

Heart of Molten Stone

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An early surveyor, tongue firmly in cheek, named it Styx—a river of molten lava running from near Altair V's north pole all the way down to its equator. It carved its way around jagged spires of obsidian, meandered across plains of rough, pitted basalt, sent glowing, fractal tributaries sprawling across half the planet. The first time I saw it, coming down fast out of the bottom cloud layer on approach to North Station, I felt like I was locking on to a landing beacon from Hell.

Which would not have been a bad name for Altair V itself. Its rocky surface tortured by volcanic activity, constantly bathed in an actinic, ultraviolet glare from its blue-white primary, cloaked in a wispy atmosphere of sulfur, ash, and carbon dioxide, it was one of the last places you would expect humans to try and carve out a foothold. But it had mineral riches beyond imagining—single crystals of emerald and sapphire the size of a jumpship, shimmering pools of molten gold, superconducting metglass splashed across the lava plains like spilled milk.

There were two mining stations on Altair V. The main station near the north pole served as the planet's spaceport, such as it was. The finicky mag-fields of the planet were weakest there and the location made for cleaner navcom. Follow Styx's spidery sprawl down to the equator and you'd hit Deep Station, clinging like a flea onto a landscape that made Earth's Dakota Badlands look like Avalon.

There was a skeleton crew of humans at both posts, a handful of andys, and a lot of expensive hardware. The mineral shipments from the planet had broken records at first, then dwindled down to a trickle in recent months. It was my job to find out why.

A yellow light was blinking on my nav-panel, indicating that I was receiving a carrier for a landing beacon but it was rejecting handshaking protocol for lock-in. I tongued my radio on.

“North Station, this is the jumpship *Conrad* . North Station, this is Martin, jumpship *Conrad* . I need a lock. Repeat, I need lock.”

Nothing except the hissing whisper of background static in my mastoid speakers and the rushing sound of my own blood in my ears.

“North Station, I need a lock. Goddamnit, wake up down there.”

Crackle, hiss. “*Conrad*.” Very weak signal. I boosted the gain. I could barely make out the words beneath the roar of static. It sounded like two voices. “...no ... Schwartz ... beacon.”

“Please repeat, North Station. Please repeat.”

Hiss, crackle. “...turn ... Schwartz ...*No!* ...”

What the hell was going on down there?

“North Sta—”

There was a sharp click in my ears and the panel light went green.

“*Conrad*, you are locked. You are locked.” Signal sharp and clear.

About time, I thought. “Affirmative, North Station.”

I tongued on the three-sixty display, saw a brief sparkle as the induction field wrapped around my optic

nerve, then I was sitting on empty space, streaking down into a glowing hellscape.

I followed the river Styx upstream. It flowed quickly in the middle, glowing bright yellow and fading to orange and red near the banks. Patches of black crust seemed to grow out from the banks into the main flow and break off, careening downstream. Billowing clouds obscured parts of the river, glowing red and yellow as if with an inner light.

North Station was a sprawl of domes, blockhouses, and heavy equipment, scattered across a flat plain of black glass on the high side of the river. A crude landing field was marked off by an 'X' of blue lights. Beneath the faint shimmer of an environment-field, I saw a crew of black-skinned andys crawling like ants around a large, treaded vehicle.

I tongued back into realspace just as I landed with a slight bump. I powered down the drive, unstrapped myself, and removed my helmet. I felt cold all of a sudden, naked and exposed. I had been augmented for so long, it was like removing a limb.

I got my gear and strapped a portable environment-field generator to my belt. My ears popped as I walked out the port and the ship's e-field merged briefly with my own. The sky was red in the direction of the river, fading to deep purple on either side, framed by jagged cliffs and spires. Straight overhead, blue and green auroras rippled across the black sky, peeking out from behind an inconstant curtain of shredded cloud.

There were two men waiting for me at the bottom of the ramp. One of them was tall and lean, with long blonde hair pulled back in a braid and a slight Asian cast to his features. His companion was almost as big around as he was tall, and it looked like solid muscle. Definitely enhanced—hormones for sure, maybe surgery. The skin on his scalp was sculpted in an elaborate series of ridges. His lip was split and swollen, glistening in the light of the landing floods.

I raised my hand in the Company salute.

“Gentlemen.” Raspy buzz of enhanced subvocalization.

“You're Martin,” the blonde said. My jaw tingled faintly with the vibration of my mastoid speakers. “I'm Flint. This here's Drake.” He nodded towards his companion.

I looked at Drake. “That lip looks nasty.”

Drake returned my gaze with an expression of sullen defiance. “I fell,” he said. A bubble of reddish spittle formed on his lower lip and dribbled down his chin.

I looked back at Flint. There was a faint, wry smile on his face. This clearly had something to do with the scuffle over the landing beacon, but whatever was going on here was between the two of them. I didn't want to get involved unless I had to.

“Fine,” I said. “Well, you know why I'm here. Is there someplace we can talk?”

We walked across the black glass landing field towards a low cluster of prefab buildings. As we drew near, I saw that their carbon-fiberglass sides were streaked and pitted with oxidation scars. We entered a covered vestibule in front of the nearest one and walked through a doorway. My ears popped again as the e-fields adjusted.

We were in a large room, almost the size of an aircraft hangar, that clearly served as a live-work area. One end of the room was scattered with computer equipment, machine tools, and biomech gear. Spotlights mounted on ceiling tracks illuminated the area, leaving black shadows in the corners. The other end of the room was partitioned off by flimsy barriers into sleeping quarters and an eating area. A pair of androids stood motionless near a corner, gleaming, black synflesh dully reflecting the room's lights. There was something odd about them, but from this distance, I couldn't tell what.

Flint and Drake seated themselves around a large round table next to a porta-stove. Empty provisions crates served as chairs. Flint produced a bottle of clear, oily-looking fluid and three metal cups. He poured a round and handed out the cups. He looked at me expectantly.

I lifted my cup and took a sip. It was vile, some sort of compost Everclear. I hoped it wouldn't blind me.

“All right,” I said, when I could talk again. “The Company sent me here to find out why production on this rock has dropped fifty percent in the last six terra-months. I'm supposed to review your procedures here, head down to Deep Station and talk to Schwartz, and take whatever action is necessary. I've been given full authority.”

I looked back and forth between the two of them. The tension between them was almost a living thing. Drake was staring down into his cup, looking mean and sullen. His swollen lip gave the impression of a childish pout. Flint looked back at me with a blank expression that didn't quite mask a hint of supercilious amusement.

“Full authority,” I repeated.

I kept staring at Flint. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

“I don't know what I can tell you,” he said. “We can only ship out what we get from Deep Station—that's where most of the mining action is. Last few terra-months, though, we haven't been getting much out of Schwartz. A few days of big shipments of rock or metglass for processing, then nothing for weeks at a time—”

Drake broke in. “He's into some intense shit down there.”

Flint shot him an annoyed glance and went on. “Only reason the Company's gotten anything at all the last month is we've been cleaning out our backstock.”

He paused and took a sip, holding the cup up to his lips for a long moment, looking lost in thought. Finally, he nodded, as if coming to a decision, and looked up at me. “I sent Orbison down there in the flitter a few days ago and I haven't heard anything. We have a comsat in geosynchronous orbit but it went belly up just after Orbison left, totally dead. Can't bounce signals off the ionosphere with this planet's crazy fucking mag-field. Only jumpship on-planet is down with Schwartz, too.”

He shook his head, and again I thought I saw a hint of wry amusement in his expression. “So we have been stuck here, mister Company man. High and dry. Incommunicado.”

I took another sip and the raw whiskey burned my throat. I turned to Drake. “What kind of shit?”

He shook his head and stared down into his cup again.

Flint laughed abruptly, a short bark. “Let's just say that Schwartz has been working outposts a little too

long. It didn't matter as long as he kept up his shipments..."

"What didn't matter?"

He waved his hand at me. "I'm getting to that." He paused and took another sip of whiskey. "He seems to be acting out some sort of ...*fantasy* ... with his andys. Some sort of God thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Schwartz seems to believe that his andys ... worship him."

I looked closely at him. It was ludicrous. Andys were ... andys. They had a functional bipedal form, but they were just high-melanin synflesh stretched over a fullerene endoskeleton. There was a vat-grown knot of ganglia between their ears that gave them a rudimentary vocabulary and the ability to carry out manual tasks. They were outstanding tools, but they had about as much capacity for spirituality as a toaster.

"That's crazy," I said.

Flint shrugged. "Well, yeah, but you have to understand. It's different with andys out here."

I felt a sharp jolt in the ground underneath me. The lights in the shed flickered briefly. There was another, gentler jolt.

"Quake," Flint said. "We get them all the time."

"Great," I said. I'd lived in South California for a few years when I was a kid, just before the Big One. The holos of the Los Angeles Sea still gave me the willies. I didn't want to think about what a serious quake here might do to the e-field generators. I put both hands flat on the table, trying not to show my nervousness. "What do you mean, different?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just different. That's all. But Schwartz's really taken it around the bend." He paused. "Look, I don't know what was really going on down there—all I've got are a few radio transcripts. That's why I sent Orbison."

Drake looked like he was about to say something. I looked at him and he bit his lip and looked away. Beads of sweat glistened on his scalp ridges. Up close, I could tell that it was a home surgery job—well done, but a little sloppy. There was a fine tracery of cauterization scars around the base of the ridges.

He knew something and he wasn't talking. I would try to get him alone later on.

I turned back to Flint. "I want to see those transcripts."

He nodded. "They're on-line. I'll set you up for access and you can log in from the shop." He pointed to the clutter of equipment at the far end of the room.

* * * *

I actually had to use a keypad—it felt like I was handling an antique. Stone knives next, I thought. My fingers fumbled several times over the touch-sensitive glass and I had to start over. Finally, I accessed the file. I waited a second for the induction field to grab my optic nerve and fling the text up on my mind's eye, then I shook my head. Stupid. That's what the screen's for.

I squinted as the text scrolled down the display. It was mostly routine stuff, descriptions of shipments, maintenance logs. Then an entry caught my eye.

* * * *

Always night here. I called them to me and they came, circled around me in the dark. Always dark. Alpha is my consort. The chosen one.

* * * *

More routine entries, then:

* * * *

I am the physical manifestation of their collective psyche. Circle round me in the dark. Worship me. Through me, they do not know death. I told one today to wash itself in the river Styx, heal in the blood of the lamb. It walks down to the shore, steps off into the burning flow. Black head bobbing in the fire, washing downstream in the yellow fire. E-field good for maybe a minute or two. I could feel her life winking out like an explosion in my heart when her field collapses. Alpha tells me later that this one doesn't die, lives on in blood of the lamb. I am the Redeemer. I am the Redeemed.

* * * *

I stared at the last entry for a long time, feeling a chill deep in my bones.

I logged off and went to look for Drake. The central common area was empty, and I walked around one of the partitions to the sleeping quarters.

Flint was crouched on a stool in front of an andy. He had a short knife in one hand and he was cutting carefully at the andy's lower torso. There was a red-stained rag in his free hand and he dabbed at the freely flowing blood. I was shocked for a moment at the bright redness, but it was just good engineering—andy or not, oxygen is an efficient bio-fuel and hemoglobin an excellent carrier. I walked closer to get a better look.

Flint heard my footsteps and turned around. He smiled and beckoned me closer. The andy's entire body was covered with an elaborate pattern of scars. Tightly wound spirals of scarification on its flat chest marked where a human's nipples would be. A meandering, branching lesion ran from just below the andy's chin, sending tributaries out towards its arms and legs, flowing down until it was lost in the shadowy 'V' at the andy's sexless crotch.

Flint pointed down there and chuckled. "Deep Station," he said. He dug the blade into the purple-black flesh and a thick bead of blood oozed up.

I looked at the andy's face. Deadpan, impassive. High cheekbones graced with more elaborate scarification. Eyes of deep amber. My gaze traveled down the length of its body again. The realization hit me like a slap.

"You mean this is *amap* .?"

He chuckled again. "You catch on quick, Company man. The river Styx. Not bad, huh?"

I was horrified. "You're really sick."

He chuckled. "Maybe so, maybe so. But I told you it's different with andys out here. If you're gonna understand what's going down in Deep Station that's the first thing you gotta learn. Meet Leilani." He gestured at the andy. "Ancient Hawaiian word, means 'heavenly flower.'"

The andy looked at me.

For a crazy split second, I almost said 'hello,' but I stopped myself. "Goddamnit, Flint, what kind of game are you playing here?"

He stood up and faced me. He laid the knife on the stool behind him and held his hands out to me, palms forward. "No game. I just want to run this shop, take care of business, same as you. It's Schwartz you want to come down on, not me."

I looked into his eyes. He seemed to be telling the truth, at least as far as he knew it. "I want to talk to Drake," I said. "There's something going on between the two of you and I want to know what it is."

Flint shook his head. "Look, Drake is dumber than a box of dead crabs. He thinks that Schwartz is ... God. Or Something. It's really tiresome."

"Well, let's find him."

He sighed. "All right. Whatever."

We looked in the sleeping quarters, the shop, everywhere. No sign of him.

"I've got a bad feeling," Flint said. "Let's check your ship."

* * * *

A determined person with a hand laser can, with time and a little luck, ground a jumpship. A well-trained person can cripple one in no time. Drake was determined and he was well trained. The inside of the *Conrad* was a chaotic jumble of melted plastic, fused metal, and scorched ceramic. Great swaths of bubbled plasticene arched across the ceiling. The instrument panel was a smoking ruin.

Drake lay in a corner of the cabin, a gaping wound in the side of his head, a laser in his outstretched hand. The edges of the wound were cauterized, but it still oozed a slimy pink and red discharge. An andy was sprawled next to him, most of its face burned off. I walked forward to get a closer look. Its scalp bore a similar series of sculpted ridges, and the andy's physique looked very much like Drake's—stocky and muscular.

"Hormone shots," Flint said. "Cosmetic surgery. Making it over in his image."

I looked over at him.

And you're making yours over into the image of the planet, I thought. This place is an open fucking ward.

I looked around at the damage. "This ship is never flying again," I said. "Not without a major overhaul."

Flint shook his head. A strand of blonde hair fell across his face. "I didn't think he'd go this far. Not offing himself, anyway. He's been getting more and more wrapped up in Schwartz' messiah trip. When we found out you were coming, he freaked. He kept saying, 'He'll ruin everything. He'll ruin everything.'"

I nodded. That explained the scuffle when I was coming in.

“It doesn't matter anymore. There's a jumpship at Deep Station. We have to get down there. Are there any more flitters?”

Flint shook his head again. “Orbison took our only one.”

“Well, there must be some way.”

“We do have a couple of cargo barges. Null-g ground effect vehicles, nothing fancy, but they'll do about thirty knots.”

“That's crazy,” I said. “This is some of the roughest country I've ever seen. We won't get two klicks overland.”

Flint smiled grimly. “Yeah, we'll have to use the river.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “No...” The idea of riding a cargo barge for two thousand klicks down a river of molten lava to confront a messianic lunatic had very limited appeal.

“If you can think of any alternatives, Company man, I'm all ears.”

I looked at Flint. He was actually smiling.

“You're out of your fucking mind,” I said.

He laughed out loud. “Styx and stones, man. Styx and stones.”

* * * *

We didn't have much to take with us—some rations, a couple of hand lasers. As an afterthought, I backed Schwartz's transcripts onto an infodisk. The Company was going to want some documentation on how this operation went fubar.

The cargo barge was a flat pallet of titanium and fullerene, ten meters long by five wide, featureless except for a raised control platform at the front and a low railing that ran around its perimeter. It rode about half a meter above the ground on a cushion of null-g fields. When Flint drove it out from behind one of the processing shacks, his andy was standing beside him at the controls. Their e-fields shimmered faintly in the half-dark.

I stepped over the railing and onto the barge. It rocked a little with my weight, then stabilized.

“You're bringing her?” I didn't realize until after I said it that I had referred to the andy by the female gender. It gave me a crawly feeling at the pit of my stomach.

Flint didn't seem to notice. “Yeah.” Just asking me to make an issue out of it. I looked over at her. Was it my imagination, or was her chin raised in a profile of defiance?

“All right, fine. Let's do it.”

It was about half a klick to the river, through a tortured landscape of rough hills and gaping fissures. Flint

drove quickly over the rough ground, managing to avoid the worst of it. The barge rocked slightly with the unevenness of the terrain. The river glowed orange from behind the hills in front of us, the glow intensifying as we approached.

We rounded a cliff of jagged obsidian and there it was in front of us, a vein of flowing, liquid fire, fifty meters wide. A large rock jutted out of the stream near the middle and the lava splashed over it, solidifying into crystalline streamers in mid-air and falling back into the flow.

The river was different this close up. There was almost a presence about it, a spirit.

Flint eased the barge to a stop. “Styx,” he said. He wasn't smiling this time. He pointed to the rock in the middle.

“Whatever you do, don't get caught up on one of those. This thing spills and we wind up in the drink, your e-field'll polarize. It's good for maybe two minutes before it overloads. Then you're history.”

I nodded. “Let's go.”

We eased forward, off the bank and into the river. The ride felt different over the flowing lava, smoother and more stable. Every now and then we lurched slightly as the null-g field passed over density inhomogeneities in the flow.

We floated out to the center of the river, pointed downstream, and gradually picked up speed, leaving a viscous, vee-shaped wake stretching out behind us.

After a little while, the river widened and the cliffs on either side fell away. The river was so calm and flat we could have been riding on solid ground—except for the occasional bubble that rose up from the depths, stretched the skin of the surface into a glowing, yellow hemisphere, and popped, sending a spray of liquid rock in all directions.

I sat on the flat bottom of the barge behind Flint and Leilani, watching their silhouettes rock gently with its motion, looking over the side at the lava speeding past. If you looked closely, you could see shifting patterns in the flow, honeycomb-shaped convection cells growing, merging, collapsing. It was hypnotic. I felt myself sinking into a light doze and I went with it. Flickering dreams, snapshots of flowing fire. Drake's dead eyes looking through me. Glowing jagged scar ripping down Leilani's body, tearing her open. Head and shoulders emerging from the blistered wound, pushing back the seared flesh like snakeskin. Long ascetic face, sad eyes. I recognized the face from the files I'd studied. Schwartz. *Schwartz* .

“Why don't you take the conn for awhile?” Flint said, his buzzing voice on my mastoid speaker shaking me into wakefulness. “I need a break.”

The controls were simple and primitive—wheel for steering, foot pedals for speed. Flint and Leilani went to the rear of the barge and sat looking out at the glowing wake.

I thought about Schwartz, about the andys, about this hellrun down the river Styx. I felt like there was a lot more going on here than was obvious on the surface, like there was some sort of metaphysical understructure that would click into place for me if only I had the key.

Schwartz. I'd been sent out to punch his clock, but riding toward him down this river of fire I was beginning to feel an odd kinship with him. I wanted to talk to him, to try to understand him.

I looked behind me. Flint and Leilani were sitting with their arms around each other, their merged e-fields like a single coruscating glove, silhouetted against the orange glow of the river and the black sky.

I turned away, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

* * * *

The river was starting to narrow again. Cliffs rose on either side, until we sped down the bottom of a deep, rugged gorge. Red light reflected from the molten river flickered off the obsidian cliffs. Flint had walked up from the back of the barge and was standing beside me. I looked over at him and nodded, and we stood there together for a while, looking out at the river.

I didn't know how to ask him what I needed to know. I was curious about his andy, confused. I needed to understand.

"Flint," I said. "You and your andy ... Leilani."

"Yes?"

"What do you ... what do you *do* ?"

"You mean sexually?"

"Well, yes ... No. I mean, in part, yeah, but really, what *is* it between you?"

I thought he would get angry but he only smiled that enigmatic grin of his and shook his head.

"I don't think I can explain it. We have a ... connection."

The ride was starting to get a little rough as we hit some rapids. I held onto the steering wheel and looked behind me. Leilani was sitting at the rear of the boat, facing forward, braced against the back rail.

I looked back at Flint. He smiled again. "You understand, Company man. You do. You're just not ready to own it yet."

The barge lurched and he grabbed a rail for support. He looked ahead and his eyes widened. I followed his gaze.

Up ahead, the river narrowed further, the speeding flow at the center glowing a bright yellow. Then, the river disappeared abruptly. *Falls* .

We looked at each other for a long moment. I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't know what. Then he braced himself against the railing and I tightened my grip on the wheel.

We went over the edge and the bottom dropped out of my stomach. Ahead of me I saw a twenty meter drop down a crystalline channel of glowing stone into a cauldron of roiling fire.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

A sheet of lava washed up over the bow of the barge, freezing into glassy stone as it hit the deck. It sent a molten tongue lapping at my feet and splashing up my legs. I felt a moment of intense heat before my

e-field polarized, wrapping my thighs in a skintight funhouse mirror that faded to transparency as the lava cooled. I kicked the crust from my legs and held on to the wheel.

Beside me, Flint lost his grip. I saw him tumble and slide back the length of the barge and grab the back railing. He didn't have much of a grip, though, and I could see him struggling to hang on.

Leilani was back there, too, braced securely against the frame of the barge. She could have reached out and helped him. I saw it clearly. There was the space of a heartbeat, maybe two, when she could have reached out her hand and saved him.

His scream buzzed in my mastoid speakers as he lost his grip and disappeared into the fire.

Suddenly, everything was calm again. We were floating downstream bobbing on the lava current. The falls behind us appeared impossibly high. I looked, but saw no sign of Flint. I turned the barge around and sped back to the base of the falls. I got as close as I could, and looked for him long past the time his e-field would have failed. He was gone.

Leilani had come up to the com. I turned to her and grabbed her shoulders. My ears popped as our e-fields equilibrated and merged.

“What's wrong with you?” I shouted. “You could have saved him!”

She looked impassively back at me. Her ebony skin glowed in the hellish light and her scars stood out in bold relief.

“Love...” she said. I'd never heard her speak before and her voice was like the sound of metallic bees, low and without inflection.

I reached back and struck her with the back of my hand as hard as I could. Her head jerked back and a trickle of blood flowed from the corner of her mouth.

“Not...”

I struck her again. Her lip split open.

“Power.”

I balled up my fist and struck her again. She staggered back, tripped over the railing, and fell into the molten flow. Her head bobbed in the current as I left her behind. Moments later, far behind me, I saw the flash as her e-field failed.

* * * *

I drifted downstream on a river of bloody fire. I thought about Leilani's words. Love not power. Did she mean that she loved Flint but that didn't give her the power of life and death over him? Or that what he thought was love for her was power, and she rejected it? Or was it an admonition? I didn't know. I didn't think I ever would.

By the time the cluster of crude shacks that was Deep Station came into view, all I knew was that I wanted it to be over.

There was a head on a titanium pole in front of the largest shack. It was mummified by the thin, corrosive

atmosphere, but it was recognizably human. Orbison.

I found Schwartz behind the buildings on a small rise, overlooking the base and the river. He was stretched out on a crude fullerene cross, his arms and legs secured to the beams by loops of wire. His e-field flickered around his head like a halo. I recognized the symbolism, of course—I'd studied archaic forms of worship.

He'd been out there a long time—he was almost dead from dehydration. I cut him down and brought him into the main shack. There were no andys about, but the whole time, I had the feeling I was being watched.

I laid him down on a bunk, tried to dribble some water between his cracked lips. Held somewhere in the lines of those ravaged features, I could see the face from my dream. Lean, aristocratic cheekbones. A deep sadness.

“What happened here?” I asked. “Did they do this on their own or did you put them up to it?”

His eyes fluttered open and his pupils wandered, not tracking on anything, then they seemed to focus on me. He grabbed my shirt and pulled me close to him. He struggled, as if trying to summon up the strength to speak.

“They ... suffer.” Each word came with an incredible effort. “*Live... in us ... manifest ... expiate.*”

He let go of my shirt and closed his eyes. He shuddered once and was still.

I sat there looking at him for what seemed like a long time. I didn't understand, I didn't understand anything, but I knew what I had to do.

I found the station's fusion plant, knocked out the safety interlocks, and set it to overload. I had about an hour. It wouldn't be much of a bang, maybe a kiloton, but it would be enough.

When I reached the top of the ramp to the jumpship, I turned around. They were coming out onto the landing field, about twenty of them, identical except for the one at the lead. She had a long ascetic face, lean aristocratic features, a deep intelligence burning in her eyes.

We looked at each other for a long moment, then I turned around and closed the hatch behind me.

* * * *

The trip back to North Station took about five minutes. After I did what I needed to do, I lifted up to about a thousand clicks and looked back at the fiery chaos of a planet tearing itself apart. The River Styx looked like a cracked and blistered wound, leaking pus.

A perfect disc, searing white, blossomed near the equator and faded to a dull red. Seconds later, another one blossomed in the north.

* * * *

I had about a terra-week of acceleration to match velocities with Sol system before making the jump. I wrote out my report.

Bioinfestation. Sterilization mandated. Regrettable but necessary.

It was a lie, but I had no idea what truth was in all this mess. Truth was Drake's body sprawled like a limp doll amidst the wreckage of my jumpship. Truth was Flint's life winking out in a white, searing flash, while the reflection of the River Styx flickered in Leilani's amber eyes. Truth was Orbison's head on a post and Schwartz stretched out like a tin Jesus bearing the weight of all our sins and folly. The truth was a ghost, a shadow, a whisper. The only thing I was sure of was that I was tired.

When I got back to Gateway Station and filed my report, I found out that Schwartz had a wife somewhere on Luna. I was passing through there on my way to Earth, so I decided to look her up. I wasn't sure why, but it felt like something I had to do.

We agreed to meet in a bar I knew with a magnificent holoview of the Sea of Tranquility. We were actually about a klick underground, but it looked completely real. I arrived early and got a table next to the window. The landscape was a study in contrast—bright grey where the sun lanced off the surface, deep black where the surface lay in shadow. I heard a rustling in front of me and looked up. She was beautiful. I knew she would be. I wasn't at all surprised at her aquiline features, the cool intelligence in her eyes, her smooth, dark skin. Schwartz' black Madonna.

We sat together looking out at the moonscape for what seemed like a long time. Words didn't seem necessary. Then she turned to me.

“Were you with him when he died?”

I nodded.

“Did he ... say anything? Any last words?”

I thought about it for a moment. I could tell her the whole story. I could try.

“Yes,” I heard myself saying. “He said to tell you that he loved you. That's all.”

Her eyes grew moist. It must have been a trick of the light, but they seemed to flash amber for an instant, the way a cat's eyes will glow briefly as it turns its head. She touched my hand.

“Thank you,” she said.

We sat there together for a little while longer, then I excused myself.

“Ship to catch,” I said.

She nodded, smiled, and took my hand. When I got to the door I turned around and looked back. She was still sitting there at the table, her head slightly inclined, looking out at the flat, lifeless plain. She must have sensed my gaze, because suddenly she looked over at me. I raised my hand. She nodded with a slow, sad smile. Benediction or release, I wasn't sure, but it was enough. It was over. I nodded back, turned around, and got out of there.

END