

James Rolph

innerverse

The field of stars above was breathtaking. Lights of many colors packed in so tightly against one another that it became hard to distinguish any one from the amalgam. The sight was so beautiful, but also terrifying. With billions of lights in his eye, there was no room for any one of them, and trying to see them all at once was downright impossible. It felt as though every star pulled on a tendril of his mind – drawing them further and further out until his consciousness was spread so thin that no sense of personality remained. His mind could spend an eternity flitting from light to light searching for something it has long forgotten and never finding it. At first fascinating, the incomprehensible scope becomes oppressive, and his mind must turn inward or risk dissolving. Stephen stopped looking at the stars when this feeling became unbearable.

Stephen awoke blearily to the sound of the Luons playing from a speaker next to his bed. He liked the Luons a lot and had chosen them as an alarm to blunt the shock of waking up, but he had long since learned to ignore them as though they were nothing but white noise. He told the alarm to dismiss itself and began his morning ritual of contemplating going back to sleep while secretly knowing he could not.

Stephen took a quick breath and focused on this inevitability, then sat up, threw his blankets off and swung his legs out placing his feet on the floor. He cringed at the cold tile below.

The morning chores went so smoothly that Stephen felt as though he could fall asleep working if he wanted to. He checked the levels of all gases in the compound, verified that all systems remained functional and cleaned oxidization off of the climate equipment. Stephen

slumped against a small patch of bare wall in the room buzzing with various sensors, gauges and control panels.

“Are you well rested today?” asked a voice from a speaker on the ceiling.

“Well enough Clyde, you?”

“I do not sleep Stephen,” said Clyde blandly.

“I know buddy.”

Clyde was the artificial intelligence that ran all computer systems and coordinated all functions in the facility. He was industrially built for functionality and lacked the personality or finesse of more expensive computers – like humor, emotional awareness, and emotions in general.

“You have not eaten yet Stephen. That is not within standard procedure Stephen.”

“I know, I know, what’s for breakfast?”

“I suggest pork chops Stephen.” Clyde had mysteriously lost the ability to produce and meal that wasn’t pork chops.

“You don’t say? And you don’t have to say Stephen in every sentence. I just wanted you to stop calling me ‘human recourse’ to my face,” said Stephen sighing.

“I will refrain from using your name or position in any further communications, though I do not know how to designate you.”

Stephen chuckled.

“Well if you start getting me confused with someone else we can deal with it then.” He was alone on this moon with Clyde and had been for two years, four months, 17 days and five hours. Stephen looked at the screen of the terminal in front of him – and four minutes now.

The station was a communication relay and general research outpost with no name. The technical designation was 04.9982.56, but this was a mouthful, so Stephen had taken to calling it Charles, just as he had taken to calling the computer Clyde despite its assertion that it had no name either. Giving things female names made Stephen’s mind race for home, so he stuck with male names.

Two years ago Stephen had taken the job because it paid well, and he fancied the adventure. Being on the forefront of human exploration and retransmitting messages to the colonies sounds fabulous until you get there, but Stephen was convinced that he would get through it. He always did.

“You will need to bring coolant from the storage bunkers,” said Clyde once Stephen finished wiping his hands.

“Oh yeah,” said Stephen. “I don’t suppose that could wait till tomorrow.”

“I cannot.”

I took an hour to get the gear on. There were 17 gaskets and 8 valves to connect and test, and a large portion of it had to be done by one of Clyde’s clumsy robotic arms. When they were finished Stephen looked like a 19th century diver crossed with a refrigerator. His arms and legs were encased in rigid hydraulic lifts, and his body was suspended by a harness in a large box made of high strength alloys and flawless silicate. He was slow, essentially indestructible, and encased in half a ton of hardware. Peeing was no longer an option.

Stephen stepped out into the pressure chamber by the air lock and waited as hissing signaled the removal of all gas from the room. There was a momentary humming, causing Stephens's stomach to flip. The air lock opened.

Charles the moon was entirely covered in a mile thick of ice with surface temperatures peaking at -160 Celcius. Hurricane force gale winds carrying razor sharp ice were a common refrain, and neither day nor night brought much celestial light. Sometimes winds would die and the stars would show more brightly than they ever could at home, but today the sky was obscured in a dark haze.

Stephen began walking across the metal path that lead to the bunkers. He had to pause each step because his – the refrigerator's – feet became magnetically attached to the path and had to be manually released by a button under his index finger. It was a legally obligated safety precaution.

Twenty minutes later Stephen was in the bunker. His nose had begun to itch five minutes ago. He loaded coolant from crates into a magnetic panel on the suits back. He left the bunker and began slowly walking when he noticed the wind change direction. He looked out over the frozen plateau and saw the horizon eating itself.

“Clyde,” he said into his radio, “there's a black wall coming towards us.”

“It's an ice storm.”

“Oh crap.”

“You will survive intact. That exo-suit is made to withstand anything hear. Just plant your limbs on the pathway and activate all magnets.”

“I have to get in Clyde!” Stephen attempted to move towards the base without releasing his feet causing the suit to lurch awkwardly

“You will not make it. My barometric gauges just picked it up. It is a flash storm. Brace now. Radio will cut out very soon.”

“This has never happened before,” said Stephen, the bottom dropping out of his voice.

No response.

Stephen knelt forward, placed his hands on the ground and pressed all the buttons activating the electro-magnets in his hands and feet. He looked up and it was upon him, and then he was I pitch blackness. He could hear ice and rock bouncing off him, sending shivers through the suit. A glance at the screen showed high oxygen and energy levels... and no clock. How could their not be a clock?

He knew it must have been hours, but he could see nothing and all he could hear was the clank of debris against his suit and the hiss of white noise on the radio. His muscles ached and he itched everywhere. He had occupied himself with as many thoughts as possible, but now he could only think about the storm. How long had it been?

“Fuck.”

He could feel the straps of the harness tightening around his legs, and his heart rate increase. Now his other limbs felt constricted and even the cap he wore seemed to be squeezing his skull. Perhaps the cold was shrinking the metal.

“Stay calm. This thing is unbreakable. Think about what you know.”

The metal continued to squeeze. His mind raced and he started releasing little whimpers with each breath.

Stop hyperventilating, you'll pass out.

"I'm gonna die here."

He jerked and twitched in the suit feeling the cold wires around him cutting into his skin – pulling him apart.

He was about to release the magnets when something made his left buttock sting. He immediately felt his heart rate slacken, and he slipped from a cold blackness into a warm one. He dreamed not of stars, but of friends and lovers he longed to see again.

Stephen opened his eyes and was waste deep in clouds. He looked up and saw a sky in ecstasy. Stars of every color painted the sky. The gas giant he orbited shown angry and red in the stars light. He looked back across the galaxy feeling his spine tingle, then he looked down at the cloud bank. It wasn't clouds, but frozen gases. Stephen released the magnets on one of his feet and lifted it. The latticework of gossamer crystals broke and the clouds imploded slowly around him. Frozen gases -- it was cold.

"I have been trying to wake you for ten minutes," said Clyde. "You directed that I not wake you until fifteen minutes before your shift."

"What? How long have I been out?"

"13 and one half hours."

"What time is it?"

"Five minutes before your shift."

“Seriously?” said Stephen “You left me out here? I’m not working in five minutes Clyde.”

“You directed me not to wake you-

“Your and Asshole Clyde! I don’t know what happened to me, and I’m taking a sick day.”

There was a pause while Clyde processed.

“That is acceptable. It is likely you had a panic attack. The suit administered a sedative to regulate your heart rate. You will need to go back for the second load of fuel on your next shift.”

Once Stephen had made it back inside and removed the suit and cleaned up, he retreated to his quarters. He lived in a tiny room with a bed and single bedside table. All military grade and square shaped. He reclined on the bed and pulled out his personal computer.

“What the fuck happened to me?” he said aloud.

The panic had seemed too real. He had known what he felt wasn’t real, but he had been powerless to stop it.

“It was just the storm. No more of that for me ever thanks.”

Stephen pulled his computer from under his cot and set it on his dresser. He clicked through files until he found a collection of sound files innocuously labeled ‘music.’ He had been secretly copying some of the transmissions that the station processed for months. He would listen to them sometimes after work, just to feel connected. Nothing important, just random personal transmissions from Earth. He donned his headphones and opened one. A woman’s voice began talking about someone’s birthday. She sounded happy. He opened another and a man began

talking about his son. Stephen kept opening files until the voices were a cacophony. They sounded so distant. He didn't feel like he understood anything they were saying. Stephen closed his computer and again stowed it under his bed.

The next morning Stephen woke up very sore and shaky and ready for pork chops. Clyde's voice accosted him as he brushed his teeth.

"You should take the pills in the cabinet labeled PSYCH. You experienced neurological symptoms in the storm, and those nanots will ensure balance."

"It was a minor episode. I think I'll take my chances"

"You are a high value investment here and the consequences if you lose neurological function are severe."

"Alright, fine." Stephen grabbed the pills, but pocketed them. Clyde might be all-commanding, but he was not omniscient. He couldn't see most of the base, and his sensors were limited.

That day passed without incident. Stephen's indoor work ran smoothly, and even the trip to collect coolant was painless. Two more days passed and things had completely returned to routine. After his shift, Stephen wandered over to one of the outpost's windows. It was made of flawless silicate like the helmet of the refrigerator suit. Nearly indestructible, but almost always covered in ice or dust. But the storm had cleared the glass, allowing Stephen to see clearly. The sky was overcast, but lit enough to watch the wastes. He gazed for a while and lapsed into his own thoughts.

Then a ball of fire emerged from the clouds. Meteors were fairly common, but this one was close. Stephen knew he was safe, but he still felt nervous watching. The ball slowly dimmed as it approached the ground, then went out. Stephen was about to look away when the ball lit up again – this time the fiery trail came from below. Stephen stared confused for a moment then gasped.

“Retro rockets!”

Stephen ran about shouting at Clyde as he collected gear.

“It was coming in fast. Must be some sort of emergency pod... or maybe a personal pod gone awry. I was careful to plot where it landed so I think I can find it quickly.”

“There have been no transmissions indicating an emergency landing here,” said Clyde. “I don’t think it is wise to use the coolant. We may not have enough to reach the next supply drop.”

“Tough turkey. Someone is out there. We have to help,” said Stephen, putting a first aid kit in a crate for the back of the Fridge suit.

“You do not know that someone is there.”

“And neither do you. You can’t see shit outside.” This was true. Clyde was blind to everything but radio traffic and barometric pressure outside base.

“You have been having psychological symptoms. This would affect your perceptions of what is real.”

Stephen reddened. He turned, but having no one to turn to, he looked at the speaker in the ceiling.

“Clyde I’m getting this person. If you don’t help me I will break the exo-suit trying to put it on alone.” He stared stonily at the speaker, which most certainly didn’t stare back. “I am making an executive decision here and overruling you. Code 19620.”

There was a thick silence in the room. Then Clyde said “I have plotted more accurate course to the crash site based on your data. You will need more medical equipment and the spare exo-suit. And of course you will need the EPAT”

Stephen stared blankly for a moment.

“Thanks buddy.” He left the room muttering “Remember it’s a damn machine...”

Stephen pulled the large tarp off the extra-planetary-all-terrain, or EPAT. It was big and black with six hydraulic legs holding its five-ton body. It ran on a fusion core, just like the station. On another world, Stephen would have loved driving it. But even the EPAT could not save you from ice volcanoes or massive earthquakes.

Once inside, Stephen uploaded the course and set the EPAT to drive itself. He sat strapped in his seat and watched as the machine walked away from the base. He knew leaving the bedrock meant exposure to all of Charles’ least seemly qualities. For a moment the day of the storm came back to him. He shuddered.

The EPAT scuttled over rough terrain at a considerable clip, but the trip would still take several hours. There was no way to know or predict where Charles’ seismic activity would erupt, so Stephen was left alert and anxious. The stars were out again, and visible all across the sky. They filled Stephens mind with emptiness. He felt like they made his world shrink.

“Focus on what you are doing. Let’s get this person and get back.”

The moon's surface was achingly still. No wind stirred and no clouds were visible. As he traveled, the gas giant rose and cast a soft crimson glow across Charles' surface. He was close now. The estimated crash site was directly ahead. Stephen slowed the EPAT and scanned the horizon – and there it was.

Stephen's heart raced as he directed the EPAT to a small crater in the ice. It took three tries to lower the electro magnet into the pit, but once it was there was immediate contact. He set the hydraulic winch and sat. He had stopped breathing.

Slowly the ice around the crater crumbled and a large egg shaped object appeared. Stephen chuckled nervously. The egg had to first be loaded into the air lock, then heated. When it was finally raised into sizable bay behind the cock pit, Stephen rushed over. It took several seconds to find the emergency release. Evidently it was an emergency escape pod. Stephen pulled the release and a door came open.

A man wearing an oxygen mask and complicated harness looked back at him through tired eyes.

“Can you – can you hear me?” Stephen asked. The man said nothing but gestured feebly at the mask. Stephen pulled it off of him.

“Help me out. I need to get out,” the man wheezed. Stephen fumbled with the harness. Once freed the man slumped out and hit the floor. Stephen uttered something between a curse and an apology and picked the man off the ground. He carried him to a crate at the back of the bay.

“Are you alright?” asked Stephen.

The man breathed feebly but no did not respond. His eyes were closed now. Cursing, Stephen found the first aid kit and hastily connected the man to a life support pack that would keep him stable.

“Ok. Step two. Let’s not die out here.”

Stephen guided the EPAT back towards the outpost. The sky had clouded over and plunged the moon into darkness. Without the computer for navigation, he would be totally lost. He craned his neck to see the man still fastened to the crate and life machine. He lay there, breathing weakly.

Two hours past slowly and deliberately in the frozen darkness. Stephen was just checking their course again when the EPAT began to shake. Out the windows, he could see chunks of ice and rock quivering all over the ground.

“No no no no no. Shit.”

Several hundred yards to the left a plume of silver liquid erupted from the ground and shot hundreds of feet into the air. Stephen upped the power to maximum and veered away from the torrent, trying to map the new course as he went. But the geyser was just the beginning. Cracks formed along the ice on all sides and began vomiting thick grey steam obscuring the EPAT windows.

Stephen was breathing quickly now. He remembered the black of the storm. But this was far worse. A storm was dangerous, but a volcano was not survivable. The EPAT shook more violently, and Stephen could again feel wires tightening around him. His vision was becoming patchy and he could hardly draw breath.

“Hey! Snap out of it!” said a gruff voice to his left. Someone grabbed him by the jaw and twisted his head. “Look at me. You have to focus now. Focus on what you know. Drive now.”

The words cut through him like a hot knife. He looked at the man. His face was obscured by the darkness, but bushy eyebrows and wavy graying hair were apparent.

“Go! Now!”

Stephen grabbed the controls and took off. All he could do was bolt away from the noise and avoid large obstacles. Twice a geyser nearly formed beneath them, but both times Stephen was able to jump the EPAT out of the way. The man stayed there the whole time. At first he barked direction and warnings almost continuously, but he soon became exhausted and slumped onto the floor where he mumbled encouragement.

They made it out of the eruption. The steam cleared from the ground making the sky grey and flat. Eventually they climbed a telltale rise indicating they were on solid bedrock and the end to horrible ice volcanoes. The EPAT heat gauge showed that the reactor has volatile, to Stephen put it on low power and took stock of his situation. The man had gone back to sleep, and was again attached to life support. He had no idea where the outpost was.

“Better start figuring that out.”

Stephen was busy working out equations for the angle of the gas giant relative to the outpost when the man woke up again. He pushed himself onto his feet while Stephen watched, and slowly walked over.

“Well that was hell,” he said. “I’d been in that thing for four weeks when you found me. I mean, sedated mostly. My name is Jacob by the way.” Jacob collapsed onto a seat next to Stephen.

“My name is Stephen. Where are you from? How did you get here?”

“I got here in that damned pod,” said Jacob chuckling. “I’m from the colonies. Tried to hitch a ride back Earth-side, and well,” he gestured at the pod, “You get what you pay for.”

There was an awkward silence where Stephen was forced to acknowledge that he didn’t know how to converse any more.

“Well thank you for the pep talk back there. I’ve been having trouble keeping my cool lately,” he finally said.

“You live on an awful rock my friend. I would be surprised if it didn’t drive you batty.”

Stephen went back to his calculations but absently listened to Jacob. The man told him about his life in the colonies, and his desire to get back to earth to see his wife and daughter. The man talked for some time, but eventually stopped mid-sentence.

“But what about you? What makes you tick? Are you out here all alone?”

“Well yes. Mostly. There is an AI, but our relationship has been deteriorating...”

“Uh huh?” said Jacob.

Suddenly Stephen was talking. He talked about his past, how he had taken the job to be courageous, but was really running from his life back home. He talked about his friends, and the work on the moon. The man became more and more passive and eventually he indicated that he needed rest, and Stephen helped him re-attach to life support as a precaution. Then Stephen

retrieved a blanket from a crate and lay down on the floor by the cock pit. He passed out immediately.

When Stephen awoke, Jacob was awake and sitting reading the EPAT manual.

“I’m a trader. So sorry if I’m no help at all.”

They made their way along the plateau based on Stephen’s calculations. In three hours Stephen could make out the outpost in the distance. An hour later they were nearly there.

“Just wait till you meet Clyde,” Stephen said with a dark chuckle.

“Not fond of your AI friend?”

“He’s not exactly a desirable roommate.”

As they neared the buildings, Clyde’s voice crackled over the radio.

“Hello, you have returned, were you successful?”

“Yup,” said Stephen smugly.

“Understood. You should dock directly with the main outpost. We can do processing and first aid immediately then,” Clyde said.

They docked with the station and waited while the airlocks interfaced. Once the outpost’s airlock opened Jacob and Stephen piled in.

“Where is the survivor?” said Clyde.

“Right here,” said Stephen.

“Hello there, nice to meet you,” said Jacob.

“What do you mean?” said Clyde. “There is no one with you.”

“That’s odd,” said Jacob, scratching his head.

“Yea I don’t know what’s up,” said Stephen, though he couldn’t help notice his heart was pounding. “Clyde, you are malfunctioning again!”

“I am not. Did you find nothing out there?”

“No I found Jacob. Right? Tell him Jacob.”

“He did find me,” said Jacob “I’m a trader from th—

“You aren’t taking to anyone but me Stephen,” Clyde cut in.

Stephen looked at Jacob, who stared back bemusedly.

“You re nuts Clyde,” said Stephen. There were bags under his eyes, which stared wearily at the speaker on the ceiling.

Stephen walked Jacob to his quarters where he again lay down. He still had nearly no strength after weeks in zero gravity with exercise. Stephen returned to maintenance room.

“What the hell is up with you Clyde?”

“Did you take your pills Stephen?”

“What? No! What is happening with you? Why are you using my name again?” The questions spilled from his mouth faster than he consciously thought them. There was a panicked buzz building in his head and he hadn’t yet figured out why.

“You’re having a psychotic episode. Those pills will ascertain and stabilize your mental state. The whole outpost is at risk.”

“Why can’t you see Jacob?” said Stephen, his voice rising.

“There is no person named Jacob here. This is a desolate moon far from any major settlement.”

“You are so full of – fucking – crap Clyde!” spat Stephen, his voice coming in awkward staccatos.

“Once you take the pill and stabilize, we will need to make plans for preserving coolant until the next shipment,” said Clyde.

“I’m not going to put up with this,” Stephen snarled. He stomped out of the room and into the bathroom and slammed the door so Clyde couldn’t see him.

Stephen looked in the mirror. His eyes were dark and ringed and his face was pale grey and splotchy. He reached into his pocket and found the pill bottle he had hidden. He opened it and tipped one capsule into his hand. He could just take it to prove Clyde wrong. That idea was very distasteful. He thought about recent events.

“We are out in the galactic boonies. No one trying to get to Earth would come through here... There is a fair chance I am completely nuts.”

He turned from the mirror to the window. Ice had begun to form on the edges, but it remained mostly clear from the storm. The stars were out again. The masses blended together making brilliant beams of red, white, yellow and blue.

Stephen thought about the darkness and his life on Charles. He thought about the elation he had felt successfully returning to the base earlier. He remembered the way Jacob’s voice had cut through the mental fog. Saved his life even.

“Is who I am based in reality, or in some reality inside me?” Stephen sighed at the abstractness of his problem.

He lifted the pill up to the light, then emptied the rest of the bottle into his hand and poured them down the sink drain. He released the valve, jettisoning them into the wastes outside. He turned and opened the door.

“Clyde! We need to talk.”