



Sublimation Angels

A novella by Jason Sanford

*Artwork "Sublimation Angels" by Paul Drummond at www.pauldrummond.co.uk.
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Alna and I stood on Eur's mirrored-in surface, taking a breather in our sweat-stenched slush suits. The hole we'd dug through the frigid reflective ash smoked a haze of oxygen toward the blue and orange maw of the Crab Nebula, which hung in the sky near our planet's distant mother star. Across the vacuum black, countless Aurals shifted the star field into a mnemonic ROY G. BIV of circles and exclamations. As I watched the alien balls of energy fly by, I remembered something my brother said shortly before he died. How our skies – and our whole existence – were merely the backdrop on which the Aurals played their indecipherable games.

While I rested, sore from digging in my ill-fitting suit, I watched a yellow Aural. The illuminated ball shot toward the horizon, its parallel reflection flashing across the planet's mirror surface. The yellow Aural and its reflection flew closer and closer until they merged at the horizon, an illogical sight which shoved my eyes to vertigo and my stomach toward vomit – a fatal thing to do in a sealed pressure suit.

To calm myself, I cranked my suit's tick-tock ventilator, blowing scrubbed-clean air across my face. I then scraped away more of the superinsulating ash with my ice cleaver, revealing the frozen light-blue oxygen below. Soon an even larger cloud of air bubbled around us.

Alna grabbed my shoulder. "Moms...mad...this," she shouted, her shout carrying as weak whispers because of our touch. I gave a thumbs up. Moms were always mad when anyone messed with the Aurals' precious mirror ash, which kept the oxygen and the rest of the frozen atmosphere from returning to gas as Eur's eccentric orbit took us back toward the planet's mother star.

Alna chunked her ice cleaver aside and kneeled reverently. When I didn't join her in prayer, she grabbed my suit's ventilator crank and pulled me to my knees. Like many low kids, she believed clouds of air like this were sublimation angels, or the spirits of those denied rebirth. By releasing enough air into the world, you freed the soul of anyone you loved. In this case, the angel and prayers were for Omare, Alna's husband and my twin brother.

"Pump me up, Chicka," Alna shouted/whispered when she finished praying. I detached the backup hose from her suit, attached it to our spare oxymix canister, and cranked her pressure to four times normal. After checking that the partial pressure of the nitrogen in her suit was enough to hit narcosis – the needle dial showed 3 bar – I ran my own suit through the same procedure, then lay back in the ash and stared at the sky.

Above us, a red and purple Aural lit multiple tracers as it blossomed into a flower of light, creating the rainbow petals of six brand new Aurals. Alna rapped on my helmet and grinned. "I feel Omare," she said, tears dotting her facemask.

I laughed. This was silly. My dead brother wasn't bubbling into the sky. Instead, frozen air naturally sublimated when the light from Eur's mother star hit it. But before I could say anything, movement from the mirror landscape snagged my eye. To my surprise there stood Omare, buck naked and waving at me.

My twin looked impossibly thin, his body and arms reaching for the horizon as he smiled. The nitrogen narcosis caused me to imagine – for the briefest of moments – that I was the one standing on the surface. That my own body waved at me. Then I remembered the moms grinding Omare's body to kibble and dumping him in the decay pit. I moaned.

As if to distract me from such ugly memories, Omare pointed to a passing Aural. Even though enough rationality survived my narcosis to know my dead brother couldn't be standing naked on a world so cold its atmosphere long ago froze and fell from the sky, I smiled.

Alna touched her helmet against my helmet and we heard each other giggle. For the first time since being born on this cursed world, I felt like I truly, truly belonged.

#

I am stupid. Omare was smart. Of the expedition's two thousand people, he was chosen. I was not. Everyone knows this. The smart boy and his dumb brother. The special one – and the one who fears the Aurals.

But it shouldn't have been so. I was born a mom. Born to know things. And I do. I know we aren't meant to live on a frozen world. I know the tech our ancestors created for us six hundred years ago – all the suits and cleavers and tick-tock mechanisms keeping us alive – are wearing down. I know the Aurals are not our friends. I know all this, but because I wasn't chosen like Omare, no one listens.

Omare and I were born in the highest level of the cave in as much heat and good air as our expedition could give. While low kids raised their children in the lower cave's cold, Omare and I never knew this deprivation when we were young. We only knew that our

mother and father loved us, and if we climbed down the cave's spiral tunnels we wore clumsy pails of frozen oxymix around our neck. The insulated pails contained a tiny tick-tock heater, and you cranked them every few minutes to smoke out the extra air needed to live.

When we were ten, our parents led us to the surface for our ceremonial joining with the expedition. They sealed Omare and me in a tuber, a clear bubble used for emergency pressure drops. Once outside the airlock, I poked the bubble over and over, amazed that something so flimsy could keep our air and warmth inside. We walked awkwardly across the frozen surface to where a handful of other bubbles waited, each holding two kids from our age class.

Omare, being Omare at even such a young age, whispered that this bubble was like all the expedition's dead technology – the slush suits, the cave, the rebreathers and heat exchangers – built for us long ago and still functioning with only minimal repairs. "This tech might as well be magic," he said, "because we sure can't create it anymore."

I suppose he would have gone on like that, a ten-year-old babbling of things his brother didn't care about. But right then the burning ball of an Aural flashed across the sky. No larger than the tuber Omare and I stood in, the indigo Aural dipped for a moment before flying back toward the Crab Nebula, where it exploded into several smaller Aurals, each spinning spirals across the star-burned blackness.

Omare stared in amazement at the disappearing aliens. Heck, we all stared. But for Omare, it wasn't enough to simply see a beautiful sight. No, he had to understand. "They're playing," he whispered. "There's no logical reason for such displays unless they're playing with us."

I shrugged, having no way to know. But mother and father, touching our bubble with their slush suits, heard Omare's comment. Mother leaned over the tuber until her facemask pushed the clear bubble in. "Be quiet," she ordered nervously, her voice tinny to what I now know was my first experience at suit to suit talking. "And keep quiet when Big Mom starts the ceremony."

Omare and I nodded, and I was suddenly aware only the thinnest of barriers separated us from a quick and cold death.

Soon the bubbles were pushed together so the clear surfaces touched and we heard the other kids still laughing in amazement at the Aurals. However, one age mate was quiet and merely glared at Omare. His name was Gunetar. He was a big, nasty boy my brother had fought with numerous times. Gunetar loved picking on low kids, something Omare refused to tolerate.

"Chicka," Gunetar whispered. "She's gonna pop you."

"Who?" I asked.

"Big Mom. She makes an example out of two kids at every ceremony. Orders the enforcers to cut open their bubble. Slice. Bang. Dead."

My face paled and Gunetar laughed. Omare started to tell Gunetar to decay off, but right then Big Mom walked out of the airlock in her black space suit. Big Mom was tens of thousand of years old – with over six hundred of that spent on this planet – and her word was life or decay for everyone in the expedition. Before coming to this world, Big Mom had been an artificial intelligence, one of the numerous AIs who oversaw humanity's affairs. But in order to enter the Aurals' system, she gave up that power and encased herself in a flimsy human body.

Beside Big Mom stood three large enforcers in black suits, each holding a combat cleaver. One of the enforcers lowered her cleaver until it hovered a handspan above the bubble holding Omare and me. Behind us, Gunetar made a soft popping sound with his mouth. He snickered when I grabbed Omare's hand.

Big Mom stepped forward and placed her suited hands on the tubers so everyone heard her. "You are privileged to be here," she whispered in a majestic, harmonizing voice, which

hinted so perfectly at her AI origins. “This is the six hundredth and third year of our amazing voyage. You already know why we’re on this planet. To learn about the Aurals. To contact them. So far, we have failed. Perhaps you will succeed where we have not.”

As Big Mom fell back into the history we’d all studied, I yawned. We all knew the Aurals were the only intelligent spacefaring species discovered so far by humanity. We also knew that each attempt by humanity and our AIs to either contact the Aurals, or expand into the systems they claimed, resulted in the destruction of our ships and probes.

Noticing my eyes glazing over, one of the enforcers kicked our bubble. I sat up straight, hoping Big Mom hadn’t noticed.

“The Aurals hate humanity’s high technology,” Big Mom said. “That’s why they attack us. But perhaps they’re also receptive to coexistence. So here we are, on this frozen planet, presenting ourselves to the Aurals in simple, unadorned peace. No technology but the most basic. No way to leave until this planet’s eccentric orbit takes us back out of Aural space.”

“Do they really want us here?” Omare asked. “The Aurals, I mean.”

The silence of vacuum fell into Omare’s question, although I heard Gunetar snicker softly. Big Mom stared at Omare, and one of the enforcers raised his cleaver as if to slice open our tuber. Big Mom waved for him to stop.

“An innocent’s question,” Big Mom said, placing her hands on our bubble alone. “The short answer is yes. This is the Aural home world. Long before humanity reached into space, the Aurals pushed their home world out of its normal orbit, causing Eur to travel to the edge of this star’s gravitational field and leave Aural territory for a brief period every five hundred years. A single message, one of the few we’ve received from the Aurals, humbly offered us their home as a means to travel into their realm and meet them as equals.”

I thought of the power of the Aurals. Able to throw their home planet into a new orbit as if a toy. How they coated Eur with mirror ash once the atmosphere froze, preserving the world as easily as a ball of food thrown onto ice. Even though this didn’t seem like a meeting of equals, I thanked Big Mom for telling us what we already knew. But Omare wasn’t satisfied. He wanted to know why we hadn’t left Aural space, since Eur’s orbit was five hundred years long and we’d been here for more than six centuries. As his mouth opened to spout that deadly question, the guards shifted their tuber-cutting cleavers.

I quickly kicked Omare. “Please excuse my brother,” I said to Big Mom. “He’s simply excited about the Aurals.”

Omare glared at me as he rubbed his sore shin, then nodded agreement.

With no more intruding questions, Big Mom ordered our bubbles spread across the mirror ash to see if the Aurals would communicate with us. This had been attempted with every person born in our expedition for six hundred years, and in all that time none of the Aurals had taken the least interest in us. But that didn’t stop the moms from trying again and again to gain the Aurals’ attention.

So much for our meeting of equals.

For a moment nothing happened. A few random Aurals arched through the sky. I glanced down at the mirrored surface to watch their reflections, causing my stomach to almost explode from vertigo.

Gagging, I looked up in time to see a pink Aural spin out of the sky. It fell scary fast, causing several startled enforcers to jump back. The ball of energy shot around the moms and veered right at our tuber, where it stopped.

As I looked into the pure light of an Aural, the vertigo of a moment before returned, as if instead of an Aural I watched my own reflection dancing a jig while my body remained perfectly still. The Aural hovered silently for a moment, then bumped our tuber gently, even though the Aural didn’t appear to be solid. Omare – again, merely being Omare – reached out his hand and touched the thin bubble separating us from the alien.

But where Omare wanted to touch the Aural, I wanted to get away. I could only think of the power of this damn thing. How they threw their home world across space. How they destroyed any high tech which dared approach their system. But if the Aural noticed me clawing in panic against the back of the tuber, it didn't respond. It merely nuzzled against the bubble separating it from Omare's hand, rang like a ceramic chime, and spun silently back into the sky.

And so Omare became the Aural's chosen one.

Everyone celebrated that day. Moms. Low kids. Middle workers. Even Big Mom couldn't wipe the smile from her face. Our first true contact with the Aurals.

Or I should say, everyone celebrated but me. Back in our tiny bub, I cried in my mother's lap. Told her our mission was stupid stupid stupid. That we didn't belong on this world. That the Aurals were evil.

"You should be happy for your brother," she said as she hugged me. "This means a lot. Not only to him, but to all of us."

I wanted to scream, but instead I wiped my tears and said I understood. I then waited until Omare came back home and punched him in the stomach.

#

Of course, the moms caught Alna and me.

After only fifteen minutes of nitrogen narcosis, our suit's tick-tock regulator valves clicked on and began venting the excess pressure, edging the hallucinations away as we slowly decompressed. I opened my eyes to see a massive cloud of oxygen boiling into the sky. Through the haze I saw Alna hacking at the mirror ash with the cleaver, making the hole bigger – far bigger – than it should be.

I grabbed the cleaver from her and began to scrape mirror ash back over the oxygen. But it was too late. The moms had seen us. They marched across the mirror ash, small at first, their suits' dark lines wavering between original sky and reflected sky, stick-figure mirages growing larger and larger the closer they came. I thought about running, but they were between us and the cave's airlocks. Neither Alna nor I had enough air to stay out much longer.

When the moms hiked close enough to see their helmeted faces, I saw they were led by Gunetar, now Big Mom's main enforcer.

"You're kidding me," he said, grabbing my facemask with both his suited hands, so he could both hold me and force his words to my ears. He was red-faced mad, sucking oxymix at a terrible rate. "Chicka, you're as crazy as your brother."

Alna blew a mugging kiss at Gunetar, turning his face even redder. She obviously didn't give a suit's tear about Gunetar catching us. With Omare decayed, she didn't want to be reborn.

Before Gunetar boot stepped us back to the cave, he ordered us to rake the insulating ash back over the smoking hole. As I covered the last of the oxygen, a blue Aural the size of my head flittered across the mirror landscape. The ball of energy circled us twice only a meter above the ash. Like Omare had done as a child, I reached out to touch it as the clear tones of bells filled my head. The Aural hovered near my glove for a moment before the tiny ball arched back to the skies like we hadn't mattered at all.

#

Three years after Omare became the Aural's chosen one, our father died in a cave-in while overseeing the mining of a new supply tunnel. Our planet suffered from constant

seismic shocks. While the cave was built to survive tremors, the supply tunnels – which cut through the different layers of the planet’s frozen atmosphere – frequently collapsed. That risk was why our father had several times asked Big Mom for a new job. But one did what Big Mom ordered, even unto death.

Mother screamed in rage when she learned of the collapse, and ordered the enforcers to dig through the rubble to reach him. “He might still be alive,” she said. But Big Mom stopped them.

“He’s safer under the ice,” Big Mom said. “When Eur leaves Aural space, we’ll recover his frozen body and reborn him with tech you can scarcely imagine. He’ll wake, and learn how humans should truly live.”

“Don’t you understand?” our mother yelled. “We’re not leaving Aural space. We never will. If this planet was going to leave, it would have done so a hundred years ago.”

A cold-shock hush fell across the moms. Everyone knew we should have long since left Aural space and been rescued by humanity. But that was a fact no one ever spoke in public, and especially not to Big Mom.

Big Mom gestured to an enforcer, who raised a cleaver to our mother’s neck. “Speak of this again,” Big Mom said, “and your children are orphans.” She spoke so dispassionately I had no trouble believing she’d once been an AI.

Our mother nodded, and silently led Omare and me back to the safety of our little bub.

A month later, Omare and I woke to find ourselves alone in our bub. By the time we dressed, Gunetar stood outside our door. He wore the grey apprentice uniform of a newly sworn enforcer and grinned wickedly.

“Your mother killed herself,” he said. “Jumped out an airlock without a suit.”

I screamed at Gunetar and tried to hit him, but Omare held me back. “Liars,” I yelled at Gunetar. “You, the Aurals, Big Mom. All of you.”

Omare told me to shut up before he thanked Gunetar for the news. Gunetar looked surprised at Omare’s icy reaction to our mother’s death, then nodded his head like a pompous fool and walked away.

Once we were alone, I told Omare that Big Mom killed our mother. “Of course she did,” Omare said in that calm, logical tone I found so irritating. “But if you talk of this, we’ll suffer the same fate. Our mother wouldn’t want that.”

A few hours later, Omare and I watched the enforcers grind up our mother’s stiff body and throw the pieces into the decay pit, where her flesh bubbled among the yellow and green liquids. Big Mom watched impassively, looking older than I remembered and leaning on her main enforcer for support. When Big Mom finally spoke to the gathered crowd, she said she understood the anguish which drove our mother to question our mission and kill herself. However, she added, some things could not be allowed. “Remember,” she said. “Rebirth is only for the dutiful.”

Omare held my hand. “Don’t let the moms see your anger,” he whispered. “Anger will mark you as dangerous.”

As I shoved the tears back down my eyes, I swore to keep it hidden.

#

Naturally Omare and I were punished for our mother’s deeds. We were kicked out of our bub into a new one near the bottom of the cave where the low kids lived. While our old bubble house had been big enough to sleep ten people side by side, our new bub – simply a round pocket carved into the rock, and coated with thermal blankets – barely let you stretch out without touching both walls.

Big Mom also demoted me to middle worker, forcing me to learn the trade of pressure suit repair. Omare, though, was given probation, and allowed to continue his higher studies. After all, he was the chosen one, and the chosen one couldn't repair suits for the rest of his life.

One night I couldn't sleep because of leg cramps from long hours of test walking slush suits. I opened my glow tube and glanced through Omare's school books. Angry that I couldn't study and learn like he did, I wrote four questions on the back page of his physics book – the asking of any of which was a death sentence.

My questions were simple:

Why did the Aurals throw their home world into a new orbit and preserve it under mirror ash, thousands of years before humanity reached space?

Do the Aurals hate humanity's high tech, or do they hate us?

Why hasn't this planet's orbit taken us back out of Aural space?

If Big Mom is now human, why is she still alive after 600 years?

For a moment I considered letting Omare take the book to school, and imagined his professors' reaction when they saw the questions their beloved chosen one dared to contemplate. But in the end I couldn't risk Omare's life. I woke my brother and showed him what I'd done. He read the questions slowly, nodded solemnly, then tore the page out of the book.

"You truly are my twin," he whispered. "I've pondered the same questions. But you forgot the most important one."

"Which is?"

"What are you going to do about this?"

Everyone else in the expedition loved it when the chosen one was cryptic and sage-like. Me, I hit him and fell asleep angry.

#

Big Mom was still, well, Big Mom.

Gunetar dragged Alna and I to our expedition's largest bubble house, where Big Mom sat surrounded by dozens of thermal blankets. Since I'd been kicked down to middle worker, I'd rarely been allowed up where the heat and air were sweet and you could walk around in only a thin insulated jumpsuit. Even though being here meant we were in deep trouble, Alna smiled, enjoying the warmth and fresh air. I glanced out the window and saw the spiral tunnels leading to the lower cave, where the air turned cold and carbon dioxide pockets trapped anyone not wearing extra air.

Big Mom muttered my name, and I turned back to her. She listened as Gunetar gave her a one-sided view of catching us doing narcosis on the ice. Big Mom had aged badly in the decade since she'd killed my mother. Her body looked frail and weak, and she shivered despite several warmth blankets wrapped around her shoulders. However, you could still see the two purple lines from her eyes to cheek bones signifying she'd once been an AI. During Omare's studies of human history, he'd often told me stories about humanity's artificial overseers. I tried to imagine the power Big Mom once controlled, before realizing she still controlled enough power to kill me.

When Gunetar finished talking, Big Mom glared at me. "Chicka, it saddens me to see you under such circumstances," she said softly, like oxygen sublimating into near vacuum. "How is your brother?"

"He died several months ago."

“Oh yes, I forgot,” she said, a look of irritation running her face as if she hated dealing with the weakness of her now-human memory. “He was such an amazing child. Shame he went so strange.”

I nodded, not wanting to say anything to land Alna and me in even more trouble.

“I need to know what you were thinking,” Big Mom said. “Why risk your lives by doing narcosis on the surface?”

For once Alna kept her damn mouth shut and merely glanced at me, silently urging me to do the talking. We both knew enough human history to feel the threat behind Big Mom’s words. Before taking this voyage, Big Mom – or any AI – could have ripped the very thoughts and emotions from our minds, using the tech which saturated human existence beyond the Aural system. But while I may not live damn near forever like Big Mom, and can’t control technologies beyond imagining on this iceball world, here my thoughts are my own. Despite her years as a human, Big Mom still didn’t get this.

“We wanted to see if the Aurals might respond to a different level of consciousness,” I said cautiously. Big Mom stared, trying to decide the truth to my words. Gunetar, however, rolled his eyes. He obviously didn’t believe me. He moved his massive mouth toward Big Mom’s ear like he was about to swallow the shrunken cartilage and skin there, but Big Mom waved him silent.

“Did you feel anything, Chicka?” she asked. “Did they try to reach you?”

“No. But right when Gunetar found us, a small Aural circled us several times. Maybe if he hadn’t been there...”

“Is this why so many low kids do nitrogen narcosis?”

“Yes,” I lied. “They understand the mission, but they also want to try new ways of reaching the Aurals.”

Big Mom nodded in excitement. But just as I thought she might fall for my lies, a gentle tickle ran the back of my scalp. Big Mom’s eyes narrowed to pin-sticks of anger. “You think it’s funny to lie to me,” she whispered. “I should decay you.”

I tried to mutter an explanation, but Alna interrupted me. “Go ahead and decay us,” Alna said. “At least we’ll be with Omare.”

Gunetar’s face spit a wicked cut of a smile. “I’m so sorry for what happened to Omare,” he said. “He could have gone places – even with such a poor choice in a mate.”

That comment pushed Alna over the edge. “You son bitch,” she screamed in low kid talk as she leapt at Gunetar. “You know. You decay Omare.”

Gunetar easily slammed Alna to the floor. Because Big Mom was watching, he didn’t do the different pains and hurts he knew, but he was so much stronger than Alna he didn’t need tricks. I reached for Alna, maybe to tell her to calm down, maybe to get Gunetar not to hurt her, and suddenly I was thrown to the floor. The mom guarding the door held me down, pressing her knee into my back and twisting my right arm behind me.

I glanced at Alna, who cried like she had when Omare died. Gunetar told Big Mom we’d always been trouble. Big Mom nodded, still angry at my lie. But she softened as she stared at me, and I knew she was seeing Omare’s face in place of my own. Maybe she regretted all she’d done to push my brother to his death.

“Don’t kill them,” she said, her voice exhausted as if she’d walked in a slush suit emptied of oxygen. “Work them in the decay pit.”

#

The decay pit lay hundreds of meters below in the very lowest reaches of the cave. Heated by the expedition’s heat exchangers – which reached to the planet’s core and used natural convection to cycle cold down and heat up – the pit was warm enough that people

actually sweated when they worked. Omare once told me that if the big moms had wanted to, they could have built our expedition with enough heat exchangers so the entire cave would be as warm as the pit.

“Why didn’t they?” I asked naively.

“If everyone had good heat and air, we wouldn’t need Big Mom to control us.”

I thought of this as the enforcers dragged us to the decay pit shores. For a moment I feared Gunetar would defy Big Mom and grind us up, dumping our kibble into the pit like he’d done my brother. Instead, Gunetar held a half-eaten fruit ball before my face, then tossed it into the liquid decay.

“Maybe Omare’s hungry,” he said.

Alna’s eyes flashed with rage, but I held her back so she wouldn’t get us in even more trouble. “You are such a wimp,” she screamed at me.

Gunetar laughed as he left us to our prison.

So began my life as a low kid.

Working the decay pit was the worst job in the expedition. The size of a thousand bub houses, the pit contained a lake of bacteria and modified fungi which digested everything thrown in. Our job consisted of rowing a boat back and forth across the pit so our paddles mixed the ferment and liquids. We’d then strain the muck from the bottom with a net and drag it to shore, where we packed the slime around the roots of the pale green vegetables and grains, their thin, sickly leaves arching toward the faint lights on the ceilings. In a connected chamber, a lake of shewanella bacterium hummed as they turned even more waste into weak electricity, which was fed into the decay pit’s simple grow lights.

This far down, low oxygen levels and carbon dioxide pockets posed a continual threat. Since CO2 was denser than good air, the gas continually flowed down the cave, at times building to dangerous levels in the pit. As a result, Alna and I always wore extra air and rebreathers.

Despite that, I gasped for each breath, the pit’s humid, rotten stench keeping a continual backwash of vomit in my throat. The heat also dripped sweat from my body, a feeling I’d never felt before and now hated with a passion. Whenever the ice fetchers dragged one of the rare blocks of air to the pit, I’d stand near the ice to both cool off and breathe the fresh air as it sublimated away.

Several times each day other low kids dragged sacks of rotten food or compost to the pit, which we’d crank through an ancient grinder before dumping the kibble into the pit. I often stared at the grinder’s pointed glass fingers, which were still sharp despite 600 years of grinding, and wondered at the power of the humans and AIs who created all this. Then I’d cuss them for sticking me with such a life.

Alna, though, loved the work. She made snowballs out of the muck and threw them at me. When I once muttered that this job would kill us, she shook her head and dipped a bare hand into the decay pit. “Can you feel Omare?” she asked.

I said she was as crazy as my brother. She pursed her lips and kissed me on the side of my rebreather, thanking me for the compliment.

#

Could I feel Omare? Yes. I felt his loss each and every day.

Omare died less than a year after he defied Big Mom by marrying Alna. While middle workers occasionally married low kids, moms never did. But as usual, Omare didn’t do what everyone told him to do. Big Mom sentenced him to work the decay pits until he changed his mind. Omare never did.

One cold night, when the exchangers poured almost no heat into the low kids' area of the cave, Omare returned from the pits with the coughing fever. Alna and I stayed awake worrying over him. With the air too poor to risk candles, Alna opened her portable glow tube and lit the bub in the faint green of bioluminescence. Each time Omare coughed, Alna pounded his back to clear the congestion. Each smack caused the foxfire inside the glow tube to flicker, almost as if the modified mushrooms feared for Omare's life.

After what seemed like hours, Omare regained his breathing. When the tick-tock clock chimed its regular call for more air, he released a burst of freshness from the oxymix canister. He then asked what I thought of the AIs who sent us on this mission.

"What do I think?" I whispered in anger. "What type of people sacrifice future generations to a life of pain and cold, with only the promise of a new life if we behave? Every big mom deserves to decay for this."

"That's just it," Omare said. "The big moms aren't human. They don't see life as we do."

"But they reborn us," Alna said softly in the dark, her low kid slang clipping gently over us. "Don't talk this, or you'll get decayed."

"They won't reborn us," Omare said knowingly. "Why reborn a bunch of know-nothing humans, who've lived without the most basic tech? Beside, this planet isn't taking us home. We're already a hundred years past the pickup. We have to seek our own rebirths."

Alna shifted nervously. Like me, she was both excited and fearful at the idea that we could manage our own rebirths. We waited for Omare to say more, but instead he moaned. Alna cradled Omare's burn-hot body while I passed into sleep, thinking on Omare's words. I woke hours later to Omare's face a finger-touch from mine in the green-tinted dark. "You should have been chosen, not me," he whispered. "The AIs are master manipulators."

I nodded, even though I didn't know what he meant. The Aurals had chosen him, not Big Mom, who wasn't even an AI anymore. "Don't worry about it," I said.

Omare was silent, not appearing to breathe. Worried, I touched his frighteningly hot cheek, then wiped his forehead with the water rag. Even though the wind-up clock hadn't chimed its reminder for air, I vented a little extra from the canister.

Omare sighed and closed his eyes. Just as I started to doze off, he whispered in my ear. "Reborn this world. That's our test. That's our burden."

"How can we reborn a whole world when we can barely stay alive?" I asked. He smiled, but didn't say anything more before falling asleep. I wiped his forehead a final time and also fell asleep.

When the clock next chimed for air, he was dead.

Alna cried, but I told her to hush. "We have to get Omare to an airlock," I said. "Rush him to ice before the moms find out."

Alna whispered agreement. While Alna readied my slush suit, I grabbed a pail of air and ran through the spiral tunnel to the low kids' communal bub. Two of our friends, Luck and Tuck, lived there with maybe fifty others. Luck and Tuck were a sister and brother who'd always been low kids. While Luck and Tuck mostly kept to themselves, they were also hard workers, and always ready to help a friend.

I found them in the communal bub's mass of stenching, shivering bodies, and told them about Omare. Tuck grabbed his slush suit while Luck put on her air pail and ran to help Alna drag Omare to the reserve airlock, which was rarely guarded. I popped into my slush suit, pumped in a supply of air from our canister, then climbed to the airlock to find Alna holding Omare's head to her chest. I promised we'd bury Omare's body deep in the oxygen layer. "Cover him good, so moms don't find," she said.

I nodded and carried Omare into the lock. As Tuck cranked the lock through its venting cycle, I prayed that the Aurals would protect my brother until our planet once again left Aural

space. That those amazing humans and AIs who lived among the stars would reborn his frozen body. That one day in the far future Omare and I would be reunited.

But the Aurals must not have been listening, because as I rolled the airlock door to the side, all I saw were the cold, face-masked eyes of Gunetar and his goons.

#

By the end of our third month in the decay pit, Alna and I had the cough, the same hack and crack which killed Omare. Each day we climbed down from our bub and reported to the pit boss, a wannabe mom named Handle who never spoke a word. But he was big and strong, and when he pointed at a job we did what he wanted without question. The one time Alna smarted off to him, he backhanded her a meter into the pit.

At first the other low kids treated me with suspicion. Only Luck and Tuck and Alna taught me how to survive in the bad air and harsh work of the lower cave. Alna explained that this was simply how low kids were. "They can't know you. Think maybe you mom spy, so they watch. Be patient."

Alna was right. As time went by, I began to be accepted. Once, as I ate breakfast in the communal kitchen, someone asked why my brother married a low kid. I shrugged and said he loved Alna, which was true. Another low kid asked if she could have a bub house like mine. I said she had to ask Big Mom, which caused curses all around.

One day the cave shook, sending waves across the decay pit and disturbing the electric bacteria so much they shut down light power. Alna and I sat very still in our little boat, listening to the waves ripple the shoreline rocks. I told Alna the cave had been built to withstand quakes far worse than this. She didn't say anything, but her hand snatched mine in a painfully tight grip. Only when the lights glowed again, and our fear of being entombed in the pit's sea of muck vanished, did she let go.

That wasn't our worst day in the pit. That happened when Gunetar and his enforcers dragged a mom to the pit. The man, an aged astronomer for whom I'd once repaired a slush suit, was silent as Gunetar strapped him to the grinder. Alna started to protest, but I silenced her by pointing to the squad of twenty enforcers who stood just outside the main entrance. Those moms wore space suits so black I had trouble seeing where the suits ended and shadows began. Their space suits worked much like our slush suits, meaning you had to mechanically crank in air supplies. But what really mattered was that their suits were indestructible. The moms also carried combat cleavers, whose large glass-like blades could cut through ice and flesh with equal ease.

"You, Omare boy," Gunetar yelled at me. "Get over here."

I trudged over. Gunetar told me to crank the grinder. I glanced at the old man strapped down before me, who stared calmly at the ceiling. Alna said she'd turn the crank, but Gunetar told her to shut up. I leaned over the condemned man and whispered my apologies.

"It's not your fault," the man said in his sing-song educated voice. "And if it had to be anyone, I'm glad it's Omare's brother."

"Get to cranking," Gunetar ordered. I turned the crank, and the man slowly moved toward the row of glass cleavers. Gunetar had strapped the man in so his feet hit the cleavers first. To the man's credit he didn't scream until his ankles started to be ground to fingernail size pulp. I cranked as fast as I could, but the grinder wasn't built for speed.

The man died when the grinders reached his knees, all his blood spurting into the exhaust tray. I kept cranking until there was nothing left but bloody kibble, which rattled and poured down the tray into the pit.

Gunetar slapped me on the back. He asked if I wanted to know the man's crime.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

Gunetar cut his face into his ugly, wide smile. “Exactly. That’s exactly what I was going to say.”

#

Thankfully, that was the only execution we attended during our time in the pit. The following week, Alna and I were eating lunch when Handle walked up with Luck and Tuck. The sister and brother grinned from ear to ear as they told us we could get out of here. Handle nodded authoritatively.

“Here’s a deal,” Luck said, sounding sassier than I’d ever heard her sound. “You can stay in decay two years, or Handle pull you to other jobs for ten years. Other jobs much better.”

I nodded in excitement. Alna and I wouldn’t last a year in the pit. Alna, though, was her usual suspicious self. “Why so lenient? And why you talk for Handle?”

Luck and Tuck giggled, and Luck slapped Handle on his massive back. “Handle no never talk, except to me and Tuck. And Omare. He loved talk Omare, and he doesn’t want you go like him.”

I tried to shut Alna up at that point. After all, why question good luck. But of course she couldn’t go quietly. “So you decay Omare, but we get good work?”

Handle glanced at me with that familiar gaze, which meant he was really seeing my twin’s face. “He tried,” Tuck whispered. Tuck rarely talked, usually letting his sister speak for him. “Handle offered Omare a pull. Omare refused. Omare wanted death.”

Alna screamed and tried to hit Tuck, but I held her back and thanked the pit boss. Handle scratched his bald head as he nodded, while Luck and Tuck grinned. They obviously weren’t done dealing.

“One more thing,” Luck said. “We want to be bubmates. You got bub. You got one boy girl, we got a girl boy.”

Alna glanced from Luck to Tuck to me and smirked. I looked into Luck’s blue eyes, which stared like puddles of warm water on an icy cave floor. To my surprise, vertigo hit and my legs shivered slightly.

“I take that a yes,” Luck said with a laugh.

#

Omare once told me the cave wasn’t supposed to work like this. We were all supposed to be moms. Not big moms, but moms all the same.

But after barely five years on this planet, with the expedition still starting out but well beyond the point where humanity’s advanced tech could rescue us, things went bad. The heat exchangers didn’t provide as much heat as the big moms had promised. The food was poor and the work hard. For many members of the expedition, who had given up high tech lives and been forced to bio-engineer their bodies to survive the bad air and cold, the knowledge that they’d be frozen at death and revived into their old lives was no longer enough.

A group of humans revolted against Big Mom. But Big Mom and her supporters, with access to indestructible space suits and military cleavers, soon triumphed. Those who’d rebelled were pushed further down the cave, where their kids and kids’ kids were allowed to work for the heat needed to survive. Thus the low kids and middle workers were born. The lows kids worked the worst jobs, while the middle did those skilled jobs the moms didn’t want. Just as good air goes bad as it drops, and heat rises to those on top, the moms had the best of both.

“You know what truly scares me?” Omare asked one day while visiting me in the suit repair room. I had no idea what scared Omare. I knew what scared me: Freezing to death. Choking on poorly mixed air. Getting beat by the enforcers. Not having enough food or warmth. But I figured Omare’s fears wouldn’t be anything so mundane, and I was right.

“What scares me are the Aurals,” he said. “The more I learn of our history, the more I think the Aurals used Eur’s eccentric orbit to trap us in their system.”

“Why do that?” I asked. “They’re so powerful they could have taken humanity by force.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s the confusing part. The Aurals are vastly stronger than our AIs. But I’m certain the Aurals used Eur to remove a sample of humanity from the big moms’ control. I suspect they even caused this planet to leave its regular orbit as a means of trapping us.”

I thought about that. The Aurals sent their home world into a new orbit long before humanity reached into space. If what Omare said was true, that indicated a degree of foresight on the Aurals’ part which scared the crap out of me.

“Why do all that to trap a few thousand people?”

“Because they have plans for us – plans which don’t involve our AIs.”

Omare pulled a history book from his backpack. I was secretly jealous. Omare had access to the expedition’s library, while my world consisted of a room of torn pressure suits. On the wall behind me hung thirty pressure suits in various stages of repair. While Omare played at his studies and over-thought every little thing, decades of the same work stared me in the face.

Omare opened the book to a section on ancient history. “I’ve been studying the ancient methods of creating alloys like steel,” he said. “To create an alloy, you place various metals through heat and stress. The alloy that results has different – and often enhanced – properties from its parent elements.”

“I know you aren’t interrupting my work to suggest the Aurals are using this world to enhance us.”

Omare grinned. “Think about it. Outside this system, every human is so integrated with tech and AIs that to kidnap us would be pointless. Those humans wouldn’t know how to live because their culture is based around AI tech and control, and control and tech are all those humans know. But not here. Over the last six hundred years we’ve slowly changed. Been slowly weaned off the AIs and their tech. Look at the low kids. They have different speech patterns, and a unique subculture with ritual beliefs like sublimation angels.”

I sighed. I loved my brother, but I wished the Aurals had never selected him. He was obsessed with discovering the truth to everything, and one day Big Mom would crack him hard. But I also knew he was probably right. I thought about all the manipulation going on here – manipulation from the Aurals, from the countless AIs who ran humanity outside this system, and even from our own Big Mom. That’s when I realized what truly scared me: my brother.

He was going to get both of us killed, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

#

Thanks to Luck and Tuck, Alna and I only worked in the decay pit two days each month. The siblings said Handle didn’t like people dying for no reason. So once he decided to trust you, he rotated you in and out of the most dangerous jobs.

Due to my skill at managing and repairing slush suits, I found myself working in the cave’s supply airlock. Because the airlock extended above Eur’s frozen atmosphere, the supply rooms were extremely cold, with a slick patina of ice coating the rocks. A long spiral

ramp ran from the lock to the cave's different levels. Every day, teams of low kids donned their slush suits and hiked into the near vacuum to mine loads of oxygen and nitrogen and other gases. They then dragged the ice blocks back by sled and lowered them to different parts of the cave system, where other low kids cut and sorted the frozen gases into needed mixes and let them sublimate.

Even though you'd think those ancient suits could take everything thrown at them, the low kids continually found ways to rip them apart. I worked nonstop repairing their suits, each time earning thanks and an extra ration or pail of frozen air from the grateful person whose life depended on my repair. I also continually lectured people on how much air they needed in their suits, and how long they could stay on the surface. Even though anyone wearing a suit was supposed to know their air tables, most of the low kids gleefully pushed the safety limits.

One day I sat stitching a patch over a ragged slush suit when Luck walked into the repair room. She wore her slush suit with the helmet off; just outside the door I saw a sled loaded with air canisters.

"Where you go?" I asked, slipping into low kid speak without meaning to.

Luck smiled her prettiest smile, which lit her face in heart-jumping ways to the room's green glow tube light. "Observatory. Wanna go? I never see stars without a suit."

The observatory was set a kilometer across the ash. Luck and I dragged the sled quickly, taking care to not wear ourselves out or use too much air. Omare had interned in the observatory, and I'd always wanted to see it. When we reached the site, I was astounded to see a clear bubble rising fifty meters above the surrounding mirror ash, looking for all the world like a giant version of that tuber Omare and I had been placed in as kids. Inside the massive bubble, ceramic and glass telescopes scanned the heavens as they rotated on a series of hand-cranked gears. On the lower level of the observatory sat row after row of book shelves, the famous library I'd never been allowed to visit.

After delivering fresh air to the observatory's store room, Luck and I snuck behind a telescope to watch the stars. One of the moms saw us, but he was a young-looking guy and, in kindness, pretended not to notice. Leaning against the clear bubbled wall, Luck and I held hands and snuggled and kissed as we pointed at both the stars and the Aurals blazing across the sky.

Eventually, Luck grinned in her cute but serious way. She pointed at the young astronomer beside us. "Ask if true," she whispered. "That we not going home."

"I can't. It's forbidden." I thought of the astronomer I'd been forced to kill, and wondered if he'd asked this very question and been condemned for it.

"You can. You Omare brother."

When she said that, I knew I'd already lost the argument. So I stood up and walked to the astronomer, trying to make sure I asked the question in my best imitation of proper mom grammar. The astronomer stared at me in curiosity and shock. At first I thought he was puzzled by me speaking like a mom, but I soon realized this man must have known Omare. He was seeing my brother in my face.

After glancing around to make sure no one could hear, the astronomer waved me closer. "Are you Omare's brother?" he whispered.

I nodded.

The astronomer hugged me tight for a moment before stepping back, trying to control his emotions. "Omare was right," he said. "The older moms don't want to hear it, but his observations speak for themselves. We aren't going back."

"What do you mean?"

"According to your brother's calculations, this planet is being slowly moved into its original short-term orbit around the mother star."

Seeing my surprise, the astronomer nodded. "It's astounding," he said. "Omare observed a gravitational lens effect around certain stars. There's something out there distorting this system's gravity – Omare believed it was a small singularity, which would account for Eur's frequent seismic activity. And just as he calculated, this singularity appears to be moving the planet back into a proper orbit around the Aural star."

"Does Big Mom know this?" I stammered. The astronomer nodded. He looked like he wanted to say more, but right then an older mom walked up and demanded to know what I was doing. I grabbed Luck's hand and we ran to the supply chamber, where our slush suits and sled waited.

As we dressed, Luck kissed me. "We aren't going back," she said. "No cushy shushy big momma rebirth for us."

I stared in shock at her. "How did you know?"

Luck kissed me again on the cheek, then whispered in my ear, "We low kids know things. We know all the things you need to know."

#

That night Luck and I told our bubmates what the astronomer said. The glow tubes lit our fungal protein green as we ate, and we huddled together under a large blanket for warmth. Alna accepted the news that Eur wouldn't leave Aural space with calm resignation, while Tuck, much like his sister, seemed to have already known this fact.

"No big deal," Luck said.

"No big deal?" I asked. "If Eur doesn't leave Aural space, we'll never be rescued. At some point all the leftover tech keeping us alive – the slush suits, the glow tubes, the heat exchangers – will wear out. We'll freeze."

Luck and Tuck laughed, and even Alna smiled as if I was being silly. "What?" I asked.

"Think," Luck said. "You smart, but you miss true smarts. How long we supposed to live on Eur?"

"One orbit. Five hundred years. We're well past that."

Luck paused, waiting for me to catch what she saw as an obvious oversight. When I didn't understand, she asked how come all our fancy suits and heat exchangers hadn't worn out already.

"Because they were made to last," I said. "Because people like me repair them."

Luck shook her head. "No, silly. They work because someone magics them."

"Who? The Aurals?"

"Yes and no. But Aurals have hand in it."

I tried to argue. The Aurals weren't magic. They were simply a different form of life than humans, and possessed technologies we didn't understand. Luck and Tuck laughed at my explanations, and I grew so angry I retreated to my warmth bag.

When the clock chimed its first call for air, Luck climbed into my warmth bag. I tried to stay angry at her, but with her body pressing against mine that was impossible. While Alna and Tuck had kept things at basic bubmate level, Luck and I didn't see any reason for that. As Luck wrapped her long legs and arms around me, she whispered that the Aurals were magic. "They give us this planet," she said. "Their old home world. Now they move Eur back to orbit. Magic."

"That's not magic," I whispered back, feeling her lips next to my ear.

"You move planet?" she asked. "You do that?"

What could I say? No, I couldn't move a planet, but neither could I make a slush suit, heat exchanger, or cleaver. I could do minor repairs on a suit, keep it cleaned and functioning.

But the fact that I was so limited didn't make suits and cleavers magic, any more than the Aurals' abilities made them the same.

But when I explained this to Luck, she merely shook her head. "It not what they do," she explained. "It what they play. They play big joke on big moms."

I told her I didn't understand. She giggled and told me not to worry – that she still loved me even though I was so dense.

I laughed and hugged her close, and we both fell asleep happy.

#

The supply tunnels surrounding our cave were long, running for endless kilometers along the original surface of this planet. According to the moms, surveys of the planet while it was still outside the Aural system had not revealed any remnants of whatever civilization produced the Aurals. However, the surveys did show that before Eur's orbit was changed, the planet had an abundance of plant life and animals. Now the tunnels we cut through the frozen atmosphere led us to frozen organics and water.

One day Alna and I worked four clicks down an older tunnel, hacking out a clump of organics and water for the decay pit. Or perhaps I should say, I was hacking away. I turned around to find Alna had disappeared.

I cursed as I checked my suit's air supply. The gauge's needle said just under two hours, which was enough time to drag this chunk of frozen organics back to the pit. But I didn't have time to do that and look for Alna. Irritated, I lost my temper and slashed my cleaver against a frozen fern entombed in the ice wall. I then followed Alna's faint boot prints down a side tunnel.

There are accurate maps of these tunnels in the library, maps hand drawn on stiff sheets of carbon and paper. And I knew all the animals that once lived on this planet were long dead. But as I walked the dark tunnels alone, with only the faintest glimmer of a glow tube to light the way, I imagined monsters to every flick and stab of shadow. Perhaps whatever force brought forth the Aurals on such a primitive world had also enabled a monster or two to survive.

I followed Alna's tracks into a new-looking tunnel. I hesitated, afraid to enter the tunnel. You never knew when a new-dug tunnel might collapse. Even stranger, this tunnel appeared to have been melted through the ice, instead of chipped by cleaver. But from the fresh boot prints leading inside, Alna had come this way.

I gripped my glow tube tight as I entered the tunnel. I saw a green glow ahead, which revealed a human shape. I stepped up, expecting to see Alna leaning against the tunnel wall.

Instead I saw my brother's dead face, glowing from foxfire etching every pore of his body.

I screamed, and dropped my glow tube. It rolled across the icy tunnel, the light appearing and disappearing to a jumbled code of illumination. Suddenly the flickering tube floated into the air and back toward me. I pulled the ice cleaver from my suit's tool slot and held it like a shield, but as the tube neared I saw Alna held it.

She placed a hand on my suit and shouted/whispered, "Clumsy ...you." She then twisted the glow tube off, so I could see nothing but the green glow from my brother.

He was encased in the frozen carbon dioxide which made up most of the ice at this level. I stepped forward with my ice cleaver held high, ready to free my brother, when Alna grabbed me. "What...you...do?" she asked in horror.

"Free...him."

"No. He angel. Sublimation angel."

She referred to the clouds of sublimating air, like the one we'd created on the surface for Omare. I started to protest, to tell her that we'd both seen Omare's body ground to pieces. But by the faint light coming from Omare I saw that Alna's eyes were the sanest I'd seen since my brother's death. I looked back at Omare and I swear he'd moved. He now smiled, a smile frozen in CO2. But that was crazy.

Again, I glanced around this new tunnel, trying to understand how it – and my brother's body – had come to be here. I asked Alna what was further down the tunnel, but she said the tunnel simply ended. "Nothing there," she said. "Just wall."

I was still trying to understand what this meant when Alna pointed at my air gauge and said we had to leave.

#

We made it back to the cavern with only a few minutes of good air left. As I removed my stinking helmet, I asked Alna what the hell we'd just seen.

"What we seen," she said, "is Omare. Reborn."

I refused to accept that. I told her we'd seen his body ground to kibble. Alna nodded her head, as if all this made perfect sense. When I asked her to explain, she muttered something about the Aurals and walked away with a happy smile on her face.

I kicked the cold rock wall until I thought my slush suit boots would break.

That night Alna told Luck and Tuck what we saw, but I refused to talk about it. When Luck snuggled up to me, asking if I now believed in the Aurals, I pushed her away.

"You is dumb and dumb," she said. "What it take, make you true low kid?"

"Handle," Tuck suggested. "He need talk Handle."

Great, I thought. Talking with a low kid supervisor who never talks will convince me the Aurals are magic. Not for the first time, I wondered when the universe had gone crazy, and if I was the only sane person left in the cave.

Despite my misgivings, in the morning Luck dragged Alna and me to see Handle. The giant supervisor stood a full head taller than me, and he seemed irritated that Luck expected him to actually speak. He waved for us to leave, but Luck punched him in the gut, her tiny impact barely registering on Handle's massive girth. But Handle appeared shocked at the assault, and when Luck mentioned our discovery of Omare's body, he nodded sagely.

Handle glanced around, then whispered. "I know what you're feeling," he said. "I discovered his body a few weeks back. But last year, I also saw Gunetar grind up Omare's dead body. I can't figure out what the Aurals are doing with all this."

I stared in shock at Handle, from his massive muscles and broad chest to his eyes, which were suddenly alive with an intelligence I'd never noticed. Alna also seemed surprised. "You sound like Big Mom," she said. "Same talk she talk."

Handle laid a beefy hand on each of our shoulders, his fingers both gentle and threatening as they caressed the bones under our skin. "I trust you two will keep my secret. Only Luck and Tuck know, and they're my distant, far distant, grandkids." He smiled. "Of course, the way Luck looks after Chicka, I imagine I'll be having more descendents soon."

I nodded, not knowing what to say. Handle hugged me to his body with the strongest grip I'd ever felt. "Welcome to the family," he said.

#

That night in the bub, Luck and Tuck were extremely excited that we finally knew about Handle. Luck clapped her hands and kissed me for good measure. I saw Tuck try to kiss Alna, but she pushed him off.

“So good you know,” Luck said. “Hard keeping secrets from bubmates.”

“So what is Handle, a mom?”

Luck giggled. “He not mom. He big mom. Older than our Big Mom.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked, trying to wrap my understanding around Handle being the same as Big Mom – an AI now living as human. Then I remembered Handle saying he was one of Luck and Tuck’s ancestors. “Wait. I didn’t know AIs could have kids.”

“What they do, they do,” Luck said, grinning as she waved her hands at me like she was some ancient magician conjuring up a spell. “Lookie me. I’m part AI!”

We all laughed.

“So why didn’t you tell us?” I asked.

“Wasn’t Alna,” Luck said. “Was you. You were mid kid. Born momma boy. Handle say not tell moms or mid kids who he is.”

“I’m not any of those now,” I said.

“No, you not,” Luck laughed as she hugged me close. “Now you low low low.”

#

In the weeks that followed, word spread quickly among the low kids about Omare’s body, creating a steady stream of trekkers to see the sight. Alna said seeing Omare’s frozen body, with the knowledge that he’d been decayed, gave low kids hope that they too might one day be reborn. Some low kids were so Aural struck that when Alna and I led them to see Omare, we had to remind them to crank the carbon dioxide scrubbers on their suits.

To my surprise, Handle often stood in the tunnel observing Omare’s body. He’d stand there for hours in his slush suit. Sometimes I’d walk back to the cave for fresh air, and when I returned Handle would still be standing before Omare. I wondered why his suit didn’t run out of air. I also wondered why Handle looked so fit and young if he was truly older than Big Mom herself. Was there something about these former AIs everyone was missing?

I asked Luck about this, but she merely cocked an eye. “You not got enough work to do?” she said. “Handle give more work, you don’t shut up.”

I laughed and said I’d shut up.

When I wasn’t needed on work details or to escort low kids to see Omare, I continued repairing slush suits. Once a month Luck and I dragged supplies to the observatory. On our next trip I saw the young astronomer who’d been friends with Omare. I wanted to tell him about Omare’s body, but Luck shook her head and said it was forbidden. “Only low kids need know.”

I nodded. Only us low kids.

Then came the day Luck didn’t show up for our observatory trip. Instead, Handle dragged the sled of air canisters to the airlock. “Luck’s not feeling well,” he said. When I looked panicked, he laughed. “Don’t worry. She ate something that didn’t agree with her and feels queasy. Can’t risk her throwing up in a slush suit, can we?”

Handle asked me to help him drag the sled, although I didn’t have a clue why a man as big as him needed help. To my surprise, he attached a disk the size of my thumbnail to the outside of my slush suit helmet. “We can talk through this without touching,” he said.

I was shocked. “It this high tech?” I asked as Handle absently wound his suit’s CO2 tick-tock scrubber.

“No. Just something I rigged up.”

It seemed like tech to me, but I didn’t say anything more as we pushed the sled across the mirror ash.

The hardest part about traveling to the observatory was that the path was so old you continually brushed the mirror ash aside, causing the oxygen underneath to bubble away. As

a result, I kept brushing the ash back over the exposed air. After my umpteenth time doing this, I must have grumbled because Handle asked if I knew why the Aurals had preserved Eur's frozen air under mirror ash.

"I don't know. Omare once said it was part of their plan to temper us. To make us stronger, or some crap."

Handle laughed, but to my surprise it wasn't at Omare's theory. "Omare and I often debated that 'alloy' analogy of his," he said. "I must admit when he showed me the numbers proving the Aurals were pushing the planet back into its regular orbit, his alloy theory suddenly sounded as good as any I'd heard."

I started to ask if the Aurals were helping us, like so many of the low kids believed, but Handle spoke before I could say anything. "Don't believe that" he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're anthropomorphizing the aliens. Don't assume they're helping us. We truly don't know anything about these creatures."

I bristled at how Handle knew my question before I asked it. Outside this system, big moms were supposed to read and control minds. I remembered how Big Mom had been able to see through my lie all those months ago, and I wondered if she and Handle could still do this, even though they supposedly gave up their AI abilities before coming to the planet. But Handle laughed when I asked about this. "I can't read your mind," he said. "If I could still do that, we might as well have all our old high tech. Hell, I might as well still be an AI."

"Why are the Aurals so hostile toward our technology?"

"I didn't say they were hostile to our technology, although that's what the most AIs believe. Myself, I wonder if they simply don't like what the combination of humanity, its tech and AIs have become."

I stared at Handle, wondering what life had been like for him as an AI. But when I asked, he said it would be like trying to explain human life to a newborn baby.

"No offense," he said, "but I can't explain what my life was like before I gave everything up for this body."

I muttered that I wasn't offended, even though I was.

"That's what I mean," Handle said with a laugh. "That sarcastic tone to your voice. When I was an AI, I had powers beyond your comprehension. But despite that, I never truly understood humanity. It's taken me centuries of living as human to comprehend sarcasm. If the gulf between humanity and we AIs is so wide, imagine the distance between humanity and the Aurals."

"What about you? Are the Aurals as far above you AIs as you are above humans?"

Handle paused for a moment, and I knew that despite once being an AI, he'd been human long enough for my comment to hit a nerve. "Yes. We AIs can't approach the Aurals in power and ability. Our theory is that they are a naturally occurring intelligence with AI abilities, but we don't know for certain. I mean, they told us this was their home world, yet there's no evidence any Aural ever lived here. Did they lie, or are we unable to understand what they meant? I honestly don't know."

I wanted to hear more, but by that point we neared the observatory and there wasn't time for talk. Handle removed the talking disk from my helmet and placed his hand on my shoulder so we could talk the old fashioned way. "Just remember," he said. "The whole reason for this expedition was to find answers to the very questions you are asking. So don't feel bad at not knowing more about the Aurals than we did six hundred years ago."

#

For the next month, things went pretty much as they always had. We low kids hauled frozen air and water and organics to keep the cave alive, and the moms left us alone.

To my surprise, Luck asked me to marry her. Her water blue eyes had eaten their way into my soul, so I said yes even though I worried about the life I'd be bringing our kids into. Alna and Tuck and our friends scrounged all the slush suits they could find and took us to the surface for the ceremony. As we said our dues, holding hands so only the two of us could hear what was said, I felt the happiest I'd been since Omare died.

Then came the day a low kid was decayed alive. Six teenage low kids had been dragging nitrogen blocks down an airless tunnel when Gunetar confronted them, telling them to hurry up or he'd decay them. One of the low kids laughed at Gunetar, which shouldn't have mattered except the kid laughed just as Gunetar touched his suit. Gunetar heard the insult and lost control, ordering his enforcers to drag the kid to the decay pit. Luck and Alna and I were working nearby when Gunetar threw the teenager onto the grinder. When we heard the boy's screams we came running, as did many of the other low kids.

Gunetar was almost finished grinding the boy's body when he and the moms realized they were outnumbered. But they wore indestructible space suits, and by flashing their cleavers they forced the low kids to back down.

But I remembered something from long hours of repairing suits. How a fancy space suit might stop stuff from penetrating, but momentum and force could still hurt the person inside. I mentioned this to Alna, and fire jumped her eyes as she grabbed a heavy spar used to steer the ice sleds. She smashed a mom across his back. He fell and rolled across the rock floor. Other low kids grabbed additional spars and beat the fallen mom. Soon blood flowed under that unbreakable facemask, and the man inside no longer breathed.

With the long spars, we held off the moms, and whenever one fell down we smashed his suit until his body bled. Alna turned out to be an amazing leader, yelling at us to stand here or there so the moms couldn't cut us off. Finally Gunetar called a retreat, and the moms grabbed their dead and injured and ran for the safety of the higher cave.

When Handle came to see what had happened, he shook his head in irritation. "Try not to make it as bloody as last time," he muttered before walking back down the tunnel.

#

Handle called it a cold war, a historical joke I didn't pretend to understand. But the practical point was that after the first encounter no further blood was spilled. Our group of low kids barricaded ourselves in the decay pit work area, meaning we had access to the food growing there. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough good air to last longer than a few days. Without a constant supply of oxygen to counteract all the carbon dioxide in this part of the cave, we'd soon fall asleep and never wake up.

We tried to reach the other groups of low kids scattered around the cave, but the moms cut them off. As for the middle workers, they stayed neutral, which meant our little group was isolated. The moms also blocked all the supply tunnels which might lead to any extra oxygen.

As a result, the focal point of the standoff became the main tunnel leading into the upper cave. At one end stood we low kids, armed with spars and hiding behind overturned sleds and muck boats. The moms lined up in their suits at the other end of the tunnel. We taunted each other, but neither side tested the other's resolve.

After two days of standoff, Big Mom strode forward to talk with us. She walked confidently, looking stronger and far younger than I remembered from when Alna and I had been dragged before her last year.

"I will speak to this Alna," she announced.

I glanced nervously at Luck and Tuck, wondering how Big Mom knew Alna was leading us. I told Alna it might be a trap, but she waved my concerns away. "Talk is talk," Alna said. "We got nothing else to do."

I followed Alna as she walked out to greet Big Mom, even though being near the armed enforcers scared me silly.

"Ah Chicka," Big Mom said when she saw me. "I should have known you'd be involved in this."

"What do you offer?" Alna said sharply.

Big Mom looked suspicious. "Who said I'd make an offer?"

"Only reason you would leave a warm bub is to cut a deal. And I think, why moms not attack us last two days? Again, I think you want deal."

Big Mom didn't seem to believe us, and suddenly I felt that familiar tickling against my scalp. Somehow, somehow, this damn AI could still read minds. But we were telling the truth, and she smiled upon learning this. "You low kids are smarter than people think. Here's my offer: Surrender and go back to work, and all is forgiven."

"That it?" Alna asked, surprised. "No punishment? No trouble?"

Big Mom nodded. "As you say, no punishment, no trouble."

"But what you get out of it?"

Big Mom smiled, a smile without all the wrinkles she'd had the last time I saw her. "What I get is for things to be like they were before. And what you get is to keep on living. Even as we speak the cave's CO2 is flowing toward you. Once your portable air supplies run out, you will die. So I suggest you accept my offer soon."

With that, Big Mom returned to the main cave. I was excited by Big Mom's offer and said we should surrender, but Alna wouldn't hear of it. "What you think moms do?" she asked. "Pat our butt and say okay? No. They grind us up. Grind us all up."

Reluctantly, I agreed with Alna's reasoning. The moms had to make an example out of us. Otherwise, all the low kids would rise against them. Even though I tried my best to avoid fights, it was no secret what Gunetar would do to us if we surrendered.

I knew this wouldn't end well, but what else could we do?

#

The four of us made our bub in a nook of a tunnel, near enough to the decay pit that we stayed warm, but far enough back that we didn't continually smell the stinking air. We slept on top of our slush suits and cranked our pails of air and pretended we were back in our cubbyhole home.

Even though Alna was still our bubmate, she rarely slept. She paced the pit at all hours, rallying the scared low kids and making sure we didn't let our guard down. Tuck followed after her, helping in any way he could as he tried in vain to win Alna's heart.

So it was that Luck and I had the temporary bub to ourselves most of the time. Luck dug some dried ochre out of a waste pile and coated the tunnel walls in dabs of orange and red. We joked about what a lousy honeymoon this had been.

Then Luck told me she was pregnant. "We have to tell Handle," she said.

Handle wasn't surprised. "I figured as much," he said, "what with you having trouble keeping food down. I wish you both the best."

Luck thanked Handle. I asked if there was anything he could do to stop the CO2 from flowing down to us. "Do?" he asked. "What do you mean, do? You are low kids. You are trapped. Enjoy life while you can, because this standoff won't end well."

Luck glared at him with shocked eyes. "You not help?" she asked. "You? Older than Big Mom but looking younger than me? You help you, but not us?"

Handle didn't say anything. Luck hit him, and hit him again, then stormed back to our bub. Handle shook his head sadly at me. "Your brother would have understood," he said.

I stared at him, troubled by something I couldn't begin to explain. "Did you hear Big Mom's offer?" I asked.

"Yes. You should take it. All of you should."

"You don't think the moms will try to punish us?"

"And if they do? Anything is better than what you face right now."

I started to ask why Handle didn't think he faced the same dangers we did, but decided not to push the issue. Not knowing what else to do, I walked to the bub to comfort Luck.

#

That night I stood guard with Tuck. As the hours passed, the moms glared at us from their side of the tunnel, and we glared back. The moms looked as fresh as ever, with all that damn good air and heat to warm their hearts. At one point Gunetar walked by to check on his people. He saw me and flashed that nasty face-wide smirk of his. I gave him the finger, which enraged him so much he had to be restrained to keep from charging me.

Once Gunetar was gone, I asked Tuck what his sister had meant, that Handle could help himself but not us. Tuck didn't answer, only looked at me with his usual dead eyes. I'd always taken those eyes to mean a lack of understanding, but I now knew that was simply how he kept his secrets to himself.

By the time Tuck and I finished guard duty, we were so exhausted we collapsed into the bub. I snuggled up to Luck and she moaned softly from whatever dream she was having. I kissed her neck and quickly fell asleep.

I woke to Tuck shaking me. He held his finger to his lips for silence and pointed down the tunnel. At first I didn't see anything. Then a giant shape appeared, a shape that could only be Handle in a slush suit.

Tuck quickly helped me into my slush suit and attached a full air tank to my back. I asked him if he wanted to come, but he whispered that his place was defending the pit with Alna. I asked him to keep an eye on Luck, then hurried after Handle.

I kept my glow stick shut, so my only light was the faint glow from Handle's stick, which beckoned me through the tunnels like a hauntingly peaceful ghost. We quickly entered the supply tunnel which led to the frozen water and organics. It also led to Omare's body.

Sure enough, when we reached the newly cut tunnel where Omare's body lay, Handle stopped. I waited at the tunnel entrance, watching Handle as he stood before Omare for what seemed like forever. He waited so long I began to worry about my air supply. But then he turned and walked deeper into the new tunnel, even though the tunnel merely dead-ended a little ways down.

That's when Handle disappeared.

I twisted my glow tube on and raced forward. Sure enough, the tunnel still ended in a sheer wall. I reached out my gloved hand and it fell through the wall before me. An illusion.

Before I followed Handle through the fake wall, I checked my tick-tock gauge to see how much air I had left. Since I'd started with a full tank I knew I should have another hour and a half of air left. But long years of managing suits had given me an instinctive feel for air. Even though Tuck had topped off my suit before I left, the air had a slight aftertaste to it, which shouldn't have occurred until I was running low.

To my shock, I had less than twenty minutes of air remaining.

My legs begged to collapse. My heart screamed. But I refused to panic, and fought my body into obeying. I also cursed Tuck. I'd trusted him like a brother.

Air is a simple equation – either you have enough or you don't. It would take me at least an hour to walk back to the decay pit at this point and I didn't have the air to do that. My only choice was to die right here, or keep following Handle and hope he had a backup tank.

So I stepped through the imaginary wall. I no longer worried about Handle noticing me and kept my glow tube open. For half a minute I followed him down this new tunnel, the green glow licking into the CO₂ and water ice and flickering back with frozen images of the swamps that once lined this ground. I thought about the primitive creatures that lived here – creatures as far below me as I was below an AI or Aural. I thought about Luck and our child. I thought about Alna and even damn old Tuck. I refused to die here. I refused to give up.

And then, to my surprise, Handle disappeared yet again.

He'd been standing thirty meters in front of me. I rushed forward, afraid I'd lost him in another illusion. Instead, the tunnel ended in a blackness which my glow stick couldn't dispel. I leaned over the edge and held out the glow stick. By its faint light I saw a massive shaft angle away to my right and left, and drop to perfect blackness below. The walls of the shaft had the smooth perfection of high tech.

The sides were so slick there was no way I could climb down. I assumed Handle had gone down because the roof of the shaft ended a few meters above the tunnel. Not knowing what else to do, I dropped the glow tube over the edge. It fell forever until its light was lost in the darkness.

I now stood in perfect darkness. My suit's air reeked of coming death. I suddenly knew that Tuck had known about this shaft. He'd given me just enough air to get here, but not enough to return home. He'd wanted me to jump into the shaft after Handle.

Having no other options, I stepped forward into the dark, swearing that if I made it home I'd beat the crap out of my brother-in-law.

#

I'd like to say I didn't scream, but Omare always said not to lie. So yes, I screamed. I yelled and cursed until my ears rang inside my helmet.

Once that was out of my system, I remembered a physics lesson Omare taught me. How Eur was similar in size to old Earth, and how objects on Eur fell at 9.8m/s^2 . I started counting, trying to figure how long until the big splat. To my surprise, I counted well past 10 seconds, then 20. I quickly fell several kilometers, amazed that a shaft could be this deep.

Just as I wondered if I'd ever reach the shaft's end, or if my air would run out first, I heard a faint whistling sound. I saw a faint glow below and realized it was the glow tube I'd dropped earlier. The tube raced toward me and I braced for impact, but instead I slowed down. Gentle as can be, I landed on the stone floor beside the glow tube.

I heard a small thump behind me and turned to see Handle laughing inside a backlit doorway. He waved for me to follow him. We walked to a small indentation in the stone wall, which sealed behind us and lit up with the brightest lights I'd ever seen.

"I wish you'd seen your face as you fell," Handle said as he removed his helmet. "You're the first one to follow me over the edge."

I cautiously removed my helmet. The sweetest air I'd ever breathed flooded into my lungs. "I didn't have a choice," I said. "Tuck shortchanged my air. I either jumped or died."

Handle laughed even more. "That scoundrel. He followed me down the tunnel a few times, but never took that final leap into the shaft."

Handle shook his head at his great-whatever-grandson's ingenuity at tricking me, then led me down the bright tunnel to a large, open space about fifty meters wide. Inside, the lights were so powerful they actually shone white. Plants grew everywhere – corn, wheat, spinach

and many more I didn't know the name of. Their leaves were a deep, dark green, far beyond the paleness I'd always seen in our decay pit gardens.

Strange machines and technology lay everywhere. I glanced at what could only be a viewscreen and saw an image of myself falling through the shaft. I glanced at another screen and saw Luck yelling at – and then hitting – Tuck as he explained where I'd gone. Another view showed the enforcers outside the decay pit. A final view showed Big Mom pacing her bub, arguing with Gunetar about how to handle the low kid rebellion.

“Do the Aurals know about this technology?”

“Of course they do. Even though we're 10 kilometers deep, I dare say they know all about this.”

“Then why did you bury this so deep? And why haven't the Aurals killed us for using tech?”

Handle sighed and collapsed into a cushioned chair. “This room wasn't buried to hide it from the Aurals. It was buried to hide it from humanity.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to understand that most humans didn't agree with the decision to undertake this mission. However, the invitation from the Aurals to travel into their system was too important to let humans decide. AI consensus was that we couldn't pass up this opportunity to learn about the Aurals.”

A familiar anger welled inside me. “It isn't humanity's technology the Aurals don't like. It's you AIs.”

Handle snorted. “A false distinction. Over the millennia we AIs – which, I remind you, humanity originally created – have so merged with human culture and lives that it is impossible to separate the two of us.”

I glanced at the marvelous technology all around me. No doubt there was tech here to nourish my child with healthy food and air, and stop the moms from hurting even one more low kid. “Then why haven't you helped? Why have you let us suffer?”

Handle nodded sagely. “I help in little ways – keeping the decay pit working, repairing the heat exchangers when they threaten to clog. But this lab wasn't designed to support an entire expedition. Only to aid here and there.”

My hands shook with anger as I remembered Handle declining to help Luck. “You're lying.”

The sage-like pose Handle had been striking disappeared. “Any particular reason for thinking that?”

“Answer me this: How did Big Mom survive all this time? How did she suddenly look so young the other day, when she looked near death only last year? And I know she can still read minds. She shouldn't be able to do that.”

Handle shrugged. “It was dictated by the Aurals. Two AIs could travel into this system with the humans, but we had to use human bodies. We could also bring whatever tech was needed to keep Big Mom and I alive until the planet's orbit carried us back out, but nothing more. Tech support for the expedition was incidental.”

I wanted to smack Handle's perfect-young body for all he and Big Mom had done. Omare was right – the AIs had manipulated us as much as the Aurals. Everyone manipulated everyone. The Aurals sent the planet to entice humans into their space. The big moms pretended they were sharing the suffering, but they really weren't. Damn them all.

I kicked a nearby machine. Handle's face blanched even though the machine hummed without complaint. “So Big Mom comes down here?”

“No. She and I were given separate duties and abilities, to keep us from trying to get rid of the other. She doesn't know how to get here. When I heal her body, I take the tech to her.”

“But she knows this planet isn't going to take us out of Aural space.”

“Yes.”

“So she punishes people for merely speaking the truth. What were you two going to do – keep this insane world running forever by tricking people into still believing they’d be reborn?”

“I know you’re angry, but you’ve only lost something you’ve never known. I gave up abilities beyond your understanding. And to know it was for nothing ...”

The old me would have hit Handle, but I knew he was attempting to explain – in his own arrogant way. I was tempted to keep talking to Handle, to learn the answers to puzzles and questions which had haunted my brother until his death. But now that I knew how much these AIs had manipulated everyone, I no longer cared for any answers Handle could give.

But to my surprise, Handle now begged for answers. He grabbed my right arm in a grip so powerful I thought my bones would break. “Tell me the truth,” he said. “Why did they choose Omare?”

I stared in shock at him. “You don’t know?”

Handle glared into me and I suddenly felt that eerie tickling in my scalp as he ran through my memories. But to my surprise, he couldn’t learn the truth. “You’re too angry to read,” he said. He slammed me in front of a transparent machine, where he again asked why the Aurals choose Omare. I told him I didn’t know. Handle stared at the machine’s colorful wash of lines and words. He must not have liked what he saw, because he released my arm and collapsed to the floor.

“I thought you’d know,” he said. “That maybe Omare told you something. He must have known what the Aurals were doing. I mean, they choose him.”

I remembered what Luck had told me once – how the Aurals were playing a joke on the big moms – and realized my wife was wiser than anyone I knew. “So the Aurals played you like the big moms played us,” I said. “Now what are you going to do?”

Handle shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s a massive amount of energy inside Omare’s body, but this primitive tech can’t make an accurate reading. I suspect the energy in his body is similar to readings the Aurals give off.”

I wanted to laugh at Handle considered this amazing technology primitive. But I didn’t have time for this nonsense, not when everyone I cared about was waiting for either the moms or the bad air to kill them. I glanced around Handle’s lair. “Is there anything here to help the low kids?”

Handle no longer cared. “I can give you a spare space suit, so you’ll be protected like the moms. But my other tech is too precious to risk with you.”

I ignored the insult. “Give me what you can.” I then noticed a map on one of the viewscreens. The map looked strangely familiar, even though it was far more detailed than anything I’d ever seen. “Is that a map of the cave?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll also need a copy of that.”

#

Whatever technology slowed my fall down the shaft also launched me back up. The new suit I wore contained powerful spotlights, and I watched in amazement as my body flew through the air toward a tiny tunnel I couldn’t even see. I was afraid my occasional tumble would cause me to miss the target, but the tech slowed me down so I landed on the lip of the tunnel as if I’d jumped there from a half meter away.

I quickly ran to the decay pit, where the low kids screamed in fear at my bright-lit suit. Alna stepped toward me, holding her spar ready to strike. I twisted my helmet off and laughed as she and the others hugged me with excitement.

After explaining what I had learned – and after punching Tuck in the face, an action Luck quickly added to tenfold – I explained my plan. With the printed map Handle had given me, I showed the low kids the hidden escape tunnels which led to the surface. We could use those to evacuate, then reenter the cave through the surface airlocks. From there we could hook up with other low kid groups and have safety in numbers. And with our knowledge of Handle’s hidden tech, we might even convince the middle workers, and a few moms, to join our fight.

“Risky,” Alna said. “Once we go back to the cave, word will spread. Moms will think quick to find the new tunnels.”

I nodded. “But Big Mom is up to something. She has been manipulating things for so long, she won’t let us simply surrender. Since she knows about Handle and his tech, maybe she’s worried he’ll end up helping us. I think that’s why she offered to let us surrender. If she believes Handle is helping us, she’ll send the moms against us sooner rather than later.”

Alna and the other low kids agreed with my view, and everyone voted to risk the hidden tunnels.

“Since we only have a few slush suits,” I said, “it’ll take a number of trips to get everyone to safety. We’ll send guards with each trip. Using this space suit will give us an edge.”

Alna looked doubtful. “You fight in suit? You?”

“No. I can’t fight worth a damn,” I said as other low kids laughed in agreement. “But if you were in the suit...”

The low kids cheered. There had never been a low kid permitted to wear an actual space suit. The low kids hoisted Alna and paraded her around the decay pit until she told them to put her down so we could get to work.

As I stripped off the suit and handed it to Alna, she hugged me close. “You a true low kid now,” she said. “True and good.”

#

Figuring the first trip would be safest because we’d take the moms by surprise, I insisted Luck be among the group. As she donned her slush suit, I told her everything I’d seen in Handle’s hidden lair.

“I want to see this hole,” she said. “Be fun, to fall without hurt. See plants of real green.”

I hugged her and promised as soon as this was over, I’d take her to Handle’s lair, just the two of us.

“Yes,” she said, laughing. “Just us two. My brother, he can’t go.”

Tuck was dressing in his suit beside us and he hung his head at his sister’s comment. I smiled and slapped him on the back. “Let me push you off that shaft once and we’ll call it even,” I said.

Tuck smiled and we all laughed and then Alna stepped up in her bright lit suit and led us to safety.

The hidden tunnel breached the surface near the observatory. As stealthily as we could we hiked back to one of the cave’s side airlocks. There were ten of us in the group, with myself, Alna, and Tuck as the guards, each carrying a long cudgel. We quickly cycled through the airlock and sneaked through the cave until we reached the communal bub of another low kid group, where quiet whispers and hugs greeted us. Alna, Tuck and I then refreshed our air and set off for the airlock and the hidden escape tunnel.

We managed two more trips that day, ferrying low kids to safety. Even though we tried to be careful, it was impossible not to leave tracks in the mirror ash. Each time we left the escape tunnel I tensed, prepared to battle any waiting moms.

Then came the fourth trip. Tuck stepped out of the tunnel first, waving for us when he didn't see any moms. Alna and I quickly followed, shepherding our nervous charges out. As always, the Aurals danced into the heavens, and the Crab Nebula grabbed its way across the sky.

That's when I saw sublimation angels smoking out of new gaps in the mirror ash. I'd never seen angels emerging naturally, and pointed them out to Alna just as the ash exploded and a squad of enforcers climbed out of a camouflaged hole, cleavers slashing at our slush suits.

Alna jumped between the low kids and the attacking moms. One of the moms stabbed her with a cleaver, only to stare in shock as the cleaver bounced off Alna's suit. Alna flicked on her suit's light, blinding the mom, then smashed the enforcer with her cudgel. Tuck and I stood beside her, using her suit as a shield while we pushed and smashed the moms, giving the other low kids time to escape back to the tunnel.

Once the other low kids were safe, Tuck and I grabbed Alna and tried to drag her to the tunnel. Alna, however, refused to go. She waved for Tuck and me to escape while she protected us. Through our combined touch I heard Tuck's soft voice arguing with her. I glanced at Tuck, about to touch his shoulder and tell him to help me force Alna into the tunnel, when suddenly he let go of Alna and screamed a silent scream.

Alna and I fell back onto the ash as Tuck stood there with a long cleaver growing from his chest. Blood spewed across the mirror ash, and a sublimation angel rose from his suit to greet the sky.

Alna shouted something I couldn't hear and reached for Tuck. I jumped up, looking for his attacker, and saw Gunetar standing behind him. I charged and knocked him back with my cudgel. As he fell, I smashed him over and over until two other enforcers tackled me. Other moms piled onto Alna, who fought to reach Tuck.

When time Gunetar picked himself up, his wide wide face slit out the cruelest smirk I'd ever seen. The moms held Alna and me down and I knew we were about to die. I expected Gunetar to gloat, to tell me how much he'd hated Omare and me and how we didn't deserve rebirth. But to my surprise, he merely walked over to Alna and twisted her helmet off in an explosion of suddenly frozen air.

I've thought for many years on Alna's death. On why the sudden decompression didn't kill her. Those with a touch of science have said maybe enough of the planet's atmosphere had sublimated where we stood that Alna didn't immediately die. Others say that maybe Handle's suit, or some other remnant of his AI tech, briefly protected her.

I don't agree. As the air in Alna's suit disappeared in a rush of snow, she sat there for a moment with a puzzled look on her face. Then she stood up, shoving aside the surprised moms who held her with one powerful sweep of her arm. As the Aurals spun rainbow colors above us, and our images stared back from the mirrored surface, Alna looked at me and smiled. She said "I feel Omare," and the strange thing was that in the near vacuum we all heard her words. Heard as clear as a bell.

She then leaned over Tuck's body. I hope some part of him still existed to see Alna place a single kiss on his frozen facemask, before she sat down in the mirror ash and frozen oxygen beside him. She made a snow ball, which she threw at Gunetar's facemask. She nodded her head as if someone whispered a deep, true secret in her ear, then made another snowball and threw it at me.

"Reborn," she said as she brushed mirror ash off her suit. "Reborn the whole damn thing." And she died, looking as peaceful as if she'd merely gone to sleep.

#

Instead of killing me, Gunetar dragged me to the main airlock, where he removed my suit and gagged and tied me. He warned his enforcers not to say a word about what had happened. But our cave is a little world where gossip travels faster than heat. Maybe one of the low kids in the escape tunnel saw what happened to Alna. Maybe one of the enforcers couldn't keep quiet. Either way, by the time we left the airlock, crowds lined the spiral pathways. Low kids screamed and threw things at the enforcers and chanted Alna's name, while the middle kids and moms whispered and pointed at me in shock. Gunetar and his enforcers looked unnerved, and waved their cleavers in futile attempts to disperse the crowds.

When we reached Big Mom's bub, Gunetar encircled the dwelling with his enforcers. Crowds pushed against the suited moms, and for one brief moment I saw Luck as she smashed a cudgel against a helmeted figure. Luck waved at me before she and the rest of the crowd ran away from the enforcers' flailing cleavers.

I didn't need to be Omare to know this was well on its way to ugly. But before I could see more, Gunetar dragged me inside the bub and sealed the door. I lay stiff and unmoving as he told Big Mom what happened on the surface. Big Mom walked to a window and stared at the crowds surrounding the bub. Something smashed against the unbreakable glass before her, causing Big Mom to curse.

Big Mom walked over to me. "I need you to go outside and tell people nothing happened."

"Gunetar murdered my friends," I said. "That's what happened."

"Totally justified. Alna led the low kids to revolt; the other one dared raise a weapon to us. I'll ask one more time: Will you tell them nothing happened?"

I shook my head. I expected Gunetar to pull his cleaver and threaten me, but instead, Big Mom merely smiled. I felt a familiar ticking in my scalp, and knew she was trying to stick some command up there, to make me do her bidding.

Even though I've always been afraid of almost everything, and even though I've never been a hero like Omare or Alna or Tuck, I refused to give in to Big Mom. I wouldn't go out and lie merely so my child could one day be manipulated by this damn AI. As Big Mom wormed her way into my head, I heard Alna speak her final words. About reborn the planet. I remembered Omare saying something similar shortly before he died. I wondered if that was the key. If that was what my brother had meant all along.

"Handle," I whispered.

"What?" Big Mom asked, leaning over me as the tickling stopped.

"It was Handle. He helped Alna. He has tech."

Big Mom looked suspicious. "Handle is sworn to not interfere in cave affairs unless I ask."

"Where do you think the suit Alna wore came from?"

Big Mom glanced at Gunetar, who nodded.

"I know how to reach his secret lab," I said. "You won't have to rely on him to keep you young. You can take all the tech you need."

Big Mom stared at me, trying to decide if I was lying as she tickled her way into my head again. Desperate to keep her from the truth, I remembered how Handle hadn't been able to read my mind when I was angry. So I thought of Luck and our soon-to-be child, and how he or she would one day beg for heat and air. I thought of Handle, and the life-saving tech he hid below our feet. I thought of my brother, and how the Aurals had picked him merely to die. Anger burned me, and Big Mom staggered for a moment before the tickling stopped.

She looked at me, trying to decide what to do. She then motioned for Gunetar to cut my bonds.

As I stood up, I prayed to the Aurals my brother knew what he was doing when he set all this in motion. I also prayed that a nobody like me, who had been manipulated by others all his life, could finally twist things to his own advantage.

#

By the time I walked out of the bub with Gunetar and Big Mom, the enforcers had beaten back the crowds. I saw Luck and several low kids, all with bloody faces, trying to break through the moms with their cudgels. But the moms were too tough. I yelled at Luck to pull back, but Gunetar slapped my face silent. When I glanced back up, Luck and the other low kids were gone.

Gunetar led us to a supply room, where all of us – including Big Mom – donned fresh space suits. We then marched with twenty enforcers to the decay pit tunnel. The barricades lay where we'd built them, but a path had been shoved through them. I assumed when the moms had pulled back to stop the riot, the remaining low kids had fled. As we passed the decay pit, Gunetar patted me on the shoulder and, mimicking Alna's voice, said he felt Omare.

Not yet you haven't, I thought. But you will.

None of these moms had ever hiked so far through the ice tunnels, and they flinched and jumped as our glow tubes lit the passing shapes in the ice. I wondered about the ancient swamps which had once grown on this world. Wondered if Omare was right and the Aurals had sent the world out of its orbit merely for humanity's use, or if there were other reasons we couldn't suspect. But in the end, it didn't matter what others did to you. It only mattered what you did for yourself.

"Is this the entrance to Handle's hideaway?" Big Mom asked, her right glove gripping my suit's shoulder as we entered the tunnel containing Omare's body. I muttered yes, praying Handle was watching us on his tech. Gunetar walked a dozen meters in front of us with two of his scouts, and when he reached Omare's glowing body he stopped and slammed his gloved hand into the ice wall. I laughed. I knew Gunetar was screaming – screaming outrage in that sealed suit of his. Screaming that the person he'd hated more than any other had returned.

I hoped Handle remembered how much Gunetar hated Omare. If he remembered that, he'd know what was coming next. I also hoped the son of a bitch AI manipulator remembered all the Aural energy coursing through Omare's frozen veins.

When Big Mom and I reached Gunetar, his two scouts held him from attacking the ice wall. Big Mom stared at Omare for moment, then grabbed my facemask and slammed me against the ice with a strength which shocked me. "What is this?" she asked. "What have you done?"

"It's not me," I stammered, hoping I seemed as afraid as I felt. "It's Handle. He recreated Omare's body. Said he'd reborn Omare. Said Omare would lead the low kids against you."

Big Mom pushed me away in disgust. She reached out for Gunetar, no doubt to tell him to cut my brother's body from the ice. But before she could touch Gunetar's space suit, the back of her suit exploded blood and quick-frozen air. She fell as I saw Handle running toward us, his suit lighting up the tunnel and a strange rod in his hand shooting bolts of energy.

"Get away from him," Handle screamed, the strange weapon in his hand glowing hot as another mom's suit ripped to pieces. I didn't ask how Handle broadcast those words to my

suit. And I didn't ask who Handle meant to get away from – it was obvious he wanted to stop the moms from cutting Omare from the ice.

Gunetar waved for his men to form a battle line. As they did, I shoved the mom who held my suit and ran for Handle. The rod in his hand pointed at me for a moment before firing at a mom behind me. "Damn you," Handle broadcast into my suit as I ran past him, but I didn't care and I didn't stop until I was down the tunnel and passing through the imaginary wall. I kept running until I reached the drop off leading to Handle's lab.

I paused, afraid to jump because I didn't know if Handle had left on whatever tech slowed the fall at the bottom of the shaft. Glancing back, I saw the imaginary wall only worked one way. I watched Handle shooting the moms over and over with his weapon. Gunetar appeared unhurt, but the other moms spun and fell as their suits vented blood and air in colorful snow storms illuminated by Handle's spotlights. As Gunetar realized he had mere moments before Handle shot him, he lifted his cleaver and slammed it into the ice above Omare's body. The green foxfire coating Omare's body electrified the cleaver and Gunetar, who flailed and jumped like a low kid fed through the grinder. Handle turned to run toward me, but the foxfire grabbed his body as it raced down the tunnel, the ice spurting to steam and shoving its way into a massive shock wave with only me blocking its escape.

I no longer cared if Handle left the shaft's tech on. I flung myself into darkness, and watched as the foxfire pushed up and up until I saw open sky above and the rainbow tracers of Aurals circling and circling, almost as if they were writing words of encouragement for my eyes alone to read.

#

Don't ask for explanations. I have none.

As I'd hoped, the shaft again slowed my fall. As I landed, a blast of steam and debris pelted my suit, and I barely made it into the safety of the lab before a mountain of frozen air smashed into the doorway.

It took me two days to learn how to control enough of Handle's tech to clear the shaft, and another three days to return to the sky above. During that time I stared at the viewscreens, wondering what it meant where before only blackness could be seen before in the shaft I now saw a tiny dot of sky, which – strangely – appeared to be blue.

Once I could control one of Handle's strange flying machines, I loaded up as much of Handle's tech as I could manage and flew up the shaft. I wore a new space suit and was armed with one of Handle's projectile rods. When I cleared the crater the foxfire had created, I circled above, shocked by what I saw. The mirror ash was gone. In its place the oxygen and nitrogen and all the other frozen gases sublimated into the sky, the rising clouds tinted a faint blue when backlit by the mother star's light.

I found no evidence of Big Mom, Handle, Gunetar, and the other enforcers who'd been in the tunnel.

Unable to see more than a few dozen meters due to the outventing gas clouds, the flyer's tech guided me to the cave. When I was two kilometers away, the skies cleared and mirror ash returned. I looked around. The Aurals had left a circle of frozen air around the cave, hopefully enough to survive on until the planet's atmosphere stabilized. The wall of clouds circling our little frozen world reminded me of Handle's shaft, and how you couldn't see much of anything when you looked up from inside that deep deep hole.

I landed beside the main airlock. As I cranked through the system, weapon ready, I imagined myself storming the caves and freeing my people. Instead, I stepped inside to the cheers of a hundred people, all led by a laughing Luck, who stood there in an insulated jumpsuit.

“Took you forever,” she said, before kissing my helmet.

After I removed my suit, Luck led me to Big Mom’s bub, where a green glowing image of Omare floated.

“It answers questions,” Luck said. “Well, some. It’s how we knew you came back.”

I stared at the blank face of my brother. The green image looked like the holographs I’d seen spinning in Handle’s lab. I wondered if anything of my brother existed before me, or if the Aurals had crafted tech in his image to make us feel comfortable about the changes this planet was undergoing.

“What happens now?” I asked Omare.

Omare turned its head slightly and stared at me with eyes glowing foxfire through blanket-empty pupils. “This planet is reborn and will soon orbit its star again. You live here, also reborn. No manipulating AIs can reach you now.”

“And what about the Aurals? They manipulated us even more than the big moms.”

Omare didn’t answer, but its lips twitched into a cruel smirk.

“See,” Luck said. “It’s not the real Omare. Your brother never cruel.”

“I know,” I said. I started to turn away, but a question I’d wondered about since my brother’s death popped into my head. “Is this why you picked my brother,” I asked the glowing tech. “Is this all you wanted – to use him up until he died?”

For a moment the glowing Omare glared at me in what could only be described as irritation. “We didn’t choose Omare.”

“What do you mean? I was there. I saw you.”

“We didn’t choose Omare. We chose you. And you have done well.”

I screamed and tried to hit Omare, all the anger I’d felt when others manipulated me slamming through my body. Luck and several low kids dragged me away as I yelled not to trust the Aurals. “They’re no better than the big moms. Remember that. They’re just the same!”

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Luck and I snuggled in our little bub, feeling warm in our insulated jumpsuits and blankets. Over the last six months, Eur’s surface temperature had risen by fifty degrees C. Our astronomers, in conversations with the Aural-projected Omare, said the planet would likely have a breathable atmosphere within twenty years. Things would still be extremely cold, but we wouldn’t have to survive off frozen air anymore.

With Big Mom and Handle no longer manipulating us, and with there being no need to fear the use of technology, we’d already improved the lot of the entire cave. The shewanella bacteria now funneled their energy into lines feeding electrified heaters around the cave. While the low kids still lugged most of our air supply, the middle kids and moms were beginning to join in. Now that everyone realized no rebirth awaiting them – and that our expedition would stand or fall on its own efforts – people were more willing to do the hard, dangerous work of keeping us all alive.

There were still problems, still fights and anger over the way things had been and the way they’d go in the future. But now that we’d seen the Aurals’ power, and that we had to deal with them without the help of the rest of humanity and our AIs, people saw no alternative but to come together.

I don’t know what will happen. It’s obvious the Aurals wanted to trap us here. It’s also obvious they’re using this planet to change us. As Omare said, it takes a long time to change a culture. Humanity relied so much on tech and AIs that when we first came to this world we wouldn’t have survived without Big Mom and Handle watching over us. But we’ve changed

over the centuries, and no longer need them. Now that they're gone, who knows what we'll become.

Not that this makes the Aurals any better for what they've done.

Luck moaned and rolled on her side. I placed my hand on her belly and felt our child kicking. Felt the tiny punches of infant outrage against everything holding him or her back from our enticing world.

I smiled and kissed Luck on her cheek.

Even though the air canister's tick-tock clock hadn't chimed, I reached up and released a burst of fresh air.

END

About the Author

While **Jason Sanford** was born and raised in Alabama, he currently live in the Midwestern U.S. with his wife and two sons. Among his life's adventures includes work as an archeologist and a Peace Corps Volunteer. His fiction has been published in *Year's Best SF 14*, *Interzone*, *Analog*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Diagram*, *Pindeldyboz*, and other places. His stories have won a number of awards and honors, including the 2008 *Interzone* Readers' Poll, a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship, and being nominated in the best short fiction category for both the BSFA Award and British Fantasy Award. His website is www.jasonsanford.com.

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Paul Drummond was taken in by the good folk of Lancashire, England. He now lives there and divides his time between commercial illustration, website design, game development and working through a long list of things to do. His website is www.pauldrummond.co.uk.