

BEYOND THE PALE

I

"I just don't understand why you have to go." It was the third time I had heard those words that week.

"For the last time. I was selected. Hand picked, even."

"So what? That isn't a reason, and you know it. You never--"

"Of course it's a reason. I owe a lot to the company, and you do too, for that matter. It doesn't take a whole lot of sense to see that--"

"...sir..." A voice from the outside began to tap at my awareness.

"-that this is going to be a big step up for us. Yes, I'll be gone for a while, but--"

"...approxima... advise..."

"-but I'll be back before you know it, and you'll have plenty to occupy yourself with. I always hear you talk about how busy you've been recently and--"

"Are you talking to someone else? Is it work?" Her tone became nervous and borderline fearful.

"No."

There was a brief silence. "It's not about being bored. I don't know how much more I can stand being apart for so long..."

"...atten... behoove..."

I sighed.

"I understand that it can be hard for you at times like this... It is for me too."

"Liar."

"But you need to understand that there are certain things I can't just turn down."

"You turn *us* down all the time! You have a life back here! You have a family! You can't just--"

"Sir...long will...if it is..."

"...you didn't sell your life to that company!"

Those words echoed in my head for a long time before I could respond.

"You're right, I didn't." I cut the comm link and opened my eyes. I was in my body again.

I sat up in my bunk and looked towards the door of my tiny quarters. My swimming eyes adjusted to the sight of a stately figure before me. Its refined, pseudo-metallic features regarded me with barely disguised amusement. It was my administrative assistant, Christina. I didn't know how long she had been in my quarters, but it would likely have been much longer than I had been hearing her voice for. She had recently made a habit of standing around until noticed, rather than speaking up to get your attention. I'm not sure whether it was out of shyness or if it was some kind of game for her, but I was never able to break her of the habit - especially not at compromising times like these. Such quirks weren't necessarily unusual for units of her model, though. Perhaps it's a feature.

"If now is an inconvenient time, I could return later. Sir was speaking with someone, was he not? If I could be so bold as to guess..." -she stifled a laugh- "...sir was speaking with his... *companion*? Was he not?"

Her intuition about these things was so uncanny I at times suspected she had somehow gotten read access on my neural tap. After her laughter calmed down, I asked her what she had come there for.

"We will be making landfall in approximately twenty minutes. Sir would be well advised to see to any duties he may have on deck, and to be prepared to disembark promptly when the time comes. I would have notified Sir remotely, had he not been indisposed with his communication channel... So I had no recourse but to come and visit you--"

"Thank you, Christina." I was already out the door before she had finished.

I strode across the few meters of the deck that separated me from the railing of the ship and leaned over it, straining to catch a glimpse of anything at all, but to no avail. A thick fog had settled in unnoticed, and we seemed to anyone on board but the pilot to be hurtling into nothingness. I relaxed and inhaled through my nose. The air was frigid; chilling. It was the kind of cold that chilled the body but heated the spirit - that stirred the imagination to places remote and forbidding. Our expedition had come so far north now that even in the height of summer one could breathe this kind of air - and our destination lay still farther north. Though we were traveling over the relatively shallow waters of an inland sea, I liked to imagine them much deeper. To me who had spent his life in the cradle of civilization, the thought was exhilarating.

My reverie was cut short by other company employees assigned to the expedition joining me on deck. A few were accompanied by their assistants. Everyone on the boat was cybernetically augmented with a neural tap at the least, and while most were engineers, like myself, there was a chemist, a geologist, and even a few anthropologists and linguists as well. Most of them, human or assistant, gazed out into the fog with unreadable expressions. Among the trickle of passengers came Christina. She sidled up next to me and spoke into my mind: "Even if Sir leans over the railing, he won't make the ship go any faster."

I turned to face her. Her brass, chrome-ish lips were curled into a wry smile. At least, as much of one as she could make. Her facial construction was mostly empty of human imitation (people had stopped bothering to make them look human long ago) and her face looked rather like a bronze mask, dully lustrous and with a warm hue. It wasn't actually metal, though, and so she had many facial expressions at her disposal, of which she made abundant use. Her lips could smile or frown, but never part to reveal teeth; the muscles around her seemingly empty eye sockets could smile, too, but never make crow's feet. As with most assistants, she had a charming but rigid face. There were those, especially in the company, who would have preferred to say "charmingly rigid", and while I did not judge those individuals for their tastes I did not count myself among them.

While straining to think of some witty reply I was tapped on the shoulder. I turned to see the smiling face of a colleague and long time friend, Brian Lovejoy, along with his assistant, Suzy. He was a well built man with ruddy features who always seemed to be in good spirits; quite rare in his line of work. He was a software developer with a focus on language processing in administrative assistants, like his own Suzy or my Christina. His fondness for the humanoid machines whose "personalities" he was so integral in forming well surpassed that of most in the company; his affection towards his own assistant in particular earned him a kind of jocular infamy.

He stood there for a moment with his hands out, not saying anything. Then, he pointed to his ear. At that point I realized that my neural tap's local area communication channels were only open to Christina. I whitelisted Brian and thought a question to him:

"Hello, Brian. Did you need something?"

"Why do you keep your comms closed all the time? You're so unsociable, man." He grinned somewhat mockingly. "I hope you were talking to Christina, at least. You better not be rude to her. She's your one and only assistant, after all. You should treasure her."

"As always, you speak with perfect accuracy and tact, Mr. Lovejoy," Christina chimed in before I could tell Brian to get to the point. Thus emboldened, he continued:

"Even assistants need love, you know? They're not just machines. They may say that the language processing unit is just silicon, but the magic it makes is *life*." He turned away from me and began to soliloquize, too focused to be stopped now: "You would know if you gave it a chance. The only difference between me and my Suzy" - he grabbed his assistant by the waist - "is the raw stuff we're made of. But our love is just as real and just as rare as any other." As he said this, he ran his hand down Suzy's cheek, in response to which she covered her face bashfully - a gesture that I had seen Brian perform often since he was young. Adjusting his posture and placing his fingers on his chin, he pontificated smugly, "That's what you need more of, man. Love. What it comes from is just a detail,

and details never matter much in the end." I was amazed he could say such things despite being a software developer.

Such attitudes were not at all uncommon, however, especially in our company. Indeed, one of the company's early sources of major revenue was the sale of "anatomically accurate" robots, none too subtly marketed for the tending of sexual desires. The sight and even knowledge of them was a hard adjustment for society at the time to make, but eventually most came to see their utility; not only as sexual partners, but as helpers, friends, or even spouses in some cases. These "sex robots" were the progenitors of the more overtly synthetic "assistants" mostly in use today. We in the company who are of sufficient rank are all issued one, and the occurrence of romance between an employee and his or her assistant is perhaps as high as 20%, though it's lower in other corporations and in general society.

I bore such people no ill will, and had no strong opinion on the matter either way. Even still, whether to reprimand his unwarranted haughtiness or simply to argue, I ventured a response even though it was not my field of expertise. "If that love is just the result of matrix multiplication on a massive scale, one could argue that the details matter. Human intention plays a large role in these things, you know. An assistant's alignment matrix goes a long way in simulating that but it's ultimately just that - a simulation."

"You think I don't know this shit? That hurts. I thought we were better friends than that." He made a show of affected grief. "But you know, you really should think about what it's a simulation of in the first place." Then, in a somewhat graver tone, he added, "Your human *mode of being* isn't as unique as you think it is." He punctuated this claim with a discordantly jocular waggle of his finger. Suzy imitated him playfully, making sure to direct a matronly look at me. One thing Brian and I had in common is that we were both given assistants that were so damned smug all the time. Suddenly, Suzy seemed to remember something, and addressed her owner: "Honey, didn't you come here to tell him something?"

"Oh, right," he exclaimed, shedding his condescending air in an instant. "You said you wanted a map of the Valley, right? I tried to give you one but you're blocking file transfers."

It was standard procedure in the company to refuse all requests for file transfers except on a case-by-case basis and from one's own assistant for obvious security reasons. Brian was the only one who flouted this practice, to the detriment of his own safety and of those around him. He would apologize when chided but constantly forget to rectify the issue. Thankfully, he's mostly only ever around coworkers, doesn't get out much, and knows enough to not execute malicious code that's been dropped into his brain.

Brian himself, of course, is probably one of the least malicious people alive, so I opened file transfers to him; a straightforward task since every company employee's UUID is preloaded into our brains. Sensing this, he sent a map file to my mind and I closed file transfers again. Finally having an excuse to leave this conversation, I bid farewell to Brian and Suzy and found the nearest place I could stand without blocking foot traffic. I closed my eyes and shut out the world again. After a brief repose, I opened the map of the Valley I had gotten.

At about 1 degree, 38 minutes north of the Arctic circle, there is a mountainous and inhospitable region far from any significant human habitation. Nestled in these mountains is the Valley, ringed with exceptionally tall peaks and alone in its pleasantness for hundreds of kilometers. This place was the object of our expedition. Compared to the high altitudes that surround it, it nestles abruptly into the Earth and, furnished abundantly with snowmelt rivers from the surrounding peaks, creates a relatively habitable zone where various forms of life are known to flourish. The mountains that encircle it are so tall that one cannot scale them without life support gear, and few have made an attempt at getting up them, let alone getting down into the uninhabited valley from which there was no guarantee of escape, comparatively livable though it may have been. (At least, if any tried, they did not return.) Moreover, the area is so prone to inclement weather that the windows of time in which it can be safely flown into by plane are typically measured in hours per week, and they're rarely contiguous. Consider further that

there was little practical incentive to go there, and it becomes clear why the civilized world had heretofore only known the Valley through satellite imagery and geological surveys of the surrounding mountains.

The seeming lack of any useful resources in the area had consigned the Valley to be mostly an object for ideation rather than study or exploration. Its virginal peaks and untapped mysteries have captured the minds of any person who is enchanted by the unknown or weary of the mundane for generations. For them, the Valley was an almost religious object that whispered hope of a life apart from the benign and merely sensible life of an urban employee. Who knows how many weeks, months, or years have been collectively whiled away by those dreamers, staring out the window and nursing thoughts of adventure to soothe a tedious life - and though tedious lives may abound in our day, few could reasonably justify dropping everything and just going. Their rationality, their calculation of profit and loss, and their expectations of right and wrong, held them in unwilling bondage. This, then, is why, when a mountaineer returned from a trek with a rock sample that suggested the presence of uranium in the region, there was celebration among the general public as well as in the boardrooms of great corporations and in the halls of governments. Now, the world had found what it most desperately craved: an excuse to plumb those depths; to risk life and limb braving the most difficult terrain on the planet for some distinct end beyond self satisfaction. The allure of a valuable metal had sufficed to appease the severity of good sense, and to secure its source was the primary goal of our expedition and the reason why we were able to do what so many had dreamed of for so long.

But this was not all: only a few years before the discovery of the uranium, careful observation of satellite imagery revealed trace evidence that the Valley was inhabited by a primitive society of humans, with whom no known persons had had prior contact. The stir this caused, not only by its own weight but also by the amazement that such a fact had gone unnoticed for so long, greatly increased the public appetite for this newly mysterious place. People the world over were willing to leap on the excuse of the uranium all the more quickly on this account. To make contact with this new culture, then, was the second object of our expedition; it was hoped that they could provide us with knowledge of the area and act as guides if necessary. It was to this end that there were anthropologists and linguists accompanying us on the expedition, and their excitement to be at the cutting edge of their field was palpable, and shared even by those outside of it.

The map Brian had given me was a topographic map, made by a composite of satellite imagery and aerial Lidar scans. As I mentioned before, the region the Valley is in is generally mountainous. As one approaches it from the south, the average elevation gradually increases from 2 to about 4 kilometers, with peaks here and there to a maximum of 6.3 kilometers. The incline from south to north is shallow, and there are sufficient lows and valleys in this territory to make traversal relatively easy, provided one knows the best route to take. This area was therefore of no great concern to us, and it was generally supposed that we could cross it overland in about a day. However, things change drastically when one arrives at the threshold of the Valley. It is ringed by mountains so tall that even the mildest of them tower above their farther neighbors, having an average elevation of 7.3 kilometers and reaching extremes of 10.8 kilometers. To stand on such a precipice would require not only an oxygen supply, but a pressurized suit to be consistently survivable. Of those mountaineers who attempted the climb to the tallest peak, the survival rate was (at the time) 23%. The corpses of those who died cannot be removed due to the dangerous conditions at those heights. The unfortunate lie there still, frozen and unchanging, watching the world below pass them by.

If the elevation change from outside of the Valley to its edge is drastic, then the change from the edge to the Valley itself is still more so. As one enters the Valley, the edge mountains drop off with dizzying suddenness and their slopes plummet over only 5 kilometers into the valley itself, whose elevation is a mere 2 kilometers. If one wished to descend into the Valley by even the shallowest route (the one we were to take from the south), it would require at least some actual climbing, and pulleys to lower equipment. If one did manage to thread a path between the crags, through the narrow passes, and

down the near vertical drops, he would eventually find himself in the Valley proper. Compared to the lethal environment of the peaks, it was supposed to be quite pleasant. Rivers and streams run thatch-like over a grassy tundra plain, and in the warmer months wildflowers bloom, animals roam about, and as we had recently come to know, a young human society of Adams and Eves makes busy to prepare for the Arctic winter. The exact means of their survival was unknown to us; it was clear that they didn't practice agriculture, but beyond this we could only make reasonable inferences.

Satisfied with the layout of the region, I strained my eyes open once again. I noticed Christina was standing next to me. She was nonplussed when I noticed her and seemed somehow annoyed. "Sir, it is most impolite to leave the presence of company so abruptly. When Sir stormed off immediately after getting what he wanted, I had half a mind to scold Sir the way a mother might before he had the chance to slip into his little dream world," she fluently seethed at me. "I apologize," I began halfheartedly while looking over her head across the deck, "for my curtness." It seemed I had finished my study of the map just in time for disembarkation. "You know, Christina, if you wanted to look at the map too, I could have sent it to you. You only had to ask," I offered with mock timidity. "Oh, fie. Sir knows well that such things are his job, not mine. If it pleases Sir, he should refrain from using his work as an excuse for being unsociable," she riposted.

It was undeniably true that Brian had gone out of his way to help me out with something I had pestered him over for some time, and asked nothing in return. I should have thanked him more graciously. Informing Christina of her victory, I said, "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry. I'll catch up with Brian and Suzy later today, if I see them." She seemed pleased with this, and we sauntered over to the off ramp together.

After stepping onto the dock, we surveyed the area. In the distance, boreal pine forests loomed, half shrouded by the haze that had yet to fully clear. The area ahead of the beach was clear for about 200 meters. Our accommodations had been built in this area, with a good stone's throw of space's separation from the coniferous treeline. Rather than "accommodations", it would be more accurate to call it a forward operating base. We were to stay here for the night before departing towards the Valley in the morning. It was hastily constructed ahead of our arrival by unaugmented contractors at the order of the company. These contractors were also in charge of manning the radios, keeping the lights on, and generally looking after the place until it was no longer needed, which would be after our return about three months from then.

We filed off of the boat with eagerness, relishing the cold winds of the near-arctic; there was excitement in the air so thick one could taste it. I set my comms channel to promiscuous mode to listen to what my coworkers were talking about. Suddenly my head filled with voices, some engaged in conversation with specific people and others speaking to any who would listen.

"God damn, it's cold up here."

"We're gonna get to see 24 hour daylight once we get there, right?"

"Starting in June, we should, yeah. We're not far enough north for it to last more than a few days, though."

"That's what I'm saying. We *know* that there are clay deposits there. There's no way they haven't figured out pottery, at least!"

Comments like these went to and fro. It reminded me of departing for a trip as a child. We all had the anticipation of an unknown, exciting destination at the forefront of our minds; few could think of anything else.

As we approached the building, it started contacting our neural taps and gave us awareness of the standard things: knowledge of the building's layout, room assignments, meal schedules, and so forth. Every one of us had fully internalized and started expressing opinions about these things before we were at the door.

Some of the unaugmented contractors stood out front and watched us furtively, looking unsure of whether they should greet us or not. None of us were used to waiting on the unaugmented or having

them wait on us. Perhaps that's why we filed past them as if we were of one mind. With some perturbed expressions, some disdainful, and some frightened, they watched us enter into the building and find our quarters as if it were our own home and without speaking a single word aloud. Perhaps we appeared to them like aliens from outer space, or as scarcely more organic than the assistants that, to their eyes, followed us around in grim, determined silence. To those who could not access our network our small talk, the banter between friends and assistants, and our opinion of this place and its stewards were all unknowable, or at best, unintelligible. They were simple people who could not hear the voices of buildings, love a machine, or feel a mind as we did; they could only communicate with sound. All the same, I have never believed that they deserved our ire, and more than once I shot them curious glances which were often returned.

Christina made much of the spartan quarters that I felt the map direct us to. "Oh, look, Sir! What lovely lodgings the company has provided us with." Likely due to the haste of the building's construction, there were few trappings of comfort in the quarters. The walls were featureless plaster and the furniture was merely functional. She continued, "And what a view from this window!" It was still foggy outside. "Why, this is a 500 watt charging port! My power reserves could be at full by the time Sir has fallen asleep!" It would be strange if there wasn't one, but regardless I was glad that she had something nice for herself here. I chuckled and sat down on the bed. It was large enough for two people. "It's not like it matters, right? It may as well take all night for you to charge since there's nothing for you to do at night anyways." It was theoretically possible, though extremely difficult, to listen to someone's dreams, or perhaps the echoes of their dreams, through their neural tap, if one had unrestricted read access. This access was unilaterally forbidden to others as a rule, although some users (like Brian) choose to give their assistants conditional read access.

Christina was silent for a moment, then responded to my injunction, "Yes, I suppose Sir is correct. How silly of me." It was not in her nature to relinquish an argument so suddenly, but before I could inquire about what she was thinking, the building told our minds that dinner was to be served in the cafeteria in five minutes. Christina stayed behind and I went out to the table that the building indicated to me, where my coworkers were sat. I espied a few unaugmented having their dinner at a table across the room, but there were only a few of them. They must not have taken their meals at set times.

The only one who brought his assistant was Brian. The two of their faces occasionally flashed smiles, and Brian's occasionally reddened. They must have been whispering sweet nothings to each other's heads. As I noticed this, some of the unaugmented came out of the kitchen carrying plates, which they started wordlessly passing out to us. They skipped Suzy, of course, while barely managing to hide their exasperation that she was there at all. While they walked away, I heard one whisper to the other, "Fuckin' augs, man." Feeling only slightly miffed for having been compared to Brian, I picked up my utensils and began eating. Suddenly, I saw one of the contractors lingering in the corner of my vision. She was a young woman, and looked at me with a strange, but not altogether hostile, intensity. Her friends had left and looked at her from a distance with concern.

"Hey." She was addressing me since I was sitting at the edge of the table, but her voice was so unexpected that nearly everyone at the table looked up at her. She was clearly expecting a response, so I would have to use my voice for the first time in almost a month.

"W-what i-" My voice cracked and I tried again, "What do you need?" I thought 'What do you need' might seem more personable than 'What is it' so I changed to it at the last second.

"How did you know where to sit?" The banality of her question ill-suited the intensity of her glare. It was so banal that I wasn't sure how to respond.

"What do you m-mean?" I asked weakly.

"The directions they left us said not to specify a table for you guys to sit at, but you all sat at the same one. Why?" The other unaugmented lingering in the distance also seemed interested in this.

"The, uh, the building told us."

"Huh?" I was not ready for her to be confused at that part. My own confusion likely showed on my face, since she continued, "No, well, it's just... We never installed any computers or anything here, so I don't know how that could have happened." *You did*, I almost let slip, *only they were embedded devices, and not totally standard*. I sometimes forgot that people from outside this line of work often lack knowledge about it. Still, if all she wanted was a technical explanation, that was at least straightforward.

"It's technically true that there are no *computers*" - I emphasized the word with air quotes - "in this installation. There are, however, small mixed-signal microprocessors that many would think of as computers but technically aren't. When the company builds something to be used by the augmented, they will embed these microprocessors into various parts of the installation, usually the doors. In fact, many building appliances, vehicles, and so forth are just manufactured with them pre-installed. They can have information uploaded to them over any remote connection; most are configured for RF reception. They can even communicate with each other, and then compare their ledgers for accuracy, updates gotten by one and not the others, and so forth. When there's a lot of them in a building, it sort of becomes its own simplistic 'hive intelligence', if you will... They're... *secured*" - I used the word hesitantly - "so that they can only send this information to the neural taps of specific persons who are privileged to know it. In this case, those persons were us, or more specifically, our neural taps. That's how we got our knowledge of this place when we arrived.

Her demeanor seemed to relax as my explanation went on. After digesting the information I had given her she asked, "So... these chips even told you where to sit?"

"They probably did, because we all felt the strong impression that we should sit there."

"Did it tell you or not? How could you not know?"

My vocalization became smoother as I got more used to it. "The neural tap, at its most fundamental level, isn't a device that sends ones and zeros into your brain. It's an *interface* between those ones and zeros and the organic electrical system that is the human brain. It can't send information straight in - it has to indirectly create awareness of that information by stimulating the neurons in your brain in a very particular way, which it learns to do through a long period of training and mutual adaptation with the user. The information it sends you doesn't *feel* any different than information that just occurs to you, or that you intuit. You use it just by thinking, and after a while it feels like a natural extension of your own mind."

She was looking at me somewhat blankly, and without thinking of whether it was a good idea or not I continued, "A lot of people think that the neural taps are little computers in your brain, but that's only slightly true. The idea that computers are all digital is a relic from the past; analog computing has been prominent and extremely important ever since machine learning and brain interfacing became key areas in computer science. Our modern AI and cybernetic technology wouldn't be possible on purely digital architectures; it would be too inefficient to even be feasible. What's more, the signals in your brain are, ultimately, analog signals. Some people naively compare neurons to transistors but that leaves out a lot of important--"

My tirade was suddenly interrupted by laughter. I looked up to see the young woman doubled over with amusement. After catching her breath, she asked, "You just keep going and going. Are you an electrical engineer?"

"M-mostly, yes."

"I see." She giggled a bit. "My grandpa was one, too. The way you talk about it reminded me of him." She sighed and glanced over the table. "I guess you augs are just weirdos, after all." Her gaze lingered on Suzy for a bit. She smiled good-naturedly, and said, "Sorry for bothering you," then left.

I turned to look back at my coworkers at the table and was distraught to see them all staring at me. I asked them what the matter was, although I well knew. Michael Harrison, a mutual friend of Brian and I, said, "Well..." He looked around himself. "All's well that ends well, I guess." This conciliatory manner was very typical of him, and had been ever since I had first known him as a young

adult in technical training. He didn't quite look the part, though. His features were quite sharp and he was prone to glaring without realizing it. Those who knew him often said he had an "intelligent" face that spoke to a hidden shrewdness in his personality. This was not entirely untrue: while he was a great diplomat, he could also be a great manipulator, if he ever wanted to be. The occasions for that had always been very few, though.

Suzy enjoined angrily, "Hmph. It may as well not have. Did you see how rude those people were to me? Brian, honey, you should have given them a piece of your mind. You're good at vocalizing so I'm sure they would have listened to you."

"It's alright, Suzy. Some things in life aren't worth getting upset over." His attempt at placation had the opposite effect.

"Are you saying it doesn't matter if someone treats me like shit? Is that what you're saying? Because that's basically like saying you don't love me."

Michael nipped this exchange in the bud by saying, "Please have your lover's spat in private and let the rest of us eat in peace." Widespread agreement and some laughter resounded, and the attention of the table was now fully diverted away from me.

The meal proceeded uneventfully until we all received unsolicited calls to our neural taps. It was from the CEO. Doubtless he wished to ostensibly christen our coming adventure with his blessing, and actually remind us that we were going there to do a job, not have an adventure. Most of us answered his call; the rest, I assumed, planned to catch up on it by asking the others who had later.

He began with an elation of dubious authenticity: "Coworkers, compatriots, friends. This is John Sower, your CEO. I am happy to greet you on the eve of such a propitious day. This expedition was long wished for, and hard fought. I'm proud to send you on this most important of missions, and to afford you the opportunity to serve the company in this way. Selection was extremely competitive, and I can confidently say that you were selected because you are the most suited for the job and the best that our company has to offer. I'm sure you are all very proud."

Despite his controversies, I personally was quite fond of this CEO. His election was extremely close; the board of directors was initially split 4-3 against him, but at the last second one of the majority electors was rumored to have received a surprise visit from some of his old friends in the biomedical division. These old friends, open supporters of Sower, allegedly engaged this elector in private conversation, in which some amount of "persuasion" was said to occur, with the end result that the elector's vote was changed and Sower won the election. Mr. Sower had no shortage of friends or enemies; supporters or opponents; so this split the company quite neatly down the middle - between those who felt the election had been stolen (i.e. people who did not like him or his policies) and those who felt that there was nothing wrong with the situation (i.e. people who did). I belonged to the latter camp. His policies seemed sensible to me (target increased assistant sales in regions controlled by competing corporations, increase naval patrols along the coastlines of lands where rival corporations are known to operate, and increasing new employee recruitment incentives were his main points), and despite the obvious falseness of his public persona, he had a track record as an efficient administrator, which is ultimately where the chips fall. Obviously, I'm not on the board of directors and therefore had no vote to cast, so I was used to viewing the outcomes of these elections with some detachment, but this time I dared to feel a little enthusiastic.

To smooth over the aforementioned controversy and division, he made his first project in office something with near universal appeal - the expedition to the Valley. Of course, he did the usual song and dance of giving a livestreamed speech to the board about how much advantage we could turn the uranium to, and the importance of preventing our rivals from obtaining nuclear material. This was reason enough for any sane person, general popularity of the Valley notwithstanding. With this exceedingly rational argument, he obtained the needed approvals and began organizing the expedition within a few weeks. No one had even bothered raising issues like whether we should try to get mining rights from the nation-state whose borders the Valley was in. (It was a small nation and had no great

military might. There was no way it could stand up to the company, and the fervor for the expedition was so great I'm not convinced anyone would have hesitated even if there had been a show of arms.) It had only been a month before we were all selected and on a plane, and then a boat, heading north.

Ruminating on these things, I realized I had missed a part of his speech. "...even if such voices do exist, let them not deter us from our aim. By now, you should have been made aware of the route you are to take into the Valley. Pull up your maps and inspect it now." I was glad that I came to in time for the important part. The map showed a red line heading from our current location into the mountains to the north. It crossed two checkpoints and ended at a third, near the rim of the Valley. It seemed that the path to the first checkpoint would be easy enough to traverse that we could take vehicles. After that, the terrain would be prohibitive, and our progression would be a matter of threading a path through various low points and up whatever inclines were shallowest.

The CEO continued, "The route was planned to avoid as much danger as possible, but even still the terrain in this region is treacherous. In addition, the possibility that you will encounter operatives from rival corporations is non-zero. Keep your weapons close at hand and be vigilant. Make extensive use of your equipment and lung enhancement to avoid mountain sickness. Our hopes are riding on you; all of us back home are praying for your safety. Do not take unnecessary risks," he said with sternness rather than compassion. "Your further instructions will be shown to you when you reach the third base camp. Good luck. We're all counting on you."

...and just like that, he was gone and we were all back to our senses. One of the first things I noticed after seeing my surroundings again was that the contractors were staring at us from afar. I chuckled to think of how strange we must have looked to them, all stopping our meals at once to stare off into space for a few minutes.

Nobody felt that there was any reason to remain here any longer, so bit by bit we left the table and started for our quarters. As I was walking down the hall to my door, I noticed from out of a window that the fog had cleared and the surroundings were clearly visible. It was still just light enough to discern the surroundings clearly without seeing any hint of red or crimson in the sky. I stopped to look. Behind the pine forest, from a place where no tree could grow, the mountains loomed, shrouded in parts with mist. Rocky and blanketed in snow from the lowest elevation they were visible from, one could see here and there, through the clouds that partially hid them, fissures; a crevasse - here a little plateau, there a steep or smooth section - all of them surely presenting lethal falls when approached in accurate scale. Every detail offered the possibility of violent death. The tallest peak, replete with violence like all the others, seemed to press against the curtain of the sky, threatening to tear it open like so much fabric and expose us to whatever lurked on the other side. Though nothing was further away, nothing commanded the attention more than the mountains. They forced all else to the background; forests, valleys, rivers, buildings and myself together were all pulled in orbit around them and floated helplessly before the immovable center. I thought, How have we undertaken to cross such a thing? For the first time in the expedition I felt fear.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the sudden feeling of a hand on my shoulder. It was Michael, looking somewhat concerned. My thoughts must have been showing on my face. I felt uncomfortable and forlorn after being brought so suddenly into my surroundings, but managed a weak smile regardless. To reassure him, I gave probable cause to my being there, saying, "Beautiful, aren't they?" He looked at the mountains with a benign smile. I couldn't sense anything from his eyes.

"Yeah, they really are something." The smile faded. "It's just a shame how dangerous it all is, though."

"Well, approaching from the south side, it shouldn't be too hard to traverse..."

"Yeah, true. Although I was mostly thinking about the people we might encounter on the way." The CEO had told us there was a "non-zero" chance of encountering hostile operatives. This far from the jurisdiction of any militarily capable corporations or governments, our interactions with such agents were likely to be dangerous. We had never been given explicit orders to kill (we weren't soldiers, after

all), but if a rival corporation wanted to undercut our head start of setting up in the Valley, them sending operatives to kill us was not out of the question. They may do anything they can, short of damaging any safe route through the mountains, to delay our expedition. Naturally, then, any overly destructive weaponry was likely out. If they came to oppose us, it would be face to face.

Michael continued, "Have you ever shot a gun before?"

"A few times, when I was young. My dad was able to get a little piece of the land he oversaw after he retired, and we'd go out there to shoot deer, sometimes. I got a few over the years."

He didn't seem to care about the answer to the question he asked and responded, "I'm just hoping everyone can make it home safe. That's what matters in the end." I didn't bother enunciating a response to a platitude like this. A fairly long silence intervened while we looked out the window together, although the scenery had stopped penetrating my awareness in the same way it had before.

Suddenly, Michael found a new thread to pull at, and said, "You had to convince your wife to get augmented, right?"

"Yeah."

He chuckled. "How did that go?"

"She never went past compulsory education, so she never got a job that required it and never wanted any augmentations besides. I won her over to it by emphasizing the communications and file sharing capabilities it would give us."

"By files, I assume you mean pictures, right?"

"That's where her main interest was, yes."

He looked at me sidelong and smiled knowingly. "When did you guys start hanging out, again?"

"What's with all these questions? It was... in secondary school, I think. We had Literacy II together and were in the same group for a project. We got along well, and found out we lived in the same neighborhood. Of course, we were teenagers, and things went from there. Our parents were in favor, too. Once I got my first position after finishing technical training, we got married." This reminiscing made me forget the scenery outside the window almost entirely.

"Just like that? I've known you for years now and you never seemed like the type to get swept up in passion like that."

I forced a wry smile and joked, "Well, times have changed, you know? The corporate life grinds you down. It's the fate of all who work."

"I don't think anyone in our department works as much as you do, though." No response came to mind and I continued looking out the window, seeing nothing. "Do you miss her? Are you going to?" I turned to look at him and saw that his expression had become serious.

I remembered my call with her from earlier today. Certainly, there had been a time when I would have missed her. But somehow, over time she had just become annoying. She had never wronged me in any way. She always gave me plenty of space. She didn't make unreasonable demands, or have any penchant for arguing. No one could ask for a better wife, and yet her presence, her existence, even, had become intolerable to me. I could tell that she sensed my aversion towards her, and gradually her attitude towards me took on in small part an air of pleading, but mostly a heavy sadness. To see her that way froze my heart over with pity.

What was it that I had felt towards her, back in our younger days? I tried, I racked my brains to remember, but in the end the only thing I could grasp at was a comfortable memory of childhood.

Seeing my silence as an opportunity to continue, Michael said, "Every time I've met her, she's been so sweet. I can't imagine her being that insufferable at home. You have something a lot of people would kill for, you know." He turned to look out the window again. "Maybe not so much in our company, true. But in general, among all people, you are extremely lucky to have her. I..." His voice quivered under the weight of an emotion just barely contained. "I would hate to see you take that for granted." He looked down now, with knitted brows and narrowed eyes. Looking at him, my wife's

words, "Do you have to go?" suddenly echoed in my head. I couldn't bear to look at him any longer and turned my depleted gaze towards the mountains again.

What could I have said? My only paltry offering to him was this: "It's alright. It's not like that. I'll call her again tonight, and let her know we're thinking of her." After some time had passed, I was back in my quarters. Christina was there, looking out the window. Without turning to look at me, she said, "It simply astounds, Sir. The view is actually this good."

"So you didn't mean it before," I sighed, with exasperation that was only partly fake.

"Oh, but Sir knows I love a good jest." I barely mustered some off-hand grunt of a response as I laid down on the bed. "Why, whatever is the matter? Sir looks so drained." I stared into the air vent in the ceiling above my bed; into the blackness behind the grating. Trying in vain to make its emptiness the content of my mind, the only thing I could feel was shame welling up in me. Michael's words and my wife's face flashed viciously through my mind in alteration. I was shirking a responsibility. There was something I needed to do. To try, at least.

"Christina." It had come out more forcefully than I had anticipated.

"Heavens, Sir. What's the matter?"

"I'm going to call my wife. You are not to disturb me until I come to my own senses again."

She was silent for a moment. "Ah... Sir's companion, is it? Didn't he just speak with her this afternoon? There can't be so much in need of saying that it can't wait for tomorrow, can there be?"

"It's urgent. Do as you're told."

"Hmph."

I laid down on my bed and closed my eyes. I thought of my wife; of our apartment, the chair she would sit in to take the call, the way she might come over to it, whether slowly or quickly, and of her expression after sensing me from thousands of kilometers away, the possibility of her being glad to see me, the possibility of her being indifferent. Before long I heard her voice.

"Hello?" There was clear loneliness; a kind of fragility in it. I felt a twang in my chest but continued nonetheless.

"Hey."

"This is a surprise. Is something wrong?" I realized then that I had not prepared any topic for conversation.

"No, no. It's nothing to worry about. I just wanted to update you on where we are, and what we're doing."

"Oh... okay." She said it as if a weight was being lifted from her shoulders, and relief washed over me. She didn't seem to entirely trust the feeling, and there were still notes of caution in her voice, but I felt reassured to continue.

I explained to her how we arrived at our first stop, how we were now, officially, north of the arctic circle, how cold but also beautiful it was. With my best descriptive abilities I unfolded a picturesque view of the boreal wilderness before her. My efforts bore fruit as she seemed to be slowly warming to me again, and with each turn of narration I became more intoxicated by my fascination with what I was telling her and her seeming high regard for it.

At some point she interrupted me in my description of the mountains, asking, "But wouldn't crossing over that be dangerous? What if you fall?"

I was too elated from my description to realize the darkening of her tone, and hastened to answer, "Well, I suppose you'd die in that case. It's pretty much an occupational hazard for us, now. I've never really had a dangerous job before so it's like I'm earning my wings, or something." I laughed. The simple fear of death could not have seemed more remote at that time from the fear I had felt looking at the mountain earlier. "That reminds me. Michael was really worried -- you remember Michael, right? He used to visit when I was in technical? He's on this expedition too. I don't remember if I told you that or not. He was really worried about operatives from rival corporations; he even asked me if I'd shot a gun before. He's always been sort of timid. Anyways, Michael says hello."

I awaited her answer anxiously, like an enamored child, but got only silence in return. After a moment of waning confidence, I began to have the sinking feeling I had done something wrong.

"You will come back, right?" I could sense tears in it and my chest tightened.

"Of course I will," I said, defensively. I could feel in my bones that I was making a mistake by saying this, but the words came out of a volition that was not mine, as if propelled by some internal pressure. "Why are you always so damn worried about this? It's annoying."

"How can I not worry about you?! You're always so distant, you spend so long at work, then you disappear for months at a time! You're just not... there any more!" Her sadness threatened to overflow. "How am I supposed to..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

There was a rising anger in me; I did not want it there but it continued to grow and culminated in my uttering, "Supposed to what? Just give me some space, will you?"

There have been few things in my life that I have regretted as much as these words. As soon as they were out, I knew that I had ruined everything. Her tears began to flow fully.

"Why are you so cold? Don't you..." She struggled under the weight of what she had been trying not to say for so long.

"Don't you love me any more?"

I was in over my head. I needed to leave this situation, and I started stammering, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just... I do love you. I just... need to be somewhere else for a while. I'm sorry."

Her sobbing continued; I couldn't take it anymore and simply ended the call. Awash with shame and despair, I opened my eyes to my quarters bathed in moonlight. We were well in to the very short night time we would have at this latitude. I sat up, corpse-like, to see Christina plugged in to her charging port, staring at me from across the room. She only stared, saying nothing; I returned a haggard stare of my own. Nothing passed between us, no thoughts entered my mind, and she gave no token of thinking anything herself. Then, she turned her head toward the window, gazing fixedly at something outside. I looked myself, and saw again the mountain. It did not see us, but stood atop earth and man and mind, drawing me inexorably towards thoughts of the next day's journey.

II

At some point, I had fallen asleep.

When I opened my eyes, a pale, early-morning light illuminated the room through the heavy fog that had since resumed its dominion outside. Christina was sitting on the side of my bed, her body turned at an angle to look at me, with her hands folded neatly in her lap. Among assistants, she had never wanted for eccentricity, but this I had yet to see. I looked at her dumbly for a moment or two, wondering if she would perhaps explain what she was doing, before speaking up myself: "Good morning, Christina. Your placement is making me quite uncomfortable; move out of the way." She didn't respond immediately; her pitch black eye sockets seemed to seethe with some unnameable intensity, or perhaps I imagined it. When she did at last respond, she did so at first without moving.

"A thousand apologies, Sir. Only, it seemed that Sir was thrashing terribly in the night, as if in the throes of a most fearsome night terror, and I only wished to confirm his safety. Sir... is well... is he not?" She leaned closer to me as she said this, propping herself up on her hand, placed a hair's breadth from my arm.

"I don't recall having any dreams last night, Christina," I said, sitting up and pushing her out of the way. I stood up and started putting on my coat. "And my private affairs," I continued, turning to face her with stern expression, "are none of your concern." Still sitting on the bed, she looked at me quietly for a moment before turning to look at the nothingness outside the window.

"Of course, Sir," she let out at last, quietly.

Most others had gotten out of their quarters a little earlier than I had, not having been held up by their assistants. The building would have woken us all up, although it wasn't unnatural to think that a few would linger behind to have a short breakfast or tarry with putting on their clothes. I headed down the hallway and out the rear exit, which opened into a large fenced-in courtyard with garages and storage rooms adjacent to it. The contractors were already busy pulling large crates of equipment out on trolleys, and my colleagues were beginning to drive our armored transports out of the garages. I saw a small group unpacking some mining equipment to stow in a transport truck. Brian was among them, and Suzy not far behind, marveling on all channels at how strong he was to lift that hydraulic drill so easily, and so on and so forth. Whatever lover's spat they had had the night before, it seemed to be well behind them now, as Brian grinned broadly and flexed his arm, drinking in Suzy's praise like wine.

I jogged over to Brian's group with slightly heavy steps to help with the labor and, setting my communications channel to Brian, Suzy, and Christina, said, "By the way, Brian: thanks for sending me the map yesterday. I was badgering you for it for a long time; it was probably annoying. My bad." Surprised to hear me say it, his eyes widened and he looked at me for a few seconds, before beaming his characteristic broad grin.

"Ah, don't worry about it. It was nothing, and besides, I still owe you for that time in secondary school, when--"

"...I helped you cheat on that literacy test?" I chuckled. "It wasn't even that hard."

"No, seriously. I would have flunked out of school if you hadn't helped me out then. It's those long books, man. I can't do it."

"It's hard to believe our best software guy can't even read."

"Is that really a surprise? I don't need to read any documentation or anything, I just keep compiling 'till it works. My debugging process is basically just a random walk."

I looked at him, and him at me, with a serious expression, until the silence became too much and we began laughing, warmed by the memory of simpler days. Suddenly, his laughter trailed off, and looking over my shoulder, he said, "Looks like Christina's come to see us."

I turned to see her walking toward us in her usual stately manner. Her expression looked unperturbed and aloof, and she didn't speak to any of us until she was within five meters or so. Addressing Brian first, she said, "Good morning, Mr. Lovejoy. I trust Sir has not caused too much trouble for you yet?" For a brief moment she turned her face towards me slightly and smiled mischievously before turning back to Brian again. Brian looked then at me, smiled, and said, "Well, there's only so much trouble a little shrimp like him can cause," and laughed heartily. As I heard Suzy and Christina begin a droning conversation about something-or-other, I began to feel clean of the previous night. I exhaled and let the tension out of my shoulders and looked out at what little I could see of the forest treeline through the fog. It would make for rough driving with transports of our size, although it would thin out quickly as we moved farther north. We were just on the precipice of the latitude where the energy from the sun became insufficient to support plant life of that size and complexity. I thought it was noteworthy that our point of embarkation just happened to be right at the point where the planet's boreal forests began to thin, when my musings were interrupted by Christina exclaiming, "Ah, Mr. Lovejoy, this box has the radio equipment, does it not? You had better be careful with this; it's Sir's very favorite." A brief silence. "He loves it more than anything in the world." I snapped out of my reverie and turned to face her, saying, "Not *anything*. I have other interests. Like just now, I was thinking about how the trees--" She interrupted me with dry laughter and it didn't seem worthwhile to continue.

The work of hoisting crates into armored trucks proceeded smoothly when the humans were all working together. Our assistants only offered moral support from the sidelines, not being strong enough to lift such things. When it was done, I took a moment to rest, leaning against one of the trucks and luxuriating in the feeling of pleasant emptiness that follows physical activity. The fog had cleared some

more and the treeline was more visible. The woods were dark and seemed somehow comfortable; I let my wearied attention rest on them for a while.

"Hey." A gruff voice spoken into my mind interrupted my rest.

"...Who is this?" I sensed from his call that this person's name was Johnathan, but it rang no bells.

"Tch. We met two days ago, how can you not remember me?"

"I'm a voracious socializer, so there's no way I could remember every guy I met two days ago." I'm not sure what impelled me to joke like this. Perhaps it was leftover giddiness from my earlier exchange with Brian. He responded impatiently: "Listen, dickhead: we're getting ready to mount up in a few minutes, and you haven't given the briefing you're supposed to be giving yet. This is a courtesy call to remind you to do your fucking job and stop sniffing the flowers."

With the added context of this statement, I was able to remember that he was the head security manager for this expedition. I responded promptly, "right, it slipped my mind. I'll do it right now."

I set my comms link to promiscuous mode and overrode client-side access permissions so everyone would hear me even if they refused outside messages from me (a privilege I had been granted specifically for this expedition). It was rare that such things were entrusted to an individual rather than some kind of system, like the buildings. While looking for Johnathan, I began the address:

"Good morning, everyone. I am the radio specialist for this expedition, and I am to instruct you on the proper use of your communication channels and other RF capabilities while we are in transit to the Valley. As you well know, the likelihood of our encountering operatives with hostile intent towards us is significant enough to warrant our taking precautions. Such operatives, if we were to encounter them, should be assumed to be augmented, or at the very least, in possession of radio equipment that will be able to detect any long range communications we send out." Suddenly, I felt warmth on my face, and realized that the fog had broken enough to begin allowing in sunlight. I looked up, and sensed the inkling of a vast sky above us for the first time that day. The newfound sense of space looming over me pulled me out of myself, and my eyes lingered up there, enchanted. I continued the address mechanically.

"Thus, if we are to avoid detection and make it to the Valley unmolested, we must place severe limitations on the range of our transmissions until we set up our long range radio station in the Valley itself. Therefore, all members of the expedition are to limit the transmit power of their neural taps to twenty-five milliwatts. Furthermore, any order given either by myself or by the security officer for radio silence must be adhered to immediately and without question. This extends to orders given by atypical means, such as vocalization or physical gesturing. Non-compliance on this point could potentially endanger the lives of everyone on the expedition and the expedition itself, and will be punished promptly in any way that the security officer and I deem suitable. More specific orders will be given as the circumstances demand, and our most recent orders should be given primacy over older ones. That is all."

When I had finished the broadcast, I tore my gaze away from the glowing cavern of waning mist above me and looked about myself at my coworkers. They had resumed their normal activity after my address was over, but the few lingering contractors looked at them suspiciously, not having heard any of it themselves but sensing that something had happened.

Realizing that a hand had landed on my shoulder, I turned around to see Johnathan, at last. He made himself up in the style of an action hero, with a steely glare and gruff beard, proudly accentuating a scar across his forehead and brow by closely cropping his hair. Beyond this notable exhibit, however, his skin was relatively smooth and devoid of wrinkles, untouched by any stresses of the hard life his style so proudly bespoke. He glared at me with a sardonic frown. Seeing him immediately after looking at the sky was like being splashed with cold water.

"We're not getting paid to gawk at clouds, asshole." I wasn't sure how to respond to this. I just looked at him, probing for some reason for his unabashed hostility. Perhaps also stricken by the incongruity of his own greeting, he seemed suddenly self conscious and relaxed his bearing.

"I'm Johnathan Windsor, security manager. We'll be working together a lot these next few days, so let's get along well." I assented to this and we shook hands. He asked as if to get a fresh start, "by the way, you said we're limiting transmit power to twenty-five milliwatts, right? How much range will that give us out here?"

"In ideal conditions, maybe fifteen meters or so. In *these* conditions" -- I looked up at the sky again, and saw that the clouds had thickened and the faint sunshine had been covered again -- "maybe half that. It depends on whether it's raining or not."

He made an expression that was some mixture of a smile and a grimace, and said, "Raining? Well, I gather that it basically rains all the fucking time out here. So that 'half' is probably what we should count on." He looked over to the transports and saw that they were ready to board. "Better get a move on. You and I are in the lead truck. I'm driving," he said, without looking back at me.

Like the building facilities in the outpost, the armored transport trucks we were to use were designed solely for use by the augmented. As such, they had no windows or analog controls -- they were driven entirely by user input from a neural tap and passengers could see outside via a composite image created by cameras studded all around the outside of the truck, which images could be seen through the "mind's eye", as it were. Armored as they were and meant for carrying cargo and personnel, they resembled aerodynamic shipping containers on large wheels. To carry thirty-six of us, fifteen assistants, and enough equipment to shelter and sustain ourselves in the Valley, as well as carrying the radio and prospecting equipment necessary to our mission, would take only four of these transports.

As we climbed in to the lead transport via the access hatch in the back, I settled in to one of the seats lining the walls. There were seats on either side, but the center of the compartment was reserved for carrying equipment, so there wasn't enough space to stretch one's legs forward even a small amount, and the people sitting at the opposite wall would not be visible. This claustrophobic setting combined with the general dreariness of an unlit, windowless military transport made me glad to access the cameras and see the outside world as if floating slightly above the center of the vehicle.

Looking around, I could see that the courtyard was now clear of everything except our transports and a few last contractors scurrying to some last minute duty, one of whom was opening the gate that led to the outside world. We were directly in front of it, and my eyes naturally tracked upwards through the gate, to the forest we were to pass through, and at last to the dim outlines of the misty mountains far behind it. The sight impressed a certain sense of finality on me. I had been on many business trips before; occasionally to somewhat remote and wild locales. However, I had never felt, as I did then, that I was truly *leaving* my small corner of the world. In those times I had always felt the presence of a tether that would inevitably pull me back home to my office, my walk to work, and the stillness of my apartment at night. This time, though, the tether was somehow absent. I keenly felt that the gate the contractor had just opened was not the threshold to a forest, or a tundra, but something else entirely, some truly new space where the voices of our old lives, of our very world, would gradually cease to reach us. That the mountains in the distance, which stretched endlessly towards heaven, were not, and could not ever, be things to be merely seen, but a place where I would walk and breathe the sparse frozen air and, at its peak, stand suspended between an infinity of space above and below me, where nothing lives and no cry is heard -- in that moment, this fact resounded through my being and filled me with an awesome terror.

At some point, we began to move forward, and in a moment of supreme quiet, we crossed the threshold.

* * *

It only took a minute of driving or so to get to the treeline and into the forest proper. The coniferous woods were relatively sparse at this latitude, but still not trivial to navigate for vehicles of our size. Johnathan drove skillfully enough, and its mild darkness and confines isolated me from any sight of the mountains, allowing me to clear my mind somewhat and regain my bearings. The forest gradually became thinner, however, and before long we were out of it entirely. We were greeted by an open space of tundra stretching out before us. Beyond it, so large as to skew one's sense of distance, was the mountain range we were to cross, whose tops were hidden by the blanket of clouds that had returned while we were in the forest. The morning had become gray once again, and it promised to remain so for the rest of the first day of our journey.

The terrain was, at this point, mostly flat, although there were some plateaus, rivulets, or malnourished trees here and there. Scanning the horizon, a question suddenly occurred to me: *Were we not terribly vulnerable here?* There was wide open space all around us for dozens upon dozens of kilometers. We were visible from everywhere; could be shot at from anywhere. It was difficult to imagine that an interested party wouldn't know where our point of departure was and have at least a vague idea of where our first checkpoint was as well. I raised these doubts to Johnathan. His response was prompt.

"Right now, I doubt anyone would try anything. We're close enough to home base that we could still radio our situation to HQ if we needed to, so unless they take all of us out in one shot, with no survivors, the attacker in that case would be taking undue risk of giving themselves away and just getting another expedition sent, with more firepower this time. What we oughtta be worried about is the last stretch of the mountain pass. See, there's really only one route up that's viable for a team as large as ours, carrying as much equipment as we are, but there are plenty of other, harder routes that a lighter or more mobile team than ours could use to intercept us. And if you're going to spring an ambush, obviously the best place to do it is at the highest point you can, where your prey is going to be the most exhausted and least able to fight.

"And that's not all. They probably don't know where our checkpoints are exactly; they're supposed to be well disguised and the contractors staffing the ones higher up the mountain have apparently been given orders for radio silence as well. But that doesn't mean they couldn't be found once said hypothetical lighter team makes it to the main route ahead of us. If that does happen, and we arrive at the last checkpoint to not only find it destroyed with its staffers killed, but a team of enemy augs armed to the teeth waiting for us? This expedition will end early."

I supposed he wasn't the security manager for no reason. Ever since the CEO's speech the previous night, the feeling had begun to gnaw on me that the higher-ups were downplaying the threat of an encounter to a worrying degree. If we walked into an ambush at that late juncture, "vigilance" would probably not be enough to save us. It was perfectly possible that we were being kept in the dark for security reasons, and Johnathan knew of some plan or countermeasure to these dangers that had been decided upon by qualified individuals with larger paychecks than us. But what if he didn't...? That fear was strong enough to motivate me to ask him with uncouth directness, "So, we have some sort of protocol in place, right?"

He scoffed. "Not really. Giving us guns was about all they could manage on such short notice." Being connected to the truck's cameras, I couldn't see his face, but I imagined that he was smiling bitterly. "I tried to convince them to delay it, at least for another week, but they insisted the danger of someone getting in ahead of us was the primary concern." He added quietly, as if to himself, "Yeah, we'll see." A few seconds of silence passed before he added hastily, "And don't tell anyone I told you this. Security, need-to-know, and all that." I assured him he had nothing to worry about and got to thinking.

It seemed that Michael's fears were not as unjustified as I had initially assumed. If management really was as clueless about the dangers as Johnathan let on, then it meant that we were going to have to take matters into our own hands if we were going to survive - being outside of the radio contact

range of corporate headquarters once in the mountains gave us that "luxury". However, we weren't soldiers, so any plan that worked would have to be based on an equal supply of luck and cunning. Just as I was thinking of how to broach such a plan with Johnathan, he spoke to me again.

"There's pretty much zero chance of them getting to the second base camp ahead of us. Let's take stock of the supplies there and spend tonight coming up with a plan. I'll break the news to everyone sometime then, too. Just need to think of what I'm gonna say."

"Sounds good." A silence followed, and I refocused my attention on the outside. As the tundra passed us quickly by, I noticed that the mountains seemed closer than before. There was a low hanging sheet of clouds that covered them from halfway up. I couldn't bring myself to stop looking at them. Every stone and crevice shone into my awareness like a glint of light from blade. The walls of the mountain range were fanning their deadliness like some Plutonian bird of paradise. It was an odd signal that I didn't know how to heed, and I only watched, spellbound. My focus on that living rampart deepened still more until Johnathan scattered my disquiet with an inane question.

"And one other thing... You ever shot a gun?"

"A few times, yes."

"Ever hit anything?"

"A lesser few."

"What kind?"

"Of gun? Or thing?"

"Uh... Both."

"Deer with my father's bolt-action .308."

"Oh, okay."

I looked out at the horizon again and was surprised that the mountains already seemed closer. Just as I was getting used to the silence, he spoke up again: "What does it feel like?"

"What does what feel like?"

"Taking life."

"They were just deer."

"Even still."

I remembered the first deer I killed when I was fourteen or so. It was a stag; quite young, according to my father's friend it was just on the cusp of adulthood. I spotted it at a moderate distance and it seemed to look directly at me. I met its blank gaze through the scope for a moment before pulling the trigger. It went down instantly and we approached to inspect the kill. As we drew nearer to its crumpled form, an icy discomfort began to burrow its way into me from the outside. My steps were heavy under the weight of an otherworldly awkwardness that settled into the pit of my being and reminded me that I was far from home and made me feel somehow dirty. I was flanked on either side by my father and his friend; I only wanted them to disappear so I could at least suffer this feeling in privacy. They were saying something about my aim.

At last my toes were touching its fur. Its stillness was surreal and when I looked down its glassy eye was boring a hole through me, as if it was staring through me towards the far shores of the unknowable place to which I had condemned it to go. I followed its gaze up and behind me and saw nothing. It occurred to me that I should stand out of its way. Was such a thing necessary? Was it possible? At that point the chills overcame me and I vomited.

It only took me a few seconds to answer Johnathan: "It feels like when, as a child going around with your parents, you might get lost and look around to suddenly realize that you no longer recognize anyone around you." He made no response and I didn't care to request one. I heard the muted crack of distant thunder. It seemed we would soon be in for some of the region's famous weather.

* * *

When we arrived at the first basecamp at the foothills of the mountain range, we found it whipped with a fierce wind and driving rain. It consisted of a relatively small bunkhouse and a modestly sized garage. We parked outside but received no greeting, only the sight of a hunched over figure in a raincoat standing on the threshold of the entrance of the bunkhouse. Johnathan contacted the building and included me with listening permissions. He must have been hoping for the contractors to have a radio inside because he started speaking.

"This is Johnathan Windsor, grade 3.2, of Noesis Electrics, security chief and representative of this expedition. We're parked outside of your checkpoint, acknowledge."

After a moment we heard a response. "Well met, Mr. Windsor. This is Alexander Smith, grade 2.4, of Bradford Construction, foreman and supervisor of this installation under contract from Noesis Electrics." The person standing outside began to knock heavily on the door of the bunk house, doubled over to keep out the wind and rain as much as possible as he was buffeted by a fresh swell. Mr. Smith continued, "we have eyes on your transport cars and have confirmed your presence. I'll radio your employer to inform them of your arrival as soon as weather conditions improve."

A brief pause, and Johnathan asked, "Mr. Smith, where is everyone? My superiors informed me that we were to be met by the contractors staffing this installation and that they were to help us unpack our gear."

"I've already sent someone out to make contact. We've confirmed your arrival and encourage you to use the garage to your... left to shelter in while you unpack your equipment and take any necessary measures for the next leg of your assignment. The door code is 5643." At this point the door to the bunkhouse opened just widely enough and the straggler rushed inside.

I heard Johnathan exhale strongly. "Need I remind you, Mr. Smith, that you are under orders not only by your own employer, but by ours, to assist in our preparations? It's mission critical that they be completed as quickly as possible and failure in our assignment on account of any delays here could be placed squarely at your feet. I'm sure you understand what that could mean for your... well-being."

Mr. Smith responded in a leisurely tone, "Mr. Windsor, I feel compelled to remind you at this time that I am also under orders, from both your employer and my own, to keep my subordinates safe from harm that could jeopardize their ability to perform their duties or hinder the completion of our and your assignment. It is my judgment that the weather conditions outside are too dangerous to permit any heavy labor by unaugmented workers, and as such, I have no choice but to leave the unpacking to your more capable entourage."

"You mean to tell me," Johnathan sputtered through teeth that would be gritted if he was using them, "that you're failing to carry out orders on account of a little rain? Is that what I should report to your employer?"

A muffled chuckle could be heard on the other end. "You're free to do so if you believe that it's necessary, Mr. Windsor. Ending comms."

"Fucking useless apes!" Johnathan began. "They think just because we're out of contact with HQ for a few months we're not gonna remember they pulled this shit in time to report it."

"Or maybe they think we won't survive," I enjoined, a little morosely.

"Yeah, right. Bullshit. Bull fucking shit. The second we get our radio tower set up in the Valley I'm calling this shit in. What was his name again?"

"Alexander Smith."

"Alexander... Smith. How long will it take to get our long range comms set up over there?"

"Well, it's hard to say when we don't know exactly what the conditions will be. Probably a few weeks at best." We would have to climb to the top, or near to the top, of the mountain range to set up an antenna that could transmit out of the Valley reliably enough, and even then, it would be a fairly short one due to our weight limitations. That means that the carrier frequency would need to be fairly high, which means that our transmitted signals would be even more prone to atmospheric interference than they typically would be for long range communication. Add to that the fitful weather in the region, and

I rather suspected that Johnathan was being set up for disappointment. Things were much easier in the days when satellite communication was possible, but these days hostilities between rival corporations and nations were so intense that it's hard to even keep one in orbit without it getting shot down. A few treaty-protected imaging satellites are all that's left. I felt a sense of nostalgia for the days when radio waves ranged freely through the atmosphere.

Johnathan's voice brought me back to the present. "Alright, good. In a few weeks that guy is fucking over."

For the time being, though, there was nothing he or anyone else of us could do but begin unpacking on our own. It was, simply told, exceedingly dreary work. The garage wasn't big enough to fit all of our transports, and those it did not even all the way, so we had to unpack them in two rounds with the transports parked halfway in. Our hands were numb from the bitter cold and the rain and wind that got into the garage lashed us terribly. The soil of the tundra was hard and absorbed little water, which led to a proliferation of puddles and excess water running every which way. When unpacking sensitive equipment we had to do our best to block the rain with our bodies before we could cover it in tarp. All this was punctuated by Johnathan's anger, broadcasted on mission-sensitive channels most unprofessionally, at the unaugmented and his various opinions about them and their involvement in our current straits.

It suffices to say that our unpacking took almost four hours, two longer than planned, which essentially guaranteed that we would not make it to the second basecamp by nightfall, let alone by the time we were expected. We left the transports in the rain with the garage opened and left, doubled over with heavy rucksacks and nearly slipping in the mud with every footfall. Those of us with rifles clutched them tightly. Our assistants followed last, behind us, scarcely managing the terrain better than we did despite carrying nothing. As we took our first steps we saw the unaugmented watching us leave through their windows; dim, forlorn silhouettes vanishing more by the second into an inscrutable haze, until they were not silhouettes at all, but a part of that haze, and then at last were gone.

It was scarcely five meters before we lost sight of them, so thick was the fog and rain we were mired in. The only indication that there were mountains of any kind in the direction we were headed was the water that flowed down in rivulets around our feet. Ahead of me, stepping adroitly over them so as not to get their feet too wet, were Brian and Suzy walking hand in hand. Brian sometimes matched her pace, sometimes escorted her by the hand, and sometimes offered himself as a support over one of the wider tracks of water. They looked for all the world like a couple on a date. I watched them absentmindedly as though a much greater distance away than I actually was. They began to appear to me like the two people least out of place on that hillside.

At some point, Brian was distracted by something (perhaps someone else's voice) and his eyes snapped to his left. From behind, his profile looked pensive and the few seconds he was distracted spanned enough time for Suzy to slip in something. Brian moved to catch her but was too late, and she fell on her hands in the mud. I jogged to catch up to them and was greeted by their voices when I entered transmission range.

"--fine, babe. I just got a little dirty."

"You're sure no water got in?" His voice was strained with worry and he grabbed her hands to help her up.

"None at all." She tugged his hands with each syllable. Then she was on her feet again and Brian was peering at her face intently. I don't know whether he only saw his own reflection in her shiny mask, or something past it, but whatever he saw, it induced him to reach out and wipe something from her face with the sleeve of his jacket.

"You got a little smudge on you."

"Honey, it's fine. There's no way any of us are going to stay clean out here anyways." He continued working at her cheek with his sleeve even as they were walking away. "You're so embarrassing sometimes." She raised her free hand to her other cheek.

He responded without removing his focus from the smudge, "That's a sign of my love, sweetheart. Sometimes it--"

His voice cut out as he left transmission range. They walked ahead into the fog until they were gone from my sight, leaving the last uncanny fragment of their conversation echoing in my mind, though even this echo was eventually drowned out by the sound of rain and footsteps.

We were at least fortunate that we were still close enough to sea level that the rain had not yet become snow, and that by the time the terrain became steep enough for the rain to be a serious problem, it would be rain no longer. The fog had lightened a bit, and our visibility now extended far enough to get a clear idea of where we were walking and to see, just barely, the outlines of the nearest peaks at the edge of our visibility. Our path upwards was along the bank of a wide slope, and was soon no more difficult than walking up an ordinary hill but for the rocks and stubborn boulders we occasionally had to step around and the slipperiness due to the rain. Even our assistants had started to manage it with ease, and gradually our footsteps eased into a monotonous pattern that punctuated the backdrop of rainfall.

In such conditions, my thoughts would typically drift elsewhere, but something about my surroundings kept my awareness outside of myself, and it seemed I wasn't the only one. The others didn't speak at all, even though we walked quite closely together and would be able to hear each other even with our reduced transmission ranges. Some occasionally ventured glances upwards at the ever-nearer mountains, but most looked at their feet, perhaps to keep a close eye on the terrain or perhaps to avoid seeing too keenly these frightful, inevitable masses that loomed above us. I could tell through furtive glances about myself that the grade we were walking was hemmed in on both sides by sharp, mostly uneroded peaks, making our path almost a walkway. Was it our fortune that it was here? It was a great boon to our ascent, to be sure, but it was also a funnel that led us more and more deeply into inhospitable mountain ranges -- an alien land that permitted no life to exist, a place where only the rocks could watch us from their high places; from their seats of honor above us poor beings of flesh and silicon. Before long, even fleeting glances at the mountains felt too bold, and I stopped altogether.

Under the mountains' vigil the air seemed to become sharp, or strained, as if one stone out of place, one misplaced step, or one breath too deep would tempt some terrible vengeance that would lash out to tear the air in front of us straight down the middle, revealing an emptiness in between that would swallow the world and dissolve it into some greater, more terrible substance. I was grateful that it was unnecessary for any of us to speak aloud in the event we had something to say -- I believed by then that the terrain allowed us to proceed only on the condition that we made ourselves as small as possible. It cowed us into a deep silence of the mind, and kept our eyes stuck only to the ground where we might next place our feet.

Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and thinking nothing, we trudged uphill through that deafening vale for almost six hours.

I first recall regaining my presence of mind when I had noticed that at some indeterminate point the rain had let up significantly. I looked up to see that the heavy blanket of clouds that covered us before had had broken up in places, and was thinnest in the center of the sky above us, in the direction we were walking. Over the course of a few minutes the mist lightened still more, until the sun cleaved the cloud cover in twain, making a brilliant streak of golden sunlight that pointed our path forward, into the mountains. Here and there, gaps in the clouds afforded room for beams of sunlight to cascade down to Earth. A fierce wind at last blew the last of the low hanging mist away from us and we suddenly stood in all clarity, and could see that we had come high enough to see the lowest peaks beside us. The taller ones still stood in the distance, closer now, and more vivid. The nearest of them felt close enough to touch, whereas the farthest stretched still higher above the remaining clouds in the distance, their spires shining brilliantly from the snow that cloaked them. Their peaks pointed our eyes towards the sky and the radiant gold that shone from there. All of us, humans and assistants alike, stopped without saying a word to stare at it open-mouthed, even against the freezing winds. The cold light we were

being anointed with displaced all other thoughts from our minds and made us as mirrors for that place. No other thoughts were possible but of it, and the alchemy of our renewed perception turned these mountains, and this sunlight, for the first time, into something immanently real. It was, for all of us, as if we had seen the sun for the first time in our lives.

Our path ahead could be seen clearly now. We hadn't much left of the easy embankment to climb; soon we would be filed into a narrow crevasse, or a canyon of sorts, some five hundred meters ahead. I looked back for the first time since we left. The blanket of fog was behind us now; whether we had walked through it completely or it had moved down the mountainside I couldn't say. It covered everything back there; nothing of the world below was visible any longer. I checked my altimeter. We were 3728 meters above sea level.

III

The canyon we were to proceed the next leg of the journey through soon became more of a cave. There was a stream running through it the entire way, whose erosion probably formed it over many years, but as we ascended through it and the temperature dropped, a kind of icy ceiling began to form over it. Undisturbed ice from centuries ago likely clung to the ridges of the canyon and grew outwards, never melting but occasionally breaking off in places, with the end result that the path we now walked was open to the sky but narrowly, and what light could enter in the twilight conditions took on a blue tinge on its influence. The ice above provided shelter if not warmth, and we proceeded easily along a walkway that natural erosion had made for us over millennia.

By the time the ice had formed to the point of being nearly a ceiling, we were well into the below-freezing range, and while it was a welcome relief to not have to worry about water any more, the cold had become all the more intrusive. We held our coats fast but as the arctic night set in, even these couldn't keep out the chill entirely, and we worried for our assistants, as their batteries would perform worse in the cold. By the time we were proceeding by our flashlights alone, we continued taking steps only in the hope of seeing some lighted windows or other sign of the second outpost. With every passing minute our walkway became colder, and the penetrating chill reminded us that we were in a place that beings such as us were not meant to be. The longer we walked, the more keenly we focused into the blackness ahead of us, straining to see some token of humanity to banish the strange desolation we were now marooned in.

After almost an hour, we finally we saw a flashing red light in the distance, and gradually the kind of shabby half-tent structure we had become used to seeing. It was built entirely inside this canyon-cave, but was otherwise like the first outpost, only about twice the size and with no garage. I supposed they intended for us to sleep with the equipment we carried on our backs, which, in all fairness, we were probably tired enough to do after our ordeal. The ice ceiling was still intact (and thicker than ever), which offered it superb shelter from the elements.

Without a word, Johnathan led the way to what was presumably the front door. I noticed with great interest that the building did not speak to us as we approached. Perhaps this was why Johnathan could not contact anyone inside remotely. As we stood out in front of it I turned on my flashlight and got a better look. Rather than a structure, it was really a composite of large tents with a few walls, windows, and doors being its only elements that spoke to any kind of organized construction effort. The tents were at least connected and, when Johnathan's pounding on the front door finally yielded an answer and it was opened by an unaugmented contractor, it was apparent to all within a three meter radius that the interior was heated. Few of us dared to wish for any more at that time.

After a brief verbal exchange with the doorman, Johnathan turned around and informed us that our quarters were in the western "wing" to our left, and that we should begin laying down our

equipment and finding a bunk for ourselves, as it was a large room with no assigned beds. Furthermore, himself and I were to proceed into the main "building" and touch base with the staffers of this installation. His message had to be relayed a few times since his reduced transmission range was not far enough to reach the back of the crowd. As the humans and assistants made their way over there, Johnathan and I approached the entrance to the main tent. Christina caught up to me and followed wordlessly.

We entered into a moderately sized "room" with an eclectic mix of furniture lined against the walls and strewn around the interior of the room -- mostly desks, a few bunk beds here and there, and a table with an old radio on it, at which a stern old man with a beard sat and eyed us gravely. Around him and near the entrance, the unaugmented sat and stood, and they watched us bleary-eyed. Neither of us had any idea of who was who or what was what, since none of it spoke to us. We could only make our best guess of who was in charge and who to report to, and what was for us to use and what wasn't. Perhaps on instinct, or perhaps on pre-implanted orders, we walked toward the end of the room where the old man sat, who was eyeing us guardedly all the while, past the resentful gazes of the various unaugmented about the room.

After what felt like a very long time, we stopped at his table and Johnathan cleared his throat and began to vocalize an introduction to the old man. Before he had even gotten through his name, the old man seemed disgusted and the wrinkles that lined his bony face deepened under the weight of a palpable scorn. Within two seconds he interrupted Johnathan's formal introduction: "Yes, yes. Well met, foul chimera. And what the hell took ye so long? My men have been itchin' fer some shut eye just shy of two hours now, and I've had to keep 'em up on account o' waiting fer ye damned metal men." Johnathan simply stood with mouth agape. I sensed the contemptful eyes of the unaugmented boring into our backs.

"Oh, but I know ye lot aren't too fond of speakin' like one o' God's own creatures, so I've, eh, taken the liberty of preparin' some accommodations fer ye." He gestured regally to the radio on the table he sat at, which, on closer inspection, was broken, and said, "I hope it'll serve adequately as yer tongues, if yer wantin' for skill in use of yer real ones," then broke into dry and bitter laughter. I looked down in front of me and saw Johnathan clenching his fists. His breathing became pinched from a Herculean effort to control it. While I couldn't see his expression, the old man certainly did, and responded to it by leaning back in his chair and fixing Johnathan with a penetrating glare.

"Oh? What's the matter, lad? Are ye angry? Y'gonna kill me? Well best see to it quick, then. I couldn't stand another minute in this frozen hellhole." He never broke eye contact with Johnathan while saying it. After a moment of silence his expression relaxed into a smile of smug self-assurance. "Hmph. Look at ye. I can tell there ain't no fight in them freakish, mechanical eyes o' yers. And not all the metal in the world'd make ye any better at playin' the tough."

Even from behind I could tell that Johnathan's anger had reached a fever pitch. He was so focused on the object of his hatred that he didn't see that the other contractors were watching bemusedly, with seedy sidelong glances and furtive postures, hungrily awaiting our response from the obscurity of the far corners of the room. Even from the periphery of my vision, they looked exhausted and gnawed constantly by the cold, even in the heated interior of the structure. They were not pleased that we were there and I had no idea what they might have been willing to do to get us out again. Johnathan had left his gun outside and mine was slung behind my back. Christina, still behind me, was of course defenseless. It was clear we needed some recourse in case Johnathan gave the contractors the justification they perhaps wanted. But what to do?

Suddenly, I heard Christina's voice in my head. "Sir, I believe Mr. Windsor is on the verge of doing something drastic and irreversible, and these unaugmented do not take kindly to our presence. I suggest that Sir calls for Mr. Harrison. He is likely to manage the situation more adeptly than Sir."

Michael's presence was probably our best path towards defusing the situation. With his help, we should have been able to build an effective rapport between Johnathan and the unaugmented. Praying

that he was in range, I contacted him, and asked him to come to the main room and bring his gun, but to enter casually. Until he arrived I needed to bide our time as diplomatically as possible.

Before Johnathan could make any sudden movement I pulled him back by the shoulder and interposed myself, and carefully vocalizing, said, "W-we offer our sincere apo-apologies for our tardiness. It's j-just, there were significant delays around the first outpost." I was grateful to the contractor woman at the coastal outpost for giving me the opportunity to practice speaking like this.

The old hand then turned his face to me, bored and nonplussed, as if the mundanity of my interjection disappointed him. I continued, "We've come here to check in for record keeping purposes, and to consult you about the conditions on the path ahead." A slight anxiety turned in my stomach as I remembered to add, "and if it's not too much trouble, if you could tell us about whether you've seen any evidence of nearby activity from... other corporations... recently..." At first, he perked up briefly as if he were going to say something, but stopped just short. Instead, he simply stared, his deeply set eyes regarding me coolly from out of a horribly tired face.

Then, his eyes drifted to my right and landed on Christina, and he came to life again. Taking on a wicked smile, he said, "Oh...? Brought yer lady friend, have ye? But don't y'know that this is no place fer such a gentle creature?" He glanced at her again. "Thing of artifice, aye, but gentle still." His smile gradually faded away and his widened eyes returned to me. "Tell me, lad. If they're no good fer labor, their batteries run low in the cold, and they can't do any computer-like thinkin' that you can't... why'd ye even bring 'em? To what end? Fer... conversation? Heh... Heh... Can't keep the solitude away with yer fellow chimeras? Too fleshy for yer palette?" He reclined once more in his chair and regarded us all now with naked disdain. "Hmph. Robot lovers. Robots yerselves, look at ye. Metal bits stickin' out o' yer temples. Strange light in the eyes. Yer not but beasts, what sold their souls fer power and think little o' those who still have 'em. And lord, do we ever know beasts here..." These last words he exhaled rather than said, and he seemed to breathe out his vitality along with them. His sternness lapsed into fatigue, and he continued as though in defeat.

"Listen, lad. Earlier ye asked me if I've heard aught o' rival corporations comin' through these parts. Truth is, we've all more than heard. We've been damned hunted and corralled by beasts o' yer make for the past week and a half." Hearing this, Johnathan awoke from his stupor and shot into action again.

"Who did they work for? What augs did they have? Where did you--"

"Enough, lad. Enough. One thing at a time." He began to gingerly fiddle with the radio on the table while he collected his thoughts; his vigor appearing to rally somewhat.

At this point, Michael entered, carrying a radio receiver for him to talk through and a rifle slung over his shoulder. He walked nonchalantly up to my side and spoke into my mind, "What's the situation?"

"Calmed down for now. I'll explain later." The old man hadn't noticed his entry and began speaking.

"Ten days ago were when we first ran up against 'em. Three o' the younger lads wanted to head up the mountain a ways, to see how far this here cave went. They left at oh-six-hundred or so, a few hours after sunrise. T'was nearly evenin' when one of 'em alone returns, pullin' himself along the ground with two mangled legs trailin' behind him, covered in grime and blood; half-dead. We pull him in and get him on life support, and once he's recovered and in his right mind again, he tells us all what transpired.

"He says they found a vertical exit to the cave some two hundred meters ahead. They climbed up it and found 'emselves straight away in an open clearing o' sorts, maybe a half-kilometer of open space uphill, but hemmed in with high peaks on the sides. He says they weren't up there two minutes before suddenly, in the space of a second, all their knees get blown out. Hadn't heard no gunshots, he says -- it came sight unseen, and they all went down. Three minutes they lie there in the snow, me boys, screamin' in pain and callin' for help from where no friendly ear can heed, when suddenly, three augs

come up to inspect their handiwork. Foul things, as I heard it: about two and a quarter meters tall, with metal legs angled like a cheetah's, carryin' silenced rifles and covered head to groin in combat gear; faces covered in balaclavas and goggles. Not one of 'em said a word -- at least, not what our boys could ever hear.

"They hoist 'em over their shoulders and carry 'em off at an unnatural speed, almost fast as a car, and over uneven terrain, he says. Deposit 'em in a small cave in the mountainside, just deep enough to be a bit safe from the elements. Then, the augs lay down their gear and take off their masks; go and stand off by themselves, probably talkin' on somethin' or other. He notices our other two lads have gone unconscious, so while the augs are distracted he takes a stim shot out of his pack and starts crawlin' out, slow as he can, and by God he makes it, lads, makes it a good five, ten meters, only to look back at last and see, still in the cave, far away now, one o' the augs lookin' dead at him, with horrid eyes, black and yellow, peeled open like a hawk's, and smilin', lads, do ye hear? Smilin'. T'were the devil's smile, he says, cruel and cold as the grave. Unnatural and puppet-like; a skinwalker's greeting. It puts the fear o' God in him and he crawls fer dear life. They were at a distance what could be closed in a few seconds if they tried, yet none did. They let him crawl away, let him make it back down the rope they used to climb out o' the cave. Later he returns as I already told ye."

As Johnathan, Michael and I listened to this story, the identities of these augmented mercenaries became more and more obvious.

"Is this man still alive? Could we speak with him?" Michael asked through his radio.

"He lives, but hardly. The poor lad were sapped by the whole ordeal, and he's makin' a slow recovery in these arctic conditions we weather. Besides, we got the story straight from him. He couldn't tell you naught what I haven't already told." His expression became downcast. "We... never had sight or sound o' the other two since they left. We've taken 'em fer dead."

Just then, two contractors came out carrying a severed bio-metal digitigrade leg. It was roughly hewn and stained with blood at the top, and on its own was almost as long as I was tall.

"Here's one o' them legs what those augs were sportin'. I don't suppose it belongs to one o' yer relatives?"

Choosing to leave the issue of how the obtained this for later, we three drew close and saw, all at almost the same time, the serial number stamped close to where the hip would be. It was partially obscured by blood, but legible enough to confirm our suspicions.

"Pennrose," Johnathan said simply.

Pennrose Security is a private military corporation that typically contracts to smaller entities that can't afford their own military standing, or who don't need one on a consistent basis. However, as that is a fairly small market, they branch out into various specialty services, including consulting (mostly for national governments), conducting assassinations and other covert activities, and renting out mercenaries as auxiliaries to larger entities. In these areas they have found a profitable niche, mostly due to their infamous lack of compunction in using kidnapping, early-life indoctrination, and extreme degrees of augmentation to rear some of the most effective and unscrupulous soldiers in the world. This has its downsides, however: such soldiers usually don't live very long due to the strain of their many augmentations (to even see 35 is exceedingly rare), and their propensity towards antisocial behavior makes them *personae non gratae* in most civilized parts of the world. They tend to eke out their existences in the underworld, or on the fringes, or well outside of human society -- in other words, our exact location.

In any case, it was clear that any hopes we were dealing with a team more like ourselves could be dispensed with. These people were not here to get to the Valley ahead of us to keep us out with force -- they were here to kill us, plain and simple. Whatever team would be sent afterwards, by whatever rival corporation that hired them was none of their concern and perhaps not even a meaningful question to them. We were being stalked by predators for hire.

Michael broke the brief silence in our heads with the question, "but why are they harassing the contractors like this? Aren't we their target?"

"They're probably aiming to interrogate the contractors they kidnap to find out where the third basecamp is, so they can ambush us there," Johnathan answered with confidence.

"But wouldn't it be obvious that they had already been to the second camp when we interacted with the contractors here? Why would they do that if it gave us so much warning and opportunity to turn back?"

He now stared into space for a few seconds before responding, "They may well not even have thought of that. Rumor goes that Pennrose guys aren't really all there, mentally. They may not have a good enough theory of mind to even know that we would think that. Or, maybe they do know that we would think that, and they're confident that we would press on anyways; or that we'd get caught in their ambush." He smiled cynically. "Guess we'll just have to ask them ourselves."

Before any of us could respond, our thought-conversation was interrupted by the old man clearing his throat, which brought us back to the present, where he greeted us with an angry glare.

"T'is rude to have a conversation what others can't hear, y'know. Have ye gleaned aught useful?"

I responded first, "Ah, sorry. Yes, we did, thank you. By the way, where did you get this leg?"

He smiled knowingly, his enthusiasm stoked by what he was preparing to say. "That weren't our only run-in with them things. Three days later, we had all heard the story to the finish, and some other lads head out to set up a perimeter. Y'know, motion trackers, sole-spikers, things o' such nature. All armed to the teeth, this time. One lad even brought a grenade launcher, and thank the almighty he did, for what d'ye think they see when they're within 25 meters o' the exit, but two o' them damned chimeras jumping right down in front of 'em! They must not've sensed our boys on their thermals on account o' the ice and rock betwixt. The one with the grenade launcher -- Jeffery, by name, I'll never forget it -- was quick on the draw and scored a near direct hit on the farther one; blew him clear to the other wall and he was down for a good while. Only, fer shame, the blast injured the nearest one of ours, and the other aug grabbed him and used him as a shield before the other two could get any good shots off. Once it knew it was safe, it scrambled up the side o' the chasm with its legs and one free arm, and was out in a matter o' seconds.

"Meanwhile, the others showered the unconscious one with blows from their boots and the butts o' their rifles until they were sure it would stir no more. Then, they dragged it back and we all hacked it limb from limb, organ from organ, picking out the expensive plunder fer ourselves. That's how we got yonder leg. The other was too damaged to be useful, and the rest o' the loot we plan to sell fer an equitable profit -- but the lion's share fer Jeffery!"

I saw some of the contractors cheer and pat one of their own on the back. Jeffery, I supposed. I couldn't gather what consolation his victory would be for the additional comrade they lost. In the midst of their jubilation, Johnathan said to us resentfully, "did you notice he started calling those guys 'it'?"

I placed my hand on his shoulder to calm him and said to the old man out loud, "You're aware that it's against company policy to resell genetically registered augmentations? Not that I plan to turn you in, but it would probably be hard for you and your men to find employment afterwards."

He scoffed in response, "who cares? We'll make a prettier penny just sellin' those parts than we would in five years o' workin' anyways. In that time, the lads can all find jobs with other companies and I can finally retire." As he said it, he was clouded over by a profound exhaustion, as his elation from telling the more triumphant of his accounts wore off. He muttered under his breath, "A shame fer the others who couldn't share it. A mere lad o' nineteen... What'll we tell his mother?"

We pressed him to continue his accounts. He clearly resented us for it, but pushed through his melancholy enough to continue. The other incidents he described were much like the first two. A chance encounter here and there, and usually a man or two dragged off. Apparently, one of the contractors scored a hit on one of the mercenaries' shoulders with his rifle. Beyond that, they made no further headway. They had yet to see any sign of the augmented mercenaries for three days up to that

point, so we assumed that they either discovered where the third basecamp was and headed there, or simply decided to look for it themselves, since it wouldn't be to their greatest advantage to ambush us here when we're not at our most exhausted. There were thirty-six of us in all, and even untrained we would likely put up a much better fight than the contractors, since at least our reflexes are faster and we can communicate instantly and privately.

Soon, our business with the contractors was finished. Johnathan and I turned our thoughts to the briefing of the situation we would give to our coworkers, and the contractors, thoroughly tired after knowing that the nightmare they had been living was likely over, began to bed down for the night.

As we turned to leave, however, Christina suddenly spoke through Michael's radio.

"Excuse me, old fellow."

He turned around, so tired as to seem half-dead, to look at Michael, and then at her, and said, "ahh, the little lady can speak, can she? And what does she want?" He said it not without condescension but he didn't have the energy for vitriol.

"I believe it would please you to know that Sir... my master... is, in fact, lawfully wedded to a... to a human woman, and I can attest to his unstinting faithfulness to her. Sir is not... by no means is he a 'robot lover'." She was looking at the ground as she finished saying it.

After the stress of the preceding events, hearing her say these words punched a hole into my stomach that felt like lead. I nearly vomited on the spot.

Hearing those words banished the fatigue from the old man's face and drew astonishment in its place. He looked at me, wide-eyed, and said, "All me lads here are either too young or disinclined to be married, and I'm a widower. But ye... ye came carousin' about in this God-forsaken place, even when ye have a woman waitin' at home? Someone who really cares about ye? Who'd mourn yer loss?" My sudden remembrance of the previous night made it hard to focus on my surroundings or make him any reply. His astonishment only relented when he scoffed and smirked with resignation.

"Then I'll pray fer yer tainted soul, lad. Fer *her* sake, if nothin' else."

He turned to leave, and so did we. I made no attempt to meet Christina's eyes, nor she mine, and she walked out of the building from a good deal behind me.

* * *

Outside, Michael asked me, "so what was all that earlier about?" I seized up and could barely answer his question, but managed some pitiful evasion nonetheless.

"Oh, well. You know how Christina can be sometimes."

"Not that. I meant the thing you called me in for."

"Oh. Well, basically, that old man started laying in to Johnathan so badly I thought he was going to snap and start swinging fists. The other contractors were generally staring daggers at us, and we were the only three in there. It looked like things could get bad any minute so I wanted a smooth talker on hand to help avoid that. It never hurts to be cautious around the unaugmented. Thankfully, everything was fine, though."

"Johnathan can be too emotional at times like this. They were probably at the end of their rope too, though, dealing with these attacks and kidnappings for so long. You shouldn't hold it against them too much."

"Yeah, I guess." We continued our slow saunter to the bunkhouse. I felt relieved for a moment before I heard him ask the question I didn't want to hear.

"Did you call her?"

The heavy feeling that had just departed returned in force. "...Yes."

He was surprised at my hesitation. "It... went poorly?"

"...Yes..."

He sighed lightly. "Hang in there, man. You'll find the words eventually." I could only wonder if words were sufficient.

"...Thanks." Somehow, I felt as though I was outside of my own body. It was all I could do to watch the smoky tendrils of my breath drift up and disappear into the freezing air. The atmosphere there was greedy; it snatched up anything warm. A gloveless hand would feel dead in minutes. Even my memories of home and my job began to ossify. It was a marvel we lived at all. Remembering the parting of the clouds and the sunlight from earlier in the day, I thought that even if there was no warmth, at least there was light. The rest of the short walk to our bunkhouse passed silently.

* * *

"The situation, essentially, is this. We are being pursued by a formerly three, down to two squad of mercenaries, of Pennrose make. It's possible that one is wounded in the shoulder. They're out for blood, and will almost certainly ambush us at some point between here and the third basecamp, most likely at the camp itself. They're equipped with long range, silenced rifles of some kind, and are equipped with a model of leg that enables land speeds of up to 15 meters per second. Based on a contractor's visual description of their eyes, they are likely of a model that enables vision at a rating of 20/5 and has some degree of thermal sensitivity. They are presumed to be alone, but their access to resupply, as well as the state of their provisions, are unknown."

Johnathan's matter-of-fact address cast a pall over our bunkhouse like little else could. It seemed as though our pursuers had been purpose built to kill us in this particular place and time, as if their whole existence converged on the ending of ours. Most had begun listening to the address lying down, but as it went on nearly everyone sat up to either look at Johnathan in disbelief or to hold their heads in their hands. Standing at the center of the room, he could get a clear idea of the sentiments of the group, and followed up with, "before we proceed, are there any questions?"

After a brief moment of silence, they began.

"Why didn't we hear about this earlier?"

"We were waiting for more information and only learned recently ourselves."

"How did one of them die?"

"The contractors-- the contractors got lucky."

"Why weren't we given a military escort?"

"If-- when we make it back, you can ask management."

"How do we know the one that was killed hasn't been replaced?"

"We don't." A brief pause. "Well, there could be three or more in the worst case." The air thickened further. Our assistants were lined against the back wall of the room, and though in low power mode to preserve battery, they probably still heard what was going on; yet their expressions remained serene. Willful or no, at times like this I envied them their stolidity, unaccountable though it was.

The silence reigned for a few more seconds, and Johnathan took this as license to press on with his briefing against the feeling of the room.

"If you're worried, don't be. I have a plan." We turned our eyes to him and found him grinning and wide-eyed, looking at no one and nothing in particular.

TO BE CONTINUED