

Leaving the Earth to join the Mars Development Project was the hardest decision Cecil ever had to make. After a freak accident leaves him debilitated and unable to fulfill his purpose, he falls into despair and must consider what he must do next. Through the darkness, a voice calls out to him. How will he respond?

Mother of Mars

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Pre-release, First Edition

Dedicated to all my coworkers who asked when this was going to come out.

Ripples

"I can't see anything."

"Something has to stand out."

"I'm telling you, everything just looks the same."

"You don't get out much, do you Cecil?"

"Quit bickering. This isn't I Spy; we're not going to pick a winner." The other two stopped quiet.

"Agrippa, how do we know what we're looking for?" Cecil peered forward over the seat in front of him.

"There's a heat signature in this area- volcanic activity. The satellite recorded some images when it passed over the following time. We were able to spot what we think are lava tubes in this area that may lead us down into the crust."

"I can feel it, we're close." Markus spoke up from the driver's seat.

"What makes you so sure?" Cecil rebutted.

"You're within one klick of the area now." The voice from station control crackled over the long-distance channel not seconds later.

"Hear that? My instinct is always right." Markus said assuredly.

"Lucky guess," Cecil scoffed back.

"Let's can the nonsense. Head north-northwest. Keep your eyes open, you two."

"Roger that, old man." Markus replied and kept on driving.

The rover bumped along the red, rocky terrain. The low drone of radio silence returned to their ears as the group focused gazed upon their surroundings.

“This area is prone to dust storms I’ve heard. How can we be sure what we’re looking for hasn’t been covered up? Cecil peered over the back seat railing at Agrippa, perched in the passenger seat, examining a tiny LCD screen.

“Granted the topography is always changing here, but there’s a few landmarks I’ve been able to track. We’ll have to spot it the old-fashioned way nonetheless.” Agrippa explained without looking up from his instruments.

“This is your area of expertise, we’re counting on you.” Cecil breathed loudly through his nose. “Think about it, we could be the guys who open up the gate to our next big step. Our names would go down in human history. Imagine what our friends and family at home would say.”

The land before them plateaued a bit as the rover drudged on. The base of a mount crept up in front of them, pockmarks and rubble dotted their path. The vehicle rumbled and shook as the sturdy tires rolled over the rugged ground.

Markus took darted his head back and forth between the landscape in front of the rover and Agrippa in the seat next to him. He broke the silence.

“You’re gonna’ let me know if I’m following the correct heading, right? You’re the science guy after all; I can’t make head or tails of that stuff anyways.” Markus continued maneuvering his way up the rocky dunes.

“I’ll have you pay your elders some respect.” Agrippa’s raspy voice was vaguely threatening. “We’re just about in range- there, that looks promising.” Agrippa motioned at a

steep hillside that met sharply with the rest of the landscape. Markus veered towards it and they started their approach.

The rover drew closer and a tear in the ground came into view. Upon reaching it, the size became more apparent. The rough walls arced up to the apex about 8 feet above the top of the rover. Sand and rocks from the surface seemed to trickle downwards into the opening. The headlights of the rover were flipped on but the beams seemed to disappear down into the darkness. Markus stood up and peered down the hole.

“This is where we stop I guess. If I try to drive the rover down there, I doubt I could get it back out. We don’t want to end up having to walking all the way back to base.” Agrippa and Cecil grunted in agreement.

The three unharnessed themselves from the rover and opened the side compartments for their gear. Cecil crouched down in front of the storage compartment and fumbled around with the contents. He alternated looking at his gear and staring off down the hole.

Markus noticed him. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m just thinking how little gear I can risk taking so I don’t have to carry as much back out.” Cecil let out a chuckle.

Markus grabbed a head lamp from another compartment. “This isn’t some romp in the pool like back home. We don’t know how tough the trek will be down there. This isn’t a tourist attraction, there are no paths or guard rails.” He threw a coil of rope at Cecil which he caught reflexively. “It’s steep, and as much as I hate to say it, we have to rely on each other for this. We’re going to do this like Everest, tethered together in a line. We don’t want to return back to the rover one person short.

“You’ve climbed Everest, Mark?” Agrippa said playfully.

“Plenty of people have. All of the rich moguls and would-be athletes have gone up and done it just for the sport of it. Not me, but I’ll have you know that more have summited Everest than have been here on Mars.”

“I recall Everest being littered with bodies of those who couldn’t keep up with their teams or made a simple mistake that lead to an unfortunate end. Rescue operations at that altitude just end up with more people getting hurt, so bodies just sit there, frozen for eternity.”

“It’s an example for god sakes. I shouldn’t need to spell that out for you, Agrippa.”

Cecil tried to stifle his snicker inside the face mask. Markus glared in his direction. Cecil deflected the gaze and turned his attention to the harness attached to his suit. As he pulled the last buckle tight around his thigh, he felt a glove on his shoulder, and the click of a carabineer in the back ring right below the small of his back.

“You’ve just volunteered for first.” Markus’s voice came through his headset.

“I’ve had worse,” Cecil gathered up the slack in the rope and tugged it forwards just enough to feel Markus stumble slightly.

“I’m not joining this chain if we’re going to engage in horseplay.” Agrippa said gruffly. He patted the pouches attached to his belt, confirming all his instruments were firmly stored.

“Lighten up.”

Cecil stared at the gloomy tunnel in front of him. The beam from his head lamp cast a disk of light on the tunnel wall and floor. His partners’ lights danced around the rock in random fashion. The ceiling and walls seemed almost close enough to reach out and touch.

Cecil took a wide footing to carefully slide down the loose sand down the tunnel.

“Agrippa, you’re the anchor, don’t get caught up in your instruments.” He turned around just enough to see the other two working their way down behind him.

“I know better than that.”

The tunnel eventually evened out and the floor became solid. The darkness continued. Need for conversation was replaced with the focus on staying together and keeping their footing. The silent radio reminded them that contact with station control had long been broken, unable to be made inside the depths of the planet. Cecil’s arms felt heavy, held up in the air for balance. Each slow step felt like his boots pounded harder and harder into the unyielding ground of the tunnel floor. A drop of sweat fell from his brow and streaked on the lower part of his visor.

“Does it feel hotter to you down here?” Cecil wanted desperately to wipe his forehead but the clunky suit would not let him.

“Is your heat exchanger not- actually, now that you mention it; yeah.” Agrippa looked down at the screen of his multi-tool clipped to his belt. “Hold up.” He stopped suddenly pulling everyone to a halt in the process.

“We’re directly inside the area where the heat signature was recorded. I think this is our lava tube, boys.” The excitement in his voice was unmistakable.

“Great, I’m already sweaty and gross.” Said Markus.

“Well at least you match your personality.”

Markus let out a 'hmpf' and pushed Cecil in the back to spur him walking again. The quick stop to catch his breath and the prospect of a finding gave him the small jolt of energy he needed.

As the tunnel went on deeper, it opened up into a wide passage. The rough ground slowly became a smooth, worn down base of granite. The unrelenting heat made his temples throb, even against the cooling system pulsing through the tubes under his suit. Cecil blinked. A drop of sweat crept toward his eye. The burn of salt stung him. He blinked again. His head felt like it was spinning. He blinked a third time.

"HEY!" Markus's yell made Cecil jump to attention. His eyes opened wide and he realized he was drifting into the side of the tunnel.

"You ok?" Said Agrippa. "We can hear you breathing like you've just ran a marathon."

"Yeah, just need a time out." Cecil shook his head. He reached out his hand and went to lean against the wall. "Yow!" He jumped, pulling his hand away. He looked down at his glove that was now covered in black soot. The ground below him was coated in the same debris. He scraped his foot against the rock, sending up particles that danced in the beam of his headlamp. He felt the distinct sensation of sweat between his toes from the heat radiating up on them.

Turning around, we found the others staring him down. Their lamps glared into his visor. "It's like a blast furnace down here. I think we're on to something." He rubbed his gloves together and swung his legs back and forth to stretch them. After adjusting his headlamp, he continued to lead the group along.

The tunnel started to become wider. The group panned their heads around, shining their lights off in different directions. The beams disappeared into far reaches of what seemed like a cavern. Cecil blinked rapidly and his eyes adjusted to the void.

“Do you see that? Dim your lights.” Cecil said.

The beams of light recoiled into their lamps and turned into a weak orange glow. One corner of the cavern seemed to emit a similar glow. The group drew closer to find the obvious source of the glow.

“Well I’ll be damned,” whispered Markus as they found themselves looking in on the magma chamber they had hoped to find.

The walls of the cavern were illuminated by the glow of the bubbling, churning basin of magma. Cecil was sweltering inside of his suit, but he felt more relieved than anything.

A communal sigh was felt amongst the group. “I need to take down some notes,” said Agrippa, halting the celebration. “We’re down almost half a kilometer from the surface. Command will be all over this in no time.”

Cecil hunched down in exasperation, knowing they would have to climb up the same way. For the moment however, he admired what he had found; the sheer uncontained power and potential of the planet’s underside. The stinging in his eye brought him back to his surroundings.

The cave seemed to contain various branching tunnels away from the volcanic activity. Something down one of the dark paths seemed to give off a gleam that Cecil immediately fixated on. He rose back to his feet, pulling the others to attention.

“Just a sec, I’m taking down some notes.” Agrippa protested.

“The way out is behind us dimwit.” Markus yanked the tether and thumbed the air behind him. “We’re almost done, and then it’s straight out of this literal hell-hole. Don’t make more walking for us.”

Cecil pulled the reluctant group along, remaining focused on the shimmer. Another compartment away from the volcanic ravine opened up. The temperature dropped quickly as they ventured deeper. The thin layer of sweat on Cecil’s forehead felt clammy.

The tunnel slowly opened up into a larger cave. The walls gave the impression of being unnaturally smooth and even. At the very center they stopped. They found themselves upon a pool of liquid, perfectly still.

The room seemed to glow like the one behind them, but it was a much colder light. Cecil moved his gaze upwards. He motioned at the others towards the ceiling; there was a direct shaft upwards to the outside.

The red Martian daylight shone brightly down the hole, and reflected faintly off the still pool. Cecil crouched down along the edge and peered deeply.

“Well if this ain’t something. I’ll make a note of this as well, and we can get out of here.” Agrippa said matter-of-factly.

The images of their suits in the reflection of the still pool stared eerily back at them.

“Well that’s beautiful and all, but it’s going to be sundown sooner or later.” Markus interrupted the moment. “I’m sure it will look at it when someone comes down here again. Let’s get back and get some chow.” He pulled at his harness that was connected to Cecil who was still entranced.

Cecil remained where he was. He could make out the faint figures of him and his teammates in the reflection. Hesitantly he brought his hand up to the surface. He extended his index finger gingerly, and broke the surface tension just slightly. A ripple extended and broke the stillness of the silvery surface.

The ripple stopped abruptly. The surface returned to its completely glassy state. Cecil turned back to the others who had noticed the strange movement as well. He turned back to the pool.

A single ripple appeared suddenly from the dead center of the pool. Then another. The time between the ripples became shorter. A hum became audible in the otherwise silent room. The reverberation grew in time with the frequency of the ripples. As the sound became louder, Agrippa shouted over the communications “What did you do?” He pushed buttons furiously on his instrument.

“Nothing!” Cecil exclaimed. The hum was now a wail. Cecil could feel it in his body and in his suit. Anything the others said was drowned out. He heard a loud crack and a lightning-shaped line formed in his facemask. He attempted to stand up. His knees felt weak, and his vision suddenly went black as the blood rushed from his head. He stumbled.

Cecil’s body hit the water with a splash. He felt the line connecting him to Markus go taut. The strong ripples forming in the water started to lap over him as he fumbled just under the surface. His strength faded quickly as he flailed about trying to stay afloat. He felt his shins hang slightly onto the ground at the edge of the pool as he tried to bring himself back to land, but to no avail. Bubbles danced in front of his visor, illuminated by the light on his helmet.

“Whoa!” Markus exclaimed as he was jerked towards the pool that now threatened to pull the rest of the group in. “Agrippa, don’t let go! Help me get him out of there,” Yelled Markus, as he dug his feet in to avoid getting pulled in after Cecil. “Quit flailing idiot!”.

Cecil felt a relaxing wave of coolness overcome his body. He was no longer able to fight back against the pool. Something tugged at him. A voice called at him from what seemed far away. He blinked deeply.

Mother

Dear Mother,

I wish I could have had more chances to write. I feel as though all we do is work until exhaustion then get just enough rest to keep on our feet. I’m afraid ‘fun’ is an alien concept here. I guess there’s only room enough for science and engineering. What I wouldn’t give for a time out just to stop caring for a second.

I sometimes think what my life would have been if I stayed on Earth. I could have a family, a desk job, and a nice soft bed. I could have done all the things that other people take for granted; go to the movies, have fun at parties, meet people, make a family. I know you always wished for grand children too. Unfortunately, I found a stronger calling outside of our world. I know what I’m doing here is for the good of everybody, not just myself. I remember before I left you told me not to have any regrets. I didn’t then, and I don’t now. I just want you to know this.

...

With much love,

Your Son -Cecil.

“Anything else you would like to add?”

“...No. Thank you nurse.” Cecil cleared his throat. His tongue felt sandpapery and unpleasant.

The chair creaked as the nurse stood up. Her shoes clacked against the metal floor as she left the room. Cecil heard the hiss of the automatic door opening. The door hesitated before it whooshed back closed, followed by the sound of heavier footsteps.

“Feeling better it seems.” The deep, gravelly voice reached Cecil’s ears.

“Agrippa-,” his voice cracked.

Agrippa let out a stifled chuckle. His footsteps drew close to the bed. Cecil heard the pouring of water and felt the waxy surface of a paper cup brush against his fingertips. He moved his hand forwards to grasp it. Sitting up slightly, he touched the cup tenderly to his lips. The room temperature liquid trickled down his parched throat.

“Writing a letter already? Just yesterday you tried to claw the nurse’s eyes out... err huh... sorry.” Agrippa’s voice trailed off. “Who were you writing to?” He asked gingerly.

“My mother. I don’t want to worry her.”

Agrippa swallowed loudly. “Cecil... there’s something I should tell you. Well, you know what. I think you should just worry about yourself for right now. Even though you’re mostly healed, you’re still weak.” Agrippa’s raspy voice had little emotion in it.

“You know you don’t dream when you’re in a coma. At least, not normal dreams. There’s no REM sleep. Comatose dreams are not composed of images and stories. It’s more like feelings. Feelings of horror, uncertainty; I’m not even sure how to describe it.” Cecil’s body

shuddered. “Everything is fuzzy. I can’t be sure what was reality, and what was just a nightmare.”

Agrippa paused for a brief moment. “In our line of work, what we had was as close to a nightmare as you can get.”

“Nobody wants to tell me anything. What happened down there, how did I get like... this?”

“Your helmet cracked open. From what it seems, the quick drop in temperature stressed out the polycarbonate enough to fail. You fell in, and as we tried to pull you out, your mask filled with liquid. We could hear you choking as we pulled you up. We had to take off your helmet to get you breathing again, somehow. Performing CPR in an environment with no air a feat in itself. Your helmet was unsalvageable, so we had to carry you out with just the mask on. We rushed you out of the cave as fast as we could, but the heat was worse than we thought. I remember... seeing blisters form and pop open on your face.” Agrippa took a deep, strained breath and continued. “We brought you back as fast as we could, and the people here at med bay took it from there.”

Cecil’s mind flashed back to the last thing he remembered. Being jostled and people yelling. The smell of burnt flesh. Getting strapped onto a stretcher and getting jabbed with needles. The feeling of wanting to scream as they debrided his flesh. He returned himself to reality, shaking his head furiously. The paper cup lay crushed in his fist.

Cecil took a deep breath. “What then?” He said flatly.

“You were placed in a medically induced coma shortly after. That was almost three months ago now. Most of the healing has been done since then. You know, you had third

degree burns on a large region of your face. Your corneas also... well, you can take a guess.”

Agrippa’s voice sounded hollow as he continued.

Cecil suddenly became aware of the tightness in his face. He could feel the skin constrict around his haggard features as his expression shifted into a grimace.

Agrippa continued, picking up on Cecil’s disposition. “It’s kind of a miracle you’re alive. I mean, we have some fine people here, but there’s a limit to our resources. We did the best we could with what we had.” His voice became very quiet.

“I can remember the feeling.” Cecil picked up, almost in a whisper. “The bristles of a wire brush grating against my skin, and every nerve ending screaming out against it. A greased up tube being slid down up nose and down into my chest. IV’s being jabbed into my arms. I wanted to thrash, gag, scream, but couldn’t move. I was dead to the world.” His voice slowly started to raise. “It was a literal nightmare that I couldn’t awake from. Now that I am awake, I’m not really any better off, am I? How can I work like this Agrippa, what can I offer now that I’m blind?”

The loud beep of the heart rate monitor slowly faded to a regular rhythm. The time between pulses seemed to be drawn out in the awkward silence. The chair in the room creaked slightly as Agrippa shifted uncomfortably.

“They made sure you would be back to being conscious around this time. The orbits are aligned right now; you know what that means, right? There’s a supply ship inbound in a couple days from Earth. After it passes inspection and gets refueled, its headed straight back. You’ll be on it.” Agrippa’s voice lacked his usual positivity. “The company has made arrangements for your rehabilitation, a corneal transplant too. You’ll be able to see again properly. When

you're able to get back on your feet, they have a nice low-stakes job for you there. No more running around on alien planets searching for god knows what."

The chair squeaked against the floor as Agrippa slid it backwards to stand. Cecil made no reaction. He remained lying on his back facing upwards. The most he could sense was the dim pale glow from the lights above. He felt a hand pat him on the leg lightly. The automatic door hissed open. The light disappeared. The door hissed closed.

Cecil woke up to a pounding headache. He shot up, his back immediately screaming out in pain. The cold air ran up the slit in his gown; his back was clammy and covered in sweat. He suddenly became aware of the queasiness rising up in his chest. His head spun. The acrid taste of stomach acid appeared in the back of his throat. He tried to swallow, choking on his saliva.

He buckled over, holding his abdomen. His fit of coughing turned to dry heaving; he could feel his throat twisting itself inside out. His knotted stomach was completely vacant and had nothing to give. He felt as he was retching from the deepest parts of himself. Warm mucus and bile sputtered out past his lips and landed with a sickening plop in his lap.

His head was pounding even harder. He fumbled desperately for something solid to grab on to. His hands found the railing on the side of his bed, which he leaned on. The cold metal popped loudly and slid down with a jolt. His arm wrestled against the tubes that were attached to him as he went down. He felt the IV tear out of his vein and rip a neat line up his bicep.

His body could not gain any traction to stay on top of the hospital bed. He slid off and met the ground with an ungraceful thump. He felt the sticky lead to the heart monitor separate

from his chest. The machine let out a siren of distress, just as the familiar hiss of the door came from beside him on the floor. Cecil heard indistinct calls for help. A pair of strong hands grabbed him below his arms. The voices and commotion slowly faded.

A buzzing came to his ears. The frequency felt familiar to him. He felt it reaching into his core, sending a prickly feeling all over his body . There was a faint distressing feeling to the humming and Cecil involuntarily flinched at it. His eyes fluttered as his eyelids grew heavier. The humming faded along with his consciousness.

Blank

A few silent days had passed. Cecil resigned himself to lying in bed and reacquainting himself with his limbs that had become stiff and numb over the course of several months. Occasionally he imagined hearing the same buzzing sound, but anytime he tried to focus on it, the sound seemed to disappear. Between napping and daydreaming Cecil found it hard to keep track of time.

A voice came to Cecil's ears. He was shaken out of his daze. "- have visitors." The pleasant voice of the nurse wafted in his ears. The sound of someone clearing their throat echoed slightly from the foot of his bed.

"Agrippa?"

"Yeah." He announced slowly. "I brought your best friend too."

There was a loud snort. "Agrippa had told me you had woken up. Man, I still can't get over... well, let's be honest. You look kind of rough." He let out a small, uncharacteristic laugh.

Agrippa let out a grunt. "Don't go making him feel bad."

"You know he's too positive for that."

Cecil let out a sigh, followed by a weak laugh. He didn't feel like laughing, but it slipped out anyways.

"You know, this guy saved your life," explained Agrippa.

"I did what I had to do. I didn't have time to think about it."

"He pulled you out of there, and pretty much dragged you all the way out on his own. We drove like crazy to get you back here. After we turned you over to the others, he almost collapsed himself."

Cecil tried to conjure up some words of gratitude. He rolled his head side to side on the pillow. "You could have just left me down there. Then I wouldn't have ended up like this..."

"You asshole-" Markus raised his voice. He stopped and held his tongue. "Look, I made you go down there first, I just thought-"

"Whatever. It wasn't your fault." Cecil started quietly, his voice still slightly hoarse. "I felt drawn to it... the pool... whatever it was. I just lost my balance and fell." He paused. "I've been going over what little bit I remember in my head. My mind feels cloudy, and it makes me terrified. If I was in the middle of the chain instead of the front, I could have dragged both of you in after me. Who knows how deep it was, or even what it was; a pool like that down there."

Cecil's voice drifted out. The room fell silent once again, save the beeping of the heart monitor.

"Down there, huh?" Agrippa questioned.

"What do you mean by that?" Cecil asked indignantly.

"Well we went back of course." Markus explained irritably. "We had to explain to station control and Cassius how you got hurt, with the pool and all. Of course, they were

excited about the geothermal activity we found, but they also seemed equally interested in that reverberation we saw and heard.”

Agrippa picked up before Markus could finish his thought. “I think you’ll be surprised at how much we’ve done while you’ve been asleep. I know they aren’t expecting much out of you, so I doubt you’ll ever get properly debriefed. Anyways, after we logged the coordinates, several teams got sent out there to scout, and they eventually set up a temporary base. They wanted everything to be built down there in those caves. So they started blasting for space, sending materials down the hole, and building a whole system of rooms down there where people could get to work.

We now have about a quarter of the workers down there, putting together a geothermal generator and who knows what else. I haven’t been over there much. The pool is somewhat of interest, but we haven’t been able to replicate what happened when we went down there. The presence of such a large body of water here on Mars is of interest, though.”

“It’s been known for a long time that there are traces of water here on the planet- although not in very big quantities, not like that. I still can’t believe it’s something extraordinary though.” Markus added assuredly. “It would be great for us to have all that extra water for use here, but I don’t think it’s a main concern for anyone right now. Unless it tries to drown another person, I could care less.”

“I think... I heard it, felt it. I don’t know how to describe it.” Cecil said blankly. He could feel the awkward silence of the other two. “It sounds crazy, but the other night I swore I heard it. It was the same buzzing down there in the tunnels. It felt more unsettling though.”

“Strange, we haven’t felt anything. Like I said, if there was any more strange activity involving the pool people would know about it. They couldn’t keep it a secret with all those workers. Are you sure it wasn’t a bad dream? Even though you’ve been out of it, you still need to get your rest for your recovery.” Agrippa sounded defeated. “You’ve been in a coma for a long time. They said sometimes when you’re unconscious like that; you pick up on things going on about you; hear what people are saying. They become one with your dreams and make you think crazy things.”

“Are you saying I’m crazy, Agrippa?”

“No, I think you’re just tired. Tired of this place. Tired of the work, the mental and physical strain. Maybe this was your wake up call to retire from this line of work. Listen, the ship is leaving in just under forty hours. Get one last night of sleep here, and don’t let any bad dreams worry you. I don’t know if we can be there to see you off, but know we’ll be waving you goodbye. You don’t have to worry about us, or whatever that thing is. You’re going to get a nice settlement from the company, a desk job, and maybe some proper rest for once.”

“I think he said everything that needs to be said. I’ll be seeing you, buddy.” Markus got the last word in. The pairs of heavy footsteps headed out the door. It whooshed closed.

Helplessly

Cecil lay in bed. He couldn’t sleep. He had always hated space travel, and his current condition would not make his upcoming flight any more fun. He flexed his leg muscles under the covers. They had slowly begun to regain proper feeling after several months of not being on them. He didn’t know what time it was, but figured that they would come get him when launch preparations were starting.

Unable to read, one of the nurses had brought him a dispatch radio that he could listen to in order ward off the boredom. He fiddled with the controls until it flipped on. The regular mundane communications came on intermittently to break up the dull buzz of the static.

Cecil recalled how he was introduced to the communications system at the base. ‘This isn’t the military, but we hold similar standards.’ they said, ‘we expect to know who’s talking and who you’re speaking to.’ It was rarely enforced; sudden communications would always give you a start when they popped into your helmet like a disembodied voice.

Cecil lay in bed and paid fleeting attention to the transmissions. He tried to listen for anything regarding the project that Agrippa mentioned. The amount of static started to increase over time. Before long, most of the communications became unintelligible. The door hissed open and the dainty footsteps of the nurse came across the floor.

“Do you know what’s up with the comms, miss?”

Her footsteps broke pattern, surprised that Cecil was awake. “Ah yes, we are having a meteor shower, its wreaking havoc with a good deal of our systems. Do you need anything while I’m here?”

Cecil breathed a sigh of relief. “No, thank you.” The meteor shower would most likely delay the launch. Cecil felt the nurse pull the blanket up on his legs, followed by her footsteps trailing away. The static hummed silently in the background, and Cecil dozed off.

He awoke to the feeling of the bed being propped up. He twitched in response to the sudden stimuli.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?” The nurse’s voice was the same as before. Cecil groaned groggily. “I’m going to put some ointment on your face. We’ve been talking and moving

around a lot recently, haven't we? The grafts are going to feel tight on your face, and we don't want them being strained or drying out." Her soothing tone felt reassuring. Cecil had only been to the medical bay maybe two or three times since arriving, and he didn't really have a face to put to her voice.

He felt her body heat as she leaned down on the side of the bed. She lightly touched his cheeks as she massaged in the ointment. She worked her way up to his forehead. He had been instructed not to touch his face, and had managed to do so despite the strange itchy, crawly sensations he had. Her soft fingertips brushed against his scalp and he realized that his head had been shaved. He had always had it buzzed fairly short, but never completely bald.

"Nurse?"

"Hmm?" She let out a hum, focused on the job at hand.

"Am I hideous?" There was a slight tinge of pain in his voice.

Her hands stopped. He felt her body heat move away slightly, as if stepping back to take a look at him. She didn't respond.

"I mean, without hair. Do I look like a Mr. Potato Head?"

She let out a giggle. "You look like a million bucks."

"Of medical procedures, that is." Markus's voice came from the direction of the doorway. The nurse scoffed. "The meteor shower has delayed the launch for now. You've got a bit more time. I'd say get up and stretch those legs a bit, big boy. Just don't run into anything and smash up that beautiful face of yours."

Cecil heard the nurse shoo off Markus, followed by the doors closing behind him. The nurse returned to his side. "I can't say he's wrong; about walking, of course. Let's get you up and stretch those legs, I can't imagine you want to be rolled onto the ship, now would you?"

Cecil gave a weak reply, but felt a jolt of excitement and anxiety about being able to be up. She helped Cecil turn to the side to dangle his legs off the edge of the bed. She grabbed his hand, her skin was soft. He gently pushed her hand back and grasped the edge of the hospital bed. The cold metal of the lowered railing touched his thighs. The nurse grabbed at his shoulder and gently pulled him forwards.

Cecil brushed off her hand and slid forward, stretching his toes to the cold metal floor. He hefted himself off the bed and placed his feet squarely on the ground, holding onto the bed for stability. He could feel the nurse's presence in front of him, guarding him if he happened to make a fall forwards.

Cecil had a brief moment of vertigo. Even though he couldn't see the floor, his feet felt like they were meters below him. The sensation gave him déjà vu as he remembered standing at the edge of the pool just before falling in. He felt light headed and sat back down on the bed.

"No good, huh? We can try again later. Just let me know before, okay?" The nurse helped him swing his legs back up and under the covers. Cecil shifted his legs around. They felt as if they had weights strapped to them. "Just hit the button if you need anything."

The nurse turned to leave the room, but Cecil stopped her. "What then? I feel like there's no means to an end for me. Even when I get back to my feet, I will be feeble, good for nothing. That's what my father said too, that I'm good for nothing."

Cecil focused at the bright spot above him, the faint orange glow that radiated from the light fixture. “I remember when I used to hang out at my father’s shop when I was a kid. I had just learned how to use the acetylene torch and was enjoying cutting apart every piece of scrap metal I could get my hands on. Of course my father drilled into me how important wearing eye protection was. One day, the guys were working on a project and I couldn’t find the proper gear. Whatever, right? I just put on some regular sunglasses and went at it.

The torch was almost too bright to look at. Like looking at the sun. My eyes were sore and there was a big white spot in my vision. It’s called a flash burn. Well, later that night it got worse, like someone had rubbed sandpaper on my eyes. I got awful headaches too, it went on for days. I was scared. Not because I thought I hurt myself. I was scared of my dad; I knew he would be angry out of his mind. One day after school my mom found me lying on my bed crying from the dull pain that I thought would never end. My dad came home later that night and figured out what had happened. He hit me and yelled a lot. It was worse than the flash burn. I felt his disappointment, rather than just the senseless anger that he usually had. Eventually my vision got better, but I could never forget the sting of my father’s hand, both on my face and on my psyche. It’s the same feeling I feel now.”

“Cecil...” She let out a soft sigh. “Your father abused you, didn’t he? I... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t say such things. Hey, some of the guys heard you had woken up. They asked about you when I ran into them. When you feel ready to get up and walk around, we can get out for a bit. They would be happy to see you, and you can give your farewell in person.”

“Farewell, huh.” He said apathetically. “That’s something. It’s better than continuing to rot here for the next few days.

“It will be good for you. At the least we can get you up walking. Go to station control and see the commander too; he helped a lot in making the arrangements for your departure. Remember, the only way you can fail anyone is if you never try. At least, that’s how I feel.”

The nurse turned once again to leave. Her footsteps trailed out but her words echoed in Cecil’s mind.

Cassius

Cecil pulled the zipper of the jumpsuit up all the way, right under his Adam’s apple. The rough, starchy material felt slightly baggier than he remembered.

“This will help you avoid running into things.” The nurse placed the thin metal rod in Cecil’s palm and closed his fingers around it. “Are you sure you’re fine to walk alone? Not that I can leave here for long, myself. I have to-.”

Cecil stopped her. “Hey. I’ve walked these halls more times than I can count. Even without this stick, I can find my way around just fine.” Cecil explained calmly. He took a few steps, swinging the cane around playfully. It hit the side of the bed and made a loud clang.

“Just don’t exert yourself. Let’s get you out before you break something.” The nurse grabbed his arm with much more force than she had used previously. She led him to the door and pushed the button to open it. The squeak of the door that he had become so accustomed to came to his ears and he felt glad that he would be hearing it a lot less. With a final push he was shoved out the door and down the hallway.

The glow of the medical ward lights disappeared as he stepped into the conservatively lit hallway. Cecil felt a sinking feeling in his heart as he knew he would have to make do without his sight. He clumsily grasped onto the cane and tapped the floor in front of him. He

directed it forward and bumped it awkwardly against the side of the path along the wall. His frustration grew and he switched hands, using the other to follow the wall.

Cecil hadn't been to the station control many times, but there wasn't much between there and the medical bay. His hand dragged across the wall, occasionally encountering grates, panels, and rough rivets. Footsteps approached him from down the hallway. He felt a person squeeze past him in the narrow hallway, otherwise seeming to completely to ignore him.

Cecil continued. He shifted to the other wall which was just beyond his arm's reach from the other side. He took a left down what he felt was the correct way. He reached what he was pretty sure was station control. He pressed the grimy feeling button, placing the fingers of his opposite hand on the door. It slid open quickly and he stepped in.

There was a faint hum of fans and computer equipment, and notable warmth. There was a faint smell of body odor, pungent like someone who had been sitting at a desk or computer all day, rather than the musky smell of someone out doing physical labor. Cecil heard someone whispering on his side. They were overtaken by a loud voice. "Well god damn, if it isn't Ruiz. What a sight for sore eyes." It was followed by a loud, harsh laugh.

Cecil rubbed his fingers together nervously. The laugh ended abruptly. The voices on the side of the room went silent. "I apologize; I know you've been through a lot." The commander's apology vaguely felt sincere.

He cleared his throat. "I bet you've enjoyed a nice vacation in the medical bay. The bed there must be nice and roomy compared to the bunks."

"Yeah, the nurse is nice too I guess." Cecil said meekly.

“So you can speak after all; I’m glad to hear you still have it all together up there.” The commander let out another loud laugh.

Cecil stood silently. He felt a loss for words. He had rarely had any contact with the commander in person. The laughing died out. “So, are you here for anything in particular?” The commander queried.

“Commander Cassius, sir... I don’t really know. I just felt...” Cecil stuttered.

“You can cut the ‘sir’ business. Spit it out.”

Cecil felt weak in the knees. “I don’t know why I’m here. To say plainly, I feel like shit. I spent the last few days hearing about everything that has been done. I’ve been a part of this for many months, and have had stakes in it for much longer, but now I’ve been left behind. I just wish I could make things all better again, and continue to work here.” Cecil let out a wavering sigh.

“Well ain’t that a surprise,” Cassius sneered. “You *have* indeed been an integral part to all this; and as much as I would like to keep you around, in this state you’d be a liability. I know Agrippa informed you that you were getting shipped out. You should have been long gone by now, but the meteor shower delayed the launch. As soon as a launch is clear you’re going to be headed home. You’ll get better medical care and a place where you can be useful again.” Cecil heard footsteps approach him. A heavy hand rested on his shoulder. “This is for you; Ruiz. Now I’m sorry I can’t chat longer, son.” Cecil cringed slightly at the use of the word ‘son.’ He could feel the commander’s hot breath on his face. “I need to keep this place in order, especially with the new installation creating new issues for us all the time. Now, I’m sure the

guys back in the crew quarters want to see you. Go on.” The large hand on his shoulder gave a firm squeeze, and pushed him to turn him in the direction of the door.

Cecil stood unable to move for a moment, feeling forcefully ejected from the room. The door closed quietly behind him as he stood there dumbfounded. Cecil considered heading back to the medical ward, but turned the other direction instead. He had become annoyed at the pity and around-the-clock doting of the nurses who didn’t know any better. The image of his tiny bottom bunk suddenly appeared in his mind, such a place that had brought him comfort after a long day of work.

He clumsily slid his hand along the wall. Under his feet he began to feel the worn down areas of the corridor of the more active areas of the base; between the sleeping quarters, the bathrooms and out to the hangar and labs. He came to a corner that he seemed to remember always passing, right before heading into the quarters. He took a few unguided steps forward and reached out. The door frame greeted his fingertips.

The door was slightly ajar as usual; left open a crack so people could come and go without disturbing those who were sleeping. As he stepped inside he heard the regular breathing of people asleep in their bunks. Cecil figured most people were sleeping in between shifts and nobody would be awake for a few hours. He felt along the bunks to the third one where he remembered his bed being. He plopped down on the rough blanket. The bed was made just as he had left it, almost three months ago; although for Cecil it felt like only a few days. There was a folded piece of paper on his pillow, a letter. He would have someone read it to him later when one of them was awake. He shoved it under his pillow.

Cecil lay down on top of the covers. The feeling of the cramped bunk was nostalgic and somewhat comforting. He slowly felt himself drift off to sleep.

Letter

Cecil awoke to a buzzing in his ears and a feeling he hadn't properly had for what felt like forever; an appetite. The room seemed to be illuminated. He sat up with a grunt.

"Hey guys, guess who's up?" An excited shout came from nearby.

Cecil adjusted himself on the bed and heard footsteps scuttling towards him.

"You disappear for months then one day we come back to see you here asleep in bed. We thought we were looking at a ghost."

"Is that really you Ruiz?" Said another "You look... worse for wear, but nevertheless still good old Cecil."

Cecil groggily nudged the small group away from his bunk so he could stand. He held on to the top bed frame for balance. He mustered up a small laugh. "I'm alive, I guess." He felt an overly ambitious pat on his back.

The room slowly went silent.

"So what's next for you, Ruiz? That ship is preparing to leave soon, rumor is that you're... leaving."

There were a few sounds of agreement. Cecil remained silent and kept his head down.

Another spoke up. "I heard Cassius was pissed when he heard one of our engineers would be out, even more when someone mentioned that he wouldn't be returning for duty. That can't be you, Cecil; or else you wouldn't be back here, right?"

“No. No, I’m done. Cassius told me yesterday, I’m a liability.” Cecil continued to look downwards, shaking his head. “I’m just here to give my farewells.”

The room was silent once more. Someone finally broke the silence.

“Well, we can’t have Cecil’s last memory of this place just him feeling sorry for himself. Let’s get some food and tell him some of the stories from all the time he’s been away.”

A few grunted in agreement. “Cecil?” someone said, nudging him out of his trance.

He nodded emphatically. “Sounds great, I’m starving.” He tried his best to put on a smile.

The group filed out of the room, guiding Cecil along. There was some chatter among the men, but Cecil filtered it out. All of the voices sounded remotely familiar, but he never had much of a chance to talk with them outside of meals.

“The harvest this time has at least 50% more flavor they say”

“What does that even mean? Flavor isn’t just something you can quantify like that.”

The clatter of the dining hall drew closer. Cecil continued to be dragged along, through the line to grab food. The cold, smooth food tray was put into his hands, and then laden down with whatever food they chose to slop onto it. Like usual there was no discernible smell.

Cecil was once again lead along to a table, where he took seat. He could hear some conversation sent in his direction, but he ignored it and started shoveling food into his mouth. The rubbery slab of sustenance tasted slightly more like eggs than he remembered. The rest of the meal was inhaled in due order.

With a full stomach Cecil started thinking clearly again. His legs felt stronger than before and the headache to which he had become accustomed began to fade away. Cecil cleared his throat loudly. The conversation was put on hold.

“I know as a group, none of us are very close, but thank you for welcoming me back like friends. That means a lot to me.”

The person next to him grabbed his shoulders playfully and shook him back and forth.

“This place sucks anyways; you’ll get on much better closer to home.”

People started to clatter their trays around and prepare themselves to leave. Cecil waited until someone grabbed his shoulder to follow them out.

Cecil heard the others discussing plans for the day on the way back to the quarters. They entered and Cecil found his way back to his bunk where he plopped down lazily. He had a sudden moment of realization. “Oh yeah,” Cecil exclaimed. The others went silent. He fished under his pillow and found the note that had become slightly crumpled. “I found this on my bed when I came back earlier. Could anyone read it?”

Cecil held up the note and it was pulled from his fingers. “Is aloud alright?”

Cecil nodded. “I can’t imagine what it could be about though. Can’t hurt, I guess.” He heard the paper rustle as it was unfolded. The reader swallowed loudly.

“To: Cecil Ruiz

We regret to inform you of the passing of your mother, a Mrs. Maria Ruiz. We offer our condolences in the time of your loss.”

The cold, brief message rung in his ears. He felt a knot form in his throat.

“Oh Christ. Cecil... I don’t know what to say.” Cecil didn’t respond. He hung his head down at the ground.

His chest shuddered as he tried to draw in a deep breath. “Mother...,” he whimpered. He swallowed hard. His eyes burnt and nose prickled uncomfortably. He slipped off the bunk and landed on his knees with a loud clunk. He buckled over and planted his hands on the ground; the hard impact sent a jolt of pain up from his wrists. His stomach gurgled and twisted. Before he could restrain himself, his stomach proceeded to release its contents onto the floor in convulsions that made his back arch. He finally collapsed into the puddle, unconscious.

Rebuilding

Cecil awoke, reposed in a familiar position. He tried to prop himself up with his arm, only to discover an IV lodged once again in his vein. He twisted around and pushed himself to sit on the side of the bed. He felt he was now wearing another hospital gown.

“You’re up? Good.” A man’s voice came sternly from across the room.

“Nurse?” Cecil said faintly.

“That’s me.” The same voice again. “You go without eating proper solid food for months, and you expect you can scarf down a bunch of crap just like that? What are you, a kid at an amusement park?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never been to an amusement park.” Cecil explained calmly.

“What, your parents didn’t love you?” The nurse said sarcastically. The hair on Cecil’s neck stood up. He silently wished the other nurse was there.

He continued without skipping a beat. “That IV is just for fluids. You’re dehydrated and your blood sugar is pretty low. I think you’ll make it though.” The nurse’s footsteps came

towards him and his arm was grabbed up roughly. He ungracefully wrapped it in a blood pressure gauge and gave it a few good squeezes. Cecil felt it tighten and release.

“Your blood pressure is back to normal, if not a bit high.” Cecil ground his teeth. The Velcro of the cuff ripped open loudly as he removed it from Cecil’s arm. “Once you feel good enough, you can take out the IV yourself and leave. Just clamp it up so it doesn’t drip everywhere. Oh yeah, here’s a change of uniform, the one you came in had vomit all over it.” He felt the set of clothes be plopped down on the foot of his bed. “Be sure to thank those guys who brought you in, they are probably still cleaning it up right now.”

“Yeah, sure.” Cecil said coldly.

Cecil sat there quietly and thought about what the letter said. He remembered Agrippa vaguely trying to mention his mother after he had woken up. He wondered if the nurse who took down his letter for him knew and was humoring him. Cecil thought about crying but didn’t want to give the nurse any more chances to pick on him. He exhaled a long, shuddering breath. His mind jumped around to various scenarios. How did she die? Who was taking care of her things? How long ago did it happen? Did she learn about the accident? He stopped and blocked them out of his mind.

Cecil calmly removed the tape from the IV needle and slid it carefully out of his arm with a sharp pain. He gritted his teeth. He pressed his thumb onto the spot hard to keep it from bleeding. Pushing himself off the bed, he planted his feet on the ground. His knees felt slightly weak and threatened to give way but he stood strong. He slid off his hospital gown and grabbed the jumpsuit, stepping into it and pulling it up over his shoulders. The zipper gave a

satisfying rip as he pulled it up to his neck. Without saying anything he walked to the door, opened it, and headed down the hallway towards mission control.

A large ruckus signaled to Cecil that he was close. Even outside the door he heard the Commander on a tirade. The door slid open and he was able to hear another voice. Cassius was in a yelling match with someone over the communications. He pondered how many people out on shift were having their eardrums shattered.

Cecil considered stepping out, but it was too late. "RUIZ, what the *fuck* are you doing here?" Cassius screamed.

Cecil put his hand in front of the door to keep it from sliding closed, just in case he had to make a quick escape. "Did you know about my mother?" He announced boldly.

"That is a non-issue Ruiz. You would have been debriefed, now get out!" Cecil could hear him seething.

"It's an issue to me. You didn't even tell me when I was here yesterday."

"Well I don't give a shit."

"Don't ignore us, please." The voice came over communications again. It lacked any tone sounding remotely patient.

"I'm telling you, anyone over here who could lend help is currently making repairs on the transport ship. It needs to be able to get off the planet ASAP; your issue can wait a couple of days *at the least*."

"And I'm telling you if we don't get the system up and running soon, we're going to have to finish it all up on solar. We're almost through all of our rationed fuel for the generators. You

can't even begin to comprehend how much longer that would take." Cassius stomped around upon being belittled.

Cecil let go of the door and stepped inside. It whooshed closed behind him. "Are you talking about the experimental Carbon Dioxide geothermal generators?"

Cassius grunted. The voice over communications came back on. "Who is this? What do you know about the system?"

"I'm an engineer from B-Block. We put together the turbine for that system; that's what you're using I assume. I've looked over the designs more times than I can count. It's fascinating to me. I know the plans forwards and backwards," Cecil went on emphatically.

"Commander, I want that man over here, now."

"God damn," he growled. He directed his attention at Cecil. "If you go there, there's no way you can make it onto the ship home. It will be another several months at least, and by that time your sight may be permanently irreparable. You know what you're getting yourself into, right?"

"There's nothing for me at home now. I can do more here without my eyes than I could ever do on Earth with all of my five senses."

"Then get you ugly mug over to the airlock hanger. I'll call a few people that we can get over there." Cecil thought for a split second that he would be heading back to where the pool was located. There was a small shiver up his spine.

Airtight

A small group of people swarmed Cecil as they helped him into his space suit. Someone grabbed at his limbs ungraciously trying to force them into their respective holes in the suit. A

heavy oxygen tank was strapped to his back; his knees almost buckling under the weight. The air mask and helmet were placed on his head; he took in the smell and felt rush of air into the breathing apparatus. The musky sweet scent of the bottled air felt strangely invigorating.

Cecil was lead onto one of the rovers where he was strapped more or less helplessly to the back. He felt a heavy tap on his helmet from the person in the front seat. The rover started to rumble as the engine was turned over.

The vehicle rolled slowly into the oversized airlock. As the atmosphere was pumped out Cecil felt the pressure surrounding his suit change. He breathed deeply from his mask. The well-used plastic and cheap velour of the mask rubbed against the tender skin around his nose and face.

The rover rolled over the threshold of the compound and into the Martian landscape. Cecil's ears plugged up with the change in pressure, and a he could hear a faint ringing. Popping his jaw caused a sickening release as the pressure in his ears equalized, leaving a cold, empty feeling behind. He shook his head to clear his mind and the ringing seemed to stop.

Strapped to the back of the rover going over the rocky terrain caused Cecil to be jostled around like a ship on re-entry. A familiar feeling crept up in Cecil's stomach. Breathing deeply from the now stale-tasting air did little for the empty feeling in his gut. He grabbed on tightly to the hand hold and stiffened his body to lessen how much he was flailed.

The ground leveled out a bit and Cecil became aware of how silent it was, save the sound of his breathing and his ears brushing up against the inside of the helmet. Not even the buzz of the communications radio was present. He knew there were two others in the front seat not inches from him, but he felt completely alone.

He could feel the rumble of the rover's engine throughout the seat, but it made no sound. The heat exchanger in his suit pushed around cool water in tubes sewed into the lining. For a moment he felt like he could feel the rushing of liquid through them. He felt detached from the rest of reality, and was unsure if he was experiencing peace or terror.

Cecil was knocked out of his day dream as the rover started to climb an incline and he was threatened to be thrown off the seat. The harness held him tight, but he took a firm grasp on to the hand hold nonetheless.

They seemed to continue to ascend for eternity. Cecil's hand was sore and his shoulder ached. The vehicle finally slowed to a halt on a flat area. He took his hand off the railing and shook it around. A tap on his shoulder from the front seat alerted him to disengage. The carabineer fastening him to the vehicle was unwieldy with his gloved hand, but after much fumbling he felt the sharp click of it releasing. He stood up and stretched his legs once again on the Martian surface.

A hand grabbed his and placed in on his shoulder. He helplessly followed in tow behind. Cecil felt the faint rumbling in his boots of the rover turning around and driving off. The person in front of him didn't seem to react.

Cecil's boots met the slick surface of metal plating that contrasted with the rough ground. There was a gentle feeling of suction that followed an airlock being opened. Cecil continued to hang on to the person leading him inside. Jets of air blasted his suit to remove any dust and other particles. The pressure engulfed his body and he felt slightly better. The inner set of doors opened and he reached for the seal on his helmet.

There was a quick whoosh of air as he removed his helmet. He was met with warm, dry air entering his lungs. He swallowed hard; the back of his throat was equally. The helmet dangled from the fingers in his still sore hand, as he rested the other against the wall. He heard the other man with him disengage his helmets in the same fashion.

“Welcome to ‘Secundus,’ boys.” A man’s voice came clear through the air. “I’m overseeing operations here, the name’s Aetius. We’ve got a lot of work. Watch your step there.”

Cecil switched his helmet to the other hand and pushed himself away from the wall. He reached out his arm searching for the person who had accompanied him. His hand grasped the air causing him to clumsily shuffled forward, stumbling as his boots met the edge of a panel in the floor.

A pair of arms caught him. “What did I just say?” Aetius spat in his face.

Cecil regained his footing and turned his face upwards toward the voice. There was a slight gasp.

“You’re shitting me... you’re the one they sent?” There was an air of skepticism in his voice. “You’re Ruiz, huh? I thought I was going crazy, hearing that name over the radio. ‘We got an engineer named ‘Ruiz’ they said.’”

“In the Flesh,” Cecil said roughly.

“I think you were still out of it when I was sent over here. I figured you would have been shipped off by now.” He paused, his footsteps circling the room. “Well damn, what do they expect me to do with you?” His tone became agitated. “Can you even work? You’re blind

as a bat, or so I've been told? Cassius said we were getting the most capable person he knew, not some invalid."

Cecil attempted to react to the rapid fire of questions. "I know I can be of use to you, just give me a chance." He replied unenergetically.

"Yeah and how do I know you're not going to end up hurting yourself down here again?" He raised his voice.

The sound of someone loudly clearing their throat came from beside Cecil. "This project will go nowhere with that kind of talk." Cecil heard a familiar voice that made him turn around to face it involuntarily.

"Agrippa?"

"I guess they forgot to activate the radio inside your helmet in the rush to get us over here. Well, I never expected to be back here again, especially with you in tow, Cecil," said Agrippa, exasperated.

"You seem to know this guy. Do you think he can help us at all, buddy?" Aetius interrupted.

"Ruiz is one of the best engineers we've got. He knows the plans from top to bottom. Commander Cassius sent me in his stead to make sure it all goes together as planned as well. Now you're going to show us down there and we're going to get to work."

He exhaled loudly out of his nose. "Well, let's hope you don't end up more trouble than you're worth. Let's get you prepped."

Cecil felt a heavy hand on his shoulder that pushed him along. Agrippa moved in close behind his back and spoke lowly. "I don't know if you know what they say you know. But that's

the least of my worries. I'm worried this place is going to get to you. Do you think you can handle it?" Cecil nodded uncomfortably.

"Try to keep up you two; we have people waiting on us." Aetius shouted from ahead.

Cecil and Agrippa followed him deeper into the first level where they got a storage room. With some help, they stripped down out of their suits and changed into coveralls and boots. Aetius spoke up again. "Most of the facility is underground. This area is known for big dust storms, so we didn't want to risk it. There was a good amount of room down below anyways. There's a big lift that leads down the shaft that you guys found, straight from the surface down to that big chamber.

Cecil grabbed onto Agrippa's shoulder. He felt a cool breeze coming up through the floor grate. They continued into the center of the room where Cecil could hear the low hum of a generator. There was a loud, ungraceful scrape of metal on metal as the doors to the lift opened. Cecil allowed himself to be guided onto the questionable device that lead down to the cold depths of the cavern. He thought briefly of the pool.

"What's with that face, Ruiz? I mean, that expression, sorry."

"Just call me Cecil. I'm not entirely comfortable with this, any of this, but I know there's a job to do."

"Cecil, huh. Now that name rings a bell, I've heard from Cassius about you. I'm sorry for judging too quickly." Cecil wasn't entirely sure he sounded completely ready to accommodate him. The lift doors scraped closed and the lift started to descend.

Cecil's stomach jumped slightly as they went down. Aetius continued to prattle on. "All of the CO₂ systems are set up and the holes are drilled, but the turbine is still causing us trouble.

We brought it over a whole ago and we just got them installed, but we can't get them to do shit. I'm pretty sure being in storage for God knows how long took a toll on them."

"That's something I can do. I've worked on machines just like those turbines. I could do it with my eyes closed if you know what I mean." Cecil said blatantly. Aetius grunted in an unimpressed manor.

"I've worked some of the geological data down here, but that's the extent of my knowledge." Said Agrippa. "Mind getting me up to speed on all this jargon?"

"And you're supposed to keep us all in line?" Aetius grunted.

"It's quite simple. We pump liquid down into the rock under pressure, and the heat from the ground turns it back into a gaseous state that powers turbines." Cecil explained. "On Earth systems like this use water, but we don't exactly have a lot of it floating around here, so we're using Carbon Dioxide."

"Supercritical Carbon Dioxide. It's pressurized to over a thousand psi, and in addition can corrode various metals. If you don't take proper precautions, it's catastrophic. Thankfully that step is taken care of. Now we're down to the little things, in matter of speaking." Aetius explained in an animated manor, talking even over the clamor of the lift. "But it runs a lot more efficient, and like Ruiz- Cecil said, is more appropriate for this environment."

Agrippa let out a dumbfounded 'hum.'

The lift jerked to a halt. The air felt cold. The hairs on Cecil's arms stood up and brushed against the sleeves of his jumpsuit. The doors scraped open once again.

"This is where we operate. There was a lot of space down here already, but we did some blasting to clear out some room." Cecil imagined Aetius demonstrating flamboyantly.

A strong grip grasped Cecil's wrist and pulled him out onto the grated floor, and off after Aetius's voice that kept on.

"Over that way is the magma chamber that you guys ran into. We didn't bother to seal it off; you need a suit on anyways, the heat is pretty killer to say the least." Cecil felt his face prickling. "We took down some walls here and there; enough to make room for the CO₂ tanks and turbines. Over this way are the crew quarters, if you want to go as far as to call it that."

"I'm guessing this isn't some five-star place with a restaurant and latrine then?"

"Heh, we're roughing it out here," laughed Aetius. "We have some MRE's- I hope you like dehydrated spaghetti. As for the second one- well, there's a few buckets that get some use."

Cecil cringed at the idea, but after using a bedpan for several days it didn't seem like much of a stretch. He perked up as he heard voices faintly echo in the distance. Agrippa shouted ahead.

"Grab the project managers. We've got new hands down here and we could go for a new plan of action. No more crap."

Manpower

Cecil leaned uncomfortably against the rough wall. There were several sets of footsteps as the few men came in one by one. There was some whispering but Cecil couldn't pick out anything specific.

"Alright then," Aetius's voice echoed around the room. "We've received a bit of help from the main base. Two hands, to be exact. Now I know we would have benefited from more-

He was interrupted by many of the people mumbling loudly to each other. Agrippa cleared his throat loudly and the voices died down.

“I understand I’m cutting into our precious time here, but up until now we haven’t seen the results we’ve been expecting. If we don’t get this done on time, you can all expect to see more work down in this awful place.” His voice boomed over the now silent group. “Some of you probably know Cecil Ruiz here. For anyone working getting the turbines up and working, he is now your boss. Everyone else is under Aetius and me making sure the wellheads and pumps are fitted and ready to be tested when we say.”

Cecil picked himself up against the wall. He felt a wave of discomfort come over here. There were more murmurs seeming to be directed at him.

“Ruiz knows the system just as much or more than all of you so don’t hesitate to ask him for direction. For now, that’s all you need to know. Now, everyone back to your positions!”

Cecil stood off in the corner. He felt a sudden burden, as well as a loss of where to go. He jumped as Agrippa seemingly appeared in front of him.

“Listen, I can’t be here to baby sit. However, I want you to make sure your safety comes first. I don’t want you freaking out and getting hurt again. Here’s a radio I borrowed- the regular comms don’t work down here. Don’t hesitate to use it to contact me.”

“Hey, quit hogging Ruiz,” came a call from across the room. Agrippa patted him heavily on the arm and walked off. Someone else came out of nowhere to grab him.

“Ruiz, is it? I don’t know if you can help, but we’ve been wracking our brains trying to get this working. Follow us.” Cecil felt himself being grabbed and pulled off once again.

The excited voice continued on as he was pushed along down a cold tunnel. "Watch your step- right there; we've got an exposed pipe. Hey- how did you get those... uh, scars Ruiz?"

"Down here," replied Cecil, sheepishly. "Just call me Cecil, by the way."

The pushing from behind him stopped. "I thought it was true but I couldn't bring myself to believe. You're the unlucky guy who got injured and ended in the med bay in a coma for all those months. Whenever someone visited there they mentioned someone unconscious in bed, covered in bandages; unrecognizable. That was... you. Most of us have been down here for weeks now, so we didn't know they- you had woken up. It's weird, like seeing a ghost. You're blind then? Can you really help us?"

"I want to say I can. It's my only wish to be useful. But I don't know if that's a possibility. Just a couple days ago I could barely stand on my own. At the very least I know the system. I can't get my hands on it myself, but I can lend as much of my knowledge as I can."

"I guess the only thing we can do it try. Also, I want to apologize for pushing you along. The name's Martin. I would be the project manager for this area, but I think I may have to pass that honor to you."

Martin lead him along, slightly more gently, down the tunnel. Cecil's legs ached; it seemed to stretch on forever. A couple silent minutes passed when Martin finally slowed down. Cecil felt warm. He wafted the collar of his coveralls back and forth. It cooled him down a bit, but he realized the area was overall hotter than the other sections of the tunnel.

"We're passing the condenser, but as of now it's just sitting there," Marin explained. "We've also got the wellhead sealed and the valves installed, but in between the two we have a dead freaking turbine generator just sitting there."

Cecil stepped carefully around the rough ground. There were patches where concrete had been laid, but the rest was bare rock. He heard the clamor of others working. There was a faint whistle of a pressure release valve venting. Someone bushed against his shoulders to squeeze behind him. The room smelt of grease, sweat, and the burning of metal from welding.

“I remember... it got shipped here from Earth- in pieces. I was there when we got it assembled. We had thought we were closer to finding a permanent installment for it, but it just sat there for months. Let me guess, you got to work on it after it came over here and you got nothing?”

“That’s right. The bearings are probably all frozen, that’s what we’re thinking.” There were a few sounds of agreement from around him.

“Then let’s open it up,” said Cecil, matter-of-factly.

“That’s the problem. It came down here in one big piece, and we expected it to be ready to have the rest of the system built around it. Well, you know how that turned out.”

Cecil drew on his memory to when he studied the plans, so many nights before he fell asleep. He remembered getting all the parts in big aluminum crates and putting it together like a big erector set. He remembered tightening bolts until his arm was sore, and nearly cutting himself on rotor blades multiple times trying to get deep into the machinery. Cecil took a deep breath and spoke up.

“Alright everyone, we need to get this thing stripped down and find out what our issue is. Now this is a two-flow rotor. I assume everyone knows what bearings might look like on a machine like this. There’s two rings of them on either side. Start by removing the casing on one side. It’s symmetrical so either way works.” Cecil felt a few people gathered around him

listening. He felt awkward delivering orders, especially with no way to judge how they were being received. “Um, go!” he cheered half-heartedly.

There was a lot of commotion of people banging away and giving out directions. Cecil tried his best describing how he remembered parts going on and fitting together, guiding the workers to the parts that they needed to get at. Cecil felt like grabbing a tool and jumping in but figured it would be of little consequence. He stood against the wall to try to get out of the way.

Martin came to him soon enough. “We’re down to the inner frame around the main shaft on one side. We were right; the bearings are all gummed up and the grease has all flown to the bottom.”

“Good. Well, not good,” Cecil stammered. “Make sure the other side gets help getting it stripped down as well.”

“Right. What do you suppose we do about getting the bearings cleaned off? It’s not like we can just hoist a thousand pound turbine drum off the bearings and clean them.”

“Get a propane torch. We can melt off the old grease. It’s something I learned from my Dad in his shop.” Cecil tried to hide his grin.

Shortly after, Cecil heard the clicking of flint and the distinct sound of a torch catching fire. The room started to fill with the smell of burning machine grease. Cecil held his sleeve to his face.

Cecil was updated that both sides had been cleaned out.

“Good, now smear them with new grease the best you can.” Cecil confidently shouted out the orders. “Anyone who can get their hands on some gloves, get ready to attempt to spin the whole drum. Don’t get cut by the blades.”

Everyone who had been working on other things were now focused on the turbine. There was a loud “heave-ho” as the group of men attempted to spin the turbine with manpower alone.

“Get more grease in those bearings, it’s not spread evenly enough.”

There was more commotion, and another countdown followed by grunts and shouts. Cecil heard the loud rumbling of bearings and the light breeze of the turbine blades.

“We did it, Cecil!” shouted Martin. He came close and patted Cecil on the shoulder.

“You guys did it, not me. What’s next?”

“We can put the turbine back together, but other than that and a few plumbing things, this baby is good to go.”

Cecil felt a warmth in his core. He remembered the radio that he had stuck in his pocket. He grabbed for it and shushed the group.

Cecil clicked in the talk button and took a deep breath. “This is Ruiz. We’ve got the turbine up and running.”

The button clicked loudly as he let go. The silence persisted for a few seconds.

“Copy. Good job everyone. Good job, Cecil. Feel free to call it a day.”

Cecil felt somewhat proud, and once again tried to suppress his grin. Martin jabbed him with his elbow playfully. He grabbed his wrist and guided him out of the room.

“So you guys don’t sleep in shifts here?” Cecil asked as he was lead back down the long tunnel.

“Back over there, having everyone awake and trying to accomplish all their duties at the same time would just cause a huge mess. Tensions get high enough. With our small groups down here, we’ve learned to work properly as a team; everyone depends on everybody else all the time. Don’t feel bad that you need help from somebody to help you get around; after all you’ve helped us so much in the short time you’ve been here.

“I could talk with people over there, but I felt I could never connect with many of them.” Cecil said in a melancholy manner. The tunnel got cooler and Cecil realized just how fatigued he was. Martin eventually pulled him to a stop.

“Well, also unlike that place, we have plenty of time to sit back and nurture proper relationships. We turn off the lights for a good portion of the night to save energy, so people often stay up and chat in the dark. I can’t imagine the lack of light would bother you though.

Anyways, here’s the sleeping quarters. Let’s hope someone thought far enough ahead to arrange a cot for you and the other guy.”

More people filed in slowly after them. One of the voices Cecil had heard working on the turbine spoke up. “He can have mine if there’s no space. He looks like he’s been through enough hell.” He laughed loudly.

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I guess.” Cecil said tiredly. He responded with another laugh.

Cecil eventually found his way to a makeshift bed and was handed a packet which he tore open to reveal something that smelled remotely like food. He munched quietly on the pasty substance, and then collapsed onto the bed and fell fast asleep.

Contact

Cecil stirred. Exhaustion still held on to his body. His mouth was parched. The room was sweltering and he was covered once again in sweat. He heard the faint snoring and regular breathing of people sleeping around him. He sat up and got to his feet, being careful not to crash into anyone else's cot.

He made his way to the side of the room; the wall was bare rock. Tracing his way along the wall he found the way out of the room. Outside he felt relieved to find it was much cooler. He unzipped his coveralls down to his waist and let the top drape down. His undershirt clung to his back, moist from his sweat.

In the stillness of the tunnel he could feel a warm humming between the sounds of his footsteps on the floor grate. There was a faint hum in the air, like Cecil had felt before. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination or not; it was much more calm and faint than he had felt previously. His boots traced the parallel lines of the struts in the floor grate, heading aimlessly down the hallway.

He held his arm out, his fingers dragging across the wall to keep his bearings. The temperature continued to drop. The wall he was following seemed to bow out into a larger room. He felt the same sensation as he did when he arrived down in the tunnels; his arm hair standing on end. He stopped dead in his tracks. He knew where he was.

Allowing himself to stray from the false sense of security the wall provided, he drifted towards the center of the room. A hand railing met him, which he felt continue around in a circle. He took a deep breath and tried not to think about what had happened here before. A feeling of vertigo crept upon him once again as he remembered plunging into the pool. He

realized his hands were grasped tightly on the railing. He let go and took a few steps back. His legs felt shaky. He sat down on the grated floor cross legged and took a deep breath.

His nostrils flared as he took in the cool air. He quickly became aware of the calm humming that continued to ring in his ears. He felt at peace.

For the first time since being discharged from the medical bay he felt like he could sit and think about everything that he had gone through. His mind returned to his mother.

He remembered her olive skin, the fine lines of her face, smiling as if to bid him farewell before finally being loaded onto the ship to leave the planet. It was then over 200 days of cryo-sleep later that he arrived on the planet. Two-hundred days of her waiting on an update that informed her that the ship had made its long trip safely. Then fifteen minutes for his few lines of text to reach back to Earth over radio waves.

Any personal responses from Earth were few and far between. He wondered how long it was into his coma that she had passed, if she knew she was dying, and if she ever tried to let him know.

A lump formed in his throat and his nose tingled slightly. He swallowed hard. There was a distinct burning in the back of his eye sockets.

“Cecil.”

A voice flooded into his mind.

His head shot up. “Mother?” He mouthed.

“I feel you. A familiar feel.” The voice seemed to come from all around.

“Who’s there?” He shouted. His voice echoed against the hard walls.

He listened quietly. There were no footsteps; no movement. The only sound he could hear was the acute pounding of his heart.

“I have wanted once more to make contact.”

“Who are you? What are you?” Cecil swung his head around trying to determine where the voice had come from.

“I am me.”

“I don’t understand.” Cecil stood up. His legs were still wavering. The voice invaded his senses like the constant humming that he had become accustomed to over the last few days.

“Understand. I don’t understand as well. I want to understand.”

Cecil covered his ears. He could hear himself breathing. The humming reverberated in a similar fashion. It made his head ache and pulse.

“I don’t know if this is real.” Cecil clawed at the sides of his head.

“I feel you, do you not feel me?”

Cecil’s legs gave way and he collapsed to the floor. He sprawled out uncomfortably on the grate.

“I don’t know what I’m feeling. I don’t feel okay. This isn’t real. You’re not real. You’re in my head.”

He placed his head in his hands and rubbed his temples. He breathed in sharply. Dizziness overtook him.

clunk

—

Cecil awoke to being shaken vigorously. He sat up stiffly. The pattern of the grate had imbedded itself in his arm.

“You alright?” Came a voice above him.

“Thirsty.” Cecil uttered groggily.

“Did you wander out here looking for something to drink? You should have woken someone up.”

“Agrippa?”

“Yeah, let’s get you up.” He said, grabbing Cecil by the arm. He weakly rose to his feet.

Cecil stumbled along with Agrippa behind him back in the direction of the sleeping area. Agrippa sat him down on a cot and handed him a metal jug. Cecil unscrewed the top and chugged down the cool liquid.

“We got him.” A radio nearby echoed his voice.

“When we woke up your cot was empty, was assumed the worst. You know, a blind man wandering around unmarked tunnels that lack most of the basic safety measures.”

Cecil held his stomach, that the big gulps he took now sloshed around uncomfortably. Agrippa got down close to him and spoke in a low voice.

“I know you’re not okay. You’re liable for post-traumatic stress, and this place isn’t going to help. It was brave of you to come back here so you could lend help. After the target we were able to reach yesterday thanks to you I’m sure we can finish in time. I just want to let you know the supply ship heading back to Earth hasn’t left yet. It lifts off in about 10 hours. If you want-“

“No” Cecil interrupted him impulsively. He faintly recalled the voice he had heard the night before.

Agrippa stepped back. Cecil heard him sit down on the cot across from him.

“What do you mean ‘no’? You’re really out of it Cecil.”

“To be honest, I don’t know. I’m... hearing things. Voices.”

“In your head? Or were you dreaming? Could you understand them; what did they say?”

Cecil thought for a moment. “I... I don’t know. I remember waking up and wandering out there, right there in the same place you found me. That’s when I felt it; heard it. It’s like it spoke to me, but it felt like it was inside of my head. It wasn’t the first time I’ve felt like something was trying to contact me either.

Agrippa let out a pensive hum. “This isn’t something to be taken lightly, Cecil. Hearing voices isn’t something that is *normal*, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve lost it. I’ll ask around if anyone has had the same experience, or felt anything. For now, you get some rest. I’ll leave a ration here on the cot for when you wake up.”

Cecil wanted to respond but he felt too exhausted. He laid back and quickly fell asleep.

Interest

Cecil sat up with a jolt. The room seemed to be lit, and there were people stirring.

“Oh, you’re awake?” Came Agrippa’s surprised voice.

Cecil let out a weak groan. “I... had a bad dream.”

“Was it... the voices again?” He sounded slightly concerned. Cecil felt him place a ration in his hand.

“No... just your regular old nightmare.” He laughed weakly. The hair on his arms stood on end, a shiver made its way up his back. He pulled his coveralls up over his shoulders and pulled the zipper up.

“Want to tell me about it?” Agrippa said, through chewing sounds.

“It’s a recurring dream I get, from something that happened when I was a kid.” Cecil paused. “I’m not sure you would care. What time is it?” He unwrapped the ration and started to nibble on it.

“The work is already over for the day. I could have woken you, but I figured you needed your rest. Besides, we got the most important part of it done yesterday. We only need to hook the generators into the batteries and grid down here, and we’re set.”

Cecil continued to bite off bits of the borderline stale food bar. “I wonder what’s next for me?” he pondered out loud.

“We will always have use for someone with your abilities, Cecil, just as long as you keep it together. Hear any more voices?”

Cecil shoved the last chunk in his mouth and pushed himself up. “No... I don’t know.” Cecil stretched his arms above his head. “It’s too warm in here still. I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Want me to come with?”

“I’ll be fine”

“I suppose you will. We’re turning in soon; many of them haven’t had the luxury of full nights of rest for quite a while.”

Cecil ignored him as he guided himself out of the room. He followed the same path as the previous night. The floor creaked slightly under his every step. He soon approached the

same zone of cool air as before. Apart from his footsteps it was deathly silent. His knees started to quiver. He felt a weird anticipation waiting for the voice again.

Cecil tried to remember what he thought it sounded like. It wasn't a voice he had heard before. It seemed like it bypassed all of his regular senses and entered straight into his brain. He couldn't recall the exact tone. A mental image of his mother appeared in his mind. He could see her mouthing words, but he could not draw upon the sound of her voice. His heart sank.

The room was still. There was nothing, not even the humming. He calmly sat down on the grated floor and took a deep breath. One minute passed. Cecil tried to block out any thought besides the sound of his regular breathing.

Time seemed to tick away in isolation from the rest of space. His breath tickled slightly as it whooshed out of his nose. The cool air felt good on his face. He had become acutely aware that the skin on his face emitted faint warmth, like a sunburn. The air in the room was a pleasant break from the sensation.

More time passed. Cecil started to feel drowsy, and shook himself to attention.

"Cecil."

Cecil didn't move or respond.

"Cecil."

"Why me? What do you want with me? I can't bear this." He shot to his feet.

"My first contact with you was when you fell in. At that time I was not properly attuned to such an acute sensation. I was jolted. I felt your ripples and tried to respond in a

similar way. It had no effect and I tried to increase the resonance. That's when you made full contact; I became attuned to you and how you feel. Now you have returned."

"I remember. It was the pool... but what does any of this mean?"

"I have a unique connection with you."

"I don't even know if you're real; like if you're just my memories and thoughts being rearranged in fucked-up ways. If you are real, how are you talking to me?" Cecil paced heavily. The grate below him bounced slightly under his weight.

"You interpret sounds by receiving vibrations through the air. I communicate and comprehend in a similar way. I have that unique connection with you because of your contact with what you call 'the pool'."

"What are you, an alien? Are you a part of the pool? How do you 'feel' me? None of this makes sense."

"Sense. That is what I do. I sense even the smallest of vibrations from all over. I sense the sound waves in the air here. I sense the electronic signals in your body, your nerves that make your body move. I sense many things, but understand less. I want you to help me understand."

"Like I said, *I don't* understand."

"I feel things that are new and strange. I felt you... many of you, many cycles ago. Many of you arrived. I sensed it. Still you were very far away and I could sense very little. I had to allow myself to feel far and wide to even get a remote understanding. Then you came closer. You, specifically. Like I said, I was surprised at your sudden contact, but it made me understand better than which had sensed before. It made me wish to experience more. More of you came,

but it wasn't you specifically. I could only sense you very far away, and very weakly. Those who came here were disruptive, and they did not stop. I tried to contact you, but I felt you were unable to respond. Then much later I sensed you near once again. That is now."

"Are you talking about us humans? There are many like me, why not talk to them?"

"The only true connection I have is with you. I know your memories and feelings; your pain, your sadness, and although I cannot understand some of them I can share the burden if you want to help me understand.

"Fuck you. You can't understand. I don't even understand. There are things in this universe that can't be explained even if you examine them at their simplest parts. The human brain is one such thing. No amount of introspection will help me forget that there is nothing left for me, neither here or on Earth. No voice in my head can give me peace of mind, especially if it seems to come out of nowhere. Give me some sign. Give me some reason to believe that I'm not just crazy."

There was a moment of silence. A small shiver ran up his neck. He heard a faint lapping sound, which he strained to listen for. It wasn't like the voice, the sound originated from the room.

"Cecil?" A voice came echoing from down one of the halls. It was Agrippa. Cecil felt the floor grate bounce up and down as his footsteps grew closer. "Thank god I didn't find you passed out again."

His hand reached out and grabbed Cecil's, pulling him to his feet. "I didn't really feel good about leaving you out here with no good way to get back." He stopped and moved away from Cecil. He let out a small gasp.

“That’s.... strange. The pool is... rippling. Like someone threw a stone into it. Did you do something?”

Cecil froze. He couldn’t think. Agrippa grabbed his hand and pulled him away quickly. The lapping sound of the pool sending ripples against the ground echoed in his mind.

Cecil continued his silence as he was pulled along halfheartedly. Agrippa spoke up.

“You weren’t talking with it again, right?”

“Mmm...”

“Cecil I’m serious. I heard you talking, but that’s it, no other voice responding.”

“It doesn’t have a voice. It’s hard to explain.”

“Regardless, I’m bringing you back to the main installment in the morning. I feel like you need a break from this place.”

Cecil grimaced. Agrippa lead them back to the sleeping quarters. “Try not to think about all this nonsense. You need some proper rest, and then tomorrow we can get this all sorted out.”

Cecil wanted to lash out but suppressed the urge and calmly sat down on his cot. He silently pondered the events that seemed to weave in and out of reality. He laid back and sleeplessly was engulfed by the thoughts and feelings that would not process in his brain. Agrippa began to snore lightly in the next cot over.

Psyche

Cecil was gently shaken awake. He felt achy and exhausted, like he had only managed an hour or two of sleep. He pushed himself up and his shoulders pushed back with a dull pain.

“Let’s get you back and freshened up to begin with. It will help you feel better.”

Agrippa spoke as he grabbed him under the shoulder. A feeling of indignation spread though Cecil against Agrippa for having him get up like a child before the school day. He held his tongue and went along with him down the cold hallway and into the clunky lift.

The lift lurched and jerked Cecil to attention. He pulled away from the hand that was still latched onto him and stood up straight. “Sorry to be so abrupt. Someone is bringing over a rover to bring us back, and we can’t keep them waiting.”

Cecil didn’t respond. The lift reached the top and the door slid open. With a little help from Agrippa and another worker Cecil slipped into his suit. He heard the beeps of the airlock ready to be opened and the sound of the seal on the door pulling away from the frame.

They stepped through the first set of doors. The slow change in air pressure was enough to make Cecil feel dizzy. The second set of doors whooshed open and they stepped out. Cecil was guided to a seat on the rover that had come to get him.

The ride back was the same bumpy, stomach-churning trip as before, with Cecil clinging to the handholds.

For a moment Cecil was unsure if the communications systems were neglected to be activated once again. Cecil pondered the silence for a bit before he began to hear indistinct humming coming from Agrippa’s channel.

“Hey.” Cecil blurted out.

“Yeah?”

“Never mind. Just checking.”

Agrippa went back to humming silently and continued the drive back.

Shortly enough he found himself back in the large airlock of the main base being de-suited.

“I’ve got to make some arrangements before we do anything. You go hit the showers, Cecil.” Agrippa said to him.

Cecil was lead to the shower room and had a towel and a clean jumpsuit and underwear thrown at him. He began to strip down silently.

The only sound in the room was a faint drip, and the air lacked its usual humid quality. He skidded his feet gently around the floor until his toes touched the outline of the floor drain. He reached up and touched the cold metal wall until he found his way to the knob. Pressing the button sent a spray of frigid water onto his head and down his back. Before barely having a chance to warm up it cut out, leaving him shivering in the middle of the floor.

Cecil searched the wall once again for the soap dispenser. Finding the spout he hit the switch depositing a small amount of the substance in his palm. He rubbed the soapy liquid between his hands and felt it lather lightly. He went for his face and head but hesitated. He tenderly reached for his scalp and started to massage in the soap. He felt the bristly hair that had just started to re-grow. His hairline was dotted with scar tissue that extended up from his forehead. He carefully traced his fingertips down his face and felt the bumpy scar tissue and skin grafts; parts of his temples, his eyelids, cheeks, and partway down his throat had suffered most of the damage. He felt like a badly made patchwork quilt.

The soap dripped down and found its way to the corner of his eye. The stinging sensation knocked him out of his haze. He quickly punched the knob of the shower a couple of times. The lukewarm water rushed over him and sent beads of suds down his face and body.

He halfheartedly scrubbed himself. The water hit his face, causing him to wince at the burning feeling it brought.

The water didn't last as long he remembered. The stream cut out and he remained there motionless. The air in the room began to feel like the cold metal under his feet. He finally pushed himself to move and grab his towel. Goose bumps popped up all over his body and he hurried to finish the job.

As he pulled on his underwear and jumpsuit, there was a knock on the door followed by the squeak of it opening up.

"Good, you're done?" Said Agrippa hastily. "Come with me."

Cecil grabbed his things and slipped out into the hall and chased after the sound of his loud footsteps. The footsteps suddenly stopped and Cecil ran into Agrippa's back.

"Sorry," said Agrippa timidly. "I don't want to do this, but I think it's best for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I talked to Cassius. About what you heard... what you thought you heard. Well, he wants to get you checked out. Like, a psychological evaluation."

"A what?" Said Cecil indignantly. His chest felt heavy. Agrippa grabbed him by the shoulder and started to lead him forward.

"I know that you're alright, and I know that you know as well." His voice had an aura of fake comfort. "They just want to ask you some questions. It should be fine... but you know what? Any talk about that thing you're hearing down there should probably be between you and I, alright."

Cecil pushed him off. “What do you mean? Are you saying I should lie to these people, just to make it seem like I’m alright in the head?” His shouts echoed through the hallway.

Agrippa shushed him. “You’re trying to rationalize having a conversation with someone- something that isn’t there; are you really right in the head yourself? Hearing voices is one thing, but trying to convince yourself that the voices are real, that the voices are communicating with you, that’s just too much.”

Cecil blanked. “Shit, I don’t know anymore...” he said solemnly. “I was thinking of my mother- what her voice sounded like. I can’t remember it, Agrippa. I heard that voice. I wanted to believe it was her. Then I imagined it was my psyche trying to make sense of all my emotions and feelings. Last night, it turned into something more tangible. I felt something intimate, like I wanted to confide in it. Even if you tell me so, I truly can’t tell if it’s real or fake.”

“You don’t have to shoulder all of these feelings on your own, let alone try to shove them on some imaginary friend. You have people you can talk to. Me, Markus, everyone down there at the site, even Cassius or Aetius. Let yourself confide in us. That whole project is going to succeed now in no small part from your involvement. I was woken up the other night to you writhing in your sleep. I know you’re not okay, that you’re not completely with us. Now, let’s bring you back.”

Cecil felt a small burning sensation on his cheek. The corner of his eye produced a drop of moisture which he stealthily tried to wipe away. His legs gave way and he dropped down, hitting his knees on the floor with a painful thud. Cecil sniffled and let out a weak laugh.

“Whoa, don’t break down on me just yet.” Agrippa grabbed him from under his arms and pulled him back to his feet.

“Sorry, I just...”

“I get it. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

Agrippa pushed him, along slowly. They stopped and he pushed ahead to activate the button for the door for them. Cecil was lead to a chair that seemed to be in the middle of the room. There was no other presence that he could sense.

“I guess they’re not here yet. I’m going to step outside for now.” The door slid closed after Agrippa exited.

Cecil sat silently. The newfound silence was strange and different. There was no buzzing, only the sound of his breathing, his heart beat, the sound of his clothes rubbing together. He shifted in the chair and one of the feet squeaked softly against the floor. He thought he could make out some commotion outside of the room.

A few seconds later the door slid open to Agrippa trying his best to talk someone down.

“This is something more important than your friend’s feelings!”

“Uhm...” Cecil tried to speak up.

“Tell me what you know about what’s down there.”

“What?”

Vibrations

“There isn’t anything,” said Cecil defensively.

“Cut the bullshit.” The feminine voice was strangely crass sounding.

There was a ruffle of papers and footsteps. “Stop, stop. Look, Cecil. I think you can tell her, this isn’t what I was expecting either.”

“This isn’t an evaluation? What is going on?” Cecil said, confused.

“My name is Tulia. I’m a scientist.” She grabbed Cecil’s limp hand and attempted to shake it. “There’s more to the caves down there than we know about, and I think you’re the key. Here.”

There was more messing with papers. A large ream of continuous paper was placed in his hands. It was hole-punched down both sides and the numerous folds held it in a neat stack. Fumbling with it caused much of it to end up trailing down to the ground.

“What does this look like to you?” Said Tulia.

“You realize he’s blind, right?” Agrippa spoke up.

“Err... right.” The paper was snatched from Cecil’s hands.

“It’s reading from our seismograph. Most of the time, I can just ignore it. Anyways, we started taking readings at Secundus, especially with all of the blasting and digging going on. Can’t risk anything, you know. The other night I noticed some activity that was more intense than what we usually see. Nothing to raise an alarm, but you pretty out of the ordinary. Didn’t really think much of it until I checked it again this morning and I saw a very similar reading around the same time.” She messed with more papers.

“Okay, what does that mean?” Said Agrippa, puzzled.

“Well, they’re too similar to be caused naturally. So I checked with command if any work was going on during that time. They told me, ‘no- everyone goes to sleep at the same time there. They were all asleep by then.’”

Agrippa spoke up. “Hold on. When did these occur?” More papers were fiddled with. “This is when... that’s way too much of a coincidence... but then...?” He trailed off.

“What are you thinking of, Agrippa?” Cecil said. He was strangely tense.

“These readings are from when you were out there... by the pool. Right here- remember last night when I came by to bring you back; the pool was rippling. That must be that big spike right here. Does that mean?”

“You know, Riuz. When they brought you back, after that reconnaissance mission, you had third degree burns over a large part of your face. You probably don’t remember, but I was there in the Medbay; I got called in to help out. Just over three months, that was. I still remember the smell of your charred flesh. Very unpleasant.”

“What the fuck do you want?” Cecil exclaimed. “Just tell me what you’re getting at.”

“I’m getting to it. There were similar readings from then as well. Originally I would have never drawn a connection directly to you, but now Agrippa tells me that you can feel something down there.”

“That isn’t even the beginning.” Cecil said indignantly.

“So what is it? Do you feel the tremors? A fluxuation in air pressure?”

Agrippa made a sound with his mouth like he wanted to say something.

“She speaks to me.”

“She? Who is *she*?” Cecil heard her pacing around the chair he was sitting in.

“It, I mean. The pool, or something. I can communicate with it, talk back to it.”

There was a silence. Tulia stopped walking but didn’t respond.

“I’m just crazy. That sounds crazy to you, doesn’t it? Hearing voices. That’s why I’m back here, to have someone strap me into a suit, sedate me, and put me on a ship back home.”

Tulia remained silent. More paper rustled and he heard the sound of a pen scrawling.

“Interesting.” She finally responded. “You know if you look at these, it isn’t completely random. There’s a few similarities and patterns between the two readings. Take a look, Agrippa. Here- here- and here just from a first glance.”

“Yeah, I see it. What’s it mean though?”

“To me? Nothing. Readings like this aren’t a coincidence though. There must be some sort of code. How Cecil can somehow interpret them as language is even more of a mystery.” She went on. “Tell me Cecil, what does the voice say? What does it know? What does it want?”

“I don’t know. It says it wants to understand. It wants to know about us.”

“Us as in *humans*? What do you suppose it wants with that information?”

“I don’t feel like it means us any harm.” Cecil muttered.

“The only person injured to any real extent has been you, Cecil. If it was malicious, or had the capability to do harm I think we would have known by now. Hell, it even reached out on its own accord.” Agrippa tapped his foot loudly. Cecil felt the faint vibrations through the floor.

“So what now?” Cecil sighed. “What do we tell everyone, about me, about the pool? I don’t feel any better. I don’t feel like I’m any less mental.”

Tulia jostled her papers some more. “I’m afraid I don’t want this getting out, we’ll just stir up things that shouldn’t be stirred up. I’m going to keep looking at these, trying to pick out any sort of pattern. Meanwhile, I want you to stay in contact with it, Cecil. I want you to be able to find out as much as you can.”

Cecil felt uneasiness in his stomach. He wanted to tell her off, but he held his tongue.

“Agrippa, keep him company for the time being. Take down anything you think is relevant to the matter, and for god’s sake, make sure he keeps it together.”

“I’ll do it, but let me make it clear that I’m doing this for Cecil and not for some demented quest for knowledge.” Agrippa walked to Cecil and placed his hand on his shoulder.

“Suit yourself,” said Tulia, followed by the sound of the door opening and closing.

Agrippa patted his on the back urging him to stand. Cecil tied the laces on his boots that were sitting loosely around his feet.

Agrippa took him silently out of the room and through the hallways. Cecil smelt the faint smell of food as Agrippa lead him to the dining hall. They grabbed food and sat down at the table where Cecil sheepishly poked at his food.

“Eat up. We probably won’t get another proper meal like this for a while.” Agrippa spoke through a mouth full of food, utensil clicking on his tray. Cecil forced down a few bites of the overly-salted mush.

“We’re going back there today. Somehow I think that place down there revitalizes you a bit. Plus we’ll get away from anybody else who wants to drill you with questions.” Cecil mumbled back weakly.

After eating the two headed back to the hangar. Agrippa chatted up one of the people on duty to get them suits and a rover. Cecil obediently stood firm as they contorted him into the suit and guided him to his seat on the rover. The rover started to rumble as they pulled into the airlock and finally out into the rocky ground outside.

“It’s just us now, feel free to speak your mind.” Agrippa’s voice came through the speakers sounding more raspy than normal.

"I'm kind of relieved. Since I woke up, I haven't felt like talking to anybody. I'm afraid that when people talk to me, they see my disfigured face and feel sorry for me. I feel like I can hear the pity in their voice. They ask me questions and I have to make up answers, or worse; have to relive thought I've mulled over a thousand times in my head.

That thing, it doesn't judge me. Knowing it's not a figment of my imagination makes it even better. I still don't know what to make of it, but it's some solace."

"Don't lose yourself though, Cecil." Agrippa trailed off, leaving the rest of the ride silent.

Mother

Cecil walked out to the room after spending some time napping in the sleeping quarters. "Just radio me if you need help getting back." Agrippa's voice echoed in his mind. He twisted the knob on the device in his hand until it clicked off.

The room was cool. Cecil shivered lightly. He brought himself to the center of the path and sat down once again with legs crossed. He waited.

"Cecil."

"Hello?" Cecil was unsure of how to respond.

"I feel you."

"I feel you too. In a way. I now know you're real, or as real as you can be, I guess. Tell me, what do I call you?"

"I don't understand."

"Some word that identifies you."

"There is a word."

"What word is that?"

"When I first contacted you, you called out something. That word felt like it had a great significance to you."

"...Mother."

"Yes, I would like to be called '*Mother*'."

Cecil's heart sank at the empty way it was said. "Mother." He echoed.

"Yes?"

"It feels different when I hear it from you. But you don't understand, do you? Yet you are able to communicate with me in my language."

"When you first came into contact with me, I tried responding in the only way I knew how. I know now that such a way is not suitable for you. So I listened and learned the way that you speak, as a group."

"I'm surprised."

"There is more than one way you communicate as well." Cecil heard the words spoken to him in perfect Mandarin, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and a few other languages that he could faintly recognize, all spoken by other workers.

"That's amazing to say the least. Most humans know one or two languages, and it can take years to perfect additional ones."

"Yes, humans. You are not from here. Earth is your home. I want to understand Earth."

"Earth is beautiful. It's like it was made for us. It has the right temperature, air we can breath, things we can eat, and water we can drink. Of course, after reasonable effort."

"Does Mars also have these things?"

"Unfortunately no. We are trying to give it such things though."

“It is not made for you, yet you wish to make it yours, correct?”

“When you say it like that... Earth is no longer as rich in such things as it once was.

Rather, the Earth is unable to produce sufficient enough resources for all of the people it holds.

“How many humans are on Earth?”

“About 8 billion of us. The number has gone up and down over the last few decades.

There are more of us than the world can handle; pollution has caused it to become hotter, make water undrinkable, and air unbreathable. On top of that, we wage wars with each other and kill each other. Over human history, people have wondered if humanity would be ended in one single event; an atomic war, an asteroid, a mass epidemic. It turns out our end was something we slowly built up to ourselves.”

Cecil sighed and continued on. “That’s why we’re here. They say we only have about 200 more years until the Earth starts being uninhabitable. Polar ice caps are slowly melting and the oceans are rising bit by bit. Coastal regions will eventually be submerged. There are already areas where people are packed in just about as tight as they can be, and it will only get worse. Not to mention those areas are the most polluted by far. Somehow we’re still holding on to our reserves of fossil fuels and coal, which are clouding our skies with toxic particles. People can technically live under these circumstances, but it’s in no way healthy. There’s only so much we can do to provide ourselves with bubbles of fresh air and water that has been cleansed of trash and chemicals. It’s a race against time. We’re here trying to eventually make this planet livable for us. We have the best scientific minds trying to grow food and generate oxygen on a scale large enough for, well, humanity. Right now though, we can just barely sustain ourselves.”

"I think I understand. Your role here as individuals for the betterment of so many other people is of interest to me. Scientists like yourself must be highly respected on Earth for such actions."

"No, I'm no scientist; just an engineer. I'm good with my hands, not with my brain. At least, not like them. And without my eyes, I'm just deadweight; useless."

"If you have no use, will you go back to Earth?"

"They wanted me to, but things came up. I found a niche where I can still be useful; I'm hanging onto that like the Earth to life."

"You would have died on Earth, no?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean. They planned to send me home for medical treatment to begin with; to make me better again."

"Yes, but in 200 years, what happens then?"

Cecil paused for a moment to process the situation.

"I'll be dead long before then. The average human lifespan isn't even half that time."

There was a long pause again.

"If all humans alive now will be gone before 200 years passes, why do they worry about what will happen?"

"It's not for us. It's for our children and our children's children. I remember when I was little. In school they would teach us that as individuals, we could make the world a little better, and have something to leave behind for the people after us. Unfortunately, a 'little better' didn't counteract the damage we had already done as a collective. People ignored the warning signs went on for too long. Now we have to find a new way to allow for humanity to live on."

“Do humans choose to act differently when they are a part of a group rather than by themselves?”

“It’s hard to say. I don’t think there’s any choice in the matter. For example, those us us here on Mars have a collective mission of creating livable conditions. However, my sole objective right now is to prove I’m suitable to stay. I’m not ignoring my group objective; rather I’m contributing to it by making sure I’m still around. However, no matter how hard you try as individual it’s nearly impossible to surpass the collective, especially if they’re working against you.”

“A collective is the most powerful when they all have the same idea. Yet, I cannot believe humanity had the intention to destroy the Earth, correct?”

“No. But they all had the same idea that their work as individuals was doing something. In reality, they were simply slowing the progression of our degradation, not reversing it. Everyone ignored the real problems that were already there, that actively needed fixing. They may have prevented one mess from forming, but completely forgetting about the other messes that were present and growing.”

“Even with many individuals working towards the same goal, the collective did more damage in the long run?”

“I would say that’s true.”

“This is all strange. I must consider this longer.”

Cecil sat quietly thinking of a response. He felt a yawn coming on. He uncrossed his legs which had slightly fallen asleep, and resisting the prickly feeling he felt in his ankles, he stood.

“I’ll let you do that. Goodnight, Mother.”

Self

Cecil awoke. The cot squeaked under his weight.

“Good morning, sleepy head.” came a voice from nearby.

Cecil sat up and stretched. He felt more rested than the previous days. “Good morning.” He responded. “How are things, Martin?”

“Things are going together smoothly now, though it would be nice if you came and joined us. By the time you wake up, we’re already taking breaks. I wake up some nights and see your cot empty. Is everything all right?”

“I just... can’t sleep sometimes.” Cecil attempted to avoid the notion that he had been going the same place every night. “I just like the cool air, pacing around until I get tired.”

“Geniuses like yourself go through internal struggles all the time, especially after what you’ve been through. Don’t be afraid to talk with one of us if you need it.”

“Don’t call me a genius. I’m not deserving of such praise. Is Agrippa here anywhere?” He shifted his head around to try to listen for his voice.

“He’s with the comms equipment, trying to contact station control. You know, we’re almost ready to move onto the next step of development, getting the grid set up. He’s finalizing plans with Cassius, I think.”

“Thank you,” he said, standing up and stretching his legs before heading out of the room.

Cecil followed the same hallway he had become accustomed to, counting the number of beams he walked over, and the approximate temperature he felt at various intervals. The cold tunnel was as plain as day to him.

He began to hear the buzz of radio static and a voice that continued to increase in volume as it repeated the same question.

“Reestablish contact at 1800 hours, do you copy?”

Agrippa spoke loudly over the now constant radio static that produced intermittent blips of what could be a voice. He sighed loudly out his nose and loudly flipped a switch. The static died off leaving the room silent.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to fix whatever problem you’ve got with that, now.”

“Oh! Cecil, you surprised me.” He said with a start. “No, no. We’re having a dust storm above, its cut us off for the foreseeable future. We were just about to get the go to turn on the system too. Now we just get to sit and twiddle our thumbs.”

“That’s nothing new to me, I’m afraid,” Cecil sighed.

“Yes, but you’ve earned time off. Have you eaten yet?” Cecil shook his head.

“Let’s head back then.”

Agrippa lightly put his hand on Cecil’s shoulder and pushed him along. Cecil walked confidently ahead ignoring the interaction and kept the same pace. Back inside the sleeping quarters there was a light commotion of people unwinding about the chamber. Agrippa led Cecil back to a corner where he sat him down on an aluminum crate with a slight touch of force.

“So... anything?” Agrippa said to him quietly.

“Yeah... yeah.” He said through a yawn. “Can I get a bite to eat, first?”

“Fine... sorry. I’ve just been so caught up in the rush of things.” Agrippa apologized.

“But now we have time to focus on you... and *that*.”

Cecil was handed a foil-packed bar, unwrapping it noisily. The contents were chewy and slightly sweet. Cecil felt content. As he finished the last bite, Agrippa sighed expectantly.

"I made contact again, easily enough." Said Cecil plainly, crinkling up the wrapper in his hand.

He felt Agrippa lean close to him to talk to him quietly. "What type of feeling do you get from it? What do you think it wants or is doing now?"

"Like I've said, it wants to learn. It's good at it to. I don't know how to describe it. It speaks- or however you want to describe it- in English perfectly, as well as many other languages it just seemed to pick up from listening to us."

"So it can hear us now you think? That's kind of creepy."

"If you were to feel it like I do, I think you would disagree. It's a mixture of childlike wonder and innocence and a parent's watchful eye."

"Cecil, both of those things are dangerous; a child that doesn't know better, an adult that thinks it *does* know better? What have you been telling it?"

"About humanity; how the Earth is deteriorating, how we got here and what we're doing. I'm not telling it how to manipulate us, just sating its curiosity. I don't think it has the capacity for anything dangerous, whether that is physical or mental."

"That's fine I suppose. You seemed to sleep well." Agrippa's tone changed.

"Yeah, for once."

"So I suppose you're up to continuing your communication with it?"

"Of course. It has a hunger for knowledge, and I feel like I'm the only one who can properly feed it."

“You’re very unbothered by this whole ordeal Cecil. This isn’t something normal, being able to communicate with some unknown force. One that almost killed you. Now you go out nightly to have a nice chat with it. Do you want me to brew a pot of tea for you two to talk over?”

Cecil stifled a small laugh.

“This is serious. I don’t want you being brainwashed.”

“You don’t understand. For once I feel like I’m not being doted on. Growing up, I asked my mother why nobody ever said anything other than ‘good; okay’ when asked how they were- even if they weren’t okay. She said that even if you’re feeling bad, you don’t want to make other people feel bad by saying so. It’s all just fake pleasantries. Nobody really cares how another person is doing.

Ever since I woke up in the med bay, people have been asking me if I feel okay; if anything hurts, if I’m hungry, thirsty, cold, or bored. It’s all more pleasantries by people who think they can make themselves feel better if they help me out. Just now you tried your hardest to guide me back step by step, even though I have proven myself fully capable, even though I knew clearly the forty-two panels I had to cross to make it back here. Even without my sight I know this place like the back of my hand.

Mother doesn’t care. She doesn’t ask how I’m doing, sincerely or not. She digs deeper than that. Simple feelings of an individual are too shallow for such a cognizance; she wants to know more about the human perspective; our motivations, and our interactions. You can’t fathom how comforting and non-intrusive it is when everything isn’t about me, and how I am.”

Agrippa let out a long sigh. He waited a long moment before responding.

“I see you’ve found your happy place. As long as you... nobody gets hurt, you can continue. I’m going to discuss with Aetius and Martin how we are going to coordinate the next step. I’ll consult you if I need any technical input, for now stay put, okay.” Cecil felt a slight condescending tone in the last sentence Agrippa uttered.

Leaning himself up against the wall, he closed his eyes and drifted off.

One and Many

Cecil awoke from his nap awkwardly propped against the wall, still sitting atop the crate. His shoulder ached from being leaned against the wall. People were still awake in the room and the light still seemed to be on.

Cecil stood up and stretched. He rubbed the back of his head that had been resting against the wall. His hair seemed to be grown out a bit, and was flattened down in some places. The skin on his neck felt greasy from a buildup of sweat and grime.

He slid between the maze of cots and bedmats in the room and found his way out. Down the hall just a bit he came across another opening that had a plastic feeling curtain hanging in front of it. Pulling it back released a waft of air carrying the unpleasant odor of bodily functions. Cecil breathed strongly out of his nose and headed in to do his own business.

Standing up from the makeshift latrine he cleaned himself and pulled his coveralls back on. He found his way to the basin where he was able to fumble around for a bar of soap. The slow trickle of water took its time cleaning the residue off his hands. He cupped them and let them fill up before splashing it on his face, then running his hand back over his head and down past his neckline. The water felt cool and soothing on his face. He wiped his hands on the thighs of his coveralls and headed outside, pushing the curtain aside to much fresher air.

Cecil followed the wall back to the entrance of the sleeping quarters. He stopped before entering and listened. There was less activity than before. He quietly stepped by the door and off down the hallway.

Once again Cecil was in the large room. He sat down under the railing and crossed his legs. His thighs were still slightly damp. He thought about what Agrippa had said. "Your happy place," he repeated in his head. Cecil was content.

"Cecil."

"Mother."

"You feel different; you have something new on your mind."

"That's right. There's more than just one thing. I guess you would call it accomplishment. All of the work that has been going on down here is almost finished. We can start generating more power. That means we can support more people; more great minds here to make this planet a place where we can live.

The ground here; it really can't support life. There are no nutrients in it like on Earth. We couldn't hope to ever grow plants in Martian dirt as it is. We grow food using hydroponics- there's no dirt; all of the nutrients come from water. Then we have to replicate the sunlight which plants need too. Of course Mars gets sunlight, but not as much as Earth. There's not quite enough to grow a plant, not to mention power solar panels to any great effect.

This new power source comes from Mars itself. You probably feel it, feed off it like we do. It's the heat deep down in the planet, a churning force of nature beneath the crust. It will allow us to grow plants, purify water, and help us recycle oxygen. Who knows how much we can expand by? We only have one generator right now, but adding more is no problem. The

power is nearly inexhaustible. They could be sending us more supplies and people as we speak. I'm not sure really, this place is my world now, what happens outside feels isolated. You know, I was asleep for three months while this was being put together. It's almost as if they did this overnight for me. I still can't believe it."

"More humans will come?"

"Without a doubt."

"I feel I will be disturbed more by this."

"What are you saying? I'm sure nothing we've done here has ever done you any real harm, am I right?"

"I am disturbed by the feelings of humans. It is unnatural. Bringing more will increase the negative feelings I feel."

"Humans have feelings both good and bad; it's human nature, Mother. As a collective we all just want to live, and that includes dealing with the emotions we carry."

"I have been thinking about the duplicity of humans we discussed. I have determined why humans act differently as individuals versus as a collective form. When isolated, a human does not think of others because they have no reason to. However, no human is truly isolated. Humanity is a collective, yet they still only think of themselves- not others."

"What you say has some truth to it, Mother, but everyone is different. You can't imagine what we have to deal with here. Out here on Mars, we're more isolated than any human ever has been before. Yet we still think about those left at home more than anything. We're dedicating our lives to them."

"You said to Agrippa '*Nobody really cares how another person is doing.*'"

"I did say that. To be honest, it's hard to imagine what another person is going through especially if you're disconnected from their world, their existence. I mean, when I was a kid we had it tough sometimes. I went a few times without dinner. My mother always said though to be brave, and that we would have a proper meal after she got paid. She reminded me that someone could always have it worse. I would lay in bed with an empty, growling stomach thinking how there could be no worse situation than the one I was stuck with. I never stopped to think about those children who wouldn't be getting the free school breakfast the next day like me, because they didn't have a school to go to, or worse, didn't even make it through the night.

"Yet you still suffered, your suffering was justifiable. An individual seeks to better the situation for themselves, rather than trying to help those who are in a worse situation. Even eventually when all their needs are met to the best of their abilities, they will not look back. Is this not true, Cecil?"

"Not all humans are like that. They just want to live their lives."

"Does a human living their life contribute to the deterioration of the Earth?"

"I guess a little bit."

"You said previously you tried *'to make the world a little better for those who came after'*, but it seems human existence innately causes destruction. I feel you will come here and cause the same."

"We're not like that anymore Mother. It's true; humans tend to act in their own best interest. It used to be acceptable that someone down the line could suffer if you were able to

get what you wanted. That's what brought us to the point that we're at now, the fact that humans love themselves more than anyone else."

"Do you love yourself Cecil?"

"What the fuck do you mean by that?"

"As a human do you love yourself?"

Cecil stopped to ponder what he had heard. He felt unmoved by the question. He felt tears began to well up in his eyes.

"I left the only place I knew, and lost the only person I could say I loved; my Mother. I knew coming to this planet I would probably never see Earth again, never get to start a family, and knew that I would be working myself to the bone without rest until I could no longer do so. I left right before the next book by my favorite author was going to be released. My best friend was just about to have a kid with his girlfriend of six years. My baby cousin was just about to start her first year of kindergarten. I left all of that. I could have had a normal life. After the accident, they gave me a chance at all that again; to be put back together; to be back on Earth. I decided to stay here once again because I felt like there was something I could do. I sacrificed it all so I could help develop something that would contribute to the future of humanity; to people I will never meet or know.

I don't love myself. I hate myself. I hate myself, Mother. But goddamn it If I don't love humanity, if I don't love the Earth."

Cecil grabbed the railing above his head and hung his head down low. He started to sob. The tears burned his cheeks. He tasted the salt at the corners of his mouth. His hands lost their

grip and the weight of his arms fell into his lap. He let himself collapse on his side. His cries echoed lightly through the room.

"I hope that there are more people like you, Cecil."

Father

Violent shaking brought Cecil to consciousness. There were fingers digging into his shoulder.

"Damn it, Cecil. I should have checked on you again last night."

"Stop shaking me, fucking hell." Cecil snapped. "Sorry Agrippa... stop, please." He sat up slowly.

"I was so furious last night; I just said 'forget it' and went to sleep without even thinking twice about where you might be. Hell, like it was hard to guess."

Cecil felt Agrippa sit down on the floor next to him, groaning on his way down.

"You look like hell- even worse than usual. Have you been... crying?" He said in a concerned voice.

"A bit. To be honest, I didn't know if I still could. I just felt callous to everything. In that letter I wanted to send to my mother, I said I didn't have any regrets. I wanted to believe that coming here to help the people of Earth was the best thing that I was ever going to accomplish."

"It's okay to be homesick, Cecil. We're millions of miles away from home, in an installation that feels like a glorified work camp. There are no comforts of home, barely any contact with anyone we know, and food that tastes like shit." He laughed softly.

"I could have been at my mother's side when she was dying, wishing for the company of her only son. I still have no idea what happened to her. Maybe it's better that way, you think?"

“When I became a widower at a fairly young age, I thought I had lost it all. Most people take their mid-life crisis and spend a bunch of money on cars and motorcycles. I spent my money on a gravestone and a casket. Instead of dwelling on my feelings, I signed up for the program that would eventually bring me out here. You were brave enough to leave while you still had someone there for you.”

“And now I have no one.”

“You have us.”

“You’ve said that before, but I think I refused to believe it at the time. I think I’m a little more convinced this time. After all, you came to make sure I was okay even though you hated my guts.”

“Hah, well hearing you say that doesn’t convince me that somehow you’re not going to hurt yourself running about here at night. Either way, let’s get going. We have *actual* work to do today.”

Agrippa huffed and grunted as he tried to stand. Cecil jumped up and helped him to his feet.

“I should be worried about *you* hurting *yourself* here, old man.”

“I could trip you up and you would never see it coming.” He joked.

“That’s cruel, on multiple levels. So what’s new?”

Cecil put his hand lightly on Agrippa’s shoulder so as to let him guide them down the tunnel.

“I made contact with the main base last night. As it stands, the system is as good as we’re going to get it. Of course we’ll get to see the real issues appear when the whole system

is running, but that will be dealt with when we get there. We can manage with just a few people, so some of the guys have been cleared to head back. There's a transport vehicle expected here in not too long.

Otherwise, we're clear to start the system. I talked with one of my men who were looking at core samples of this area. It seems the rock base in this area is perfect for what we need it for. To be honest, I would have liked to be back in the lab doing all that, but it seemed they needed someone level-headed down here to keep people in order. Cassius pretty much insisted I do so, especially since you ended up coming along too. You know Aetius headed back a couple days after we got here. Cassius was furious at him for hindering the project, but to be fair it wasn't his *entire* fault..."

"How do you put up with Cassius?" Chipped in Cecil, "He's kind of an ass."

"He is indeed," Aetius let out a small laugh. "He kind of reminds me of my father, whom I managed to put up with for so many years. It just comes naturally I guess."

"I never had to deal with my father in such a way," said Cecil sorrowfully.

"Why's that?"

"My father never talked down to me that much. He was never really good with words anyways, English wasn't his first language. My parents refused to speak Spanish around me either; they wanted me to speak English so I could get ahead easier. If my father was mad, he would turn physical. Even if he didn't hit me, I could see him clench his fist sometimes, and I would immediately shut up and give him his space."

"Cecil, you know that's not something a father should be doing to his child."

“Stop. I figured that out long ago, but I never wanted to tell myself the truth. That’s not how I want to remember my father. Despite all that, he provided for my mom and me. When he was still around I had good clothes, never went hungry, and we had a decent family car.”

“What happened to him?”

“My father owned a mechanic shop. That’s where I got into machinery and engineering. I hung out there as much as I could; on the weekends and after school when my mom was volunteering for the church. My dad said he was lucky that God only blessed him and my mother with one child so that he could make a proper apprentice out of me.

The shop was in a pretty sketchy part of town, but we always had pretty nice cars in there getting worked on. I never made the connection- my father was running a chop shop. One day we got raided while I was there. There was a couple dozen police, ramming down the door with a battering ram, yelling and pointing their guns at everyone. I was scared, and cried for my father. He couldn’t help me of course because they had already slammed him on the ground, handcuffing him. I remember him being pulled away, blood streaming down his face from a broken nose. As he struggled, he called to me saying ‘Don’t be afraid Cecil; everything’s going to be alright.’ I was afraid. I still have nightmares about it. Of course the police took me in too; I was just a kid. They asked about what I knew about the place and my connection to the people there. I was too shocked to say much, but they eventually got a hold of my mom to come down and bring me home.

Because my parents hadn’t been legally married in the United States everything was tied to my father. My mother and I were able to avoid any charges, but my father and many of his workers went to prison. It was kind of rough for me and my mom after that. We had to

move, and that car we were driving had stolen parts in it, so of course it got taken too. My mother had to get a new job close by. The church helped us a lot though.

I hoped for years that one day my father would get out of prison, open a legit shop, and we could get back to being a family team of mechanics, and he could teach me everything he knew. One day my mom got a call late in the day. She just listened to it quietly, only giving a few weak responses. She turned completely pale. I tried asking her what the phone call was about, but she wouldn't say anything. She hugged me tight, with tears in her eyes.

The next morning I was watching the news on TV before school started and saw that there was a gang related riot at the prison where my dad was. Much later I learned that he had been stabbed and trampled where he was left to bleed out while the rioting was subdued. He was never even involved in any gang activity; he was just an innocent bystander. Well, as innocent as someone in prison.

When I started my senior year in high school, I made up my mind that I wanted to become the mechanic my father wanted me to be. Of course there was no money for me to go to college, and I really didn't have good enough grades to get a scholarship. Right after I turned eighteen I enlisted in the Navy for their program in mechanical engineering. I could get away from that town and all the bad memories. I wanted to be able to provide for my mother with good military pay. I passed through training with flying colors, and eventually got placed in positions that had me involved in just about everything. I worked on several ships for a few years, trying to pick up what I could, and study more complex mechanics. Eventually I heard about the opportunity to go to Mars. It sounded crazy, but my superiors said that I had the talent and skill. They said they would send in their recommendations without question. Even

my mother said that I should go. It was one of the hardest decisions I have ever had to make, but well, you know..."

Cecil trailed off. He realized they had stopped and had been standing in the middle of the hallway for the last bit of Cecil's story.

"Just being here means that you've done more for humanity than anyone on Earth could have done at this point in time. Be proud of that. Both of your parents knew you had talent; they wanted to do great things rather than be stuck worrying about them. Your mother passed knowing you were doing what you loved and giving humanity a new lease on their future."

"That means a lot to me."

"Think nothing of it. Now, do you want to get this things started?"

The hair on Cecil's neck stood up in excitement. "What do we do first?" he asked enthusiastically.

"You should know this. We're turning on the pumps first, we have to saturate the rock under the wellhead with CO₂ first so it can heat up. After that we wait before the turbine can start running. In about a day, we will have almost full power production. They've even started running power lines to the main complex."

Cecil swallowed hard, remembering what Mother had said.

"What's the matter, Cecil? Is this about that... thing?"

"Mother... It is already disturbed by us, and I feel like there will be a worse reaction from this."

“Do you know this for sure?”

“No. To be honest, I haven’t had any physical reaction from it outside of our conversations. I told it that there would be more people here in the future.”

“What did it think, Cecil?”

“It couldn’t really process it.” Cecil lied. “I don’t suppose we can halt the injection process could we?”

Agrippa hesitated.

“Shoot. It’s already going by now, if they didn’t run into any hiccups. It was set to go on a schedule. Even if I tried to stop it, Cassius would have my balls, as you might say. He still doesn’t know about your little friend down here, he would think we’ve both lost it for stopping it for some random reason. What do you think?”

Cecil cringed lightly.

“I will talk with it tonight to determine if it has any reaction. I would normally say that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission, but I’m afraid such logic might not work here.”

Cecil jumped as a loud metallic cacophony echoed down the hall. The lift in the big room was descending. Agrippa brushed up against him as he turned around to head back where they had come from. Cecil continued after the sounds of Agrippa’s hurried footsteps.

By the time they reached the end of the tunnel the screeching of the lift had stopped and the door was slid upwards, the bearing in the wheels whistling loudly.

“Howdy,” shouted a familiar voice.

Depths

“Markus, you better have a good reason for being down here.” Agrippa addressed him gruffly.

“Well thanks for the warm welcome. You ordered a transport to bring some of your men back, right? Someone had to drive it. Some of these guys probably haven’t had a shower in two weeks, am I right? I’m glad I don’t have to ride back with their smelly asses.”

“You’re not heading back with them?” Cecil responded.

“That’s part two of why I’m here. I was assigned the oh-so-special job of taking a look at this pool here for anything that might be interesting.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re keen on sticking around. You should have stowed your suit up above.” Agrippa clicked his tongue.

“I have special needs for this. Anyways, why don’t you get your men and send them this way. Cecil, I need your help getting something down here; you’re up for it right?”

“I don’t know how much help I can be to you, but I’ll see.”

“Don’t end up getting him hurt again... anyways; I’ll make sure they’re ready to go here.” There was a catch in Agrippa’s voice like he wanted to correct himself.

Cecil followed Markus’s footsteps to the lift. He reached out and grabbed a strut that formed the skeleton of the structure, guiding himself in under the door.

The loud rumbling of the lift didn’t make Cecil any less perceptive of the awkward silence.

“Markus...” The lift lurched to a halt at the top.

“I’m here.”

“Agrippa just misspoke. I still don’t believe that you caused the accident.” Cecil said assuredly.

“Maybe not you, but Agrippa may think differently.” Markus kept his response short.

“If he does, we’ve never discussed it. We don’t really even talk about what happened back then. Believe me; it’s still on my mind though. It’s been months for both of you, but to me, it feels like it’s just barely been a week. It’s my own battle to fight, somehow I think being here is good for me.”

“I’m glad you think so. This place still gives me the creeps. To be honest, I don’t want to be here, to be doing this. Here, we’re going to have to pick this up.”

Markus guided him around a large object sitting on the floor. Cecil’s toes hit the edge of it, and he reached down to find a handhold.

“I managed to drag this thing in here on my own, but we’ll need it to lift it to bring it down the rest of the way. Got it? Let’s go in 3-2-1.”

Cecil got it up and quickly shifted his fingers underneath to grab onto the frame of the device.

“Your luggage is a pain in the ass, your highness.”

“Just follow my lead; I’ll get us to the elevator. It’s an air pump; and don’t even expect a tip, bell boy.” He chuckled as they slowly shifted back towards the lift.

“Okay, watch your step, you’re about to cross the gap.” Cecil stretched out his toes in front of him, finding the edge that he traversed carefully.

“This is some important equipment they’ve send with just one person. What do they have planned for you?”

"I'm going in to take a rudimentary analysis of the pool, determine what we've got underneath the surface." They shifted around and Markus hit the button causing the lift to lurch downward. The sound of rattling metal entered Cecil's ears, the strain in his arms increased slowly.

The lift touched down and the door was slid open. Cecil could hear some of the guys from behind him.

"Agrippa was telling the truth, Markus came. The brave explorers are having a reunion it seems." Markus let out a forced laugh, the strain in his voice apparent. They traded spots and the two hastily set down the object on the floor. As the rumbling of the lift disappeared up the shaft Cecil stopped his brooding and spoke up.

"I can't believe that's safe or even necessary. Don't we have an instrument to measure how deep it goes, what's down there?"

"They don't really give much thought into sending waterproofing to a planet that is supposedly bone-dry. We can't really trust some of our valuable equipment to something jury-rigged together. Thus, here I am. Believe me; I don't like the idea any more than you do."

"What do they expect to get out of this?"

"We're on the verge of having near unlimited power; next we could be having thousands of gallons of relatively fresh water at our disposal. I just need to see how deep it goes. I'll be in and out like that."

"I'm not convinced."

"Do you know something I don't?"

“No,” Cecil lied. He imagined Mother listening, and he found himself sending out thoughts that would act as a warning. He was interrupted by the light shove from Markus’s fist.

“Quit daydreaming. They don’t need you now, right? I want you here to help me and guide me down. I’ll be attached to a tether and a breathing tube from this air pump. Nothing can go wrong.”

“Do you want me to get anyone else? Agrippa maybe?”

“They’re probably busy. Cassius said he wanted the system running by tonight. Let’s get this over with and I can change out of this suit. Get the pump started.”

Cecil found the switch for the pump, which pattered to life. He felt it starting to pull air in from the bottom.

“Do you remember how they used to train old-timey astronauts Cecil? They used to throw them in pools with those big clunky suits on to let them get used to the feeling of zero gravity. For us stuck on solid ground, actually being in the vacuum of space is a rare treat for us. Take this.”

Cecil felt a radio being placed into his hands. Markus’s metallic sounding voice came on the speaker.

“I’ll be transmitting continuously so you can listen in. Air systems check. Make sure that thing doesn’t shut off on me Cecil. I don’t have any auxiliary air on me. I’m travelling light.”

“For the record I’m still not okay with this.” He pushed the button and spoke into the microphone.

“Okay, I’ve got one end of this tether on the railing here. Get this other side attached to my suit.” Cecil felt him place a carabineer in his hand. Markus turned around and Cecil felt along his back to the ring on his harness. He hooked it and gave it a good tug.

“One last time, let me remind you that your life is in the hands of a blind man.”

“Too late for second thoughts.”

Cecil heard him take a deep breath, followed by a large splash. He felt a few cold drops fly through the air and hit his face. The radio was silent for a slight moment and Cecil’s stomach cramped up into a ball. He held his breath. He was about to hit the ‘send’ button on the radio when he heard radio static crack through, followed by the sound of bubbles and heavy breathing.

“It’s still very cold here.” Markus let out a small laugh.

“You don’t feel anything strange, right?”

“Other than the tone of your voice? It’s dark and cold, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Cecil let out the breath he had been holding inadvertently. He could hear the sound of Markus’s breathing and the bubbles filtering out his mask. He sat down at the edge of the platform and dangled his feet off the edge.

He turned down the radio to listen for any sign of humming. He could only detect the puttering of the pump drawing in air. Air bubbles popped softly at the top of the pool. Cecil turned the knob on the radio back to full volume to once again hear Markus’s regular breathing. He reached up to the railing and double checked that the tether was attached properly.

“What do you think?” Cecil spoke into the radio.

"I think you're being distracting. No offence. I'm basically climbing down this shaft at a snail's pace; there's not a ton of room to properly swim down."

Cecil went back to sitting patiently. He became aware that the breathing over the radio was slowly becoming more strained.

"Are you okay? You're breathing hard."

A loud huff came through the speaker. "I guess so. I'm not that deep, but I really feel the pressure on my chest." He took a loud, deep breath. "I'm going to tread water right here for a bit."

Cecil grabbed the tether that was still loose. He pulled one end close to him, ready to pull on it. He swallowed loudly. More bubbles popped on the surface. There was a loud cough over the radio.

"I... I can't. It feels like I'm being crushed. I'm coming up."

Cecil felt a weird feeling come over him. He started to pull up the slack on the tether.

"Oh god."

Cecil could hear the surface of the pool being disturbed, water sloshing against the sides. Markus continued to breathe harder.

"This doesn't make sense. Jesus Christ, pull me out of this."

Cecil dropped the radio and let it clatter on the floor. He stood up and grabbed the tether between both his hands. He wrapped the rough rope around his palms and pulled at hard as he could. He heard Markus groaning loudly through the radio, his voice mixed with the sound of sharp breaths. The rope grated against his palms as he pulled as hard as he could. The surface of the water broke as Markus exited the pool. Cecil dragged him out and helped

him scramble up under the railing and onto the grate. He ripped off his helmet and started grasping for air.

“I think... I think my ribs are cracked.” He spoke painfully, as he made gulping sounds with his mouth.

Cecil fell to his knees. He fingers ached; trying to clench his hands down. He felt the tatters of skin on his palms from the rope, the hot sensation of rope burn and the sting of blood and grime mixing together in the wound.

Cold

Cecil winced as peroxide was poured onto his palms. A large roll of gauze was wound around his hands tightly.

“We should call them back.” Agrippa spoke seriously.

“They’re not going to have enough power to get back to the base if they turn back here at this point. By the time they get back and recharged it will be nightfall. We can get them to bring me back tomorrow morning.”

“You two both need to go back. This place isn’t nice. It isn’t hospitable. We don’t have the means to deal with shit like this.” Agrippa was uncharacteristically temperamental.

“While I don’t have any objections, I’d like to take this moment to remain as stationary as possible.” Markus shifted in the cot uncomfortably, groaning along with the sound of squeaking springs

“Cecil, let’s talk.” Agrippa said gruffly. He pulled Cecil away from where Markus lay. Speaking in a low tone, he started his interrogation.

“What were you thinking? You of all people should know that the pool isn’t something that we should be messing with.”

“I just got pulled up in his pace.” Cecil tried deflecting Agrippa’s confrontation.

Agrippa breathed heavily out of his nose. His tone changed back to normal. “I should have known with Markus. You should have called me, anyone for that matter. I’m just upset because I’m going to be held responsible for this. Did you feel nothing? Did it not try to warn you?”

“There was nothing. I tried to convey my feelings to Mother, saying not to hurt him. It’s like she wasn’t there, wasn’t listening. She didn’t give me any response. I don’t even know if it was her that caused it.”

“You know he wasn’t deep enough for the natural pressure to do that on its own.”

“I know.”

“That thing may have a front of intelligent speech and empathy, but it’s running on reflex and instincts, if you even want to call it that. You want to connect with it and tell it everything you know, but in truth we barely know what it is or how it works. It’s dangerous.”

“I know!” Cecil raised his voice. It caused a slight echo around the room.

“Tomorrow you and Markus are heading back to the installation and never coming back here. If you want to make your peace, tonight is the time.” Agrippa stepped away from him.

Cecil slid down to the floor and put his head down to his knees. Markus coughed sharply in the background. The springs on his cot creaked slightly. Cecil brooded.

—

The hair on Cecil’s neck bristled, both from the cold and his chagrin.

“Mother!” He shouted. His voice echoed around the room. His heavy footsteps clanged against the grated floor as he paced around the room heatedly.

“Cecil.”

“You hurt him. You could have ended his life.”

“I am incapable of such things.”

“What about me?” Cecil gestured at the dark emptiness of the room. “When we first made contact you said you were startled. I understand that my injuries were not out of any malice on your part. I tried to warn you this time. I know you’re always listening to us, to our every word.”

“I have little control. I feel, that is all.”

“What do you feel? Do you feel any remorse for what you’ve done?”

“I feel the ground being permeated, saturated. The substance is enveloping the land.”

“That’s the CO₂ for the system that is going to generate power for us. Does it cause you pain?” Cecil pursed his lips sadistically.

“I feel no pain. However, I cannot resist it. Having Markus enter the pool gave a likeness to how the ground beneath us feels. I felt as if I could resist, it was a reflex. I embraced him like humans are embracing this ground, this planet.”

“Don’t you have any feelings on this matter? Or are we humans just something you need to resist in any way you can muster? Do you want to kill us?”

“Human kind is killing itself and its home slowly. That is what you have explained to me. Their only feelings are of themselves. This is also what you have told me.”

“Are you saying that you hold feelings of self-preservation?”

“Not in the way humans do, however I feel it is built into my consciousness, it is a reflex.”

“It makes sense to me now. The way you feel is vastly different from the way humans feel. When my father was stabbed in prison, there was feeling. Someone with a shank felt he needed to be taken out because of how he looked. When I got news of his death, I felt sad; I was devastated. My mother too. Don’t believe for one second that life and death don’t matter to humans.”

“I don’t understand life and death. I don’t understand the feeling of sad. I wish to understand.”

“So that’s all you feel?”

.....

For as long as man has looked to space, they’ve asked themselves if there was intelligent life out there in the cosmos. When I first made contact with you, I thought that it had happened. I thought that I had become a link to what would be mankind’s first discovery of so-called intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Moreover, you connected with me on a level that no other human had. I could not not only communicate, but speak as if you were my equal.

I’ve realized now that I’m wrong. There is no trace of intelligence in you. You are simply able to repeat everything you hear back at me. You have no original thought. I connected with you because you told me the things I wanted to hear.

Your true existence is only of basic feeling, detecting the things that move around you, like the needle on a seismometer. Tomorrow the steam turbines will be turned on, powering our whole installation here on Mars. Humanity will soon make a new home here, and there is little force that can stand in its way.”

Cecil felt his throat become hoarse as he ended his speech which had grown loud enough to resonate a small echo against the rock walls around him. The sound of a sharp cough came down the tunnel.

“There’s something about you, Cecil.” Markus said painfully.

“How long have you been there?” Cecil walked in the direction of his voice.

“Not long. I just... came outside for some cool air, and heard shouting.”

“I was kind of getting something off my chest.”

“This is not the kind of place where you should allow yourself to be at ease like that.”

Markus let out a groan. Cecil felt his way towards him and went to support him under his arm.

“Yeah. One bad experience too many.” Cecil propped himself up against him. He could feel Markus’s shallow breathing against his side.

“This time you get to carry me out of this place.”

“Come on, let’s get you back to bed, you shouldn’t be up and walking about in this condition.”

Exoneration

Cecil took careful steps as he followed the front end of the stretcher out through the hall and into the lift. The fresh wounds in his hands cried out in agony from his tight grip around the handles. Cecil winced slightly with every step he took. He took one final deep breath of the cool air and nudged the button with his shoulder, shifting the stretcher to one side.

“Whoa watch it!” Markus exclaimed, followed by a loud cough and a groan.

“You said I would be the one to carry you out. I’m finally returning the favor.”

They reached the top of the lift and set Markus down on the ground before preparing their suits.

“Agrippa, take good care of this place. Good luck with the turbines today, and don’t hesitate to contact me if you need help with something.”

“We still have more than enough good hands down here, Cecil. I’m sure everything will go just fine. Aetius, bring them back home safe.”

Aetius grumbled as he helped Cecil lift the stretcher once again. They headed out the airlock and carefully loaded Markus into the back of the carrier.

Cecil took a place in the back and soon found himself more comfortable than he would in a rover. The once bumpy ride he knew was smooth, and the seat had a semblance of padding.

The long downhill journey was quiet except for the occasion strained wheezes coming from Markus. He finally broke the silence.

“So what do you plan to do when you get back?”

“Probably take a shower. I’ll be in there until they force me to get out.”

“Yeah, I’d say you need it.”

“What about you, Markus?”

“You mean besides lay in bed and deal with cracked ribs? Well, at least I’ll get to talk to that hot nurse.”

Cecil let out a small laugh. The carrier went back to being silent. He became aware of a pounding in his head, which he chose to ignore.

Soon enough the feeling was no longer possible to ignore. He placed his head down between his knees. He felt a sweat break over his body underneath the suit.

"You okay?" Asked Markus, concerned.

"We'll see."

The carrier pulled into the hangar what seemed like ages later. Cecil's whole head was pounding. He attempted to roll out of the back of the vehicle and landed half-crumpled on the ground. Aetius called out.

"Hey, let's get these two to medbay, right now. Move, people."

Cecil was delirious from the pain as he was wheeled into medbay once again. The dim light he could make out was painfully bright. He felt someone shaking him.

"Cecil, how are you feeling? On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?" The nurse sounded like she was shouting at him.

"Pthhh." Cecil sputtered as he failed to make words. He felt an IV being jabbed into his arm which he half-heartedly tried to resist. Several sets of arms held him back. His strength failed him as he lay back on the familiar hospital bed.

Anguished, Cecil tossed around until he exhausted himself. The pounding in his head died down to a bearable level. He heard Markus complaining from the other side of the room.

"That's enough. You're just going to make it worse, leave me be!"

Cecil heard the nurse stomp off in a huff. The footsteps stopped by his bed.

"Are you awake Cecil?"

Cecil let out a groan. "Unfortunately."

"Are the painkillers working?"

“Somewhat.”

He felt the side of the bed depressed under the weight of something. A pair of hands reached out and grabbed his, still wrapped in gauze. He tried to retract them reflexively.

“I need to properly treat your wounds, Cecil. Markus isn’t going anywhere for now.”

As she undid the tightly-wound dressings Cecil felt his lacerations start to sting.

“As I thought, these are on their way to becoming infected. Let me grab some disinfectant and fresh bandages.”

Her weight left the side of the bed. Cecil lay his hands flat, opening up his palms up to the cold air. Her light footsteps returned and she took a seat once again on the bed, slightly closer to him.

“This might hurt a bit, but please bear with it. Let me know if you need more painkiller.”

Cecil winced as the damp clump of gauze touched his palm, introducing a fresh burning sensation. Her soft, yet strong grip on his wrist held him steady.

“Thank you,”

“I’m just doing my job.”

“No, for before. When I came out of my coma. You were there for me. You even took down the letter for me that was meant for my mother.”

Her hands stopped moving for a brief second.

“I’m sorry.” She said softly. “Right after you were discharged I went to communications to have it sent off, but instead I heard that she had passed. I wish you could have learned about it under more pleasant circumstances.”

"I don't think anything could have softened the blow anyways. I don't think I've ever gotten your name."

"Maria."

"Thank you Maria. Thank you for making me feel at home here, in the medbay of all places." He let out a small chuckle, trying to cover up the lump in his throat.

"If you keep hurting yourself, this place will end up your home." She released her grip on his wrist and moved it up to his forehead. Her hand was cool against his scarred flesh.

"Ouch." Cecil cried out as her light touch was enough to send a throbbing pain shooting through his head.

"I'm sorry." She pulled her hand away quickly. "Have you had much issue with headaches lately?"

"I feel as if every waking hour my head is throbbing to some extent. It's just a part of my life now, I guess."

"You've been nauseated too, haven't you?"

"A bit, why?"

"I'm going to grab an ultrasound." Her voice was cold. It felt as if she had jumped up off the bed.

A few minutes later she returned, along with the rattling of wheels rolling on the hard floor. "I need to shave your head for this to work. I'm sorry if this hurts a bit."

Cecil tried to respond but was interrupted by the loud buzzing of the trimmer. The sound came close up to his face and he felt the teeth glide across his scalp. Bits of hair drifted

down onto his face. His head throbbed as the whirring instrument passed over his head again and again. It finally ended and was followed up by a hand brushing off the clippings.

“I’m afraid of what you’re getting at, nurse.” A big cold glob of gel was placed on his now bald scalp and was smeared about.

“Cecil, I think you may have a brain tumor. The nausea, the vomiting. I’ve been in contact with Agrippa too; he says your personality has been all over the place, and you have symptoms of narcolepsy.”

Cecil was in shock attempting to form a response. Something was rolled close to his bed, and he felt the wand of the ultrasound start to pass over his head.

“We don’t have a CT scanner or MRI, so this is the best we can do. An ultrasound doesn’t give the best image through bone, but I will be able to see any irregularities on the surface of your brain.”

Cecil laid still the best he could as the wand was passed slowly over his head. His fingers twitched involuntarily. He pursed his lips to hide their trembling as well. The wand found its way to the front of his skull where it stopped right where he could feel the worse of the throbbing. He wished for the whole experience to be over.

“I’m going to wake up the doctor Cecil, don’t move.” Cecil mouthed something like he wanted to respond, but couldn’t form any words before the nurse’s footsteps faded out down the hall.

He waited. The wounds on his hands stung, and his head felt cold. The minutes seemed to drift by at a snail’s pace. “Markus?” He said weakly.

“I heard, buddy. I didn’t want to kill the moment with some smart-ass comment like usual.”

Two pairs of footsteps rushed in heavily. Before Cecil could say anything the wand was once again placed on his scalp.

“That is an irregular growth, right there on the frontal lobe.” The male voice of the doctor was vaguely concerned. “Ruiz, are you with us? This is something that needs to be operated on as soon as possible or your condition will be irreversible. The only thing is we don’t have the means for doing that here. We’re going to have to put you under cryonic hibernation here until another ship arrives to bring you back to Earth. Either that or you die here.”

Cecil gave a weak nod. “Send me home.” He choked back tears.

“It’s decided. Nurse, start prepping him. I have to inform Cassius.”

The doctor’s heavy footsteps took him out of the Medbay. Cecil felt the nurse taking a damp cloth to his head to wipe off the gel from the ultrasound. She proceeded to pull the IV from his arm and place a bandage over the area.

“You’re going to be in better hands.”

“I like being in your hands the best.”

“You’ll always be a charmer, Cecil.” She leaned down and gave him a weak hug.

Prologue

Cecil awoke. Grogginess overtook him. The lights were glaringly bright. He reached up to wipe his forehead, where he felt a deep scar imbedded in his skin. He attempted to shift his

body around but was stopped by various leads on his chest and head and an IV sticking into his arm.

He lay quietly in the unknown place; a monitor of some sort beeped away at a steady rhythm. After a few minutes, he was able to pick up the sound of a door latch clicking and hinges squeaking as someone entered the room.

“Welcome back to the world of the living, Mr. Ruiz.” The voice was unfamiliar.

“Where am I?” He responded in a hoarse voice.

“Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital, Houston Texas.”

“How long have I been here?”

“About two weeks. You arrived here in a state of hibernation, but after you were thawed we couldn’t get you conscious again. We ended up removing a sizable tumor from your frontal lobe, which seemed to improve your condition considerably. It’s been a couple of days since then, and I can surely say that I’m glad that you’re still with us. You’ll probably experience some minor loss of memory, some issues with coordination, but otherwise you’re on the road to recovery. Keep in mind, your muscles have atrophied from your months in hibernation and being in the reduced gravity of Mars.

“I don’t even know what to say.”

“We received a letter for you via the space agency from Mars. I think it should help you cope. Would you like me to read it to you?”

Cecil nodded he heard a piece of paper being unfolded.

“From: Agrippa

To: Cecil

Dear Cecil,

It's been several months since you left. I figured sooner or later you would be on Earth and be up for your operation. If you make it through I just want to make sure that you know we haven't forgotten about you and your contributions here.

Markus healed up just fine and is back to work. Cassius is still bitter that we had to sacrifice space on a ship for you, but I think the real reason is that we lost you and your expertise.

The generator has been running without issue for the last month or so, and we have been able to wean ourselves off solar power. Our systems running more efficiently as a result. The installation down below has even been fitted for proper living. Aetius is now running that place with several others.

The pool was drained without any issues surprisingly. Having an extra hundred thousand gallons of water or so has been a great boon to us, especially for our hydroponics. Nothing out of the ordinary has revealed itself since; it's honestly kind of boring. I'm still not sure what to make of your experiences. I asked Maria the nurse if a tumor can cause you to hallucinate or play tricks on your senses. Who knows? Even Tulia tried making sense of the readings she got but nothing stuck out.

I'm sorry that I never got to say goodbye to you. I never told you this, but after the accident I was there by your side while you sat in a coma. It reminded me of watching my partner wither away before eventually passing. When you woke up it birthed a new hope in me. Your positivity and drive, despite your disability, helped us all. I would say you were like the son I never had, but that just seems to cliché.

One day maybe you can return here to Mars and help us take even bigger steps towards the future and the continuation of mankind.

With much love,

Agrippa.”

Cecil felt a small tear form in the corner of his eye. He tried to lift his hand to brush it away. His arm felt impossibly heavy. He could only lift it a few inches before having to rest it back down.

“May I keep that letter?”

“I don’t see why not. Anyways, we’ll be monitoring you for now, and will start rehabilitation when you think you’re ready. Just let us know if we can do anything to make your stay here more comfortable.”

There were footsteps towards the bed. The man placed the letter in his palm. Cecil wrapped his fingers around the edge. He traced the crease from where it had been folded, rubbing the tip of his thumb across the faint bumps of the letters printed on the page. The man quietly exited the room without a word, closing the door with a click behind him. Still holding on to the paper, Cecil closed his eyes.

The End