

## DESCENDANT

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I am down, fallen as far as I am going to. Outwardly, I am just something on the surface, a body in a suit.

Inwardly...

Everything is difficult. I hurt.

I feel better now. This is the third day. All I recall of the other two is that they were there; I don't remember any details. I haven't been getting better steadily, either, as what happened yesterday is even more blurred than the day before, the day of the fall.

I think I had the idea then that I was being born. A primitive, old-fashioned, almost animal birth; bloody and messy and dangerous. I took part and watched at the same time; I was the born and the birthing, and when, suddenly, I felt I could move, I jerked upright, trying to sit up and wipe my eyes, but my gloved hands hit the visor, centimetres in front of my eyes, and I fell back, raising dust. I blacked out.

Now it is the third day, however, and the suit and I are in better shape, ready to move off, start travelling.

I am sitting on a big rough rock in a boulderfield half-way up a long, gently sloping escarpment. I think it's a scarp. It might be the swell towards the lip of the big crater, but I haven't spotted any obvious secondaries that might belong to a hole in the direction of the rise, and there's no evidence of strata overflip.

Probably an escarpment then, and not too steep on the other side, I hope. I prepare myself by thinking of the way ahead before I actually start walking. I suck at the little tube near my chin and draw some thin, acidic stuff into my mouth. I swallow with an effort.

The sky here is bright pink. It is mid-morning, and there are only two stars visible on normal sight. With the external glasses tinted and polarized I can just see thin wispy clouds, high up. The atmosphere is still, down at this level, and no dust moves. I shiver, bumping inside the suit, as though the vacuous loneliness bruised me. It was the same the first day, when I thought the suit was dead.

'Are you ready to set off?' the suit says. I sigh and get to my feet, dragging the weight of the suit

up with me for a moment before it, tiredly, flexes too.

'Yes. Let's get moving.'

We set off. It is my turn to walk. The suit is heavy, my side aches monotonously, my stomach feels empty. The boulderfield stretches on into the edges of the distant sky.

I don't know what happened, which is annoying, though it wouldn't make any difference if I did know. It wouldn't have made any difference when it happened, either, because there was no time for me to do anything. It was a surprise: an ambush.

Whatever got us must have been very small or very far away, otherwise we wouldn't be here, still alive. If the module had taken any standard-sized warhead full on there would be only radiation and atoms left; probably not an intact molecule. Even a near miss would have left nothing recognizable to the unaided human eye. Only something tiny - perhaps not a warhead at all but just something moving fast - or a more distant miss, would leave wreckage.

I must remember that, hold on to that. However bad I may feel, I am still alive, when there was every chance that I would never get this far, even as a cinder, let alone whole and thinking and still able to walk.

But damaged. Both of us damaged. I am injured, but so is the suit, which is worse, in some ways.

It is running mostly on external power, soaking up the weak sunlight as best it can, but so inefficiently that it has to rest at night, when both of us have to sleep. Its communications and AG are wrecked, and the recycle and medical units are badly damaged too. All that and a tiny leak we can't find. I'm frightened.

It says I have internal bruising and I shouldn't be walking, but we talked it over and agreed that our only hope is to walk, to head in roughly the right direction and hope we're seen by the base we were heading for origin-ally, in the module. The base is a thousand kilometres south of the northern ice cap. We came down north of the equator, but just how far north, we don't know. It's going to be a long walk, for both of us.

'How do you feel now?'

'Fine,' the suit replies.

'How far do you think we'll get today?'

'Maybe twenty kilometres.'

'That's not very much.'

'You're not very well. We'll do better once you heal. You were quite ill.'

Quite ill. There are still some little bits of sickness and patches of dried blood within the helmet, where I can see them. They don't smell any more, but they don't look very pleasant either. I'll

try cleaning them up again tonight.

I am worried that, apart from anything else, the suit isn't being completely honest with me. It says it thinks our chances are fifty-fifty, but I suspect it either doesn't have any idea at all, or knows things are worse than it's telling me. This is what comes of having a smart suit. But I asked for one; it was my choice, so I can't complain. Besides, I might have died if the suit hadn't been as bright as it is. It got the two of us down here, out of the wrecked module and down through the thin atmosphere while I was still unconscious from the explosion. A standard suit might have done almost as well, but that probably wouldn't have been enough; it was a close run thing even as it was.

My legs hurt. The ground is fairly level, but occasion-ally I have to negotiate small ridges and areas of corrugated ground. My feet are sore too, but the pain in my legs worries me more. I don't know if I'll be able to keep going all day, which is what the suit expects.

'How far did we come yesterday?'

'Thirty-five kilometres.'

The suit walked all of that, carrying me like a dead weight. It got up and walked, clasping me inside it so I wouldn't bump around, and marched off, the wispy remains of its crippled emergency photopanel dragging over the dusty ground behind it like the wings of some strange, damaged insect.

Thirty-five clicks. I haven't done a tenth of that yet.

I'll just have to keep going. I can't disappoint it. I'd be letting the suit down. It has done so well to get us here in one piece, and it walked all that long way yesterday, supporting me while I was still rolling my eyes and drooling, mumbling about walking in a dream and being the living dead... so I can't let it down. If I fail I harm us both, lessening the suit's chances of survival, too.

The slope goes on. The ground is boringly uniform, always the same rusty brown. It frightens me that there is so little variety, so little sign of life. Sometimes we see a stain on a rock that might be plant life, but I can't tell, and the suit doesn't know because most of its external eyes and tactiles were burned out in the fall, and its analyzer is in no better condition than the AG or the transceiver. The suit's briefing on the planet didn't include a comprehensive Ecology, so we don't even know in theory whether the discolourations could be plants. Maybe we are the only life here, maybe there's nothing living or thinking for thousands and thousands of kilo-metres. The thought appals me.

'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing,' I tell it.

'Talk. You should talk to me.'

But what is there to say? And why should I talk anyway?

I suppose it wants to make me talk so I'll forget the steady march, the tramp-tramp of my feet a couple of centimetres away from the ochre soil of this barren place.

I remember that when I was still in shock, and delirious, on the first day, I thought I stood

outside us both and saw the suit open itself, letting my precious, fouled air out into the thin atmosphere, and I watched me dying in the airless cold, then saw the suit slowly, tiredly haul me out of itself, stiff and naked, a reptile-skin reverse, a chrysalis negative. It left me scrawny and nude and pathetic on the dusty ground and walked away, lightened and empty.

And maybe I'm still afraid it will do that, because together we might both die, but the suit, I'm fairly sure, could make it by itself quite easily. It could sacrifice me to save itself. It's the sort of thing a lot of humans would do.

'Mind if I sit down?' I say, and collapse onto a large boulder before the suit can reply.

'What hurts?' it asks.

'Everything. Mostly my legs and my feet.'

'It'll take a few days for your feet to harden and your muscles to tone up. Rest when you feel like it. There's no sense in pushing yourself too hard.'

'Hmm,' I say. I want it to argue. I want it to tell me to stop whining and keep walking... but it doesn't want to play. I look down at my dangling legs. The suit's surface is blackened and covered in tiny pits and scars. Some hair-fine filaments wave, tattered and charred. My suit. I've had the thing for over a century and I've hardly used it. The brain's spent most of its time plugged into the main house unit back home, living at an added level of vicariousness. Even on holidays, I've spent most of my time on board ship, rather than venture out into hostile environments.

Well, we're sure as shit in a hostile environment now. All we have to do is walk half-way round an airless planet, overcome any and all obstacles in our way, and if the place we're heading for still exists, and if the suit's systems don't pack up completely, and if we don't get picked off by whatever destroyed the module, and if we aren't blown away by our own people, we're saved.

'Do you feel like going on now?'

'What?'

'We'd better be on our way, don't you think?'

'Oh. Yes. All right.' I lower myself to the desert floor. My feet ache intensely for a while, but as I start to walk the pain ebbs. The slope looks just the way it did kilo-metres back. I am already breathing deeply.

I have a sudden and vivid image of the base as it might be, as it probably is: a vast, steaming crater, ripped out of the planet during the same attack that downed us. But even if that is the reality, we agreed it still makes sense to head there; rescuers or reinforcements will go there first. We have a better chance of being picked up there than anywhere else. Anyway, there was no module wreckage to stay beside on the ground; it was travelling so fast it burned up, even in this thin atmosphere, the way we very nearly did.

I still have a vague hope we'll be spotted from space, but I guess that's not likely now. Anything

left intact up there is probably looking outwards. If we'd been noticed when we fell, or spotted on the surface, we'd have been picked up by now, probably only hours after we hit the dirt. They can't know we're here, and we can't get in touch with them. So all we can do is walk.

The rock and stones are getting gradually smaller.

I walk on.

It's night. I can't sleep.

The stars are spectacular, but no solace. I am cold, too, which doesn't help. We are still on the slope; we travelled a little over sixteen kilometres today. I hope we'll come to the lip of the escarpment tomorrow, or at least to some sort of change in the landscape. Several times today, while I walked, I had the impression that for all my effort, we weren't moving anywhere. Everything is so uniform.

Damn my human-basic ancestry. My side and belly are hurting badly. My legs and feet held out better than I expected, but my injuries torment me. My head hurts as well. Normally, the suit would pump me full of painkiller, relaxants or a sleeping draught, and whatever it is helps your muscles to build up and your body to repair itself. My body can't do those things for itself, the way most people's can, so I'm at the mercy of the suit.

It says its recycler is holding out. I don't like to tell it, but the thin gruel it's dispensing tastes disgusting. The suit says it is still trying to track down the site of the leak; no progress so far.

I have my arms and legs inside now. I'm glad, because this lets me scratch. The suit lies with its arms clipped in to the sides and opened into the torso section, the legs together and melded, and the chest expanded to give me room. Meanwhile the carbon dioxide frosts outside and the stars shine steadily.

I scratch and scratch. Something else more altered humans wouldn't have to do. I can't make itches go away just by thinking. It isn't very comfortable in here. Usually it is; warm and cosy and pleasant, every chemical whim of the encased body catered for; a little womb to curl up in and dream. The inner lining can no longer alter the way it used to, so it stays quite hard, and feels - and smells - sweaty. I can smell the sewage system. I scratch my back-side and turn over.

Stars. I stare at them, trying to match their unblinking gaze through the hazy, scratched surface of the helmet visor.

I put my arm back into the suit's and unclip. I reach round onto the top of the blown-out chest and feel in the front pack's pocket, taking out my antique still camera.

'What are you doing?'

'Going to take a photograph. Play me some music. Anything.'

'All right.' The suit plays me music from my youth while I point the camera at the stars. I clip the arm back and pass the camera through the chest lock. The camera is very cold; my breath mists on

it. The viewer half unrolls, then jams. I tease it out with my nails, and it stays. The rest of the mechanism is working; my star pictures are fine, and, switching to some of the older magazines from the stock, they come up bright and clear too. I look at the pictures of my home and friends on the orbital, and feel - as I listen to the old, nostalgia-inducing music - a mixture of comfort and sadness. My vision blurs.

I drop the camera and its screen snaps shut; the camera rolls away underneath me. I raise myself up painfully, retrieve it, unroll the screen again and go on looking back through old photographs until I fall asleep.

I wake up.

The camera lies beside me, switched off. The suit is quiet. I can hear my heart beat.

I drift back to sleep eventually.

Still night. I stay awake looking at the stars through the scarred visor. I feel as rested as I ever will, but the night here is almost twice standard, and I'll just have to get used to it. Neither of us can see well enough to be able to travel safely at night, besides which I still need to sleep, and the suit can't store enough energy during the hours of sunlight to use for walking in the darkness; its internal power source produces barely enough continuous energy to crawl with, and the light falling on its photopanel provides a vital supplement. Thankfully, the clouds here never seem to amount to much; an overcast day would leave me doing all the work whether it was my turn or not.

I unroll the camera screen, then think.

'Suit?'

'What?' it says quietly.

'The camera has a power unit.'

'I thought of that. It's very weak, and anyway the power systems are damaged beyond the junction point for another source of internal energy. I can't think of a way of patching it in to the external radiation system, either.'

'We can't use it?'

'We can't use it. Just look at your pictures.'

I look at the pictures.

There's no doubt about it; education or not, once you've been born and brought up on an O you never quite adjust to a planet. You get agoraphobic; you feel you are about to be sent spinning off, flying away into space, picked up and sent screaming and bawling out to the naked stars. You somehow sense that vast, wasteful bulk underneath you, warping space itself and self-compressing, soil-solid or still half-molten, quivering in its creaky, massy press, and you; stuck, perched here on the outside, half-

terrified that despite all you know you'll lose your grip and go wheeling and whirling and wailing away.

This is our birthplace though, this is what we deserted long ago. This is where we used to live, on balls of dust and rock like this. This is our home town from before we felt the itch of wanderlust, the sticks we inhabited before we ran away from home, the cradle where we were infected with the crazy breath of the place's vastness like a metal wind inside our love-struck heads; just stumbled on the scale of what's around and tripped out drunk on starlike possibilities...

I find that I'm staring at the stars, my eyes wide and burning. I shake myself, tear my sight away from the view outside, turn back to the camera.

I look at a group photograph from the orbital. People I knew; friends, lovers, relations, children; all standing in the sunlight of a late summer's day, outside the main building. Recalled names and faces and voices, smells and touches. Behind them, almost finished, is - as it was then - the new wing. Some of the wood we used to build it still lies in the garden, white and dark brown on the green. Smiles. The smell of sawdust and the feel of pushing a plane; hardened skin on my hands and the sight and sound of the planed wood curling from the blade.

Tears again. How can I help but be sentimental? I didn't expect all of this, back then. I can't cope with the distance between us all now, that awful gap of slow years.

I flick through other pictures; general views of the orbital, its fields and towns and seas and mountains. Maybe everything can be seen as a symbol in the end; perhaps with our limited grasp we can't help but find similarities, talismans... but that inward facing plate of orbital looks false to me now, down here, so far away and lonely. This globe of ordinary, soft, accidental planet seems the cutting edge and the flat knife of twinned adamantine thoroughness, our clever, efficient little orbitals, lacking that fundamental reality.

I wish I could sleep. I want to sleep and forget about everything, but I can't, tired though I still am. The suit can't help me there, either. I don't even remember dreaming, as though that facility, too, is damaged.

Maybe I'm the artificial one, not the suit, which doesn't try to pretend. People have said I'm cold, which hurt me; which still hurts me. All I can do is feel what I can and tell myself it's all anyone can ask of me.

I turn over painfully, face away from the treacherous stars. I close my eyes and my mind to their remindful study, and try to sleep.

'Wake up'

I feel very sleepy, the rhythms all wrong, tired again.

'Time to go; come on.'

I come to, rubbing my eyes, breathing through my mouth to get rid of the stale taste in it. The

dawn looks cold and perfect, very thin and wide through this in-hospitable covering of gas. And the slope is still here, of course.

It's the suit's turn to walk, so I can rest on. We redeploy the legs and arms again, the chest deflates. The suit stands up and starts walking, gripping me round the calves and waist, taking the bulk of my weight off my throbbing feet.

The suit walks faster than I do. It reckons it is only twenty percent stronger than the average human. Some-thing of a come-down for it. Even having to walk must be galling for it (if it feels galled).

If only the AG worked. We'd do the whole trip in a day. One day.

We stride out over the sloped plain, heading for the edge. The stars disappear slowly, one by one, washed out of the wide skies by the sunlight. The suit gains a little speed as the light falls harder on its trailed photopanel. We stop and squat for a moment, inspecting a discoloured rock; it is just possible, if we find an oxide of some sort... but the stone holds no more trapped oxygen than the rest, and we move on.

'When and if we get back, what will happen to you?'

'Because I'm damaged?' the suit says. 'I imagine they'll just throw the body away, it's so badly damaged.'

'You'll get a new one?'

'Yes, of course.'

'A better one?'

'I expect so.'

'What will they keep? Just the brain?'

'Plus about a metre of secondary column and a few subunits.'

I want us to get there. I want us to be found. I want to live.

We come to the edge of the escarpment about mid-morning. Even though I am not walking I feel very tired and sleepy, and my appetite has disappeared. The view ought to be impressive, but I'm only aware that it's a long, difficult way down. The escarpment lip is crumbly and dangerous, cut with many runnels and channels, which lower down become steep, shadowy ravines separating sharp-edged ridges and jagged spires. Scree spreads out beyond, far below, in the landscape at the cliff's foot; it is the colour of old, dried blood.

I am suitably depressed.

We sit on a rock and rest before making our way down. The horizon is very clear and sharp. There are mountains in the far distance, and many broad, shallow channels on the wide plain that lies between the mountains and us.



I don't feel well. My guts ache continually and breathing deeply hurts too, as though I've broken a rib. I think it is just the taste of the recycler's soup that is putting me off eating, but I'm not certain. There are a few stars in the sky.

'We couldn't glide down, could we?' I ask the suit. That's how we got through the atmosphere, after all. The suit used the minuscule amount of AG it had left, and somehow got the tattered photopanel sheet to function as a parachute.

'No. The AG is almost certain to fail completely next time we try it, and the parachute trick... we'd need too much space, too much drop to ensure deployment.'

'We have to climb?'

'We have to climb.'

'All right, we'll climb.' We get up, approach the edge.

Night again. I am exhausted. So tired, but I cannot sleep. My side is tender to the touch and my head throbs unbearably. It took us the whole afternoon and evening to get down here to the plains, and we both had to work at it. We nearly fell, once. A good hundred-metre drop with just some flakes of slatey stone to hold on to until the suit kicked a foothold. Somehow we made it down without snagging and tearing further the photopanel. More good luck than skill, probably. Every muscle seems to hurt. I'm finding it hard to think straight. All I want to do is twist and turn and try to find a comfortable way to lie.

I don't know how much of this I can take. This is going to go on for a hundred days or more, and even if the still undiscovered leak doesn't kill me I feel like I'm going to die of exhaustion. If only they were looking for us. Some-body walking in a suit on a planet sounds hard to find, but shouldn't be really. The place is barren, homogeneous, dead and motionless. We must be the only movement, the only life, for hundreds of kilometres at least. To our level of technology we ought to stand out like a boulder in the dust, but either they aren't looking or there's nobody left to look.

But if the base still exists, they must see us eventually, mustn't they? The sats can't spend all their time looking outwards, can they? They must have some provision for spotting enemy landings. Could we have just slipped through? It doesn't seem possible.

I look at my photographs again. They appear a hundred at a time on the viewer. I press one and it blooms to fill the little screen with its memories.

I rub my head and wonder how long my hair will grow. I have a silly but oddly frightening vision of my hair growing so long it chokes me, filling the helmet and the suit and cutting out the light, finally asphyxiating me. I've heard that your hair goes on growing after you die, and your nails too. I wonder that - despite one or two of the photographs, and their associated memories - I haven't felt sexually aroused yet.

I curl up, foetal. I am a little naked planet of my own, reduced to the primitive within my own stale envelope of gas. A tiny moonlet of this place, on a very low, slow, erratic orbit.

What am I doing here?

It's as if I drifted into this situation. I didn't ever think about fighting or doing anything risky at all, not until the war came along. I agreed it was necessary, but that seemed obvious; everybody thought so, everybody I knew, anyway. And volunteering, agreeing to take part; that too seemed... natural. I knew I might die, but I was prepared to risk that; it was almost romantic. Somehow it never occurred to me it might entail privation and suffering. Am I as stupid as those throughout history - those I've always despised and pitied - who've marched off to war, heads full of noble notions and expectations of easy glory, only to die screaming and torn in the mud?

I thought I was different. I thought I knew what I was doing.

'What are you thinking about?' the suit asks.

'Nothing.'

'Oh.'

'Why are you here?' I ask it. 'Why did you agree to come with me?'

The suit - officially as smart as me, and with similar rights - could have gone its own way if it wanted. It didn't have to come to war.

'Why shouldn't I come with you?'

'But what's in it for you?'

'What's in it for you?'

'But I'm human; I can't help feeling like this. I want to know what you think the machines' excuse is.'

'Oh, come on; you're a machine too. We're both systems, we're both matter with sentience. What makes you think we have more choice than you in the way we think? Or that you have so little? We're all programmed. We all have our inheritance. You have rather more than us, and it's more chaotic, that's all.'

There is a saying that we provide the machines with an end, and they provide us with the means. I have a fleeting impression the suit is about to trot out this hoary adage.

'Do you really care what happens in the war?' I ask it.

'Of course,' it says, with what could almost be a laugh in its voice. I lie back and scratch. I look at the camera.

'I've got an idea,' I tell it. 'How about I find a very bright picture and wave it about now, in the dark?'

'You can try it, if you want.' The suit doesn't sound very encouraging. I try it anyway, then my arm gets tired waving the camera around. I leave it propped up against a rock, shining into space. It

looks very lonely and strange, that picture of a sunny orbital day, sky and clouds and glittering water, bright hulls and tall sails, fluttering pennants and dashing spray, in this dead and dusty darkness. It isn't all that bright though; I suspect reflected star-light isn't much weaker. It would be easy to miss, and they don't seem to be looking anyway.

'I wonder what happens to us all in the end,' I yawn, sleepy at last.

'I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see.'

'Won't that be fun,' I murmur, and say no more.

The suit says this is day twenty.

We are in the foothills on the far side of the mountains we saw in the distance from the escarpment. I am still alive. The pressure in the suit is reduced to slow down the loss rate from the leak, which the suit has decided is not a hole as such, but increased osmosis from several areas where too much of the outer layers ablated when we were falling. I am breathing pure oxygen now, which lets us bring down the pressure significantly. It might be coincidence, but the food from the recycler tube tastes better since we switched to pure gas.

There is a dull ache all the time from my belly, but I am learning to live with it. I've stopped caring, I think. I'll live or I'll die, but worrying and complaining won't improve my chances. The suit isn't sure what to make of this. It doesn't know whether I have given up hope or just become blasé about the whole thing. I feel no guilt at keeping it guessing.

I lost the camera.

I was trying, eight days ago, to take a photograph of a strange, anthropomorphous rock formation in the high mountains, when the camera slipped from my fingers and fell into a crevice between two great boulders. The suit seemed almost as unhappy as I was; normally it could have lifted either of those rocks into the air, but even together the two of us couldn't budge either of them.

My feet are hard and calloused, now, which makes walking a lot easier. I am becoming hardened generally. I'll be a better person when I come out of this, I'm sure. The suit makes dubious noises when I suggest this.

I've seen some lovely sunsets recently. They must have been there all the time, but I didn't notice them. I make a point of watching them now, sitting up to observe the sweep and trace of trembling, planetary air and the high clouds wisping and curling, coming and going, levels and layers of the wrapping atmosphere shifting through its colours and turning like smooth, silent shells.

There is a small moon I hadn't noticed either. I put the external glasses on as high as they will go and sit looking at its grey face, when I can find it. I rebuked the suit for not reminding me the planet had a moon. It told me it hadn't thought it was important.

The moon is pale and fragile looking, and pocked.

I have taken to singing songs to myself. This annoys the suit intensely, and sometimes I pretend that's one of the major rewards of such vocal self-indulgence. Some-times I think it really is, too. They are very poor songs, because I am not very good at making them up, and I have a terrible memory for other people's. The suit insists my voice is flat as well, but I think it's just being mean. Once or twice it has retaliated by playing music very loudly through my headphones, but I just sing louder and it gives in. I try to get it to sing along with me, but it sulks.

*'Oh once there was a space-man,  
And a happy man was he.  
Flew through the big G,  
And really saw it all, yes,  
But then one day, I'm afraid,  
He happened to trip up,  
Stumbled on a pla-anet  
And landed in the dirt.*

*It wouldn't really have been so bad,  
But the worst was yet to come;  
His one and only companion  
Was a suit that da da dum.  
The suit it was a shit-bag  
And thought the man a lout,  
And what it really wanted  
Was to be inside-out.*

*(chorus:)*

*Inside-out, inside-out, inside inside-out,  
Inside-out, inside-out, inside inside-out!*

And so on. There are others, but they are mostly to do with sex, and so fairly boring; colourful but monotonous.

My hair is growing. I have a thin beard.

I have started masturbating, though only every few days. It is all recycled, of course. I claim the suit as my lover. It is not amused.

I miss my comforts, but at least sex can be partially recreated, whereas all the rest seem unreal, no more than dreams. I have started dreaming. Usually it is the same dream; I am on a cruise of some sort, somewhere. I don't know what form of transport I'm on, but somehow I know it's moving. It might be a ship, or a seaship, or an airship, or a train... I don't know. All that happens is that I walk down a fleecy corridor, passing plants and small pools. Some sort of scenery is going by outside, when I can see outside, but I'm not paying very much attention. It might be a planet seen from space, or mountains, or desert, it might even be underwater; I don't care. I wave to some people I know. I am eating something savoury to tide me over to dinner, and I have a towel over my shoulder; I think I'm going for a swim. The air is sweet and I hear some very soft and beautiful music which I almost recognize, coming from a cabin. Wherever, whatever it is I am in, it is travelling very smoothly and quietly, without sound or vibration or fuss; secure.

I'll appreciate all that if I ever see it again. I'll know then what it is to feel so safe, so pampered, so unafraid and confident.

I never get anywhere in that dream. I'm always simply walking, each and every time I have it. It is always the same, always as sweet; I always start and finish in the same place, everything is always the same; predictable and comforting. Everything is very sharp and clear. I miss nothing.

\*

Day thirty. The mountains way behind us, and me - us -walking along the top of an ancient lava tunnel. I'm looking for a break in the roof because I think it'll be fun to walk along within the tunnel itself- it looks big enough to walk inside. The suit says we aren't heading in exactly the right direction for the base, following the tunnel, but I reckon we're close enough. It indulges me. I deserve to be indulged; I can't curl up like a little ball at night any more. The suit decided we were losing too much oxygen each time we melded the limbs and inflated the suit at night, so we've stopped doing that. I hated feeling trapped, and unable to scratch, at first, but now I don't mind so much. Now I have to sleep with my legs in its legs and my arms in its arms.

The lava tunnel curves away in the wrong direction. I stand looking at it as it wiggles away into the distance, up a great slope to a distant, extinct shield volcano. Wrong way, damn it.

'Let's get down and head in the right direction, shall we?' the suit says.

'Oh, all right,' I grumble. I get down. I'm sweating. I wipe my head inside the helmet, rubbing it up and down, like an animal scratching. 'I'm sweating,' I tell it. 'Why are you letting me sweat? I shouldn't be sweating. You shouldn't be letting me sweat. You must be letting your attention wander. Come on; do your job.'

'Sorry,' the suit says, in an unpleasant tone. I think it should take my comfort a little more

seriously. That's what it's there for, after all.

'If you want me to get out and walk, I will,' I tell it.

'That won't be necessary.'

I wish it would suggest a rest. I feel weak and dizzy again, and I could feel the suit doing most of the work as we got down from the roof of the lava tunnel. The pain in my guts is back. We start walking over the rubble-covered plain once more. I feel like talking.

'Tell me, suit, don't you wonder if it's all worth it?'

'If what's all worth what?' it says, and I can hear that condescending tone in its voice again.

'You know; living. Is it worth all the... bother?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No, I don't ever wonder about it.'

'Why not?' I'm keeping my questions short as we walk, conserving energy and breath.

'I don't need to wonder about that. It's not important.'

'Not important?'

'It's an irrelevant question. We live; that's enough.'

'Oh. That easy, huh?'

'Why not?'

'Why?'

The suit is silent after that. I wait for it to say some-thing, but it doesn't. I laugh, wave both our arms about. 'I mean, what's it all about, suit? What does it all mean?'

'What colour is the wind? How long is a piece of string?'

I have to think about that. 'What's *string*?' I have to ask finally, suspecting I've missed something.

'Never mind. Keep walking.'

Sometimes I wish I could see the suit. It's weird, now that I think about it, not being able to see who I'm talking to. Just this hollow voice, not unlike my own, sounding in the space between the inside of my helmet and the outside of my skull. I would prefer a face to look at, or even just a single thing to fix my attention on. If I still had the camera I could take a photograph of us both. If there was water here I could gaze at our reflection.

The suit is my shape, extended, but its mind isn't mine; it's independent. This perplexes me, though I suppose it must make sense. But I'm glad I chose the full 1.0 intelligence version; the standard 0.1 type would have been no company at all. Perhaps my sanity is measured by the placing of a decimal point.

Night. It is the fifty-fifth night. Tomorrow will be the fifty-sixth day.

How am I? Difficult to say. My breathing has become laboured, and I'm sure I've become thinner. My hair is long now and my beard quite respectable, if a little patchy. Hairs fall out, and I have to squirm and pull to get an arm into the body of the suit to poke the hairs into the waste unit each night, or they itch. I am woken up at night by the pain inside me. It is like a little life itself, pawing and scraping to get out.

Sometimes I dream a lot, sometimes not at all. I have given up singing. The land goes on. I had forgotten planets were so big. This one's smaller than standard, and it still seems to go on and on without end. I feel very cold, and the stars make me cry.

I am tormented by erotic dreams, and can do nothing about them. They are similar to the old dream, of walking on the ship or the seaship or whatever it is... only in this dream the people around me are naked, and caressing each other, and I am on my way to my lover... but when I wake up and try to masturbate, nothing happens. I try and try, but I only exhaust myself. Perhaps if the dream was more powerfully erotic, more imaginative... but it stays the same.

I've been thinking about the war a lot recently, and I think I've decided it's wrong. We are defeating ourselves in waging it, will destroy ourselves by winning it. All our statistics and assumptions mean less the more they seem to tell. We surrender, in our militance, not to one enemy but to all we've ever fought, within ourselves. We should not be involved, we ought not to do a thing; we've gambled our fine irony for a mechanistic piety, and the faith we fight's our own.

Get out, stay out, keep clear.

Did I say that?

I thought the suit said something there. I'm not sure. Sometimes I think it's talking to me all the time when I'm asleep. It might even be talking to me all the time when I'm awake, too, but it's only occasionally that I hear it. I think it's mimicking me, trying to sound the way I sound. Perhaps it wants to drive me mad, I don't know.

Sometimes I don't know which of us has said some-thing.

I shiver and try to turn over in the suit, but I can't. I wish I wasn't here. I wish all this hadn't happened. I wish it was all a dream, but like the colours of the earth and air, it's too consistent.

I feel very cold, and the stars make me cry.

*'Inside-out, inside-out, inside inside-out,*

*Inside-out, inside-out, inside inside-out!'*

'Shut up!'

'Oh, you're talking to me at last.'

'I said shut up !'

'But I wasn't saying anything.'

'You were singing!'

'I don't sing. You were singing.'

'Don't lie! Don't you dare lie to me! You were singing!'

'I assure you -'

'You were! I heard you!'

'You're shouting. Calm down. We still have a long way to go. We shan't get there if you -'

'Don't you tell me to shut up!'

'I didn't. You told me to shut up.'

'What?'

'I said -'

'What did you say?'

'I-'

'What? What did - who is that?'

'If you'll ju-'

'Who are you? Who are you? Oh no, please...'

'Look, ca -'

'No, please...'

'What?'

'... please...'

'What?'

'... please... please... please... please...'

I don't know what day this is. I don't know where I am or how far I've come or how far there is still to go.

Sane now. There never was any suit voice. I made it all up; it was my own voice all the time. Some state I must have been in to imagine all that, to be so unable to cope with being down here, all alone, that I created somebody else to talk to, like some lonely kid with a friend nobody else can see. I believed in it when I thought I heard the voice, but I don't hear it any more. Even at its most blandly credible it was just the flat calm of insanity. Temporary, fortunately. Everything is.

I don't look at the stars any more, in case they start talking to me too.

Maybe the base is at the core. Maybe I am just walking round it and can never get any closer to



it.

My limbs move on their own now; automatic, programmed. I hardly need to think. Everything is as it should be.

We don't need the machines, any more than they need us. We just think we need them. They don't matter. Only they need themselves. Of course a smart suit would have ditched me to save itself; we didn't build them to resemble ourselves, but that's the way it works out, in the end.

We created something a little closer to perfection than ourselves; maybe that's the only way to progress. Let them try to do the same. I doubt they can, so they will always be less as well as more than us. It's all just a sum, a whispered piece of figuring lost in the empty blizzards of white noise howling through the universe, brief oasis in an infinite desert, a freak bit of working-out in which we have transcended ourselves, and they are only the remainder.

Going mad inside a space-suit, indeed.

I think I passed the place where the base used to be some time ago, but there was nothing there. I am still walking. I'm not sure I know how to stop.

I am a satellite; they, too, only stay up by forever falling forward.

The suit is dead around me, burned and scarred and blackened and lifeless. I don't know how I could have dreamed it was alive. The very thought makes me shiver, inside here.

A guard droned knife missile saw the figure skylining about five kilometres away, on a low ridge. The little missile sized the object up carefully, not moving from its crevice in the rocks. It triangulated from the eyes on its outboard monofilament warps, then rose slowly from its hiding place until it was in line of sight with a scout missile lodged on a cliff ten kilometres behind it. It flashed a brief signal, and received a relayed reply from its distant drone.

The drone was there in a few minutes, taking a wide curve round the suspicious figure. It shook other missiles free as it went, deploying them in a ring around the potential target.

What to do? The drone had to make up its own mind. The base wasn't transmitting while whatever had hit the last incoming module was still hanging around. It had been a long wait, but they'd survived so far, and the big guns should be arriving soon.

The drone watched the figure as it skidded and slid down the scree beneath the ridge, leaving a hazy trail of dust behind it. It got to the bottom, then started walking across the wide gravel basin, seemingly oblivious to all the attention it was attracting.

The drone sent a knife missile closer to the object. The missile floated up from behind, monitoring weak electro-magnetic emissions, tried to communicate but received no reply, then darted round in front of the figure, and lasered its drone the view it had of the scarred suit front.

The figure stopped, stood still. It raised one hand, as though waving at the small missile hovering a few metres in front of it. The drone came closer, high above, scanning. Finally, satisfied, it swooped from the sky and stopped a metre in front of the figure, which pointed at the black mess of the communication unit on its chest. Then it gestured to the side of its helmet and tapped at the visor. The drone dipped once in a nod, then floated forward and pressed gently up against the visor of the helmet, vibrating the speech through

'We know who you are. What happened?'

'He was alive when we got down, but I had no medics left. Ablation caused a slow oxygen leak and eventually the recycler packed up. There was nothing I could do.'

'You walked all this way?'

'From near the equator.'

'When did he die?'

'Thirty-four days ago.'

'Why didn't you ditch the body? You'd have been quicker.'

The suit made a shrugging movement. 'Call it sentiment.'

'Climb aboard. I'll take you to an entrance.'

'Thank you.'

The drone lowered to waist height. The suit pulled itself up onto the top of the drone and sat there.

The body, bouncing slackly inside the suit, was still quite well preserved, though dehydration had stretched the skin and made it darker. The teeth were displayed grinning knowingly at the barren world, and the skull was arched back on the locked upper vertebrae, upright and triumphant.

'You all right up there?' The drone shouted through the fabric of the suit. The suit nodded stiffly to the eye of an accompanying knife missile.

'Yes. Everything's a little difficult though.' It pointed at the scarred, burned surface of its body. 'I hurt.'