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## Going My Way?

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The year 2066 was signalized by a remarkable incident, a mysterious and inexplicable phenomenon, which doubtless no one has yet forgotten. That was the year the last manned spacecraft was launched. Governments had disbanded their programs almost a decade before, but a few private concerns carried tourists. Then after six months of no sales, the last private firm went bankrupt. Like many others I'd been saving up for the flight, but the cost kept increasing faster than my savings.

I was even dreaming about space travel on the last night before I left. I say this because I went to sleep in my little apartment bed, and woke inside a glass tube. The type with the shiny metal bands and the tight fit giving you the feeling you're about to run out of air. Where the glass is so close you can easily bang your fists against it to no avail. That's where I was. Someone had changed me out of my pajamas as well. Now I was wearing ... well, it appeared to be an all-white wet suit, complete with a zipper down the front. On the inside it felt soft, as soft as cotton, yet the outer surface felt ... rubbery. The room my tube was in wasn't white, but it was very high tech. It was filled with banks of lights flashing happily, consoles, screens and what appeared to be keyboards. I was on the verge of screaming, when my tube opened with a hiss.

*Welcome aboard.*

I jumped up to a sitting position and my eyes darted around, but there was no one in sight. The voice I'd heard had been odd. It didn't sound funny, but it didn't seem to come from anywhere. Usually when you hear a voice it has a distinct direction, behind you, off to the right, some where you can put your finger on. But this voice didn't seem to come from anywhere. I continued my visual search. Checking under tables, looking behind consoles and generally trying to make out the voice's source.

*My name is Oyx and I'm pleased to have you aboard.*

Ok, now this was getting spooky. I started looking around for speakers, but even those generally give you a feeling of directionality. This had no direction. It's extremely hard to describe, because, in my whole life, I have never experienced this before. Even blindfolded, if you set up four speakers around you and made them play the same thing, your brain can still tell you the sound was coming from all around you. But this feeling was completely different.

Finally, I got up the nerve to ask, "Where are you?"

*I'm right here.*

The room still appeared to be empty. I swung my legs over the side. "Come out where I can see you please."

*But you can see me. In fact, you are sitting on be right now.*

I flew off the soft, cloth-covered table which was held inside the open tube and spun around. Nothing. The table was as empty as the rest of the room. Before I even had a chance to state my next question, it was being answered.

*Now you are standing on me. To be more precise, everything you see is me. You have to excuse me. I don't have eyes, so I'm looking through yours. I'm still getting used to it. It quite an exhilarating experience.*

I can tell you I was annoyed. I'm not the type who appreciates a prank; even one as elaborate as this. Maybe this was one of those trick puzzle rooms people pay to escape. I started thinking which one of my so-called friends had set me up for this. The voice said, 'welcome aboard,' am I supposed to imagine I'm on a boat. There's no sway, so I must not actually be on a boat.

*On your world some people might call me a boat, but I don't think it is an accurate use of the term.*

My knees were shaking. I hadn't said a thing out loud, so why did the voice say boat? I did a quick glance and a pat down. I couldn't find any wires. No attachment which might be sending signals to another location. If someone wanted the scare the shit out of me they were doing a bang-up job.

*Personally, I prefer Starship, I like the sound off the term.*

"Are you kidding me? What kind of a sick joke is this?" I was now more angry than scared. My knees had definitely stopped shaking. I pounded the table with a distinct thud, "What is going on here?" I demanded. All the monitors lit up filled with views of stars. On the one behind me was the arc of a bright blue planet ... Earth. "Nice show," I said indignantly, "But any good planetarium can do that."

The room shook from side to side and as it did, so did the view on the monitors change, in perfect sync with the rocking of the floor.

*Do planetariums move?*

"Gimbles," I snapped back.

*Gimbles? What are gimbles?*

"Don't be coy with me. You're perfectly aware you're causing this room to rock with gimbles under the floor." There was a slight delay, a silence. For a moment I felt pleased with myself. I'd managed to trip up whoever was doing this to me.

*Please hold on to something.*

I figured it was now going to rock the room more violently, so I grabbed the table in my tube. The motion wasn't violent at all, but a slow gentle tumble, as if I was inside a washing machine. In a moment I was upside down, hang on for dear life. The room continued its roll and then changed axis. I lost my grip and started falling for the floor. I started falling all right, but before I could impact any hard surfaces, I found myself floating weightless. This was no gimble. At the same time the starfield and the planet outside was spinning so fast I started to get sick. I had never been good on roller coasters.

Without so much as a jerk, I settled back down, my feet on the floor. The stars stopped spinning and the room seemed as it was before. The timing was excellent, because I was about to lose my lunch. It took

me awhile to catch my breath. It took even longer to release my regained death grip on the tube table. "You're a spaceship? A talking spaceship?" I asked in a more relaxed tone.

*Yes, exactly.*

I was now more than a little concerned. What happens if you get a talking spaceship mad at you? "Well, I want to thank you for the ride. It was most ... simulating. Can I go home now?"

*I could arrange that, but it will take some time.*

"Time?" I asked, "but we right here." I pointed at the planet in the window. I stepped away from the table and headed off to the screen with the planet on it. As my finger started moving toward the screen, I noticed, something was wrong. There were no continents, besides the clouds there was nothing but a string on long, thin islands. That wasn't Earth at all.

*You are looking at Cigini 61 C.*

I gulped, "How long have I been in this room?"

*A little less than four years on your calendar.*

I staggered over to the table again, this time grabbing on to it with both hands. "So," I asked with a great amount of trepidation, "It'll take four years to get me back home?"

*No, not at all. I can get you back quite quickly. It's ... the others do not agree.*

"Others?" I screamed, "There are others? What others. Can you take me to them?" I'm afraid I rattled off my questions at slightly under lightspeed. I forced myself to slowdown, "I can meet with them, please?"

*Follow me please.*

Out of nowhere a door appeared in the far wall. I had to will myself to let go of the table but I slowly crept over to the open door. I was unsteady on my feet, but I made it to the hall. It appeared empty, except for another lone door at the far end. It seemed to take me forever to get down to the other door. I had to steady myself, supporting my unstable legs by pushing my arms out against the nearby walls. At the other end I nearly fell thought the door.

Inside, sitting at a rather plain looking table was a man and a woman, both wearing the identical white wet suits. The man rushed up to steady me as I crawled toward them on my knees. He was balding fellow, with a touch of grey hair above the ears. He wore a set of oval-shaped lenses on a thin wire frame. He grabbed an arm and helped me up to my feet. He gazed at me, "Steady on, old man. That's the ticket."

"I'm ... I'm Ronson Priestly," I finally managed to blurt out.

"Come, have a seat," he led me to the table and I fell heavily into a chair.

"I'm Dr. M. Sorts Peterson, University of Cambridge ... and this fine young lady is Miss Sisk."

"Kattie," she corrected him, "Kattie Sisk."

Sorts took off his glasses as if he intended to wipe them clean, but other than the table and three chairs, the room was empty. He finally put them back on his nose, struggling to get the wire sides back over his ears, "Tell me, my good man, have you always wanted to venture into space?"

I blinked several times. I couldn't imagine why he wanted to ask me such a question, "Ever since I was a boy, why?"

"I though as much," he explained, "Oyx here seems to have gathered up likeminded people for an incredible journey to the stars. I quite sure we are the first Earthmen, if you pardon the expression, to have ventured this far into space."

*The cry of the adventurer is irresistible.*

"You too?" I asked the girl. She shook her head with a slight, but intense smile. She was quite attractive, but maybe it was the zipper. She had pulled it down quite far and it was ... in a way ... both comforting and distracting at the same time.

I stumbled like a small child trying to find the right words, "How did we get here?"

"Oyx brought us onboard" Sorts replied.

*Only recently have I started to see the universe through your eyes, but I have other senses and they are quite exceptional.*

"No, not that," I said, starting to recover my senses, "How did he get us all the way out here?"

"Ahh .... It appears Oyx had us in status." Sort's explained in a professorial style, "It took him almost four years to map our neural networks and learn our language. When he talks to us, he's actually firing neurons in our cerebral cortex which corresponds to sounds we have in our memories."

"You mean he reads our minds?"

"In a way, yes. But I think it's more accurate to say he shares our mental pathways."

"So, he causes brain damage?"

"He can't cause brain damage if he's using existing neuron routes," Sorts suggested. "I don't think there is any cause for alarm."

Changing the subject, I asked, "Is it a he? Is it the right pronoun?"

*I'm not sure I have a gender. I can't tell you how I came to be, all I know is, I once sensed your sun being formed. I've never met any others of my kind, so I may be the only one. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I've never had passengers or a crew before either.*

"Great," I said looking mostly at the walls, "which one are we? Passengers or crew?"

*It would be my honor if you would agree to become my crew. I want to take you places you have never been and I'd like you to show them to me. Tell me where you want to go and I'll take you there.*

"How about home for a start," I demanded.

Both Sort and Kattie looked disappointed. “How about we look around a bit first?” suggested Kattie trying to divert my impatience. “After all, we’re in space, able to travel the universe. Why don’t we do a bit of exploring first?”

“We have to assume,” argued Sorts, “this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I don’t see us being picked up by my alien spacecraft every other day. No offence Oyx.”

*None taken.*

I wasn’t convinced. I had only see two rooms a hall and a bunch of monitors and the result wasn’t the space journey I had imagined.

*You could go visit the planet I am orbiting. I picked it out just for you.*

“Is it class M?” I asked in a snotty tone.

*I don’t understand.*

“He means a planet with a breathable Oxygen-Nitrogen atmosphere, Oyx.” Sorts explained.

*Definitely. Quite like your home planet, although with a tad more Argon.*

“This is nuts.” I suggested aggressively, “What’s down there? It could be highly dangerous. I’m not keen on visiting a planet where I might sink into a methane pool or be eaten by a large alien carnivore.”

*I wouldn’t be a very good ship if I took my crew to a highly dangerous world. It would defeat the purpose. I would lose my eyes. Although you do have a point, I don’t know exactly what is down there. That’s why I need a crew. I’m too large to visit other worlds, but I love to see them through your eyes. You want to visit the stars. I want to see them. I think it will be a symbiotic relationship.*

“Suppose, you stay here and the two of us go visiting other worlds?” Kattie pointed at herself and Sorts. She had a big, bright infectious smile on her face. The kind of smile which causes men throw caution to the wind. I was hooked.

“So how would we get down there? You going to beam us down?” I asked, sounding like a full-on nerd.

*Something like that. I will transport you directly. It’s the only method I have. I do not come with ... what do you call them? Shuttlecraft.*

“Actually, I was kidding,” I smiled politely, “How exactly is this going to work?”

I never did get an explanation. For all I know my body was destroyed and rebuilt. But here I was standing in the middle of a grassy veldt with Sorts and Kattie. Everything seemed normal, except the grass was a light violet and the air had a rather pungent smell to it. I instantly stopped breathing and held my breath. Kattie took off, skipping across the open ground as if she didn’t have a care in the world. As she took off, I noticed she was now wearing large white boots. A definite change from our barefoot state aboard Oyx. It occurred to be they felt quite comfortable. Possibly the best shoes I’ve ever worn.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath too long,” Sorts advised in a mentor-like style, “You’re starting to turn blue.”

I let out a lung full of air with a gasp. Right away I sucked in a new one. I couldn’t help myself. I felt, well, I felt normal. No ill effects so far. After about the third gulp of air, I finally started to breath normally.

Although I still had a strange sensation of impending doom. I was running through an entire assortment of horrific details in my head. Kidnapped by a strange, talking alien spacecraft. Taken well beyond the technical reach of my home world. Now I appeared to be marooned on a world where ... chances are ... nothing was eatable. I wouldn't say I was having a panic attack but ... no, come to think of it, I *was* having a panic attack.

Sorts looked at me with pity in his eyes. A face one general gives a cancer patient or someone going to the dentist. The type of gaze a professor gives a student who simply doesn't get it and needs the remedial course work. "Take it easy my boy."

My eyes flashed on Kattie who was still merrily dancing around in the flora. My male genes must have kicked in right then. She wasn't worried, why should I be? My panic attack started to well up again, but it was beaten to into submission mentally by those male genes calling me a coward. Fortunately, the image did the trick and I started to behave normally. Well, about as normally as one could if you abruptly found yourself light-years away from home.

I discovered the advantages of developing a new technology, such as the technology to go to the moon. How the time to create it prepares us for the experience. We have a whole stretch to think about it. But having not worked with any of the technology I had seen in the past few hours, I simply wasn't ready for the instant upgrade. It took about ten minutes for the experience to actually sink in. I was one of the first three humans to visit another world. No one had ever even gone to Mars and here I was standing on Planet C in some far away star system. My brain rapidly went nuts releasing endorphins. It was the same feeling you get when you make an impossible Olympic sky jump, or when you see your cousin's first baby.

It was quite the ride. Just before sundown, we found ourselves back on the ship. "How did you do that?"

*I don't have a good explanation for you. I simply think it would be nice for you to visit the planet and you are there. That's probably an unsatisfying answer, but it's the only one I have at present.*

I had another slight panic attack. What If I was speaking to God? Was I dead? Yet there was Kattie again looking happy and pleased. Like a thief in the night, my macho genes clubbed by panic attack with a baseball bat and I began to feel normal again. Good thing she was here, if it was only Sorts and me, I'd have needed a rubber room by now.

I was becoming more impressed with Kattie all the time. She seemed utterly fearless. As long as she was in sight, I was sure my 'you coward' genes would be able to hold off any further panic attacks. Then it hit me, like a brick thrown through a window, I was out here, in space. Nothing I could do about it, so I might as well relax and enjoy the ride. Sorts was busy describing the local flora to Oyx. "Maybe you could find some small plastic tubes and we could bring some back for you?" I suggested. hundreds of plastic tubes, with screw on lids, appeared on the table.

*Will that be sufficient?*

"Perfect," I replied.

Both Kattie's and Sorts' cabins were similar to mine. Glass tube bed, consoles and monitors. Sorts had Oyx put up a row of shelves on his wall and he started placing the plastic bottles on them. Oddly enough

nothing inside the bottles ever seemed to change or deteriorate. Once placed inside the bottle they stayed in the same state they were in when they were picked. Sorts even had an insect in one, a sort of a cross between a large dragonfly and a lightning bug. It had large compound eyes, but it could fold up its wings and body, allowing it to fit into remarkably small spaces. We named him Sparks. After a while, Sorts let him out of the tube and he sort of followed us around merrily like a dog.

Kattie had Oyx put up ... well actually create out of thin air, shelves in her room. But she was a geologist, so no tubes, only rocks. Sparks seemed to take a liking to a shiny green one Kattie kept. When it wasn't following us around it would rest on Kattie's green rock. I guess everyone is attracted to her.

Spark's light was usually a pale green, but occasionally it glowed a deep red ... especially when Grimsby was around.

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"Oyx has acquired a human crew," Grimsby noted, "that can't be good. Too adaptable, too inventive, it might result in giving Oyx ideas above his station. We can't have that." Grimsby surveyed the universe. It was vast, unfeeling and unforgiving. Grimsby liked it that way. He preferred that the terrors of the universe kept planetary inhabitants in their place. He'd worked long and hard to keep the races on their own home worlds and out of the vast reaches of interstellar space. In this way, they died off once their resources ran out. Grimsby liked that. More room for me and less vermin in the universe. No riff-raff flying around. Yes, cold, cruel and dead ... that was Grimsby's preferred version of the universe.

"Let's see ... no ... no ... yes, Ronson Priestly that's the ticket. He's the key. Once I get him on my side the others won't be too difficult to handle." Grimsby smiled. It wasn't a sort of pleasant smile, it was more like the smirk one saw on a bully moments before he fed you a knuckle sandwich. On anyone else it would have seemed out of place somehow, like the dispassionate partial smile a doctor might have when he announces you have a rare incurable disease. Strangely, on Grimsby, the smile looked quite normal.

I was quite shocked when Grimsby first appeared in my room. He was a round, roly-poly type of a man. The type who had seriously eaten too much and had no neck to show for it. He reminded me of Sidney Greenstreet, but with the height of Danny DeVito. Not only did he appear similar he had the same relaxed, considered Greenstreet style voice. They type that when it spoke, demanded he was right and you were utterly wrong.

"A. Grimsby's the name," he held out his hand to shake mine, but I failed to take the gleefully offered pudgy fingers. He took my hand and forced our palms together and gave me a vigorous shake.

"Oyx who is this?" I asked the walls, ignoring the figure standing before me and squeezing my fingers painfully.

"Not to worry, while I'm here, all our conversations will be confidential. Oyx can't hear a thing. It's like you're asleep." He let go of my hand, but it stayed, hanging in the air. The little man took my hand and gently lowered it to my side. It was a gesture which should have been pleasant and caring, but somehow it felt creepy. "Who are you?" I asked, distressed.

“A. Grimsby Esquire at your service, or to be more precise, I’m what you would call an avatar of A. Grimsby. I’m not really here, in the flesh so to speak.” Despite his overweight appearance he moved with the same gate I had only seen bouncers use. Large men, who when they throw you out of a bar, throw you across the street for good measure. It was not a comfortable feeling. I started wondering if Oyx had airlocks and if I might be visiting one shortly. “I’m here to get you out of your predicament.”

“Get me out of what predicament?” I asked, confused.

“Yes. Let’s be honest with each other shall we, you’ve been kidnapped by an alien creature bent on keeping you captive. I think you could use my help. Quite generous of me if I do say so myself.” Both the voice and the stance conveyed another message. The simple idea this creature was not prepared to take no for an answer. And if no was your final answer, he’d happily tear off your arm and beat you to death with it.

“Why would you want to help me?”

“Oh, consider me a type of policeman. The type that keeps the universe on an even keel. Keeps the inhabitants on the straight and narrow shall we say. My department does all that ... yes, you could say I’m with the department of planetary protection. I consider it my job to return kidnap victims to their home worlds.” He was shifty, in a con man ... but you can’t tell he’s a con man ... sort of way. If my grandmother was still alive, I was sure he would be selling her to the highest bidder right now.

“And what do I do to get this help?” I was stalling, trying to get closer to the door. But with each step I took, he took another to block me.

“All you have to do is agree to accept my help, dear boy. I’ll take care of everything from there.” He gave me the same feeling a used car salesman gives you. I could almost visualize the pen in his hand urging me to sign a document and telling me I’d be the proud owner of a car only driven once by a little old lady. Fortunately, there are miracles. Kattie Sisk magically appeared in the doorway. At the same time I noticed her, the fat, pudgy figure of A. ... I ‘m Sidney Greenstreet lookalike ... Grimsby disappeared.

“Who was that?” Kattie asked, using her nothing can be wrong with the universe expression.

“You saw him? Thank God.” I sat down and started breathing again, “I was beginning to think I was hallucinating; the effects of hypoxia.”

“High what?”

“Excess carbon dioxide, never mind. You saw him?” I gave her a desperate look. If she said no, she was only kidding, I’d been ready for the loony bin.

“Yes. Oyx, who was that?”

*Can you restate the question? The four of you are the only ones I’ve allowed into my interior.*

“Four?” I panicked.

“He’s counting Sparks,” she said reassuringly. My blood pressure dropped about 80 millibars. “I was going to drop by to show you that Sparks had started to glow red and ...” she looked over at the large

insectoid who had returned to his usual light green glow. "Strange," she mumbled, "I was sure he had changed color. No matter. Who was that guy?"

"You mean the one that looked like Sidney Greenstreet."

"That's who he looked like. I thought I recognized the face, but I'm so used to seeing him in black and white. It didn't recognize him in color." Kattie had a real Déjà vu expression on her face.

*Someone I can't sense has penetrated my exterior. This is a new sensation. I think you would call it ... distress.*

"You're in distress?" I shouted, "Now that gives me a real warm feeling all over." I was being a bit overly sarcastic, but Oyx was not the only one experiencing new feelings. I think I'm going to call mine ... yup, that's it, I'm going to call mine dread.

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The three of us sat down around the table, with Sparks mostly flittering around Kattie's head. I suppose I should also add Oyx, but despite my bad counting no one was coming up with any good explanations for the encounter it had been privileged to experience. Now when I say privileged, I mean that in exactly the same way a passenger might describe their journey on the Titanic. And I was starting to become comfortable in my new role as one of Oyx's interstellar guests.

"It doesn't matter," Sorts announced with determination, "What matters is we out here, where no one else has been before. We going to see strange things. Let's accept that ... because in the end, there is nothing we can do about it."

"I like to add one more thing," Kattie declared with an infectious joyfulness, "the next time Mr. Grimsby puts in an appearance, tell him to take a hike." Even Sparks seemed to be affected by her positive attitude. One thing I can tell you from my experience exploring the universe. Never do it alone. I still don't know who he is, but I'm positive Grimsby operates alone. Because when you operate alone, that's what you become ... A. Grimsby.

Kattie wanted Oyx to take us to some place exotic next. I'll say it was exotic. Two worlds so close together they were locked in eternal tidal orbit with each other. So close they collectively shared the same atmosphere. Not only that, but they were so far away from Earth the star they orbited couldn't be seen with even the best telescopes, so the system didn't even have a name. Oyx put us down behind a set of low rolling hills. It was weird looking up unto the sky and seeing the mountains and forests of another world hanging over your head. The gravity was beyond exotic. Imagine being able to leap over one hundred yards. It was a long jumper's paradise. Sorts was in heaven. He be able to write a book about the complex forces which allowed two planets to be in such close proximity to each other and not tear themselves apart. He babbled something about it revealing the nature in which two neutrons could remain in such close proximity to each other in an atomic structure. Personally, I didn't understand a word of it.

*Please try to stay together, the atmosphere isn't toxic, but I'm putting a bubble with higher oxygen content around you and it only extends so far.*

This was great. I get to explore other planets, no space suit required. NASA would be so envious. Suck it Neal Armstrong. Ronson J. Priestly, the most traveled star explorer in the universe. Eat your heart out William Shatner, I was doing this in real life. It occurred to me high oxygen content tends to make one giddy, but I didn't care. This was great.

The planet's orbit was wildly erratic, the sun didn't merely go down, it raced for the horizon like a falling rocket, engines running. It seemed as if we went from full daylight to pitch black in the blink of an eye. As the light disappeared, so did the heat. The temperature dropped like a rock. Right about now, I could have used a spacesuit. I could see my breath. Ice crystals formed when I exhaled. I was a living snow machine. The three of us moved off to higher ground. Because of the close proximity between the worlds there was a lot of volcanic activity. We could see a fissure lighting up the sky. It had to be warmer there, so we headed off in the volcano's direction.

The path led up a steep hill. Sorts and Kattie went first and I followed up the rear. That is until I slipped. I slid down the hill like an out of control sled. Ice had formed right under the surface, creating a zero-friction surface, so I had no way to stop myself. At the bottom was a swamp. I went right in. Man was it cold. There is cold and there is cold, this, this was way beyond cold. I have no idea how it remained in a liquid state. A first, I went completely under, but I managed to swim to the surface.

Once I broke into the air, the only sound I could make was the chattering of my teeth. I couldn't even call out. I made a mental call to Oyx to get me out of this. He was usually very responsive, but this time nothing. I could now tell the high oxygen bubble had moved on. I was hyperventilating but I still felt like I couldn't breathe. It occurred to me, this wouldn't last long. Without the oxygen to keep swimming and the cold cramping my muscles, I'd be a frozen, floating log in minutes.

"My, my ..." I heard a familiar voice. It was Grimsby. "That does look uncomfortable. Never fear, Grimsby is here." He held out one hand to pull me out of the water. "All you have to do is take my hand and this can all be over. You'll be back in your nice warm bed as if nothing had happened. Go ahead," he encouraged me, "Take my hand."

That voice; it made you want to do what it said. I was fighting the cold, the lack of air *and* that voice. His intonation, it made everything he said seem so logical, so true. At this moment he seemed like a true psychopath, they can be most charming. Believe me, Grimsby was turning up the charm. By now I could barely move, the water was so cold. I summoned up my last ounce of strength, splashed him with the water and swam away.

Grimsby stood and brushed off his hands, "Very well, if you insist. I'll stay here and watch you expire. Oyx won't be able to hear you if I stay. After your gone, it'll be easy to convince the other two to come with me. I'll tell them Oyx let you die." He smiled one of those psychopathic smiles only real nut jobs can do, "This is actually going to work out better than I planned."

The bushes rattled, the branches were breaking off in the cold. I saw a blurry figure above me, I tried to splash the shape again, but I could no longer move my arm that far. Kattie pulled me out of the water, and held me close. I had been thinking of how I might accomplish this, but this had not been one of my scenarios.

Before I could even begin to think again, we were all back on Oyx, safe, warm and dry. I disengaged myself from Kattie. I have to say it took more effort to accomplish this than staying afloat in the freezing water. "Did you see Grimsby?" I asked.

"He disappeared as soon as I got down the slope," Kattie explained.

"It would appear Mr. Grimsby can follow us to more places than inside Oyx," Dr. Peterson declared, but he didn't appear happy about it. Rather like the sudden discovery everything he knew about Physics was wrong.

"He wants to make you go back to Earth," I explained, "And he was more than happy to let me die if it meant you might decide the trip was too dangerous. We should construct some weapons." I announced with determination. "Do you think Oyx can make me a baseball bat?"

Sorts played with his beard, "To a creature who can appear or disappear at will, any weapon we might construct would seem to be pointless. He did say he was merely an avatar, didn't he?"

He'd always seemed real enough to me. I looked down at my hands. The memory of his chubby fingers crushing them was still strong. "But I felt his hands. He nearly broke my fingers."

"Without a good understanding of the technology," Sorts explained, "I can't give you a full explanation. What I can tell you is this; if I put your hand between two force fields, I can flatten it like a bug." The idea didn't give me any happy thoughts. "So, what your saying is, if Grimsby is made up of forcefields, he could squash us like your average house fly?"

"There's a good probability such would be the case," Sorts acknowledged.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Kattie quoted Han Solo.

A Star Wars reference. Could this girl possible get more attractive? I reluctantly turned to Sorts. He was less pleasant to stare at, but if anyone was going to have an answer, it'd be him. "What about you? Any revelations? Any ideas what we should do next?"

"One actually..."

"If you say build the Millennium Falcon, you'll make my day." I smiled.

"Uh, why would I say that?" Sorts snorted, "That's absurd." He stared at me with an expression which spoke volumes. OK, it actually only said one thing ... moron. "This is what happens when the American public streams television for too long."

I decided the conversation should move on a different direction. "So, what's the plan doc?"

"First we go outside." Sorts announced. "Oyx can you form an Oxygen bubble on your exterior surface?"

*Yes. Anywhere you desire.*

"Good, Ronson, you're going for a little spacewalk." Sorts announced, patting me paternally on the shoulder.

"Me?" I asked incredulously, "What about you?"

“I’m afraid I have a rather serious aversion to heights.”

“Tell me Sorts,” I asked in as noncommittal voice a voice as I could muster, “Would you characterize me as the type who would willing go on a spacewalk without a spacesuit?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” I was about to tell him where he could put his crazy I idea, when I spotted Kattie out of the corner of my eye. My male genes were now popping up and shouting ‘When do we go?’ like an excited puppy. Right about now those genes were beginning to get on my nerves. I wondered if I can have them removed?

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When you are younger, people explain you’ll grow up to do this or some other impossible thing. Cure cancer, build the perpetual motion machine, break the land speed record, those kinds of things. But even my crazy aunt Ida would never have suggested I would be doing what I was doing right now. I was standing alone on a smooth metal surface ... in outer space. My first instinct was to start crawling, I could tell Oyx’s gravity out here was less than I would have hoped for. One wrong step and I imagined myself floating off alone into empty space. I took a tentative step forward and everything seemed alright, but I still was operating at one level above extreme caution.

I could hear Sorts and Kattie in my head, like I can hear Oyx. Sorts wanted to know what I was seeing. “Oyx is a round metal ball,” I described, “very smooth. No marks or even nicks from any close calls with a meteor shower.”

‘Can you see any joints?’

“Joints? What do you mean ... wait a minute ... yea, I do. It looks like one metal section overlapping another.” I slowly dragged myself over to the juncture of the two metal plates. The surface was so smooth, walking on it gave you the impression the slightest breeze would blow you over on your ass. Mentally, I was aware there is no wind in outer space, but I was also standing outside a spacecraft without a suit, so the instinct to cower as exceptionally strong.

“Sorts,” I spoke very slowly for this next part, “you’re not going to believe this, but the joint ... it’s held together by rivets. They’ve been sanded down to make a smooth surface, but they are definitely rivets.”

‘Excellent.’ I heard Sorts voice using an especially cheerful tone.

“Not to impinge on this awesome discovery,” I suggested snidely, “But how does this help us out with Grimsby?”

‘It tells me Oyx was made, manufactured. Someone created him.’

*I have no memory of being made.*

‘I wouldn’t expect you to,’ Sorts declared in his overly objective vocal quality. ‘I have no memory of being born, yet I know that’s how I can into existence.’

I shifted a little bit from snide to annoyed, “Still not following you doc.”

‘If someone made Oyx, maybe we can find him.’

'Or her,' Kattie suggested.

'Precisely,' Sorts continued, 'and they might be able to tell us who ... or what ... Grimsby is.'

"What if Grimsby is the builder and he's pissed we are playing with his toy?" I suggested.

'Interesting, interesting notion indeed ...'

"What do you mean 'interesting?' ... Doc? ... DOC?"

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Back inside the mess hall, we sat around the triangular table. Sparks flitted from one to another, giving off his bright green glow. "So, what do we do now?"

You could see Sorts was pondering the problem. He pushed his chair back and started pacing up and down the floor. I was sure hoping it was helping his thought process, because it never did a thing for me. "Oyx," he asked after coming to a complete halt, "Can you take us to some place dangerous?"

*That wouldn't be advisable.*

"I think Oyx and I are in agreement here," I said shocked. "Are you trying to do Grimsby's work for him? We already know he'd have no trouble killing us. You want to help him out?"

"We're going to need a little more information on Grimsby. We know he's visited us here," Sorts was doing a very good detective imitation, but I wasn't quite following the logic, "but he hasn't returned. We also know he appeared to Ronson when he was in jeopardy. If we could recreate the scenario in some way ... without the extreme danger ... we might be able to get him back."

I was pleased Sorts wanted to avoid the extreme danger. It was rather considerate. Yet, I wasn't all too keen on the danger part. In fact, I wasn't all too keen on trying to contact Grimsby at all. Seemed to me avoidance was the better strategy.

"Some place where I could play the damsel in distress?" Kattie added excitedly.

"No, I'll do it." I said. Those damn macho genes again. I swear I'm going to carve them out with a spoon.

*I know just the place.*

The jungle was thick, with leaves covering over leaves and branches trying to smother each other to get to the sun. But I wasn't worried about the flora. No, it was the nearby natives with the stone tipped spears which concerned me. They were definitely humanoid, with Neanderthal features; long ridges under the eyebrows, wearing a less than friendly expressions. Although the six antenna sticking out of their foreheads threw me.

*Running would be advisable. The gravity is lower than Earth, so you shouldn't have too much trouble staying ahead of them, but I'd go now.*

Oyx could see them through our eyes. We were like his camera. I stood staring at the natives. They started shouting at each other in some kind of primeval squeal and pointing in our general direction. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. We weren't alone in the universe. These were real living, sentient beings. Ok, they were primitive screw heads, but they were real people. Not only was I seeing this, but

they were heading right toward me ... and at a pretty good clip too. I bet these guys would do great in the Olympics. Sure, Oyx and Sparks were living aliens, but these ... well if you ignored the antenna ... they were almost ... human. It was amazing.

That would have been my last thought too, if Kattie hadn't grabbed my arm and pulled me after her. My survival genes, which my macho genes had been sitting on, kicked in and I started running. I was soon leaping, not over tall buildings, but definitely over some pretty extensive shrubs. We were out pacing them quickly, but you could hear the group following our trail with the delight of a head-hunter. We turned a corner around a fairly large boulder and ran straight into an open pasture.

As soon as we turned the corner, Sparks went from his shiny green light to a bright red. If he's had a klaxon, it would have been perfect. Grimsby was there, plain as day, in a slightly rumpled suit. We stopped running just short of crashing into him in a head long collision. Even though my legs stopped moving, I slid across the forest floor and only stopped directly in front of him.

Sots plan had worked ... now if only I could get the hell out of here. Grimsby calmly wiped some of the leaves off my shoulders. "I can see I'm going to have to take a more active position in this matter."

I didn't know what he was referring to, but I didn't like his tone; not one bit. "I can't have you running all over the universe, casually introducing yourselves to other species." Grimsby stood there in the forest, calmly picking the dirt out of his fingernails. I tried to say something, but I couldn't move. Grimsby looked displeased. "Might give them ideas. In fact, it might make them come looking for you ... and that is definitely out of the question." He waved his hand at us, like he was casually telling a small child to depart his presence. That's the last thing I recollect.

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The next thing I recall was lying flat on my back on a cold metal table. It was mostly uncomfortable because I wasn't wearing anything. I picked my head up and saw Sorts in the exact same state. I respect Sorts, but he's not my type. My head flew to the other side and there was Kattie, same state. Thank God, at least the day wasn't a total waste.

A series of doctors, nurses and medical technicians ran into the room covering everyone up. Somebody always has to come rushing in a spoil your day. What I didn't understand at the time was, I had not reached my lowest point. That came after the doctors, finishing with a stupidly long number of tests, explained we had been technically dead. No brain activity at all for weeks. But we hadn't shown any signs of decomposing. CGC had finally decided we had succumbed to a new type of disease. We had recently been moved to Bethesda Naval Hospital for a series of exploratory surgeries when we woke up.

I have never been more depressed. It had all been some sort of stupid dream. I know you're supposed to see your life flashing before you, but what I saw was a flash forward ... not the life I had, but the one I wanted. Only to have it all ripped away from me, to end up back at the only life I didn't care about. How could I go back to a quiet life of paper pushing after what I had been through?

Sorts had told them the whole story. He was fairly animated about it, but they simply looked at us like we needed a rubber room. Preferably a windowless room with a key they could lose. I kept telling him to shut up, but there was no stopping him. He babbled like an old lady at a gossip luncheon.

Finally, the three of us sat silently in the small quarantine dining room, sipping coffee. We were all wearing those white terry-cloth robes they use in hospitals, sitting in our bare feet. I guess somehow, in my hallucination I sensed this, that's why the inside of the wet suits felt like cotton, but we had no shoes. I felt amazing stupid. My brain was running through all sorts of ways to live this down, but I was coming up with nothing.

"We have to find a way to get back." Sorts declared.

I slammed my fist down on the table, hard. "Get back where? Into a coma? We dreamed it all up you moron. We're never going to live this down." I was expatriated. All my genes were pissed off, even the macho one.

"People don't have the same dreams," Sorts announced candidly, sipping his coffee. It still hadn't gotten through his thick skull.

I glanced sheepishly over at Kattie, "Will you tell him? Maybe *he* belongs in a funny farm, but not me. I'm done exploring the universe with my mind. I just - I just want out."

Kattie looked at me with her all is right with the universe smile. "How many times do you have to hear it to realize you 'are' an explorer of the universe?" She reached across the table and took one of my hands in hers. It was a nice feeling. Then she opened her clenched left fist ... and Sparks came tumbling out, flew around her head and landed on her right shoulder.