

Leave by Robert Reed

Politics doesn't make friendships. I have forgotten the names and faces of almost every other protester, and that's after two years of enduring the elements with those very good people, berating distant politicians as well as the occasional drivers who showed us their middle fingers.

No, what makes the friendship is when two adult men discover a common, powerful love for skiing and for chess.

I met Don in front of the old Federal Building. We had found ourselves defending the same street corner, holding high a pair of hand-painted signs demanding that our troops come home. That was seventeen years ago. Our cause was just, and I never doubted the wisdom or glorious nobility of our methods. But every memory is tinged with guilty nostalgia. Of course the war was wrong -- a blatant, foolish mistake perpetrated by stupid and criminally arrogant leaders -- and hasn't history proved us right? If only more people had stood on enough corners, and then our not-so-good nation would have emerged sooner from that disaster with our reputation only slightly mangled and thousands of our precious young people saved.

Don was the most ordinary member of our tofu-loving group. With his conservative clothes, the constant shave, and his closely cropped, prematurely gray hair, he was our respectable citizen in a platoon composed of cranks and ideologues. There was some half-serious speculation that poor Don was an agent for the State Patrol or FBI. But beneath that respectable, boring exterior lurked a card-carrying member of the Libertarian Party. Chat with the man for five minutes, and you knew he was genuine. Listen to a thirty-minute lecture, and you'd take away everything you'd ever need to know about personal responsibility and stripping the government from our private lives.

The fact that our spouses hit it off instantly didn't hurt either. Our wives ended up being as good friends as we were. So it seems that war gave me one good gift: Don and Amanda, and their two children, Morgan and sweet Little Donnie.

Cheryl and I couldn't have kids -- a constant sadness in an otherwise untroubled marriage. So when I mention being close to Don's children, picture a fond uncle.

Morgan was ten when we met the family -- a bright, almost pretty girl who would make any parent proud. She had inherited her father's fastidious attitude and a sharp, organized mind. Being seven years older than her brother, she helped raise the wild youngster. Yet the girl never complained, even if that meant babysitting a weepy, feverish imp while her folks stood in the sleet and wind, holding high signs begging the world for a single rational act.

I can't remember Morgan ever acting jealous toward her sibling. Which was a considerable feat, if you knew Little Donnie and his special relationship to the world.

As a toddler, LD (as his family called him) was an effervescent presence already speaking in long, lucid sentences. Cheryl explained to me that some three-year-old girls managed that early verbal capacity, but never little boys. Then she pointed out -- and not for the last time -- that Little Donnie wasn't merely smart, he was absolutely beautiful: a delicious sweet prince of a lad destined to grow up into a gorgeous young man.

Don was openly proud of both kids, but LD stories outnumbered Morgan stories at least three-to-one.

Every time I saw my friend, he had to share at least one LD anecdote. Preschool and then elementary school brought a string of thunderous successes, including perfect report cards and glowing praise from every teacher. And middle school -- that realm of social carnivores and petty hatreds -- proved to be a tiny challenge for the golden boy. Of course LD earned his place in the finest gifted programs in the state.

And it didn't hurt that he was a major force in the local T-ball circuit, and that he dominated the seventh-grade basketball court, and nobody in eighth grade could hang with that stallion when he decided to run the four hundred meter sprint.

But eighth grade was when our world abruptly and unexpectedly changed.

As the boy entered high school, the glowing reports fell off. Don was still genuinely thrilled with his son. I have no doubts. But suddenly he was less likely to share his news about LD's continuing rise to still-undefined greatness.

What if somebody was listening to his boasts?

Distant but horrible forces were at work in the universe, and Don sensed that silence might be the wiser course.

In an earlier age, Don and I had done what we could to battle an awful war. Success meant that our troops eventually came home, and his children could grow up safe, and nothing else seemed to matter.

But LD turned fourteen, and a new war began.

Or rather, an unimaginably old and bizarre and utterly unexpected conflict had found its way into our lives and tidy homes.

I was still kept abreast about the most important LD news. And I'd cross paths with the boy, or my wife would. As she had predicted, he grew up gorgeous and brilliant. And Little Donnie remained charming, though in that cool, detached way that every generation invents for the first time. He was always polite to us, even at the end. His lies were small affairs, and on the surface, harmless. It actually made me jealous to hear my middle-aged bride praising the Apollo-like figure who had chatted with her at the supermarket. But she was right. "The only thing I worry about," she said with a confidential tone, "is that LD has too many choices. Know what I mean, John?"

I suppose I did, but not from my own life experience.

"There's so many careers he could conquer," Cheryl added. "And with any girl he wants, of course."

Including my wife, if she could have just shrugged off twenty years and forty pounds.

"Is he doing all right at school?" she would ask.

As far as I knew, yes.

"Because Amanda's mentioned that his grades are down," she reported. "And his folks are getting worried about his friends."

Big Don had never quite mentioned those concerns, I noted.

Then a few months later, my best friend dropped his king on its side and told me, "I resign." That very poor performance on the chessboard preceded a long, painful silence. Then with a distracted air, he added, "LD's been suspended."

Did I hear that right? "Suspended from what?"

"School," Don allowed.

I didn't know what to say, except, "Sorry."

Don looked tired. He nodded, and after hard consideration decided to smile. "But he's in a twelve-step program. For the drug use."

I was astonished. "What drug use?"

He didn't seem to hear me. With a wince, he reported, "The counselors are telling us that when a kid is high-functioning, being bored is the greatest danger."

We were talking about drugs, and we weren't.

"What drugs?" I had to ask.

"It doesn't matter." Don paused, then nodded, as though he'd convinced himself it really didn't matter.

I slumped back in my chair, staring at the remaining black and blond chessmen.

"LD is in rehab," the worried father continued, "and he's promised to get clean and well. And he'll graduate on time, too."

A string of promises that were met, it turned out.

That next year, the young prince went to our local college -- perhaps to keep him within reach of his worried parents. What news I heard was cautiously favorable. But after the first semester, even those mild boasts stopped coming. The only glowing news was about Morgan and her burgeoning career as a dermatologist.

I made a few tactful inquiries.

Don would say, "Oh, the boy's doing fine too."

Cheryl's queries to Amanda ended with the same evasive non-answers.

Then one morning, while strolling downtown on some errand, I happened to stumble across the famous LD.

To my eye, he looked fit and sober.

But when he told me, "I'm going to buy a new bike today," he was lying. And when he said, "I'm riding across the country this summer," he was feeding me a fairy tale.

The boy had already made up his mind.

I didn't even suspect it.

"Enjoy your ride," I advised, feeling proud of this tall, strong kid with whom I had shared nothing except seventeen years and an emotional stake that was never defined, but nonetheless felt huge.

"See you, Mr. Vance."

"Take care, LD."

Two weeks later, Don called me at work. "Have you seen my boy?" he asked. Then before I could answer, he blurted, "In the last five days, I mean."

"I haven't," I allowed. My stomach clenched tight. "Why?"

"LD's vanished."

Some intuition kept me from mentioning the bike ride.

"We just found out," said a terrified parent. "Donnie's failed all of his classes, and nobody seems to know where he is."

I had nothing worth saying.

And then with a tight, sorry voice, Don confessed, "I just hope it's the meth again. You know? Something small and fixable like that."

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Five years earlier, our tiny world had changed. But it wasn't a historic event that happened in a single day or during a tumultuous month. In fact most of humanity did its stubborn best to ignore the subject. So what if a few voices told the same incredible story? And what if astronomers and their big telescopes couldn't entirely discount their crazy words? In our United States, the average God-fearing citizen still didn't swallow the idea of natural selection, and that's after almost two centuries of compelling research. Rational minds had to be skeptical. Even after the story broke, there were long stretches when I considered the whole business to be an elaborate, ludicrous joke. But the evidence did grow with time, and I had no choice but to become a grudging believer. And then our friends' son vanished without warning, and Cheryl turned to me in bed and asked when I thought LD would actually leave the Earth behind.

My response was less than dignified.

Thoroughly and passionately pissed, I told my wife, "He bought a bike, and he went wandering."

"And you know this how?"

"That's what he told me he was doing," I reminded her.

"And has anybody seen this bike?"

I didn't respond.

"His parents talked to everybody," she continued. "Girlfriends, his buddies. Professors and both roommates. They never saw a bike. Or a packed suitcase. Or anything you'd take on a trip."

"I know that."

"With the clothes on his back, he went out on a midnight walk," she continued. "His car was still parked in the street. Nobody remembers him buying a bike or camping gear or anything else you'd want on a cross country ride."

"Don told me all that, honey."

"Did Don mention his son's checking account?"

I said nothing.

And she read my expression. For an instant, she took a spouse's cruel pleasure in having the upper hand. "LD drained it and closed it."

"Why not? A kid on the road needs money."

"Amanda just told me. LD left all that cash in an envelope addressed to them. They found it while searching his room. Eleven hundred dollars, plus a birthday check from Grandma that he never bothered to endorse."

Bike ride or drug binge. In neither case would the boy leave that tidy sum behind.

Once again, Cheryl asked, "How soon does he leave the Earth?"

In the pettiest possible ways, I was hurt that Don hadn't mentioned finding the money.

"What's Amanda think?" I asked.

"The worst," said Cheryl.

"Did they call the police?"

"Last night. From LD's apartment."

I had to ask, "But do the cops care? This is not a child anymore. We're talking about a legal, voting-age adult."

"An adult who has vanished."

But citizens had rights, including the freedom to fail at college, and then out of embarrassment or shame, dive out of sight.

I asked, "Have the police met with them?"

Cheryl dipped her head sadly. "Amanda didn't say," she admitted. "She started to cry again, said it was too painful, and hung up."

"I believe that," I muttered.

"Talk to Don," she advised.

I nodded, wringing a sad joy out of the moment, allowing myself to revel in the awful fact that I didn't have any children of my own to worry about.

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"On average," Don asked, "how many young men and women vanish? In a given year?"

I offered an impressive number.

"Multiply that by three," he warned.

"Is that the U.S., or everywhere?"

"Just the U.S."

"I see."

We'd met at the coffee house for our traditional chess game. The board was set up, but neither of us had the strength to push a pawn. My good friend -- a creature who could not go into a new day without clean

clothes and a scrubbed face -- looked awful. A scruffy beard was coming in white. The eyes were rimmed with blood, and I could see dirt under his fingernails. Where had the man been digging, and why? But I didn't ask, watching him pick up his mug of free-trade coffee and sip it and look into the swirling blackness. Then a voice almost too soft to be heard asked, "How many go up there? Out of a thousand missing people, how many?"

"Twenty," I guessed.

"Not bad. It's ten and a half."

"How do we know that?"

"There's Websites," he explained. "Help societies and half a dozen federal agencies like to keep databases, and the answers mostly agree with each other. Most missing people are found sooner or later, and there's some who drop off remote cliffs, and there's always drug users who aren't found and murder victims too."

My black pieces waited at attention, fearless and wood-hearted.

"Go into space or become a murder victim: Those are about equally likely, as it happens." In a peculiar way, the haggard face betrayed hope. Then with the earnest tone of confession, Don mentioned, "That's what I want the cops to believe. That LD's been killed."

"So they look for him?"

"Sure."

I sipped my warm coffee, weighing the probabilities.

"Of course they don't believe me," he continued. "But if his disappearance isn't a crime, then they can't do anything beyond filling out a missing-person's report."

I kept thinking about tall and handsome LD, calmly lying to me about the bike and his plans for the summer. The prick.

"He's alive," I said, aiming for hope.

Don remained silent, fearful.

"Okay," I allowed. "Suppose he's joined up with them."

I was passing into an uncomfortable terrain. Don leaned back and dropped his shoulders, and with a whisper, he said, "Okay."

"They don't take their recruits off the Earth right away," I pointed out. "I mean, they might be wizards with space flight and all. But their volunteers have to be trained first, to make sure that they can ... you know ... do their job well enough to make them worth the trouble."

"Sure."

"Lifting a big young man past Pluto," I said. "It costs energy."

"It does," he agreed.

"LD is smart," I continued. "And sure, he has a bunch of talents. But do you really think, Don -- in your

heart of hearts, I mean -- do you believe that your son is capable of serving as a soldier in some miserable alien war...?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

Then the shaggy white face lifted, and just by looking at the sleepless eyes, I could tell we were talking about two different boys.

"Little Donnie," his father muttered.

With all the confidence and horror he could muster, Don declared, "My son would make a marvelous, perfect soldier."

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Nobody knows when the war began, and no sane human mind claims to understand the whys and for-whats that keep it alive today.

But we know for sure that the first human recruits vanished four decades ago. My father's generation supplied that early fodder, though the world didn't notice when a few thousand boys failed to come downstairs for breakfast. By unknown means, the Kuipers identified the ripest targets among us -- always male, always smart and adaptable -- and through elaborate and almost invisible negotiations, they would winnow the field to the best of the best. Usually the boy's mind would wander, experiencing a series of lucid daydreams. About fighting, of course. But more important, the aliens would test his capacity to cooperate and coldly reason and make rapid-fire decisions under stress. And they always made sure that he would say, "Yes," before the question was asked. "Yes" meant that a young human was agreeing to serve one Nest for ten full seasons -- a little more than three decades, Earth-time. Survive that maelstrom of carnage, and you were honored and subsequently released from service. Then according to traditions older than our innocent species, you were allowed to bring home one small sack stuffed full of loot.

Ten years ago, a few middle-aged gentlemen reappeared suddenly. There was some interest, but not much belief: They came from the Third World, and how credible is a Bangladeshi fisherman or a Nigerian farmer? But then six years ago a Frenchman returned to his home village, and he made the right kinds of noise for the cameras. Then came a Canadian gent, and an Italian, and then a pair of handsome American brothers who suddenly strolled into a town square in New Hampshire. In the media's eyes, these weren't just crazy peasants rambling on about impossible things. Here stood men with good educations and remembered faces and what soon became very public stories, and if their families gave up on them ages ago, at least there were siblings and elderly parents who could say with confidence, "It is him. It is them. I know it is. Yes."

And they brought home their sacks of loot, too.

Some of those possessions had obvious value -- gemstones of extraordinary purity, slabs of rare-earth elements, and other materials that would have carried a healthy price on the open market. But the biggest noise came from what looked like trash: Pieces of pretty rock, shards of irradiated glass, unfathomable chunks of burnt machinery, and in a few cases, vials of dirty water.

Each veteran looked older than his years, with haunted, spent eyes and flesh that had been abused by extreme temperatures and cosmic rays. Some had lost fingers, some entire limbs. Each wore scars, outside and in. But despite very different origins and unrelated languages, they told identical stories: About being recruited by creatures dubbed the Kuipers who taught them how to fight, and despite very long odds, how to survive.

The Kuipers were a deeply social organism, it was explained.

But not like bees or termites or even naked mole rats. There were no queens or castes. In their youth, every alien had a strong, vaguely humanoid body capable of modest shape-shifting. But as adults they had to find a worthy patch of ground to set down roots, interlocking with one another, forming elaborate beds that were at least as intricate and beautiful as coral reefs.

The Kuipers didn't refer to themselves by that name. Their original world circled some distant sun; nobody knew for sure which one. They were an ancient species that had wandered extensively, creating a scattering of colonies. For the last thousand millennia, a substantial population of Kuipers had been fighting each other for possession of a single planet-sized comet that was drifting somewhere "out there."

No veteran could point at the sky and say, "This is where you look."

Navigating in deep space wasn't an essential skill, it seemed.

When the story broke, good scientific minds loudly doubted that any world matched the vivid descriptions given to family members and the media. Comets were tiny things; even Pluto and its sisters didn't possess the gravity or far horizons that were being described. And they were far too cold and airless for humans wearing nothing but self-heating armor. But then one astronomer happened to look in the proper direction with a telescope just sensitive enough, and there it was: A giant ice-clad world moving high above the solar system's waist, carrying enough mass to build a second Earth, but built of less substantial ingredients like water and hydrocarbons laid over a small core of sulfurous iron.

That new world's crust, though frozen, was no colder than a bad winter day in Antarctica. A multitude of subsurface fusion reactors created a deep, warm, and very busy ocean. Ice volcanoes and long fissures let the excess heat escape upward. As promised, the atmosphere was dense and remarkable -- a thick envelope of free oxygen and nitrogen laced with odd carbon molecules and rare isotopes, plus a host of other telltale signs proving the existence of some kind of robust, highly technological life.

Moving at light-speed, more than a day was required to reach that distant battlefield.

Human soldiers were moved at a more prosaic rate, several weeks invested in the outbound voyage. Which was still immensely quick, by human standards. The Kuipers' ships were tiny and black, invisible to our radar and nearly unnoticeable to the human eye. They never carried weapons. Every veteran made that blanket assurance. By law or convention, spaceships were forbidden to fight, much less attack any other species. And without exception, the surrounding universe was neutral -- a taboo of peace balanced by the endless war on their world.

A curious mind could ask, "Which side did you fight for?"

Those retired soldiers always had a name for their sponsoring nest or reef, and rarely did two soldiers use the same name.

"How many reefs are there?" people inquired.

"Two hundred and eleven," was the unvarying answer.

Hearing that, a human being would invest the distant struggle with some familiar politics.

"So how does this play out?" they would ask. "One hundred reefs fighting the other hundred, with a few neutral cowards sitting on the sidelines?"

Some veterans laughed off those simple, wrong-headed questions. But more often they would put on



expressions of disgust, even rage. Then with a single passionate breath, they would explain that there was no such thing as neutrality or alliances, or cowardice for that matter, and each reef gladly battled every one of its neighbors, plus any other force that stupidly drifted into the field of fire.

War was the Kuipers' natural state, and that's the way it had been for the last twenty million years.

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Panic is temporary; every adrenaline rush eventually runs empty. Even the most devoted parent has to sleep on occasion, and breathe, and somehow eat enough to sustain a minimal level of life. That's why a new, more enduring species of misery evolves for the afflicted. Over the next several weeks, I watched my friends carefully reconfigure their misery. They learned how to sleep and eat again, and for a few moments each day, they would find some tiny activity that had absolutely nothing to do with their missing son. Normal work was impossible. Amanda exhausted her sick days and vacation days, while Don simply took an unpaid leave of absence. Like never before, they became a couple. A team. Two heads united by the unwavering mission -- to find and reclaim LD before he forever escaped their grasp.

"I almost envy those two," Cheryl confided to me. "It's sick to think this. But when have our lives enjoyed half that much purpose? Or a tenth the importance?"

"Never," I had to agree.

In my own sorry way, I was angry about what LD was doing to my old friendship. After those first days of pure terror, Don stopped calling. He didn't have the energy or need to keep me abreast of every little clue and dead end. There were many days when I didn't once hear from the man. He was too busy researching the Kuipers. Or he had to interview experts on missing people. Or there were night flights to distant cities and important meetings with government officials, or patient astronomers, or one of the very few practicing exobiologists. Plus there were some secretive exchanges with borderline figures who might or might not have real help to offer.

We tried to keep meeting to play chess, but the poor guy couldn't recall what he had told me already. Again and again, he explained that his son was still somewhere on the Earth, probably somewhere close by. The Kuipers' version of boot camp required eighty-seven days of intense simulations and language immersion, technical training and cultural blending. That was what every verified account claimed. Perhaps as many as three percent of the recruits failed this stage, earning a scrubbed memory of recent events and transport back home again. "But those numbers are suspicious," Don said. "There's no telling how many young men pretend amnesia to explain a few missing months."

From the beginning, the same relentless rumors had been circulating about secret training bases on the ocean floor or beneath the South Pole. Various governments, and particularly the U.S. government, were said to be in cahoots with the Kuipers, giving them old air bases in exchange for top-secret technologies. The truth, however, was less spectacular and infinitely more practical for the job at hand.

Not to mention far, far stranger.

"LD is somewhere close," Don kept telling me.

And himself.

Witnesses were scarce, and the memories of the veterans were short on details. But each would-be soldier was encased inside an elaborate suit, armored and invisible to human sensors. For the next thirty years, that suit would be his shell and home. For the moment, both it and its living cargo were buried deep in some out-of-the-way ground. There was no telling where. Somewhere within a hundred miles of

our little table, LD was living a cicada's subterranean existence, experiencing what the aliens wanted him to experience, making him ready for the adventure of a lifetime.

"We've got two months to find him," Don told me.

If his son had actually joined the Kuipers, I thought to myself.

Later, he announced, "We have six weeks left."

"Plenty of time," I lied, looking at the fresh dirt under his fingernails.

Then he said, "Four weeks, and a day."

"Maybe he'll be one of the dropouts," I said hopefully.

For the first time, LD's father was hoping for failure. But saying so would jinx everything. I could see that in his stiff mouth, in his downcast eyes. Don was turning into a superstitious old fool, not allowing himself even to smile at the prospect: The powerless victim of grand forces beyond his control, with nothing in his corner but the negligible possibility of a little good luck.

"Two weeks left, minus twelve hours."

We were sitting in the coffee shop. This was our usual day for chess, though we hadn't managed a full game in weeks. Don always brought his laptop, leaping around the Web while we suffered through a halting, chaotic conversation.

Three times in three minutes, Don glanced at his watch.

"Expecting somebody?" I finally asked.

"I am," he admitted.

I waited for the full answer. When none came, I asked outright, "So, whom are we expecting?"

Don smiled, anguish swirled with anticipation. "Somebody important," he mentioned. "Somebody who can help us."

Then he gave the coffee shop door a long hard stare.

I made one wrong guess. "Is it a parent?"

There were thousands like Don, and the Internet allowed them to meet and commune, sharing gossip and useful tips. Our particular town was too small to have its own support group, but every Sunday, Don and Amanda drove to Kansas City in order to sit in a stuffy room and drink coffee with people a little farther along in their misery.

Maybe one of those Kansas City friends was dropping by, I reasoned.

But Don said, "No," and then his tired eyes blinked.

Glancing over my shoulder, I understood.

Our visitor was in his middle sixties, and he didn't look too awful. I would have expected a limp or maybe stumps in place of hands. But no, the gentleman could have been any newly retired citizen, respectable and even a little bland. He stood at the door, taking in the room as if weighing all the hazards.

And then I noticed his tailored clothes and the polished leather shoes, a little old-fashioned but obviously expensive.

Some veterans returned to Earth with gems in their loot. But to my knowledge, not one ever sold his treasures, since each item carried some embedded significance far beyond commercial gain.

To myself, I whispered, "Where do you get your money, stranger?"

"I'm sorry," Don told me, sounding decidedly unsorry. "I should have warned you. Just this morning, I learned this fellow was passing through, and I was lucky enough to get his number and arrange this. This meeting."

Don hurriedly gathered up his belongings. The laptop. The labeled folders. A notebook full of intense scribbles. And finally, half a cup of black Sumatran. Then he threw a careless look over his shoulder, telling me, "Stay, if you want. Or I can call you afterward, tell you how it went."

"Okay, Don. Good luck."

Because I was his friend, I stayed. To keep busy, I brought out my own laptop and searched through the Wikipedia list of confirmed veterans. Meanwhile the two strangers shook hands and sat in back, across from each other in a little booth. I heard a few words from our honored guest, and reading the accent, I moved to the Russian portion of the database, bringing up a series of portraits.

Thirty-five years ago, a talented young art student slipped out of his parents' Moscow apartment and vanished.

I could almost understand it: A Russian might prefer fighting aliens among the stars over trying to survive the next three decades inside a tottering communist empire.

The two old boys chatted amiably for several minutes.

Then the Russian mentioned something about his time and his considerable trouble, and Don pulled an envelope from his pocket and passed it over. The Russian opened the gift with a penknife waiting at the ready, using fingers and eyes to count the bills and their denominations until he was satisfied enough to continue.

Cheryl had warned me.

"Our friends are spending their life savings," she said just the other night. "Any person or little group that might help find LD gets a check, and sometimes several checks."

"Don's no fool," I had claimed. "He wouldn't just throw his money away."

"But a lot of scam artists are working this angle," she added. "Anybody with a missing son is going to be susceptible."

Those words came back to me now.

Who actually compiled these lists of Kuiper veterans? Russia wasn't a bastion of honest government and equal opportunity. I could envision somebody bribing the right people and then setting off for the West, retelling stories that were public legends by now, and helping no one but their parasitic selves.

The Russian seemed vigorous and fit.

I couldn't get past that.

After half an hour of intense conversation and coffee, Don had to slip off to the bathroom. He barely gave me a nod as he passed by. I stood and walked over, not asking permission when I sat beside the Russian, introducing myself without offering my hand and then asking pointblank, "So what are you and my good friend talking about?"

I can't say why, but that's when my initial suspicions collapsed.

Maybe it was the man's face, which up close revealed delicate and unusual burn scars. Or maybe it was the straight white line running from the back of his hand up his forearm and under his sleeve. Or it was the smell rising from his body -- something I'd read about but never experienced -- that faintly medical stink born from a diet of alien chow and peculiar water.

But mostly, what convinced me were the man's haunted blue eyes.

"The training," said a deep, ragged voice. "Donald wants to know about the training. About what his son is enduring now."

"Can you help him?"

"I am trying to."

"Help me now," I pleaded. Then after a deep breath, I added, "But I'm not going to pay you anything."

The blue eyes entertained their own suspicions.

"Why now?" I asked. "If this war's been going on forever, why just in these last forty years have the Kuipers started coming here?"

He said nothing.

"Does their war need fresh blood? Are they short of bodies to fight their ugly fight, maybe?"

"No," he said once, mildly.

And then louder, with authority, he said, "Hardly."

"But why now?"

"Because forty years ago, my benefactors came to the conclusion that it was possible for humans to observe their world. We had not yet discovered it, no. But just the possibility was critical to the ceremony. Because all who can see what is transpiring must be made welcome -- "

"Ceremony?" I interrupted. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what you would expect the word to mean," he claimed. Then he leaned closer to me, his breath stinking of alien chemicals that still swam in his blood. "What you call a war is not. More than anything, the ceremony is a religious event. It is a pageant of great beauty and much elegance, and by comparison, all human beliefs are cluttered little affairs without a thousandth the importance that one day up there brings to the open soul."

As the Russian spoke to me, Don returned.

"I miss that world," said the one-time recruit. "I miss the beauty of it. The power of it. The intensity and importance of each vivid, thrilling moment." He broke into some kind of Creole jabber -- a mixture of Earthly languages and Kuiper that must have been better suited to describe his lost, much beloved life.

Then he concluded by telling me, "Belonging to one nest while serving my good elders, standing limb to limb with my brethren ... I miss that every waking moment, every dreaming moment ... constantly, I find myself wishing I could return again to that good, great place...."

"Is that what it is?" I asked. "A great place?"

"I do envy that boy of his," the Russian said to me.

Maybe I smiled, just a little. Just to hear that more than survival was possible, that poor LD could actually find happiness.

But Don roared, "Get out of here!"

I thought he was speaking to the Russian, and I was right.

And I was wrong.

"Both of you," my best friend snapped. "I don't want to hear this anymore. 'The beauty. The power.' I want you to leave me alone! Goddamn it, go!"

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I felt awful for what I had done, or what I had neglected to do. For the next couple nights, I lay awake replaying the conversation and the yelling that followed. In my charitable moments I would blame exhaustion and despair for Don's graceless temper. Because what did I do wrong? Nothing, I told myself, and certainly nothing intentional.

After that, I called Don half a dozen times, making various apologies to his voice mail.

Eventually Cheryl heard from Amanda. Their thirty-second phone conversation translated into a five-minute lecture from my wife.

"Here's what you have to understand, John. These next days are critical. There won't be another chance to save LD. They have leads about where he might be, which is something. Very unusual, and maybe they will manage to find him -- "

"And accomplish what?" I interrupted.

She looked at me with outrage and pity.

"Has any recruit ever been found like this?" I asked.

"Maybe," Cheryl said. "Two or three times, perhaps."

"And talked out of leaving?"

She had to admit, "No."

But then with her next breath, she said, "This is about LD's parents. This is about them doing their very best. They can't let this moment escape without putting up a fight. And what Amanda says ... the way that you've been acting around Don ... it's as if you don't want to believe just how awful this mess is...."

What did I believe?

"Doubt is a luxury they can't afford now," Cheryl explained. "And you're going to have to give Don

space, if you're not going to help."

"But I want to help," I pleaded.

"Then stop calling him, honey. He's got enough guilt in his head without hearing your voice every day too."

\* \* \* \*

One week remained.

Two days.

And then on the eighty-sixth day after LD's disappearance, an unexpected voice came searching for me, along with a very pleasant face and a sober, well-considered attitude.

"Hey, John."

"Morgan?" I sputtered.

"Can I come in? Just for a minute, please. It's about my brother."

We welcomed her. Of course we welcomed the young woman, offering our guest a cold drink and the best chair and our undivided attention. Morgan was being truthful when she said she had just a few minutes to spend with us. A list of people needed to be seen, and soon. A phone call or the Internet would have worked just as well, but with some of these names -- us in particular -- she felt that it was best to come personally.

"A favor, John? Cheryl?"

Her shy smile made me flinch. "Anything," I said for both of us.

"We have three areas to watch tonight," she reported. "Three pastures, scattered but close to town. There's evidence -- different kinds of evidence -- that LD's buried in one of them. Although it's probably none of them, and this is a long shot at best."

Cheryl asked, "Which pasture do we watch?"

"Here." On a photocopy of a map, she had circled eighty acres in the southeast corner of the county. "Really, the only reason to think LD's there is a farmer thinks he saw odd lights moving in the grass. And he's halfway sure it was the same night my brother vanished."

A very long shot.

But I said, "We'll be there, Morgan."

"There's going to be others out there with you. Cousins of mine, and some friends, and a lot of volunteers from all over. But most of us, including me ... we'll be at the north site."

"Is that place more promising?" my wife asked.

Morgan nodded. "We have a reliable witness who saw LD, or somebody like him, walking across an empty corn field in the middle of the night." She rolled her shoulders with a skeptical gesture. Then as she stood again, she said, "Thank you. For everything, I mean."

"We want to help," Cheryl promised.

Morgan looked straight at me.

Then despite the crush of time, she hesitated. Standing at our front door, Morgan spent three minutes making small talk. With a grin, she told us about the evening we'd come to their house to grill out, and while her brother put on a show for everyone, clowning around and throwing the football a mile into the air, I had taken the time to come over and sit with the ignored sister.

I had no recollection of the moment.

But Morgan did, and years later it was a cherished incident worth retelling. Then she looked at neither one of us, shaking her head. "Want to know the truth?" she asked with a conspiratorial tone. "Half of me believes Little Donnie is faking this. Just for fun. Just to see everybody jump and weep."

The big sister who had never shown a trace of jealousy said those hard, unsentimental words.

"He would love tonight," she told us. "All this effort on his behalf ... he would find it to be absolutely lovely...."

\* \* \* \*

The evening began with showers and then a hard cold rain mixed with biting sleet. Cheryl and I packed for any weather. We arrived early, pulling off the country road and waiting in the gathering darkness. Several dozen searchers were expected, half of whom never showed. In the end, it was a gathering of distant relations and friends from Don's work who stood on the mud, coming up with a battle plan. Because nobody else volunteered, Cheryl and I took the far end of the pasture. LD's parents had been over this ground a dozen times. But we were told to look for signs of fresh digging that they might have missed, and to be most alert sometime before dawn. If the most common scenario played out, the new recruit would emerge from his hiding place then, still wearing his warrior suit.

With my wife beside me, I walked across the wet, cold, and shaggy brome. At the fence line, she went to the right and I went left, her flashlight soon vanishing in a rain that refused to quit.

In the end, I had no idea where I was.

Three in the morning, full of coffee and desperate for sleep, I walked the same ground that Don had searched in broad daylight. The mission was impossible, if the mission was to discover LD. But in my mind, what I was doing was saving a friendship that I hadn't cherished enough.

By four, I was too tired to even pretend to search.

By five in the morning, clear skies arrived along with the sudden glow of a thousand stars.

Change one turn that night, or pause in a different spot, and I would have heard nothing.

And even what I heard was insignificant enough to ignore.

What I was reminded of was the sound of an old-fashioned thermostat. That's all. The soft click that meant the furnace was about to kick on, except that I heard the click repeating itself every few seconds.

I turned toward the sound.

My flashlight was off, my eyes adjusted to the starlight. Even though it probably wouldn't do any good, I tried for stealth -- a quiet stride and a steadiness of motion.

At some point, the clicking stopped.

I halted.

Then a slab of late-season grass, blond and shaggy, lifted up on my right. It was maybe ten feet from me. There was no disturbed area there before, I'm sure. Afterward I couldn't find any trace of the hole where our newest recruit was undergoing his indoctrinations. But there he was, rising up from that random patch of ground. I saw the head. The broad shoulders. Arms and long legs. All those good human parts encased inside a suit that seemed neither large nor particularly massive, or for that matter, all that tough either.

From behind, he looked like LD dressed up for a Halloween party, pretending to be a cut-rate astronaut.

I said, "Donnie."

My voice was little more than a whisper.

The shape turned with a smooth suddenness, as if it knew that I was there and wasn't surprised, but maybe it wasn't sure of my motives. LD pivoted, and then a face that I couldn't quite make out stared at me through a shield of glass or diamond or who-knew-what.

"How's that big bike ride coming?" I asked.

LD stepped closer.

It did occur to me, just then, that maybe there was a good reason why no one had ever seen a recruit leaving for space. Witnesses weren't allowed. But even if the kid was twice my strength, he did nothing to me. He just stepped close enough so that I could make out his features and he could see mine, and with a satisfied sound, he said, "If it has to be someone, John, I'm glad it is you."

Maybe the feeling was mutual.

But I didn't say that. Instead, I decided to lay things out as clearly and brutally as I could. "Your folks are sick with worry. They've spent their savings and every emotional resource, and after tonight, they will be ruined. They'll be old and beaten down, and for the rest of their lives, they won't enjoy one good happy day."

"No," said LD.

"What does that mean?"

"They will recover just fine," he claimed. "People are strong, John. Amazingly strong. We can endure far more than you realize."

The wee hours of the most unlikely morning, and I was getting a pep talk from a college dropout.

"Donnie," I said. "You are a spoiled little brat."

That chiseled, utterly handsome face just smiled at my inconsequential opinion.

"So much promise," I said, "and what are you doing with it? Going off to fight some idiotic alien war?"

Inside his battle helmet, the boy shook his head. "Where I will be is on a large world that is more beautiful and more complex than you could ever envision."



Could I hit him with something? A rock or a log? Or maybe a devastating chunk of bloody guilt?

But I had the impression that his flimsy suit wasn't weak at all.

"I am needed up there," LD said.

"Are you sure?"

"More than I am needed down here, yes." He said it simply, calmly. And I suppose that's when I realized that not only did he mean what he was saying, but that in deep ways, he was probably right.

I didn't have anything left to offer.

"John?" the boy asked. "Would you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Turn around for a moment."

If there was a noise when he left, I didn't hear it. And maybe there was motion, a sense of mass displaced into an endless sky. But at that moment, all I could feel was the beating of my heart and that slight but genuine anguish that comes when you wish it was you bound for places unseen.

\* \* \* \*

More than a hundred people had searched in the rain for LD, and all but one openly confessed to seeing nothing and no one. I was the lone dissenter. I said nothing, and not even Cheryl could make me confess what happened, though I know she sensed that I had seen more than nothing while we were apart.

To Don, I said simply, "Come to chess tomorrow. The usual place."

He was at the coffee shop before me, and I was early. He had his board set up, and he looked exactly as I expected him to look: Exhausted and pained, weak and frail.

I picked up my queen's pawn and then put it down again.

Then quietly, I told him what I had seen and everything that I had done in the backstretches of that pasture, trying to win over the heart of a boy that really, when you got down to it, I barely knew.

Don nodded.

With a voice less than quiet, he halfway accused me of not doing enough to save LD from his own childish nonsense.

But what more could I have done?

That's what I thought, and maybe he did too. Then he sat back -- a defeated father who would surely never see his son again -- and with a mournful voice, he asked, "Is there anything else?"

Then I lied.

I said, "Yeah, there's more."

I smiled enough to bring him forward again, elbows to his knees as he waited for whatever I said next.

"Donnie wanted me to tell you something."

"What?"

"That he's going up there for one reason only: He wants to put an end to that awful ancient war. He's not going to fight anyone, but instead he'll reason with the Kuipers and show them that it's better to live in peace."

A staggering lie, that was. Unbelievable to its core.

But Don accepted my words without complaint. He sat back in his chair, his shoulders relaxing and then his face too. And being his friend for years told me that here, with just a few words, I had made it easier for him to sleep easy, and if not tonight, sometime soon.