

BEYOND THE PALE

I

"I just don't understand why you have to go." It was my wife, again.

"Didn't I explain this already? 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. Even you've been saying how busy you are recently-"

"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.

"No, 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 which had been Brian's typical reaction to embarrassment since he was a teenager. 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 doing things* 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; its 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 rationally justify dropping everything and just going. Their rationality, their calculation of profit and loss, 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 ease 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 outer 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 make 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 Sir 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 past 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 their 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 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 words 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, "Are you an electrical engineer?"

"Mostly, yes."

"I see." She giggled a bit. "My grandpa was one, too. They way you kept going on and on reminded me of him." She sighed and glanced over the table. "I thought you augs all hated us, but you're 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, 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 human 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.

It wasn't long before we all received 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.

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 death 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."

"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." This much was probably true, and I couldn't pretend it wasn't. I turned to look at him and saw that his expression had become serious. "Do you miss her? Are you going to?"

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. 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 the first outpost, 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 I slowly became 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. "You're always so damn worried about this, it's annoying." There was a rising anger in my voice; I did not want it there but it continued to grow and culminated in my uttering, "Give me some space, will you?"

There have been few things in my life that I 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.

TO BE CONTINUED