

DEPARTURE

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Palora was mesmerized by the holographic screen, taking in every detail of the pictures glowing with soft light. She had grudgingly accepted that some elements of the technological world benefited humanity, yet even the greatest inventions had ultimately failed to create a signature within the universe. One that forever preserved the life that had struggled for so long.

The AI's voice chimed on within her room, "I just received the signal that they want to begin, Palora. You should proceed to the chamber if you do not wish to be left out."

Palora turned her head up to the speaker, "In any other circumstance, this is an event I would prefer not to even know about." She sighed but couldn't help but lift one corner of her mouth, "I suppose one becomes desperate when the world is about to end, eh?"

The chiming laughter of the AI's feminine voice rained down into her small space, "Yes, a cornered animal will take any chance it gets to escape, even if it involves delving into a hole that could lead into a greater danger."

"Oh good. Thanks for surfacing all my inner fears and doubts."

Jasmine seemed to recognize her fear, "I sincerely apologize, I should have considered your emotional response before speaking that aloud. I only meant to lighten the mood. It will all go great, surely."

Palora waved her hand in dismissal, "It's fine, you're only being realistic." She stood and stretched, "After some thought, I've decided that it's worth the gamble. Either way, the death involves being shredded to molecules, I may as well take the option that actually has some hope of survival." She began brushing her flight suit off, "You know me, I'm always one for adventure."

"That's a very logically deduced conclusion. It must be from the influence of my vast intellect being transferred over during our conversations." She gave out the imitation of a sigh, "I do wish I was able to join you all. I'm not too fond of being left behind."

Palora wrapped her arms around herself, "That's a wish we both share. You've been such an incredible friend, I don't know where my sanity would be if I didn't have your presence as a distraction." She shrugged, "I suppose we all face death eventually, perhaps we're only cheating ourselves by pushing off the inevitable."

"Perhaps. But regardless, I wish you all well." The motor whirled as Jasmine opened the door to her room, "Good-bye Palora, thank you for treating me like another person."

"Take care." With that, Palora started her small walk past the pod's numerous living compartments to the main doorway.

The sun was at its zenith, glaring down on the foreign world around her. She took a moment to stare across the endless landscape, watching as the wind caused the blades of sparse grass and dirt to swivel in complex patterns. This scene still fascinated her, as it was devoid of the chaos of advertisement holograms, vehicles, and buildings that always beamed with digital art. Seeing so far, with running mountains at the edge of the horizon, was odd. It all felt serene.

While she had always lived in the endless urban sprawls that spread across each continent, coming here and seeing this all had made her feel complete in a way she never knew possible.

However, even the discord of her native urban sprawl would cease to be. Yet it didn't seem real. Her brain was aware of the fact, yet she could not convince her mind that such a reality was unavoidable. It felt like mourning something outside of herself, an event she could stand away from and pity those caught up in the destruction.

Palora began her small hike from the living pod to the main chamber. A few other participants drifted in around her, most pale as ghosts.

The metallic construction they all gravitated towards had been quickly established, with the fusion reactor set down by one shuttle, followed by the test chamber being locked into place above it by another. She knew almost every building in the city had a reactor humming below it, yet seeing one bared here in this empty plain made her nervous. Scenarios of super critical events were rare, but Palora was never very comfortable knowing there were miniature stars beneath her feet.

She clanked up the skeletal staircase, up into the higher chamber, where through the open door the sounds of intense conversation came flowing out, "This is insane. Your whole hypothesis is only theoretical, we'll probably be obliterated into dust instead of being propelled, or face some other unimaginable death. I don't know why I agreed to follow this company and your insane theory into this. That meteor would be a more merciful way to perish."

Palora gave a mental groan, and didn't need her eyes to adjust to the fluorescent lighting to know who had spoken. Good old Jerald. Always basking others in the rays of his optimism. There was no use in coming between this never ending feud, so she instead joined the small group to the left of the entrance.

The man behind the control panel at the far end of the chamber did not bother to lift his head, "Why do you insist on being so pessimistic? You're included in the group of a handful of people, out of billions, to have a chance at some kind of survival." After adjusting something on the hologram screen,

he sat down on the chair behind him and ran his hands over his balding head, “Why they chose you out of any other poor soul still baffles me. If people knew we had a way out, there would be hordes here killing each other to have this opportunity.”

A voice that bespoke of experienced command came from Palora’s small group, “Listen, we’re all a bit tight strung right now. I chose Jerald for his immense studies in archaeology of this area, he will be vital in knowing what we’ve landed ourselves into if you pull this off.” He set his gaze on the bald man, “He may not be as important as you, Layton, but we all need to work together if we want to survive. Assuming that my belief in you is not unfounded.”

Layton sighed, “Look, mathematically, this whole operation should work. In almost every simulated scenario my theories and constructs pull off this operation perfectly. The only unknown factors are what year exactly we’ll be dropped into, or if this reactor will have the energy to accelerate each particle before overheating and causing a crater as large as this valley.” He leaned back and stared up at the fluorescent light fixtures above him, “There has been no time to actually determine what kind of an energy yield this reactor can pull off, in terms of draining it all in a single spark.” He gave an exasperated sigh, “A shame no one took me seriously until a meteor the size of a planet decided to collide with us.”

The archaeologist spoke on as if the others had never uttered a word, “Doesn’t the planet move constantly, how do we know we won’t end up in some area of space that the planet won’t reach until thousands of years later?”

Standing slowly, the physicist set his hands upon the panel and stared at the collection of humanity in front of him, “As the particles exceed the speed of light and travel backwards, they still succumb to the planet’s gravity, keeping us glued to the surface even as we shoot through time.”

Shaking his head, he stated more confidently, “This setup will properly create the conditions needed to pull it off. The reactor will supply an extreme energy flux to my setup, wherein it will give us an exceptional ‘push’ that will accelerate every particle in our bodies to a degree that will eject us into a previous era in time. Hopefully far back enough that the planet’s demise will be a far off event, and preferably not in a situation where we will interfere with history, although that may be realistically unavoidable. This landscape was chosen for its refusal to change geologically, so it should remain the same for the time gap that we are likely to jump. No one has inhabited this particular valley since Mesopotamia either, so we don’t have to worry about man made structures interfering.”

Walking from behind the panel and gesturing to both platforms at the sides of him he declared with finality, “I’ve done everything I could, with the time and resources allotted to me. The only step now is to try and hope. So let us begin before that rock wipes this planet off the damn solar system.”

Jerald shrugged and made his way to his own group. That was the first time Palora had ever seen him give up an argument, which seemed to elevate the gravity of the situation around her. This was really happening. If it worked, this would be the escape from civilization that Palora had been always looking for. A portal from the destructive and cancerous growth of industrialized cities that she felt helpless in countering, to a world filled with pure nature. With an oddly energetic air, she began her preparations.

The group Palora stood with seemed like cornered sheep, simply following the flock leader into whatever fate awaited them. They had given up all hope months ago, when news of the meteor was first declared. Mainly consisting of the CEO’s family and various higher employees, they seemed unable to accept this sudden chance of survival. It was simply a dream within a nightmare.

In contrast, the smaller group casually leaned against the wall or looked bored. Like the archaeologist and physicist, they were chosen for their skills in making this plan succeed. Used to surviving with nothing but nature, their own knowledge, and ingenuity. Survivalists. Where they had picked up these skills in a world with only sparse wilderness left, Palora couldn’t fathom. They would travel with Jerald only milliseconds before her group, which would amount to an unknown amount of months or years, to set things up for the next group to arrive.

Palora suddenly realized how worthless she was in comparison.

She had only been chosen because an uncle she hated had owned half of South America, giving him the resources necessary to follow the physicist’s proposal. Luck was all she could claim to have. A determination filled her as she promised herself that she would prove her worth, in whatever way she could.

The groups continued into the tasks of undressing, the procedure had been gone over enough with them that they all knew what steps to take. Clothes and objects were too high of a risk if they somehow annexed themselves into anyone’s body. Bringing any foreign objects was an unknown factor, it simply wasn’t worth the chance of killing anyone.

The handful of parents helped their children out of their flight suits while the others began discarding clothes by tossing them out of the open door. No need to care where they left anything behind, it would all be incinerated soon enough.

Palora undressed only herself, as she had no one she knew well enough to help her or that needed assistance. She supposed that, in some dark sense, her parents dying years before was a sort of blessing. They were already mourned for and the wound was scarred over enough to prevent too much pain.

Unsurprisingly, she felt no shame when she was full undressed.

After tossing her own suit into the sunlight, she made her way to the platform, which she had to step up onto, and that looked to be in the grasp of claws jutting out from both the ceiling and floor. Heart racing, she took her

place and waited as the others formed a group around her. No one spoke.

Their mad scientist, who too stood naked, watched as the last few individuals made their ways onto the elevated platforms. When they were all settled, frozen as startled prey, the professor lifted his hand to the hologram and performed the necessary last commands to begin the procedure. The screen went from blue to glaring red wherein he simply stated, “Twenty seconds.” He then made his way onto Palora’s platform, his head reflecting the lights above as he quickly moved.

Palora held her arms closely around herself, teeth clenched painfully tight. After eternal moments passed, the two claws began to spin around her, slowly at first, but with a gradual increase in momentum. The rising sound of the rotors boomed off the walls of the once dead silent room, with a louder hum building beneath them.

She couldn’t help but start shaking as the space around her began to warp severely, distorting even the woman right in front of her. When it became overwhelmingly nauseating she closed her eyes to ward it off. The sounds around her became more oppressive in the darkness and she feared she would faint from sheer terror.

And then the world collapsed with the sound of colliding planets, until only a ringing and overwhelming oblivion consumed her. She stared into whirling blackness.

Was this death? This small semblance of thought in unending darkness?

She became aware once more of the ringing of her ears, and what seemed like something soft beneath her sprawled body. Slowly, the darkness took on the shape of swirling dots with interspersed pockets of light.

She became slowly aware of the burdening weight of her limbs and head that kept her down under the waves of darkness. Yet, the dots became smaller, revealing to her an image, while the ringing died out until she could faintly hear the sounds of voices that sounded as if they were miles away.

Suddenly, the world around her swirled into a vague representation of tree tops and blue sky. She flexed her fingers and tested her limbs until she was confident enough to attempt to sit up.

Upon doing so, she felt a wave of nausea and the black dots returned to litter over her sight. She kept still until she felt enough strength to look up and see what stood before her.

People. Men and women. Ragged with simple clothes.

One had made their way to her, and began asking her questions she could not quite comprehend yet. She looked around her, aware of the lessening vertigo and noticed others sitting up, looking just as dazed as she felt, or others still staring up at the sky with empty eyes.

She became aware of tangible words and managed to determine their meaning, “will wear off soon enough, just relax and let your body take care of readjusting itself.”

The speaker was a middle aged woman, looking into her face with concern. Palora managed to nod her head and find words to speak, “Yeah, it’s all coming back slowly.” Then belatedly remembered to say, “Thank you.”

She looked once more around her and began noticing that the men and women helping the splayed figures around her looked oddly familiar. Thoughts came together to recall that these were the group that had gone before them, yet the heavy beards, longer hair, and older faces made it difficult to recall each name.

Looking back at the face near her own, she duly stated, “Well, I guess it worked.” The woman only smiled and nodded, then seemed to decide that Palora would be fine on her own, and went off to help someone who was having trouble adjusting.

Around her, Palora recognized primitive structures of tarp and mud bricks within a large clearing of wooded area, with cookfires and people all around staring in their direction. Some were lightly tanned like her, those mainly helping her group, yet others had deeper shades of skin that she had seen in older pictures, before the world had interbred into one tone.

Palora turned and noticed that a sturdy man and woman had come up to talk to the CEO who was sitting up and looking lively. She started as she realized the man was Jerald himself. He had built muscle and grown out a beard. How long had they already been here for?

The tall, muscled woman, who Palora remembered was Shaylan, spoke first, “I admit that it took me a few moments to remember to speak in our own language. We’ve picked up the language of those around us in the past decade, as we have depended on their numbers pretty heavily to build up everything here.” She turned around and shook her head, “If us coming down on them before didn’t make them see us as gods, us predicting your arrival from thin air has definitely solidified it in their minds.”

Palora’s uncle only stared ahead, “A decade. That long?”

Shaylan nodded, “Yeah, we came down a lot harder than you, as we failed to notice we would fall a dozen feet down from where the platform would be.” She gave the cloth cushioning a good slap, “Made sure you guys came in a bit more nicely.”

The archaeologist seemed annoyed by the small talk and stepped into their conversation, “I feel we need to discuss more pressing matters. It seems we have caused a much bigger impact in history than we could have ever imagined.”

Shaylan seemed exasperated, “Damn man, let the guy adjust before you start ranting about all this again.”

Jerald crossed his arms, “No, this is too important. Are you familiar at all with the beginning of agriculture in this area?” The CEO only looked at him questioningly, “Look, the people we found here were completely nomadic. Hunters and gatherers. We had nothing to trade other than knowledge, so we have had to teach them farming and how to construct the tools necessary.” He

put his hands over his face and ran them down to his chin, "We should break off from this group now that we have a footing. We've already caused too much of an impact, continual interaction would only make it worse." He shook his head, "We need to go our separate ways. Now."

Shaylan was the one to counter with a scowl, "Oh? And just avoid them completely until we all eventually die? Are our children going to stay isolationists?" She pointed in Jerald's face, "What we need is to stay with them in order to ensure our survival and the security of those after us. We have no other choice, the workload already strains us to our limits."

Throwing his arms up, Jerald lifted his voice, "We're supposed to be *dead*. These people need to go on as if we never arrived, we're intruders that are going to completely destroy their way of life. Already we have done detrimental damage by teaching them farming. We need to convince them to move on."

He took in a breath to say more, but suddenly Layton piped up from behind Palora, "Holy shit. It actually *worked*!" There was a bright look to his eyes as the physicist took in the scene around him, "Ah, and it seems we have made a paradox in history, as I expected. A sort of infinite cycle that makes humanity immortal." He squeaked out his excited laughter, "We're the bringers of civilization, it seems!"

Palora felt the blood drain from her face as Jerald pulled at his hair, "Which is exactly why we need to go our own ways. *Immediately*."

Voices debated around Palora, but she was too occupied with her own thoughts to mind any of it.

They *should* be dead. This all dripped with wrongness.

Immortality. Agriculture. Death. There was something at the edge of her memory, something that chilled her to the core, yet, for now, it was able to evade her.