

REVOLVER

By Zig Zag Claybourne

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“Are you now or have you ever been a life form?”

A brief pause separated the response from the question. “No, sir, I’m from the States.”

Niimu hated when they died as comedians.

A checkmark was made in the ether, then, without so much as an additional thought, Niimu said, “Down the hall, first door. Next.”

The sign on the door read: PULVERIZING. IDENTIFY YOURSELF IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS.

Another brief pause. “Human?”

The door split itself into three horizontal panels, and the lowest section slid open. A drab voice intoned, “Slide under.”

Awkward. And then there was no one, or thing, or *anything* inside. “Hello?”

From uniform non-illumination, a spot of light imploded as the checkmaker appeared. “How do you want to return?” it asked unceremoniously. “Or do you prefer random draw?”

Still rubbing eyes. Very awkward. “Huh?”

“Sign said pulverizing, right?”

Nodding. Yes, it had.

“Souls for pulverizing back into raw material. Can’t send you back with your memories intact, eh? Create a world of trouble doing that.”

“Just came from a world of trouble. I’d prefer something different. But I think there’s been a mistake, see?”

The amorphous checkmaker covered its middle mouth with the back of a bulbous appendage so the human wouldn’t see it grind its teeth. Then, to the waiting soul, it said: “Explain.”

“What happened to heaven?”

“Let’s avoid getting so overwhelmed by wonder that we start looking for gods, shall we?” The bottom panel swished open. On its belly, another soul wiggled in. This one was quite naked and quite female.

“Stay by the door,” Niimu told her. To the first soul, it said, “There’s only supposed to be one to this room at a time. You’re backing us up.”

“He’s kinda cute,” the fe-soul piped.

Niimu ignored her. It took the he-soul by the hand, and pulled further into abstract nothingness.

“Weren’t paying full attention at your processing, were you?”

A glance back at the fe-soul, then, to the weary closing of Niimu’s third eye, “She was behind me in line. You might say my mind was occupied.”

Niimu shared a thought along the entire continuum of Niimu to send no more through, and to expect no output from pulverizing. Although there was no outward indication, a bubble of time formed around Niimu and the soul.

“This is a reincarnation processing station. Or should I say, *the* reincarnation processing station.”

“Right. Aware that I’m dead.”

“Good. As for heaven, it isn’t part of your, well, *deal*. Not for you, I should say. You’re here to be returned to a specific moment in the nowhen. Standard procedure allows for personal choice as to form, but undue delay in decision-making imposes upon me the function of arbiter. You’ll be deposited, and accumulate enough functional experiences to warrant being eventually returned here for re-use. A recycling process, and fairly efficient, as long as no one holds up the line. There’s only so much diversity one can work into the universe. Imagination is vast, but it’s not infinite.”

“Shouldn’t there be some kind of library period? Give me time to do a little research? I mean, there’s so much I don’t know, and so many I’ve never heard of, with all the people and things. Animal species that haven’t been found yet, when I came from.”

“You can’t return as something you don’t know about. It’s an arguably valid take, but unworkable. Don’t stress over the details. Whatever you don’t return as this time, you’ll eventually get around to. Nothing is lost.”

“What about extinction? That seems like a loss.”

“Ah!” Niimu opened another mouth that had, until then, remained closed. “Linearity. No, the time of death is insignificant. You can be returned anywhen, anything, any situation. Reality is pretty flexible. Must say, you’ve never given this much trouble before.”

“Me?”

“Not specifically.”

“This is all quite fantastic.”

“Thank you,” responded Niimu. “Now, eternity is not to be delayed forever. As who or what do you wish to return? It takes but a thought, and you needn’t fret over tiny specifics. Further processing will see to those.”

The he-soul grinned, slyly. “And if I chose you?”

Middle mouth stretched into a wide smile. Not pretty. “Niimu is *quite* fixed in the loop of things.”

The bubble negated, and time flowed. The fe-soul was still by the door.

“Are you prepared to proceed?” Niimu queried. Polite.

The he-soul nodded. Instantly Niimu and the fe-soul blinked away, although the he-soul wondered for a moment whether it was he who had gone away, instead of them. But then, immersed in the concept of *Pulverizing*, he became tightly packed, dense, fell crushingly in upon himself until no more empty space could be displaced, and at the moment of critical mass, fell in and through himself and outward again, not in cataclysmic debris, but spreading rather like a gentle rain, slow and peaceful. Finally, stretched almost too thin to recognize himself as anything real, his last thought spilled upon the æther: *A billion lifetimes to choose, and never anything on TV...*

* * *

“We all want to be the hero,” Sergeant Hannspree said, looking each of them in the eye, close enough they smelled his lunch. Without warning he punched Glynnis Dobbins in the stomach so hard Dobbins spit and doubled over. The line almost broke ranks.

“Do you feel like a hero?”

Dobbins coughed and straightened slowly, eyes watery. “Sir, yes, sir.”

“Speak so we can hear you.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Why is that?”

“Because I am still standing, sir!”

“Yeah, you keep thinking that. When we drop planet I expect cowards out of each and every one of you. A coward will kill anything that moves. Do you understand me?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

But when they dropped planet for a colonization mission, Dobbins had no idea what to do when a man surrendered. The guns stopped and an indigo man jumped out with webbed hands beating his chest like he couldn't catch hold of it. The man screamed something because guns were pointed at him, and two of the platoon shot him. Two more like the victim jumped from hiding, arms raised toward some high god, crying and swallowing and beating their chests with the flats of their hands.

Dobbins thought they were communicating, clearly, suddenly, and insistently, the fact that although they were trying to kill the soldiers, and trying very hard—because the soldiers were killing them too, very hard—the task was not as important as they thought. Time out.

Indigo bodies, bits and whole, lay scattered over uneven ground.

“Mr. Dobbins is going to kill you, do you understand that?” said Hannspree.

Dobbins swallowed. “Sir?”

“We did not come out here to invite a bunch of blue ‘phibians home,” Hannspree said quietly. “We did not come out here because we want to be here. And we are not going to leave here without accomplishing what we came to do. Are we in agreement, Dobbins?”

“I'm not going to kill them, sir.”

“Yes, you are.” Cold.

The platoon edged back.

“These blue, webbed *terrorists*,” said Hannspree, “are taking your role. They're standing, Dobbins. Heroes. Are there any other heroes on this planet?”

Every other soldier gripped a weapon, and waited.

“So now I need to know who you are, Mr. Dobbins. Hero or coward?” Hannspree drew a sidearm.

Dobbins had never seen a barrel between his eyes before. He didn't like it.

One of the female medics muttered something religious. The two blue captives breathed so hard that Dobbins wondered whether his own breath had stopped. A single soldier started to lower his weapon, but Hannspree spoke the man's name and it lifted again.

Hanspree whipped the gun to the left, and fired.

The blue man on the left tottered a step. His arms flailed before he went down, and Dobbins thought he looked like a wrecked kite.

The Sergeant's eyes focused on the dying man, as the webbed hand clutched sand. A beat fell against the shore, and then a weak spasm that might have been another strike upon the chest, if it had landed. A dorsal kept the almost-corpse suspended.

And then the Sergeant crumpled.

The entire planet knew Hannspree had lost it.

“You can spin the barrel any way you like,” he said, “but some people will never be anything but a name on a bullet. Why are we here, Dobbins? Does this look real to you?”

The platoon edged back a little more. Dobbins edged back with them, and stepped on a finger that had been blown off one of the dead. He jumped toward Hannspree.

The entire platoon knew that wasn't a smart thing to do.

“Oh, son of a mother—!” he swore, as momentum carried him back to the processing station and the Niimu quickly whisked him away.

* * *

The next life he spent all his time destroying relationships without knowing precisely how or why.

* * *

A brief life went into waving cilia, gathering nutrients, and eating smaller organisms.

* * *

Another, she ignored the warnings of her mates and steered their Greenpeace RIB toward a whale calf. A larger whale capsized their boat and all hands drowned. It was shown on the news.

* * *

Yet another time, he was a large whale. He capsized a boat.

* * *

Once, he was blue. That time he got shot in the chest and died clutching a fistful of sand.

* * *

There was once he got to be a superhero.

* * *

Although most souls were beautiful and ethereal and couldn't be destroyed, there were some that were just annoyingly slow learners. How a soul could be a sorceress in one life, yet wind up face down in the muck with a back full of arrows, was as patently absurd as finding itself a theoretical physicist with a degenerative motor neurone disease in the next.

Not that the he-soul ever wound up a theoretical physicist. Theoretical physicists were seldom “slow learners.”

* * *

Absurdities, nevertheless, were introduced from time to time. When strange appendages extruded from the sides of his computer, those appendages sprouting more in turn, Ernest recognized the absurdity at once.

They wove themselves into a wall, and more, until he was comfortably encased. Consoles grew out of the walls, lit themselves, and began to flash. From the metallic deck—formerly the laminate floor of his home office—an assortment of chairs sprouted, and from the chairs people, and from the people uniforms and insignia to indicate their relative position and presumptive reason for being positioned in front of a console. A split-level screen grew astern, and a single-level grew ahead. Ernest turned, and upon the lower section of the split screen he saw his living room as it was demolished by the growing technology; the top section showed what he could only assume was intended as the floor plan for some fantastic hotel, with looped corridors that threaded their way through a maze of subdivided rooms, and circled upon themselves in unfathomably chaotic fashion. He faced forward and saw upon the main screen a starfield placed beside a simplified, underscaled planetary system schematic and columns of numeric data. Lights started to blink in front of him, and he stared at the unfamiliar manifestation as text scrolled across the big screen.

Ship's complete, Darwin. ETA rendezvous with P.T.V. Aerie: thirteen minutes. Crew signals ready. End of message, Darwin.

Darwin?

A smaller screen grew atop his monitor, snapped itself loose, and clattered to the console. Ernest read the new message that appeared on it.

Excellent, Darwin. Shuttle ready for lift. Please issue appropriate orders to crew.

"My name isn't Darwin," he replied.

Questioning destiny? Don't be difficult. Please issue appropriate orders to crew.

"Right... OK. Crew? I guess I'll start issuing appropriate orders now." He'd eaten oatmeal cookies and root beer for breakfast. A sugar imbalance might explain the hallucinations.

"Uh, hot jets. Load the torpedoes. Let's go."

Inappropriate, Darwin. Lilac's calling. This is not your time to waste.

Orders as follows: Navigator, scan course for clearance; Helm, initiate drive, point zero-one-five, increase by point zero-zero-five outer boundary; Communications, open for Aerie, leave open; All systems converge. Lift. Do it now, Darwin.

He did it. The chair-people responded accordingly. The helmsman turned to him and spoke: "Lift achieved."

The ship tore through the roof of Ernest's home. All he could do was fret, cross his arms, and view the screens. One still showed navigation data, but the upper section of the other now offered a head-on view of Earth's looming moon.

"Outer boundary. Point oh-two," the helmsman said.

"OK." Darwin smiled. *Why the hell not? Life is but a dream.* He wondered whether the expired pickles he'd eaten before bed might be to blame.

The ship left the Sol system. Ernest was certain nothing could travel as fast as they appeared to be going, but it made for a spectacular visual. The screen beeped, and a new series of letters scrolled into view.

Issue Communications: Inform P.T.V. Aerie of our arrival time.

He played along with the dream. "Communications, inform the Aerie of our arrival time."

Good. Not a defective Darwin. Lilac is pleased.

"My name still isn't Darwin."

He settled back into his chair and watched a speck on the forward screen grow into the smooth, massive form of a ship.

"Sir, *Aerie* signals ready. Advises due haste as pirates have been scanned in the area."

"Uh, right. Helm, take us in. Increase speed as necessary."

"Yes, sir. Point oh-five. Docking preliminaries engaged. ETA: one point four-five minutes."

"*Aerie* reports scan by pirates. Initiating emergency procedures."

Order D.P.V. message transmitted.

"Transmit D.P.V. message. Helm, whenever you're there please."

"Docking, sir."

The private transport vessel *Aerie* quietly swallowed the shuttle whole.

"Dock completed. Shuttle contained. Bay pressurized."

"*Aerie* commander commends you on your speed, sir. Requests your presence topside."

To your right you will find a thin screen. Strap it to your wrist and press the blue light after this message is completed. End of message, Darwin.

He strapped the flexible screen to the underside of his wrist and touched the light. A comforting screen lit with the message: *Report topside. I will guide. Dismiss crew to Rec. It's been a long mission for them.*

Long? *They've only been in existence twenty minutes*, he thought.

Topside, he was welcomed. "Darwin! Welcome aboard." The commander took Darwin's hand in a vice shake. He was a head taller than Ernest, and dark skinned.

A crewmember suddenly went white. "They're coming."

"Damn scientists. Prepare for tach. I want seven," the commander responded.

When defensive shields were activated, Ernest, trying to sound authoritative, said, "That should at least foul up their detection."

"No disrespect, sir, but they're in visual range," said the crewman. "They don't really need their offensive scanners to blow—"

The commander came to his rescue. "Observation noted. How much time?"

"Eight seconds, on the mark."

"Nav, I want them close and then go!"

"Two secs, on the mark."

The pirates were on them.

"Ride!"

Tachyon drive engaged. The *Aerie* instantly became nothing more than a memory to her pursuers, dwindling out of sensor range.

"Disengage drive. How much did we overshoot?"

"Reading now. Should take us about two weeks to get to Farm Fifteen."

"They can't reprimand us, can they? For being late?" a crewmember spoke up.

"We weren't notified of pirate activity in that system. Farm Fifteen owes us. And where were the Moths? No way they couldn't have received our D.P.A. signal. You did send it, didn't you?"

D.P.A? Ernest was about to say, "The screen told me to send a D.P.V.," when another crewman spoke up, and thus cleared him of any blame.

"Of course. Soon as I got full sensor confirmation."

Another of the technicians began to fret over her console. Ernest noticed red lights dotting her screen, and red seldom meant good. She pushed buttons, finally calling the commander.

"Sir, secondary feed shows signs of malfunction. Minimal containment shield deterioration."

"Rate?" the commander asked.

The technician made calculations, then held up a small pad for perusal. "Very minor at this point. I've detached two roids to handle it."

"Cut feed to a quarter norm. Helm, hold us at a third supraliminal mneme-neuritic velocity until further notice."

Ernest wanted to ask him what several of those words meant and whether they were in any real danger, when his wrist-screen beeped.

Not the time, Darwin, for answers. Retire to Rec Room. I will guide. All questions to be answered at the appropriate time.

He didn't like the notion that the screen knew his thoughts. He thought about saying something to the commander before he left, but saw that the man was engaged with even more technicians. Unnoticed, Ernest made his way off the bridge.

The recreation room was not at all what he expected. Nothing but an oversized honeycomb, twenty or more hexagonal booths mounted a few centimeters above the deck, held in place by spidery prongs that stretched from their tops into the darkness above. Beside each sat a small automated service unit, lit from above by a shaft of light.

Crew signals ready, Darwin.

The whole flickered, and then only three shafts of light, on three units, remained. "What crew?" Ernest asked as he stepped close to the nearest hexagonal booth. The doors on three other booths simultaneously opened and his navigator, helmsman, and communications officer each stepped out. As the doors swung shut again the service unit next to each powered down; the shaft of light above each unit blinked out. The room became shadow, punctuated only by flashes of light from a source that Ernest couldn't see.

Rather than waste time searching for the light (*and after all, if it's a dream I won't find it anyway...*), he nodded to each of the crew.

"Off your high horse, Darwin. No time for it," said the Com officer. She stood about his height and had long, black hair. Ernest couldn't decide whether he liked her or was intimidated.

All three of them wore reflective blue jumpsuits with grey harnesses containing what he assumed might be an assortment of weapons and tools. Not what they'd worn in the shuttle.

"Suit up." An identical suit was tossed to him by the navigator, also female, who could easily have passed as the Com's twin.

Ernest glanced at the helmsman. He wanted to call the man *dangerous*. The man returned Ernest's glance with a curt nod. Ernest stepped into the flimsy suit, and wondered which old television show might have inspired that part of the dream. He took the screen off his wrist until the suit completely sealed itself, sheathing him in the odd material.

"Let's go, Darwin." The navigator led the way into the emptied corridor. They made it to the shuttle bay unseen, which Ernest thought must be unusual aboard a starship. He attributed it to a failure of his sleeping imagination.

Nevertheless, none of the other *Aerie* crew was visible. He queried the wrist-screen about their absence.

Inappropriate.

When he looked up again, the hulking bay doors still weren't open.

"Do it," Com urged, her voice a hiss.

The screen at Ernest's wrist beeped. No one else noticed. *Say following: "This is Darwin ordering command override of topside monitor systems. Identification is Oats and Grain. End, Darwin." Then stand in front of the plate for security screening. Do so now.*

He stepped to the door. It was strange, acknowledging that he was “Darvin,” as he said the words. He imagined himself standing upon a mountaintop, fists raised in acknowledgment as he announced to the heavens, “I am Darwin!” And the heavens would simply smile and say, “We know, dear.”

A line of light from the security plate traveled over him before a synthetic voice declared, “Screen is affirmative. Darwin override in effect.”

The doors opened. His companions rushed in, and sped for the shuttle.

“Move it!”

But they moved too fast for him. The shuttle door opened, and the crew clambered inside, pushing ahead of him. Ernest—Darvin—just managed to leap through as the door closed. Com threw an opaque helmet to him. The navigator and helmsman sealed their helmets to suits, and seated themselves at their consoles. The helmsman stabbed a button. The outer bay doors slid apart, revealing the black essence of deep space.

“How much time?” Helm asked.

“On the one,” Com answered. Their voices sounded tinny in Darwin’s helmet receiver.

... six... four... two... one.

The small craft shot out of the *Aerie*.

Seconds later, as the shuttle left the ship behind, Darwin turned to admire its massive beauty.

Where are we going? One last glimpse of the P.T.V. *Aerie* filled the screen before the majestic ship exploded in a tight ball of light minus sound. Ragged shards chased the shuttle as it raced ahead of death. The beauty of the sight was overwhelming.

Darvin did what he could: nothing. He caught a whimper in his throat before it could escape.

* * *

“Time to wake up, Darwin.” Com’s hair tickled his face.

That’s right, wake up from this dream. He opened his eyes.

“Here... put your helmet on.” She eased it over his head.

“How long?” he asked. He didn’t remember going to sleep.

“Out? About an hour. Mira carried you back here.”

He tried to put his head together. “Where?”

“We’re at the drop off point. Hurry up. Don’t know why they let you sleep,” she complained.

Helmet sealed, he and Com hunched stern. Darwin used the moments to attempt to piece together what he could. *So the Nav is “Mira.”* That was as far as he got.

The navigator and helmsman motioned for them. “Shuttle’s on five minute delay, two of which are gone. Get your helmet on,” Mira told Com just as her own settled into place. All four of them were suited and sealed.

“Everything set?” Com asked. The helmsman nodded. “Then let’s go.” She grabbed Darwin’s hand and led him to a hatch set in the deck. They climbed through, and into a cramped hold. A pair of smaller dual-sided craft filled the available space. Com opened a hatch on one unit and lay on her stomach in the opened tear-shaped pod; following her lead, he opened the second connected halve’s hatch and did the same. Mira and the helmsman frantically climbed into the other two-person pod moments before the hold’s bottom slid away. They dropped.

Darvin, on a small screen, could see Com working frantically in her half. She stabbed a button.

“Darvin, what’s wrong over there?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Power up unless you want me to detach. Come on!”

The urgency in her voice made him nervous, but he saw a stud marked *ACTIVATION* below the screen. He hit it.

“Switch command of your pod to me,” she ordered.

“I don’t know how!”

A look crossed her face. “Below ‘activation.’ Three switches in a row. Throw them, then the red one beneath.”

The helmsman’s voice cut in. “What’s the delay?”

“Not now.” Com cut him off.

Darvin did as he’d been told. Com mumbled to herself. Darvin couldn’t decide whether she was more likely speculating on his immediate heritage, or his evolutionary forbears.

The helmsman cut in again. “We’re going. No time.”

“Go!” Com shouted.

Darvin and Com drifted another moment before their joined pods also shot away from the shuttle. As they departed, it became a smaller version of the *Aerie*, the explosive light mesmerizing with funereal grace.

“Too close,” she swore. Darvin imagined the feel of the beads of sweat that dotted her forehead. He remained very still, as if movement might disturb her. The last thing he wanted at that moment was any undue attention.

He wasn’t even sure he wanted due attention.

The pods sped along for what seemed years. Darvin became uncomfortable, claustrophobic, flying through space in a souped up tandem coffin, but made use of the time to study the instrumentation. By pressing a small button set into the screen’s frame he discovered the ability to change views. One push replaced Com with a star field. Another overlaid a representation of the pod and its course upon the screen. He studied that for a while. The linear trajectory appeared to be carrying them toward a large planet, larger by half than Earth. Another push of the button brought up an informative readout: planetary measurements, atmosphere, dominant environmental system, gravity, average temperature.

He considered having the screen explain the data to him, before deciding that would be a cheat. He wanted to do something, anything, on his own, rather than sacrifice the fleet illusion of control. He clung to that notion, not because it was expected or part of some plan, but because it was what he wished to do.

He got Com’s image back. She was beautiful even through the faceplate. Her eyes were closed and he thought she was asleep when, abruptly, they snapped open.

“Stop staring at me.”

“I wasn’t staring at you. Not for long anyway. How did you know I was looking?”

She changed her screen to course projection.

“It’s not as if I was breathing down your neck,” he continued, then saw she was ignoring him. He switched his display as well.

He glanced wearily at his wrist. *So much for control*. “OK, screen. Lilac. Whatever you are. Why am I here?”

No response.

After an uncomfortably silent period, Com’s voice startled him. “Explain yourself, Darvin.”

“You explain.”

“You haven’t known what you were doing from step one.”

“Should have known it was a stupid dream when people started growing out of chairs,” he muttered. “I’m ready to wake up now.”

Com went on. “I don’t care what your excuses or delusions are. You are here to perform, and if this mission is threatened any further Lilac will hold you responsible.”

His eyes widened. “You know about Lilac?”

Her expression said that he was a dolt.

“Who is Lilac? I want to see her, want to find out what this is, and I damn well hope this ship’s heading for her—”

“I allowed you one threat. A second will not be tolerated.”

“And I will not tolerate being used further,” he shot back, bolstering his defiance by pressing the stud. The image of Com winked out. Several seconds passed before, on voice only, she informed him that the discussion of his behavior would continue when they landed.

* * *

After the changeover, Darvin started wondering why he still didn’t know Com’s name. *After all*, he thought, *important characters have names, right?*

They’d been relegated to a smaller shuttle for this leg of the mission, and aside from Com’s console, his own screen, the computer tank, and life support, the vessel was bare of instrumentation. It felt stripped clean. Space was utilized to maximum efficiency though, with bundles of equipment secured along the bulkheads. Their tandem pod took up the rest of the room, magnetically locked to the aft deck.

Getting the shuttle had been simple, although he’d become so used to hearing little more than the sound of his own breathing that he had been startled when Com told him to switch his screen to local, a third of the way into the voyage.

In one half of the split screen floated a tiny, bright rectangle. “That’s our transfer,” said Com. “We dock in five minutes.”

As she’d spoken, the section grew to fill the entire screen; the image magnified until Darvin recognized the rectangle as another vessel.

Com explained the procedures: she would perform every necessary task to prep the shuttle; he was to do nothing but wait. *And touch nothing*.

Once berthed and efficiently inventoried, they’d proceeded at maximum drive to Godspace. Which they still orbited.

Darvin swiveled his chair to watch Com recheck the gear. Their helmets were off, and her long black hair swung about her shoulders as she moved. Bending over the pods, she pressed three glowing discs on a bulky energy feed unit. The tandem ceased leeching energy from the shuttle’s main engines.

She pulled awkwardly at the feed unit, but couldn’t get leverage while leaning over a pod. “Darvin, come here.” She motioned him to the other side. “Grab that and pull on the count of two.”

He took hold. On the count of two they pulled, and the unit rose slowly, until it reached its apex. Darvin held on as it fell backwards against the hinges, trying to slow its descent.

“Let it go, it won’t be used again.”

The unit crashed to the deck. Extending to ports set flush into the deck were three flexible metallic tubes, each nearly as wide as his neck. He scooted behind the tandem and stepped over the tubes to stand beside her.

“What’s your name?”

“Atefeh,” she said absently, pronouncing it *Ah-ta-fay*. She crossed back to the bundles of equipment.

“Why do you keep checking those?”

She pointed at a thick ring around the middle of one of the equipment carriage-bags. “Floaters. Without them we might as well never leave the shuttle. When we hit water there’ll be no way to haul all this out in time. As is, it should be just enough to get the tandem out. Once we get within three kilos above surface, they’ll follow us down. I’ll be inside prepping the tandem.”

“The floaters will follow the tandem as well?”

“After we’ve set their follower frequency to match the pod’s beacon. This shuttle’s going to be moving too fast for us to simply drop from the deck hatch. That would be too risky, even with me as a pilot... and you’re pretty worthless, right now.”

“Why the need for speed now? I understood when the *Aerie* blew, but we’re who-knows-how-far away from there.”

“We haven’t reached the end yet, Darwin.”

“Meaning?”

“That we still have a long way to go, and limited time to do it.”

“I’m pretty sure the shuttle can get us wherever you’re going quicker than however long it’ll take to eject all this and the rest of that,” he said.

“This is too big, Darwin.”

Arguing made him dizzy, and he silently wished she’d call him something other than “Darvin.” The name still felt wrong. He shrugged, then sighed. Atefeh led him back to the control console.

“Strap in. I need you to focus. *This* one is wired as a master bulkhead release; throw it and all those hatches will open so we can eject the bags. Keep your helmet on. Watch this indicator; at three kilometers hit the switch. Shuttle is going on auto, so you don’t have to worry about anything else. Course is laid in. We’ll impact—pay *attention*, Darwin!—we’ll impact in a lake region. As soon as this ship settles throw *that* switch and the one beneath to blow the aft bulkhead. I’ll fly the tandem out, and you’ll follow me down. The floaters will rest alongside the shuttle, once we splashdown. Stop at each and reset its follower frequency; when you raise the black cover on the top you’ll see a keypad. Punch in six-seven-nine-T-E-P-B, and close the cover. Then get in your pod.”

“What about the shuttle? We’re not going to conceal it or anything?”

“Underwater. And most of it will have been digested by nightfall.”

She left him to think about digestion while she worked on the pod. Presently she returned to the console.

“Taking the shuttle in. Five minutes to splashdown. Be quick, Darwin,” she advised before locking the course and engaging automatic controls. “Everything’s been fed into the computers.”

She grabbed her helmet, stepped to the tandem, opened a hatch, and climbed in.

Darvin—not-Darvin?—*honestly-not-sure-if-not-Darvin* sat strapped to his seat while everything happened around him. The craft entered the atmosphere of Godspace, and he stole

fevered glimpses out the forward port in between checking the altitude. He marveled at blue clouds wisped with gold, but then realized it had to be an effect of refracted sunlight.

The three kilometer mark was reached within seconds of breaking atmosphere. He quickly slapped the bulkhead switch, and circular hatches behind each carrier bag blew open. The bags were sucked outward, and from their thick bands short wings of translucent brown extended along a thin metallic framework to provide stability. Each bag dropped, extended, spun and righted itself, then shot after the shuttle in wing-to-wing formation.

He watched the display, wide-eyed.

Five minutes, twenty-three seconds after leaving orbit, as foretold, the shuttle slit the waters of a huge lake. His eyes widened differently, as water gushed through from the blown bulkheads. He struggled against the straps. Something like a drowned gull veered through the water and missed something like a fish outside the forward port. The small craft angle-popped from beneath the water, nearer the shoreline.

The place stank. The smell seeped through the cargo hatches and reeked of primitive influences; it filled his lungs as he leaned over the console and fumbled for the two switches to blow the aft bulkhead. When he'd done so, the polarity locks reversed themselves and the entire aft section fell backwards into the water. *Like the scale of Leviathan*, he thought. The tandem throbbed a second, raised gingerly off the damp surface, and floated end-first out of the opening he'd made for it. Once suspended safely away from the shuttle, it pivoted slowly to the right, and disappeared from view.

Darvin climbed out, sliding a leg into the briny green water, and made quick way to the carrier bags. Their wings had already retracted. As he bobbed in the chest high water, he reset the signal on each, then half swam, half ran around the end of the shuttle. He prayed Atefeh remembered about waiting for him in the tandem.

It was there, but it wasn't alone. He froze; the sudden stop sloshed and splashed water around his arms, and his breath fogged the interior of his faceplate. The tandem was perhaps eight and a half meters away, floating barely a hand's width above the surface. One meter closer to him, a shiny black hump moved through the water, dipped beneath, and reappeared.

He stood terrified, trying to will his body into non-existence. Whatever was making the hump was swimming slowly toward *him*, and he felt as though his chest was either becoming a supernova, or a black hole. Heat radiated and pooled in his fingertips, and he itched.

He brought one arm slowly in front of his helmet so that he could look at the wrist-screen. Something bumped against his thighs. His breath snagged, and he jumped blindly toward the shuttle, doing his best to keep the hump in view.

It slipped beneath the surface, still meters away. A head rose up, directly in front of Darwin's helmet, trailing a mass of unidentifiable vegetation. The eyeless creature opened its mouth, revealing multiple rows of finger-long arrow points, spread across both the upper and lower jaws. Darwin snatched a random object from his suit harness and threw it into the wide maw as he backpedaled. His shoulder hit the side of the shuttle. He swung around, and hauled himself through the aft opening, landing with a splash. Inside the shuttle the water had already reached the depth of his waist. A thick head banged against the opening as it snapped at the air.

He tried to run, lost his footing, wasted no time trying to recover, but kept moving on hands and knees. His shoulder slammed against the edge of the control console.

The creature's head slid underwater. Darwin could feel it bumping along the deck and bulkheads, feeling its way toward him. As he hunkered behind the console, more of the long neck slid in, serpentine. The mottled hide glided easily over the metal.

"Atefeh!"

As the blind creature drew closer to the console he climbed atop the structure. From there he could see that the tandem had also come closer, and that Atefeh had opened a hatch. She fired pellets, and the creature twisted its body in what looked, to Darwin, like agony.

Whatever Atefeh was using looked like a child's plastic drinking straw. Darwin searched his harness for anything similar, and found a promising shape near the small of his back. One wrench tore it from its catch.

He acted as blindly as the monster, aiming the device in as threatening a fashion as he could manage. A stream of marble sized pellets exploded along the side of the oversized mouth. Each impact was accompanied by a wet sizzle and a tendril of smoke.

Suddenly the beast jerked. For a moment Darwin almost thought it seemed as surprised as he was. The long neck thrashed from side to side, churning the water, as more and more of it stretched taut. The head reached the aft hole and its mouth opened, only to clamp down upon the metal edge.

Atefeh shouted at him. "Something's *pulling* it!"

Warily, he walked nearer the massive form. It could have bitten him in half, had it not been too busy to do so.

"Come on!" Atefeh screamed.

Darwin looked at her, stupefied.

"Whatever's pulling that thing is somewhere way out *there*—"

The lake was at least two kilometers wide. Several hundred yards from shore a spot was churning. Darwin looked from the disturbance to the head of the creature as it struggled to hold on.

His amazement was curtailed when the shuttle began to shift and tilt, causing him to slide toward the nonexistent aft bulkhead.

He submerged. He struggled. In his mind he also screamed. His arms and legs flailed in ineffective emulation of the swimming lessons that he—that Ernest—had taken, long ago. As the shuttle tipped again, he broke through the surface. It was easier to stand and walk than to swim in the now shoulder-deep water, so he did.

Atefeh already had his hatch open. He climbed in, buried his head in his arms, and tried to decide whether he was sick enough of the stupid dream to do anything about it.

With the hatch sealed and the pod powered up, Atefeh shot the craft across the water and into a low, rising arc.

Up and away, towards Lilac only knows what, thought whoever the hell he was, at that particular moment.

None of the floaters had been damaged. As soon as their lead signal, still aboard the tandem, moved out, they all silently extended their wings and followed.

* * *

After a while the pattern solidified. He dreamed of returning to something. A return to something he hadn't killed.

They were murderers. On different worlds, large numbers of beings once alive died before Darwin and the woman flew away.

They were locusts. He never understood his supposed position in the organization—Atefeh treated him with contempt often enough—nor its design, if any. There was no sense of a purpose.

Each dazed run left him weaker, drained so that she had only to tug and he would follow, or speak and he would moan.

* * *

On the first world, they simply provided food. It was poisoned.

On the second, they assassinated any on the brink of scientific understanding.

* * *

The third through the fifth became such blurs of guilt and psychological numbness that she nearly yanked his arm out of its socket trying to keep him from opening the airlock.

* * *

On the sixth planet, in its native bifurcate tongue, he finally saw the eyes of one who was about to die in (what was not even) Darwin's name: a frail tri-ped, its chest leg nearly drained of marrow where disease had set in, the surface broken and pustulating.

Darvin had walked into the open space that morning, fully expecting to see several family hutches already feeding at the communal stump. Instead there were bodies.

There were no sounds, no smells, but only the sight of death, and stillness.

The three-legged creatures had no natural enemies, and no predators, so they didn't fear him, or the woman. On the very first day of their visit, the microbes that had ridden his body from star to star began to feast on alien flesh as the creatures rubbed curiously against his unfamiliar form and he palmed, felt, scratched their ruddy silver skin.

They had behaved like cats, with their ears pricked high.

As he walked into the open space that morning, one was still dying, but something within it had not yet died. He almost tripped over it. Even in pain, the creature's eyes remained wide and peaceful; even though the orbs were milky, it saw him and tried some sound. He picked up the small body and, there being nothing else to do, simply stood crying until Atefeh led him away to their latest roundabout transport.

"We are the sleepers, Darwin," she said, "tasked with waking the worlds."

He stared at the serene landscape. "I'm ready to wake up whenever you are."

* * *

Their nineteenth planet was a return to Godspace.

"I'm pretty tired, Darwin," Atefeh said.

Darvin felt old. Ancient. "Yeah. I've been looking for someplace clear to set down."

She glanced at his face on her screen. Their one constant, between shuttles, had become the weary tandem; he thought of them as coffins for the living.

They flew without the frantic push he'd come to expect, at an altitude five hundred meters over a jagged volcanic region as darkness swathed the surrounding mountains.

"I might've landed in that valley but this area's still active. Very unstable," Atefeh said.

"What's on the other side?"

"A sea. Then from there we get to suitable land. That should be about another ten minutes."

"Why're we here?"

Something large flew through the dim illumination of the tandem lights, ahead of them.

"I'm going to speed up a bit," Atefeh said. "Bring the floaters in tighter." She flipped toggles and pressed buttons. "Back there, that wasn't so good."

"What was it?"

"Don't know. I don't know everything about this planet. Not good though, large flying animals at night. That much I'm pretty sure of."

Inside his helmet, Darwin ran the tip of his tongue around his lips. His eyes went from the screen to the viewport above the nose of his pod. Twice he saw quick, indistinct shapes, flying like darts.

* * *

They survived the landing. They camped on a cliff overlooking the sea.

He looked at the agitated waters. There was no moon around the planet, he knew, but the surface moved in waves. *O' Leviathan, thou art at work, aren't you?*

Atefeh came and stood behind him, near the cliff's edge. She looked at the side of his face, but he ignored her. He'd gotten used to her scrutinizing his features. Her gaze went out to the water, and he thought she might be making an effort to take in what he saw. He doubted she'd see it. No matter how hard she tried, there never seemed to be beauty for her, nothing to contemplate.

After a bit more silence she said his name. The sound traveled over the cliff and lost itself among the surf.

"A fragile silence. You broke it."

"I wouldn't consider it obscene to be your friend," she said awkwardly.

"I wasn't thinking about friendship," he said.

"After all we've gone through together, we aren't so different, Darwin. My mother used to say—"

"Your mother doesn't exist!" he snapped. "I'm stuck in something that isn't real. Do you understand me? I have no idea who your 'Darvin' is supposed to be, but I'm not him."

She frowned and started to turn away, then paused. "The others will be here soon."

"Who?" He held up his arm and gestured to the wrist-screen. "Lilac?"

She didn't answer. He watched her walk away, and told himself that Lilac must be the most ineffably useless of all MacGuffins; that she (if a she) didn't exist anyway; and that if he ever woke up and got himself stuck in another dream, he hoped he wound up as the bloody Lilac pulling the strings, instead of another Darwin sleepwalking through perpetual, involuntary slaughter.

He looked back down at the wrist-screen. *If not Lilac, then who?*

Then he knew: the old navigator, Mira, and her dangerous helmsman. Forgotten characters introduced part of the way through his story. Something about guns and mantelpieces skipped through his thoughts before rage at this infernal game in which he was caught, this macabre reunion of life and death, chased it from his mind.

How was it that he still knew he was someone else? After changes upon changes, he was more or less the same.

He snapped at her again. "You don't exist!"

"What are you trying to do, Darwin?"

"I am *not* Darwin. This is not my life!"

Then she blinked. Or perhaps he blinked, and she momentarily got stuck in the not-seen. Either way, it lasted barely a second... then she was back, eyes as wide as the tri-ped's had been, but full of fear. They were locked on Darwin.

Atefeh sat very still, as if afraid to move. Every aspect of her was a request for help, for someone to rescue her from the dangerous madman who would destroy worlds by blinking or waking up. But hadn't she also told him they were sleepers, tasked with waking worlds?

Help. It was as if that one word became her single point of existence.

His ears rang. He focused, trying to hear what, if anything, she might say next, but the only audible sound that broke through his concentration was an insistent beeping from the wrist-screen. He looked at it.

Lilac has instructed me as to your situation. Is this real to you?

"Oh, bloody hell. I was sitting at my computer, for God's sake! Fully conscious, *aware* of the passage of moment to moment, and in one of those moments I noticed my machine. When that moment became the next, a frigging spaceship equipped with a crew of three, and a fully operational universe—which I evidently missed the first fifteen minutes of—was growing out of my computer. Completely normal for all of them, but me, me, I've not seen anything real since I got here! What in hell's a *Darvin*? Atefeh doesn't know that she has no past. She was bloody well going to tell me about her mother."

She is highly disturbed by your tirade.

"I'm highly disturbed by a bucket-load of this place. She was gone for a second. What—"

We will never be said to not try new things. This one was stable beyond question. You forced doubt upon her and destabilized her scenario.

"What was stable?"

The dream. You are expected to know how to behave in your own dreams, Darwin.

"So I'm really dreaming?" Tears pooled in his eyes.

A pocketful of universes, Darwin. Some of them are always a dream.

He felt a jolt of fear as Atefeh flickered again.

"No! Leave her. Just leave her alone." She was trembling violently.

"*Darvin?*" Her voice was barely able to remain afloat long enough to be heard.

Part of him wanted to go to her, to hold her because he was human, even if he wasn't sure what she was. He didn't move. "I can't, I'm sorry... I won't stay here. Believe me, if there was any other way—"

"Darvin?"

"No. I can't keep doing this." He desperately wanted her not to blame him, not because he liked her, and not because she was a woman, but because she believed her universe was real, and he was about to rip that away.

The last of anything he saw before she was sucked/ripped/coruscated away was that the word for her had changed. *Help* had been uncomfortable yet oddly reassuring; it made him feel he wasn't quite so alone. She became another word before she, then the entire universe, washed away. The word was *Pain*, and the promise and warning in it weren't directed at him particularly. What she'd become told him there was no such thing as rest. The universe did not rest. The universe was a shark, always swimming so that it didn't suffocate.

Life without ceasing, and worlds without end—even at the end.

* * *

Niimu was ready for him.

“Are you now or have you ever been a life form?” The checkmaker regarded the he-soul as on countless times before, and during, and present. The accumulation of life after life deposited itself in the universal *I-have-been-here-before*. All the souls in line ahead and behind had been him, and he them, *ad infinitum*. Eventually the soul would be everything that consciousness might possibly present, he-soul and she-soul and *other-for-which-a-pronoun-is-insufficient-soul*... but for now, he was holding up the line.

Niimu did something that wasn't exactly clearing one of its throats, and asked again, “Are you now or have you ever been a life form?”

Darvin was gone. Ernest was absent. The dream, at last, was over, and it felt pretty good to wait a bit before another leg of sleep.

The he-soul voiced no words. It glowed a bit. It closed its eyes.

Eternity could not be delayed forever, but as long as it stood here there would be neither angels to worry about nor demons to avoid. Only Niimu, who was fixed.

How sad. Fixed

No matter what, no matter what, there will always be another go around.