came with it, for certain death.

Morgan went on to wonder if any nearby colonies in the Federation would be sending help in the form of transports and provisions. They would have to weigh the pros and cons of sending important supplies to help a sister colony in their maybe Apocalypse. There was also the question of whether help would arrive in time if it were sent. Morgan shook his head. He turned back to his surroundings.

The architecture of that particular neighborhood had been modeled after New Orleans. He had seen pictures. It was strangely charming to see the copy of that ancient architecture perpetually covered in frost. As he understood it, what had once been New Orleans was generally hot by Earth standards. He wondered what warm weather felt like. Terra 5, where he was originally from, was cool year-round. Never hot and never cold. He turned from the frost covered iron railings to the streetlamps, which were tiny gas-lit tongues of fire, much like the gaslamps in Victorian England. The streetlamps were his favorite part of the district. They added so much to the ambiance, and he loved how they smelled.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Morgan turned to Evelyn. She was looking at him intently. Morgan realized that in his musings over how pleasant the evening was he had overlooked the most important part of the equation.

He smiled, "Can you repeat that?"

"Penny for your thoughts."

"I don't know what that means. Or rather... I don't know what a Penny is."

"Very ancient currency from America, back on Earth."

"Was it worth a lot?"

"Depends on how far back you go. Regardless of the time it was always the lowest cash denomination."

"Seems almost insulting then. Though I know you don't mean it that way," he added quickly, "I assume it's some ancient idiom."

“You assume correctly. And I know what you mean. It does seem like a pretty cheap price for a thought.”

“Still, must be nice to get paid for what you think.”

“Like all the experts who said the world was going to turn today?”

“Yes, just like them.”

Morgan downed the rest of this coffee, then added grimly:

“Most of whom are safely off-world now.”

Evelyn nodded darkly.

Morgan leaned back in his chair and slipped his hands into his pocket where he found Stanley’s keys. He had forgotten them. He pulled them from his pocket and laid them out on the table. He stared down at them, musing. It was amazing that physical keys were still used at all. It was something he never really thought about. He looked up and found Evelyn regarding him with a questioning look.

Morgan, smiling, “Earlier you mentioned that you didn’t think most drugs were actually harmful. When taken in the right amount.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You know Stanley Wasikowska?”

“I know who he is. Never officially met him.”

“Just as well. At any rate, in his haste to leave Terra 9 he bequeathed me the keys to his house. The keys to the kingdom, as it were. I happen to know he had quite a collection of off-world cigarettes and spirits. Who knows what else we might find there.”

Evelyn nodded and quaffed the remainder of her drink.

“What are we waiting for?”

They both stood and started out into the street. They paused on the threshold of the patio as they were both warned that the accounts listed on their biochips would be charged a thirty percent tip if they didn’t close their tab. They glanced at each other. Neither one of them cared. They continued out into the street.

They walked in silence for a half a block before Evelyn spoke.

“You know what’s bullshit? Tipping robots.”

“Completely agree. When was the last time you were waited on by a human?”

“I can’t even remember.”

“Me neither. Although...”

Evelyn finished his thought, “The service did get a lot better.”

Morgan nodded in agreement, with no small amount of guilt.

Evelyn continued, "I never leave tips for robots. I mean what's the point. They don't need them."

"Do you want to go back?"

"No.... Not worth it."

They walked several more blocks in silence. Morgan was enjoying the walk, and the company. Then it occurred to him that Evelyn might not appreciate long walks in the cold.

He turned to her, "I'm sorry, should we catch a ride?"

"No this is fine."

They walked another block, at which point she paused.

"How much further is it?"

"Just a few more blocks. Just outside the Greenridge District. It's on 32nd Street."

Evelyn, satisfied, "Okay. That's fine."

They continued walking. She glanced up at his camera, which floated above them, taking a perpetual 360 scan of their surroundings.

"That's a nifty gadget."

"Between you and me that's the actual reporter. I just watch the recordings after the fact and then write up a story based on them."

"But you're always scribbling in that notebook of yours."

"I'm drawing. I can barely write. I mean, I can write, it's just barely legible. I can hardly read it."

"Writing's a lost art. Or penmanship. I think that's what they used to call it. Everyone can read but no one can write. Anyway... I'd like to see your drawings some time. If you're okay with that."

"Certainly. Maybe we can have a look over a drink, or two."

"Or three. Depending on what Stanley's got."

"The very best. And a lot of it."

32nd Street was as empty as the Greenridge District. Off in the distance they heard a house alarm going off accompanied by the sounds of arguing. Something large and heavy was dropped, which precipitated a slew of cursing. Someone was being robbed. Morgan and Evelyn glanced at each other.

"Should we call the police?"

Morgan shrugged, "They won't come. They'll all be down at the sky port. Besides, that alarm has already notified them."

Evelyn nodded, "I guess if everything turns out okay the police will find them anyway."

“It’s virtually impossible to successfully steal anything these days. What with all the tracking numbers and cameras everywhere.”

“I wonder why they’re bothering.”

“They must not think everything will be okay.”

A grim silence prevailed for the remainder of the walk to Stanley’s.

32nd Street was designed to look like a London suburb in the 1960’s back on Earth. The city planners and architects on Terra 9 never tried to create styles of their own. Every district, every neighborhood was a direct copy of something that had existed back on Earth thousands of years ago. Morgan wasn’t sure if it was laziness or prudence that made them rehash the old. The possibility of failure is woven into everything new after all. The same thing could be said about re-creating the old though, he conceded internally. Depending on the medium, he added to himself. Some things never go out of style.

They came to Stanley’s house, or flat as Stanley called it, in keeping with the London theme. Morgan shut off the alarm then unlocked the door. Stepping inside, they were immediately greeted by Stanley’s robot butler.

“Welcome back, Mr. Raskin. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure Ms...”

“Careful,” Morgan warned, “Stanley left his Butler on factory settings. It remembers every input.”

“I don’t care.”

Evelyn turned to the Butler, “Evelyn Tzu.”

There was a faint whirr and a green light blinked on the Butler’s interface as it forever linked Evelyn’s face to her name. It retreated a few steps.

“What can I do for you Mr. Raskin and Ms. Tzu?”

Morgan turned to Evelyn, “I’d just as soon serve ourselves.”

“That’s fine with me. We can call him if we need anything.”

Morgan turned to the Butler, “We won’t be needing your services today. For now, at least.”

“Understood sir.”

The Butler retreated to a corner of the room where it entered sleep mode. Morgan led Evelyn through the living room, which was essentially a round table surrounded by couches, into the dining room.

The dining room was furnished with a large faux wooden table and chairs. The chairs had remarkably comfortable cushions. Stanley enjoyed throwing dinner parties for fellow members of the press. He would throw lavish parties with the finest food and drink to confirm to all who came, particularly the female journalists, that he was a man of excellent taste. The room was softly lit, and classical music played through speakers overhead.

The real point of interest in the dining room was the large and well-stocked liquor cabinet. It was always and very pointlessly locked. Pointlessly, because the key was always *in* the lock. Turning the key and hearing the tumblers releasing did add to the allure of the cabinet, however. Morgan opened it as slowly as he could, trying to make a show of the whole affair. He cast a significant glance at Evelyn, who stared blankly back at him. Seeing that his audience was indifferent, he pulled the cabinet door open without any further delay. Rows and rows of bottles of every kind of spirit imaginable sat inside. He stepped backwards, taking up a position next to Evelyn.

“Where to begin?”

Evelyn stepped forward and picked up a bottle of Winter Berry Liqueur. An excellent choice. Strangely enough no one ever fermented Winter Berries on Terra 9. The berries were shipped to Terra 6 where the liqueur was manufactured, whereupon it was then shipped back to Terra 9. A waste of resources, Morgan thought to himself.

Morgan thought for a moment, then stepping forward pulled a very fine, and unopened, bottle of whiskey from the shelf. It was a peated Terra 12 whiskey. The peat from Terra 12 contributed a very unique flavor to the Whiskey, not unlike that of its Earthly counterparts, or so Morgan was told. He had never tasted a peated Whiskey from Earth. As he understood it, they were often referred to as Scotch, which got its name from the ancient country of Scotland.

They each took a glass from the cabinet and retreated to the living room. Morgan pointed out the couch he considered to be the most comfortable to Evelyn. Being a gentleman, he took the second most comfortable couch. They started to sit down, whereupon they both realized they were still wearing their coats. They set the bottles and glasses down on the table, pulled off their coats, and then threw them onto the unclaimed couch. Evelyn sat and carefully poured herself a small amount of the Winter Berry liqueur. For some reason she felt that she needed to explain her chosen serving size to Morgan.

“There’s so much in that cabinet I want to try. I need to pace myself.”

“I understand.”

Morgan poured himself a small glass of whiskey. He held the glass just under his nose, breathing in deeply. He looked up at Evelyn who was watching him expectantly.

“What shall we drink to?” He asked.

“Why do we need to drink to anything?”

Morgan shrugged and sipped the whiskey. Evelyn tasted the liqueur. It was such a small helping it could hardly even be called a sip.

Morgan was curious, “How is it?”

Evelyn thought for a moment, “Very good, but also... overrated.”

Morgan smiled. He quaffed the rest of his whiskey. He nodded to Evelyn’s bottle.

“May I?”

“It isn’t mine so, of course.”

Morgan picked up the liqueur and poured himself a small glass. He took a dainty sip then gulped down the remainder. He thought for a moment. Then turned to Evelyn.

"You're right. Overrated."

"I'm a little disappointed, honestly."

"I wonder if that's what Winter Berry tastes like without the psycho-active effects."

"Could be."

"I never bought it myself because it was so expensive. Now I'm glad I never did."

"How's the whiskey?"

"Excellent."

Evelyn leaned forward and picked up the bottle. She poured herself a slightly more generous serving of it than the liqueur. She sipped it.

"Much better."

After Evelyn finished the whiskey, they both stood and walked back to the liquor cabinet. They each selected a new bottle, Morgan picked a vodka made from the purple potatoes of Terra 7, while Evelyn chose a rum made from non-synthetic sugar cane.

As the evening wore on the collection of bottles on the coffee table grew. They both kept returning to the peated whiskey Morgan had selected at the start of the evening. It was thus far the best, though there were still several more bottles to try. Eventually Morgan broke his glass and took that as a sign to slow down, though he kept insisting he wasn't drunk. He booted up the robot butler long enough for it to clean up his mess. He shut it off immediately after the chore was done. He watched the machine distrustfully for a moment to make sure it was truly off, before turning to Evelyn.

"It just occurred to me that I'm famished. Care for something to eat?"

"Yes," was all she said.

Morgan nodded and made his way into the dining room and towards a bookcase. Evelyn followed. They paused for a moment while Morgan perused the shelf.

"Are you sure you're not drunk?"

Morgan laughed lightly, "I may be teetering on the edge of inebriation. But no, not yet at any rate. I've merely forgotten where the handle is. Aha!"

He reached out and pulled on what appeared to be a copy of "A Lonely Walk in Winter." It wasn't a real book. That is to say, the copy on the shelf was a disguised and rather poorly designed handle to the secret door masquerading as a bookcase. "A Lonely Walk in Winter" was a very real book about a Technician whose Ice Rover broke down on the way to his Command Center. The Technician had to trudge over four miles through the ice and snow. An impossible distance to walk in the Winter Region. Morgan thought the book a little far-fetched until he learned it was based on a true story. He had even met the Technician, before he passed, and done a little story on him. The man was in his

nineties at the time. Unfortunately, “A Lonely Walk in Winter” hadn’t sold very well at the time of its release. The book itself wasn’t very good, despite its interesting subject matter. Morgan’s story, on the other hand, was so successful that a rather clueless local reporter told him he should make it into a book. Morgan smiled at the memory as he pulled on the tome, opening the door to the kitchen.

Morgan stepped inside followed by Evelyn. He immediately made his way to a small kiosk and began perusing the items in the pantry. He pressed the button for meat and found the supply to be unfortunately lacking. Winter trout was the only option, which he had never cared for. There were plenty of eggs, cheese, and produce, however.

“I think I will have a Quiche, with Spinach and Tomatoes.”

Morgan typed in his order and stepped aside to give Evelyn room. She walked forward and scrolled through the inventory. She too seemed disappointed in the meat selection.

“Guess I’ll have the same, but I’ll add Winter Chard. They were never very creative when they named the local flora and fauna. It’s always ‘winter’ something or other.”

“It was originally colonized by roughnecks after all. Poets and artists didn’t move in till much later.”

“And do you think they improved things?”

Morgan felt vaguely insulted by her comment. He also didn’t know how to respond, so he simply shrugged. He made his way to a small table situated in the far corner of the room. Stanley had apparently eaten breakfast there, judging by the unfinished plate of toast and eggs. He must have forgotten to initiate his robot maid before leaving. Morgan pushed the plate aside, sat, and looked around the kitchen.

The stove, oven, and various other appliances were all entirely automated. To the point where it was impossible for someone to manually use them. There were no knobs or buttons for manual operation. Food and other cooking supplies would be brought in as needed from the adjacent pantry by the Chef AI, which controlled various robotic appendages. Evelyn stood watching the assembly line of robot arms preparing Morgan’s quiche. One arm broke the eggs into a mixing bowl. Another arm dumped in a handful of spinach. A third arm poured a small cup of tomatoes into the mixture. A fourth arm dropped a clump of shredded cheese in and then through a mechanical sleight of hand changed its robotic phalanges into a mixer and blended the contents of the bowl together. Finally, a fifth arm poured the mixture into a ramekin and then placed it on the counter next to the pre-heating oven. The entire assembly line then moved on to preparing Evelyn’s quiche.

Evelyn turned and walked to Morgan. She sat down opposite him.

“Being an off-world reporter must pay well.”

Morgan laughed, “The exchange rate is very much in Stanley’s favor. My living quarters aren’t quite so posh.”

Evelyn nodded, “So, no one to go back home to?”

“On Terra 9? Or back on Terra 5?”

“Either.”

“No, not on either.”

“Do you miss Terra 5?”

“Not particularly.”

“Not even in the face of a potential apocalypse?”

“Not even then.”

The robot arms placed the quiches in the oven just as it beeped.

“What about you?”

Evelyn looked up, “Do I have anyone to go home to?”

“Yes.”

“Would I be here if I did?”

“I assumed not. But I’ve been mistaken before.”

“In this case you were correct.”

The oven beeped again, signaling the quiches were ready.

“That was fast.”

Morgan stood, “Only the finest food, drink, and kitchen appliances for Stanley.”

He walked to the kitchen counter and retrieved a tray upon which had been placed both quiches and the necessary eating utensils.

“He spends every cent he makes. I’m afraid it’s going to be quite the shock for him when he returns to Terra 6 and finds out that he is once again a poor man.”

Morgan placed the tray on the table and carefully set Evelyn’s quiche in front of her. She took a napkin and fork as he placed his own quiche in front of his seat. Laying his own fork and napkin next to his ramekin, he turned to her.

“Something to drink?”

“Just water for now.”

Morgan nodded and walked back to the kitchen kiosk. He pressed the button for drinks and selected two glasses of water and a mug of coffee. The two waters were ready almost immediately. The coffee would of course take some time to brew. He returned to the table with the waters. Evelyn had already devoured half her quiche.

They ate in silence. The coffee pot beeped, letting them know it was ready. They left it where it was. They watched as the robot hands cleaned all the bowls and various surfaces that had been used in preparing their dinner.

"If it does freeze," Evelyn mused, "Will any of these appliances still be useable?"

"Yes, assuming it thaws again. Everything here is made to withstand the cold. But you know that."

"Yes. I know that's what they tell me anyway. I guess I just find it hard to believe that anything could still work after being subjected to how cold it gets. And after being left on the dark side of the planet for a hundred years."

"I think the cold actually preserves it. It's all frozen after all."

"But it's all metal and plastic. And lots and lots of complex wiring. How would cold preserve that?"

Morgan shrugged, "I just know what I've been told."

"Yeah... we've been told a lot of things."

There was a darkness in Evelyn's tone. A darkness unrelated to the present crisis. Morgan wondered what it meant, and for that matter what her comment meant, but he thought it best not to ask. He quietly finished his quiche while she sipped her water, staring into space.

"What are the sleeping arrangements here?"

Morgan was surprised by the question.

"Planning on staying the night?"

"I'm planning on drinking some more. Which might lead to me passing out."

"Well, there's a bedroom. But..."

"It's Stanley's bed."

"Yes."

"The couches are comfortable enough."

"True. I've never been in Stanley's room. I caught a glimpse once. I saw a lot of mirrors."

"Then I'll stick to the couches."

She stood as Morgan took his last bite. Wordlessly, they made their way back to the living room by way of the dining room. The pot of coffee was left untouched. After a certain amount of time had passed the robot arms would take care of it.

Upon entering the living room Evelyn immediately picked up the peated whiskey, poured herself a healthy serving, and then handed the bottle to Morgan. He poured himself an equally healthy portion, placed the bottle on the coffee table, and retreated to his couch.

"I feel like I owe you an apology."

Morgan was surprised, "For what?"

“You’re a decent guy.”

“I take it you didn’t always think so.”

“I made an assumption. Because whenever I saw you, you were with Stanley.”

“Ah. Well, my friendship with Stanley, such as it was, was purely mercenary for... various reasons.”

Morgan gestured towards the bottles on the coffee table.

Evelyn smiled, “It’s easy to overlook personality flaws with these sorts of benefits.”

“It is indeed. Do you smoke?”

“Of course. Who doesn’t?”

“Aside from Stanley’s remarkable collection of spirits and fine foods, he also has the best of off-world cigarettes. Let me see if I can find where he keeps his stash.”

Morgan stood, walked into the foyer, and then made his way down a hallway that was nearly hidden by a corner painted to look exactly like the wall behind it. The wall led to the guest bathroom and to Stanley’s room. He stepped into the bedroom and was confronted by several reflections of himself. Morgan first searched Stanley’s desk, then his dresser, then his closet. Along the way Morgan found many things he did not care to find that could be vaguely categorized as paraphernalia. He had all but given up, when he stepped into the master bathroom and checked the medicine cabinet. There was no medicine to be found, but there was quite an assortment of cigarettes. Morgan took up an armful and made his way back to Evelyn.

Back in the living room, Morgan laid the cigarette packages out on the coffee table next to the collection of liquor bottles. He organized them by brand and by his personal preferences, explaining to Evelyn his reasoning behind his ranking system. He set one pack aside, a brand from Terra 7 that he had never tried before. He suggested they start with that one. Evelyn had no objections.

They leaned back on their respective couches and lit up. They took a few drags, analyzing the flavor, commenting on the smoothness. Then, after their analysis was over, they tried blowing smoke rings. Neither of them were particularly successful. They moved on to the next brand, Morgan’s least favorite. Then they moved on to the next and so on until they came to his favorite brand which was incidentally from his home planet of Terra 5. Evelyn took a few drags. He watched her expectantly. She shook her head.

“I don’t like that one quite as much. I don’t know if I could say why. None of them taste that different to me but... I don’t know there’s something about the flavor I don’t like.”

Morgan was strangely disappointed, which he recognized was silly. He felt that his taste, and therefore he, had been slighted. Obviously, it didn’t matter, potential apocalypse or not.

They both poured themselves another drink. They each selected another cigarette. They laid back on their couches and stared up at the ceiling, smoking and drinking, musing in silence.

Evelyn, murmuring, “My parents were from Terra 5.”

Morgan turned to her, "I didn't know that."

"They were both part of a team of engineers helping the locals on an update to the Central Command Center. They met each other on the job. Fell in love and all that. Decided to stay. I don't know why they didn't go back. Terra 5's a lot more stable."

"Guess they liked it here. Are they still..."

Evelyn responded before he finished his question, "They both passed away a couple years ago. Mom first and then dad almost a year later. Meanwhile, I'm stuck here."

"If your parents are from Terra 5 then you have..."

Evelyn cut him off again, "Dual citizenship. Or I could've if I'd applied for it. All I had to do was send in a copy of all our birth certificates. I just never did it. I always meant to though. Just in case I ever wanted to leave. I just..."

She fell silent. Morgan didn't know how to respond. So he didn't.

"If the world turns, will you go back home?"

Morgan sighed, "I don't know. The romantic ideal of a reporter is someone who stays and gets the story, no matter the danger, no matter the costs."

"In the end you're just a tourist."

Her comment stung.

"We all are, I mean," she added, "I didn't mean you specifically. I was referring to the profession in general."

Morgan nodded. The clarification didn't make him feel any better. It was an uncomfortable truth he chose never to think about. There was something inherently immoral about standing on the periphery of human suffering and cataloguing it for a gawking public. The news was, and perhaps had always been, a bizarre form of pornography. At the same time, the story of humanity had to be told. People needed to know what was happening around them. Reporting could and should be a noble profession. A quest for truth. Journalism was meant to provide a glimpse into what had really happened, both for the living and for those to come. More often than not it was merely lurid exploitation. Or even worse, deliberate obfuscation.

He shouldn't be there, lying on the couch getting drunk and smoking someone else's cigarettes. But he couldn't make himself move. History was happening outside. But he had never been more comfortable in his life. Laying there, so near to Evelyn.

He didn't know what he would do if the world did turn. He'd probably leave and go back to the relative comfort of his home planet. Staying and struggling to survive in an act of solidarity would be meaningless. It wouldn't make him any less of an outsider. Especially if he was sending reports back to his employers for their intergalactic rubber-necking audience.

He sat up abruptly and poured himself another glass of the peated whiskey. Evelyn leaned forward and set her glass down on the table, a silent request that he fill her cup. He pointed towards the

whiskey questioningly. She nodded. He poured the last of it into her glass and handed it to her. Morgan laid down on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. A sudden wave of fatigue swept over him.

"I feel like I could fall asleep right now," he murmured.

"What if we fall asleep and the world turns? What if we freeze to death during the night?"

"It won't happen that fast. This side of the world will become too cold to live on very quickly, but not that quickly."

"The idea of dying in my sleep terrifies me."

"Really? I think that's how most people want to die."

"They're not thinking it through. Can you imagine going to sleep and waking up dead? It's horrifying."

"... Except you don't wake up when you're dead."

"Not in this life. But you do wake up. You wake up somewhere new. Even if it's a good place it'd be scary at first. And if it's not a good place, well..."

Morgan had never thought of it like that. Of course, he didn't think there was life after death. However, it would be alarming to fall asleep expecting to wake up in your bed, only to wake and find yourself somewhere entirely different, perhaps in an altered form, with only the core of your being still intact. He shuddered. What if the planet did turn in the night? Would they make it to the other side in time? What would it be like to die? What, if anything, came after?

"Evelyn? Would you mind lying on the couch next to me? I'm not making a pass or anything, I just suddenly felt very lonely over here."

Evelyn wordlessly rose, walked to his couch, and lay down next to him. The couch was wide enough they could easily lie on it shoulder to shoulder. Being that close to her he noticed she smelled vaguely of eucalyptus. She rolled over on to her side, facing him, and moved in closer. He could feel her warm breath on his neck. She laid one hand on his chest. He started to say something, but then stopped himself. There was nothing to say. The day had taken several unexpected turns. If it wasn't for the potential end of the world, it would have been one of the better days of his life. He smiled grimly to himself. It still was.

Ruth's father had been on hold with the Central Authority almost all day. He was pacing back and forth in the kitchen muttering that he just needed to know what to do, needed to know how to take care of his family, needed direction. The rest of Ruth's family sat on the floor huddled together watching the news. The news anchors hadn't said anything new for hours. They were merely telling the same story over and over in different words. Playing and replaying videos of the same events from different angles. Ruth couldn't count the number of times she had seen the video of the Grand Premiere's ship leaving the planet. His desertion came as no surprise to her. As young as she was, she was still politically aware. She had always known the Grand Premiere was a bad person and as such had never made the mistake of placing any trust in him.

After joining her family in the living room that morning, Ruth had stayed long enough to watch the Grand Premiere's press conference; stayed long enough to watch her family fall apart; stayed to watch her father call the Central Authority; and watched the news cycle long enough to know that none of them, the press and the few authorities who had remained, had any idea what they were doing. She went back to her room and started chatting with her friends online. If anything important were to happen they would all be alerted via the city's warning system.

Most of her friends were terrified. Julie was very nearly hysterical. Ruth consoled her as best she could, but that was somewhat difficult online. Eventually Julie left to join her family who, like Ruth's family, were glued to the television in their living room. Ruth soon tired of her friends' conversation. All of them were convinced the world would suddenly turn and they wouldn't have enough time to make it to safety before freezing to death. Jackie couldn't understand why her mother hadn't taken her to the Sky Port, to which Ruth replied "probably because it's insane there. And there's not enough room on the Inter-Planetary Waystation anyway. You might get turned away." This precipitated a conversation about how awful it would be to be sent back to the planet after thinking you were safe and sound on the Waystation.

Ruth gradually retreated from the conversation, receding into herself. She was surprised at how calm she was. The planet hadn't rotated, and while it was certainly possible that it would rotate unexpectedly, in her mind it seemed far more likely that it wouldn't rotate for another hundred years until Richter 1 passed again. She wondered if Richter 1's density had somehow changed and that was why it didn't exert the same force on Terra 9 as it passed. Was it possible for a planet's density to change? She wasn't sure if that's how gravity really worked, though it seemed reasonable to her.

She watched her friend's conversation unfold. She had unconsciously started to read every other word. They had taken a brief hiatus on discussing the various doomsday scenarios and started telling each other how much they loved one another. Ruth scoffed. Typical pubescent girls.

She wondered if she should be more worried. If the planet did rotate unexpectedly it could lead to mass death on a scale never before seen. Since mankind had left Earth there had never been an extinction event on any of the colonized planets. She shook her head. What a terrible thing to be a part of such an historic event.

She had been online for a few hours at this point and Jimmy still hadn't appeared. She was getting worried. She laughed at herself. She wasn't worried about the possible deaths of her and everyone she knew, but she was worried that her boyfriend wasn't online yet. When she thought about it, she was a little upset. Why hadn't he reached out to her yet? They might both be dead soon and he hadn't thought to contact her yet? Not long after she thought this, a chat bubble appeared on her screen. Jimmy was reaching out. She breathed a sigh of relief and clicked on the message.

Jimmy: How are you?

Ruth: I'm okay, considering. How are you?

Jimmy: I'm okay. Considering 😊 Meant to get online sooner but my family insisted that we all watch the news together.

Ruth: It's okay. Mine did too.

Jimmy: Do you think they're right? The news I mean. If the planet turns all the sudden are we all going to freeze?

Ruth hesitated before responding.

Ruth: If the planet didn't turn I don't really see any reason why it's going to just randomly turn. Something has to make it turn. Maybe they were wrong about what makes it rotate. I don't know. But I think it's probably not going to turn again for a very long time. If it ever turns again. It would actually be good if it never turned again. I think anyway. Then we could make all the settlements more permanent. A hundred years is a long time but think about what we could do with the planet if we could invest in it for longer than that.

There was a pause.

Jimmy: You're so smart 😊

Ruth smiled.

Ruth: I could be wrong though.

Jimmy: Everyone else is so scared. I think we can give hope a try. A least for a little while.

There was a pause.

Jimmy: I'd like to meet if that's cool.

Ruth's heart started to pound. She typed several sentences and deleted them all. She took a deep breath and then started typing again.

Ruth: Yes, but I don't know if I can get away.

Jimmy: When do they normally go to bed?

Ruth: 9:00. But who knows if they'll even go to bed tonight. They'll probably fall asleep watching the news in the living room. I think Dad's still on hold with the Central Authority.

Jimmy: Tell him he can hang up. No one's answering calls. My uncle works there. He told us they were told not to answer calls until they have a plan to evacuate the planet. They're waiting for Terra 8 to confirm if they can send transports.

Ruth thought for a moment then responded.

Ruth: I'm not going to tell him. It makes him feel like he's doing something proactive.

Jimmy: Understood.

There was a brief pause in the conversation.

Ruth: Back in a second.

She stood, walked out of her bedroom, and crept down the hallway. She peered around the corner and saw her whole family all sitting together on the couch, still watching the news. Her dad

must've finally given up on reaching anyone at Central Authority. She silently crept back to her room and sat down at her desk.

Ruth: Where do you want to meet?

Jimmy: At the pond? By the old Greenhouse?

Ruth: Okay. When?

Jimmy: I can leave now if you want.

Ruth: Yes.

Jimmy: Great. I'll see you soon.

Ruth signed off. She opened her bag and carefully pulled the contents out. She laid her clothes out on her bed and picked her cutest insulated jacket. Then she carefully re-packed everything. She didn't know when or if they would have to move to the Winter Region, so she wanted to keep everything packed and ready. She sat back down at her computer desk and turned her camera on to get a look at herself. She put on some slightly tinted chapstick. Her mother didn't let her wear make-up. She studied herself for a moment then sighed. It would have to do. She pulled her beanie on, stood, and made her way to the window. She unlocked it and climbed through.

She rounded the corner of her house and stepped onto the street. She paused for a moment in front of her neighbor's house. A family of six lived there. She had never met them. They were all huddled together in the living room, staring at their television screen. A family of four lived in the next house. Same story. They were all sitting together, waiting to be told what to do.

A few houses further there were two young children playing in the snow, making a snowman. A young woman, evidently their mother, sat on her doorstep watching them, smoking. Ruth wondered how much she had told the children. As she walked past, she heard the older of the two, a boy, telling his younger sister that the snowman they were making was a member of the Expeditionary Force and that he worked on ice rovers and that he could survive in the Winter Region for a week without freezing. The younger sister accepted the game and the story with the resignation of a younger sibling who was used to the older one always getting their way.

Ruth walked past the last house on the street into an undeveloped stretch of road separating her neighborhood from Golden Yak Park. The second Grand Premiere on Terra 9 had tried to raise a herd of Yak, thinking they would be a good source of meat for the population. When the first Great Migration came, they were herded into enormous heated pens in the Winter Region where they would remain until the dark side of the planet grew warm enough to sustain them. As it turned out, it took too long for the sunny side of the planet to grow the necessary plant life for the Yak to graze on and it was far too costly to import feed from Terra 8, the closest sister colony. In the end, the majority of the herd was slaughtered. The Grand Premiere kept several alive with the intention of breeding another herd for his successor to move during the next Great Migration. However, the next Grand Premiere did not share his predecessor's passion for breeding Yak. The remainder of the herd was slaughtered long before the next Great Migration. Folk musicians wrote songs about ghost herds of Yaks roaming the frozen tundra. City planners frequently named parks and new developments after the fabled herd. Ruth never understood why the animals had captured the popular imagination the way they had. She had seen

pictures and watched videos of the creatures and she hadn't found anything particularly remarkable about them. It wasn't as though they were extinct either. They were alive and well on multiple sister colonies. She shook her head. It was strange that even in moments of crisis her mind would wander the way it always did.

The sidewalk ended roughly thirty feet after the last house. She stepped out onto the road and continued towards the park. The sound of the river was now audible. Up ahead the terrain was split by a ravine roughly forty feet deep, at the bottom of which was Gilroy River. The road ran parallel to the ravine until about a quarter mile before it led into her neighborhood. The ravine curved away from the neighborhood, as though it were avoiding the subdivision where she lived, cutting a deep gulch in the tundra all the way to the Border Zone. Obviously, they built the neighborhood around the ravine and not the other way around, but it amused her to think of the ravine barreling towards civilization only to turn at the relative last minute and charge off into the frozen wilderness.

She had always wondered why the sidewalk stopped where it did. Another fifty feet and it would have connected to the bridge over the ravine and therefore to the path which led to the park. Why hadn't they extended the sidewalk to the bridge? It didn't matter now, of course. Perhaps it never did.

Twenty feet from the bridge she spotted a man standing on it, looking over the railing. Somehow, he had blended in with the structure. As she drew closer, she paused for a moment, studying him. He was completely oblivious to her. He was staring intently into the rapids below. Even from that distance she could see that he wore a crazed expression. She briefly wondered if she should walk on to the next bridge, but that was miles away. Sighing, she continued on, eyeing the man warily.

Drawing nearer she realized his face was contorted with an overwhelming, unbearable fear, not some strange madness as she had originally supposed. It was obvious what he was contemplating. He didn't notice her until she stepped onto the bridge. Startled, he looked up, and then immediately turned away as though embarrassed. He turned his attention back to the water below. Ruth walked slowly past. She paused at the end of the bridge and turned back to him. He felt her gaze and looked up at her. She wanted to tell him not to do it. But she didn't think he'd listen to a twelve-year-old girl. They stood for a moment looking at each other, silently commiserating. She smiled. He nodded and turned away. She stepped off the bridge and continued towards the park. Not far from the tree line she turned around. The man was on the road, walking towards the subdivision. Hopefully he had changed his mind. It could very well be he had chosen an alternative means in the comfort and privacy of his own home. She wondered how many people had been driven to the same irrevocable decision that day by dread and uncertainty. She felt a sudden surge of anger and resentment towards the Grand Premiere and his staff. She had never thought of any of them as being particularly competent or brave, but they had sunk to a new low when they had fled, leaving their supposed constituents to fend for themselves. While the public officials couldn't be blamed for suicidal decisions on the part of the people, their decision to turn tail and run certainly hadn't helped.

Ruth followed the cement path through the forest of evergreens to the large clearing with the pond and the dilapidated Greenhouse. There was a bench outside of the Greenhouse that overlooked the pond. She assumed Jimmy would meet her there. She rounded the corner of the building and saw with some disappointment that he hadn't arrived yet. She was disappointed, but not surprised. He had much further to walk than she did. She sat down and looked out at the pond.

Cixin Lillies flourished in the pond. They were enormous blue water lilies. They were so large, and the leaves were so firm that children could walk on them. This was discouraged of course, both because of accidental drownings and numerous cases of hypothermia after children had fallen into the water. Every child who went to public school had been dared to walk on Cixin Lilies at some point in their life. Ruth had been dared multiple times and had always refused. She had of course been accused of being scared, which didn't particularly bother her. Being scared to do something stupid was such a strange thing to be ashamed of.

Ruth looked up at the sky and then back out at the pond. She checked the time. A few minutes passed. She fought the urge to look at the time again. He would get there when he got there. Watching the clock wouldn't make the time go any faster. If anything, it would make it go slower.

At long last she saw him stepping through the tree line on the far side of the pond. He waved and then started around the water. Ruth stood and started walking towards him. They met halfway and hugged. It was the first time they had ever embraced each other. They lingered for a moment, enjoying the feeling and the warmth of each other's bodies. Wordlessly, they parted and then started walking back to the bench. They held hands as they walked. As they sat down on the bench Ruth wondered if they would kiss, not necessarily right away, but at some point during their visit. She immediately began to worry about her breath.

They sat in silence looking out at the pond. Jimmy released her hand and took off his glove. He held it back out for her to take. She removed her own glove and placed her hand in his. They looked at each other. There was expectation in the air. For a brief moment it looked as though he was going to lean in, but he didn't. They sat looking into each other's eyes for a long time. Both of them too afraid to make a move. Jimmy finally turned away and stared down at the ground. Just as well. They were too young to be kissing. Or so her mother would tell her. But what if the world turned and they had to rush back home? What if they never saw each other again?

"You know, Cixin Lillies give off heat during photosynthesis," Jimmy murmured, "That's why the ponds they grow in never freeze. In the Summer Region anyway."

Everyone knew this of course. Jimmy was just filling the silence.

Ruth looked up at him, "Not enough heat to prevent hypothermia."

Another pause. It was Ruth's turn to talk.

"Terra 9 Evergreens can hibernate for hundreds of years. So, they don't die no matter how cold it gets. I guess like the ones on other planets, but a little different. Winters on the other colonies aren't as long or as cold."

Jimmy nodded and turned back to her. Their eyes locked again. Neither of them turned away. She sidled closer and tilted her head up. Jimmy leaned down and pressed his cold lips against hers. A thrill like she had never felt before ran through her body. He pulled away. She opened her eyes, unaware that she had closed them. She smiled. He smiled back. They kissed again, longer this time. They pulled apart and turned back to the pond. Ruth leaned her head against his shoulder. It had turned out to be a good day after all.

Til sat opposite Haggard. They were drinking the last of Til's coffee.

Haggard, looking into his mug, "This is the best damn coffee I've ever had."

"It's grown in soil imported from Earth."

"From Earth?"

Til nodded.

"How long did it take for soil from Earth to get here?"

Til shrugging, "A couple lifetimes I think."

"How can you afford this?"

"My family has money." Til admitted.

"What are you doing out here. On the Expeditionary Force... if your family has money."

"There is no greater purpose on Terra 9 than to be a part of the Great Migration. And it comes but once every 100 years."

"103 years," Haggard corrected.

After the Grand Premiere's press conference all the Technicians had been told to wait until they received further orders. Haggard was already on his way to Til's pod, so he kept driving. He figured they both could use some company.

Haggard, staring into his mug, thought of all the Technicians who were already out in the Winter Region running Command Centers. He thought of all the people in transit. He thought of all the people who had already moved. Command Centers in the Winter Region couldn't be kept running forever. Sooner or later, they'd have to move all those people back to the Summer Region. What if the planet finally turned?

Haggard sighed, "Who knows how many millennia this planet has traveled this same orbit. Then all at once... we just assumed it'd keep doing the same damn thing, because it did yesterday, and the day before..."

"Terra 9 will rotate."

Haggard looked up, "What makes you so sure?"

"Because I will not be robbed of my destiny." Til knew that was too grandiose to say. As such, he replied:

"I just know."

Haggard nodded, "Well what do you want to do about it?"

"If all else fails. L30 will be up and running."

“Indefinitely?”

“Yes.”

“One Technician can’t keep a Command Center running all alone.”

“... I can.”

They both knew he couldn’t. Nonetheless, Haggard didn’t feel the need to remind Til of all the many different reasons it was impossible.

“And you want me to drive you?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

Haggard laughed grimly.

“Driving in the Winter Region is nothing but trouble.”

“Will you do it?”

“We’ll be driving all night.”

Til shrugged, “But will you do it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to go on to your Command Center?”

“No. I’m going to go back to my pod and wait for further instructions. There’ll be no one nearby for a hundred miles at least. You still want to go?”

Without hesitation, “Yes.”

Haggard nodded and downed the rest of his coffee. He stood and looked down at Til expectantly. Til stood, walked to his closet, and pulled his space suit back on. Haggard hadn’t taken his off. Til picked up his bag and followed Haggard out the door and into the darkness.

Til followed Haggard to the ice rover, pausing for just a moment to look out at the tiny sliver of light frozen on the horizon. There would be no sun out at L30. Behind him he heard Haggard start up the rover. Til turned and climbed into the vehicle. Haggard threw the car into gear and they started off into the night.

Miles and miles passed. Frozen evergreens rose from the tundra, luminescent in the rover’s headlights. Tiny white shapes began to dot the landscape ahead, growing as the car approached them. They were settlements from the past, old neighborhoods, old buildings from what had once been the Summer Region, laying dormant, waiting for the people to come back. On the outskirts of the ghost town Til could see the lights of the first Command Center, L1. Two months prior, give or take, a Technician had stepped inside and begun the process of powering the station up. Not long after the people had arrived. Til wondered what they were thinking. No doubt they were debating among themselves whether they should return to the Summer Region or remain in the Command Center. Til turned back to the road ahead.

They continued into the night passing more and more ancient settlements. More and more Command Centers. Eventually they came to a Command Center that had not yet been powered up. It was L28. They were getting closer to L30. Haggard spoke for the first time since they had left Til's pod.

"In a minute we'll be crossing over Moon Lake. You can see Cixin Lilies glowing underneath the ice."

Til leaned forward expectantly. This was something he had always wanted to see. Ironically, if the world had turned as expected, it would've been daylight by the time they had reached Moon Lake. There was a bridge over the lake, but there was no telling if the frozen structure would still support the weight of an ice rover. The safest thing to do was to drive over the frozen lake. Even if the sun had risen, the combined heat of the sun and the Cixin Lilies still wouldn't be enough to melt the ice for a few days. Regardless, the idea of driving on the enormous frozen lake made Til nervous.

The ice rover drove up a small embankment and then dipped downward as it began a slow descent towards the lake. It was glorious to behold. An enormous ice patch, stretching for miles, glowing with the light of thousands of Cixin Lilies drifting beneath the surface. The light shifted from blue to neon green and back again. The light from the lake made the surrounding night even darker.

"Can you imagine how bright they must be to penetrate the ice like that?"

Haggard nodded, "It would be like staring into the sun. On Earth that is."

"On Terra 9, they would shine brighter in the night than the daytime sun."

Despite the distraction of the glowing lilies, Til's heart still skipped a beat when they drove out onto the surface of the lake. The terrain felt no different through the tires of the vehicle than the frozen tundra had. Til exhaled, not having realized he was holding his breath.

Several miles later they passed over the edge of the lake and back onto the tundra. Darkness once again engulfed them. Til felt sad leaving the lake behind. There was nothing of interest between it and L30.

After roughly half an hour a shape began to emerge from the night sky ahead of them, a slightly darker shape against a dark background. As they drew nearer, Til recognized it as L30. He was surprised to discover that it filled him with dread. Delusions of destiny aside, this was likely to be the place he died. L30 was an enormous, frozen sarcophagus. This likelihood did not alter his intentions.

Haggard pulled to a stop in front of L30's enormous blast doors. There was a smaller door off to the side that Til would enter through. He sat for a moment staring up at the doors illuminated by the ice rover's headlights.

Haggard broke the silence, "You sure about this? We can head back. Spend a little time out on that lake."

"If the world turns the people will need a place to go to."

"And if doesn't turn?"

Til didn't reply. He turned to Haggard. They shook hands. Til picked up his bag and stepped out of the rover into the night. The cold was unimaginable. He walked to the smaller door next to the large

blast doors and punched the code into the keypad. There was a hissing sound as the door opened. A few tiny lights blinked on and off in the vast hangar inside. Til turned back to Haggard and waved.

Haggard backed the rover up and turned it around. He paused for a moment. Perhaps giving Til one last chance to change his mind. Til heard a grating sound as Haggard shifted the rover into gear. It started off into the darkness. Til should have immediately stepped inside and closed the door. Instead, he stood, watching the rover drive away. He waited until the red of the taillights were swallowed up in darkness. A solitude like he had never felt before crushed him. He took a deep breath, stifling panic. He turned, stepped inside, and pulled the door shut.