

I live by routine.

I cut the green wire.

My life consists of sentences, not memories. I scan for distress signals. I fly the ship. I work. I attach the small vibrating cube to the green wire and hold my breath. Nothing happens. So be it.

When you truly devote yourself to yourself, you realize everything else is just noise. Uncaring obstacles. That's why I secure the lid of the translucent cylinder with the cube soldered under it. A small act of self-love.

I got the cylinder from work. You can't see anything behind the frost of its tempered glass body, which is what makes it so ideal. I slip it into my inner coat pocket so my hands can stop shaking.

"Creepy fuck, you asleep in there? I'm giving you ten seconds before I aim a wakeup call at your piece of shit rust bucket ship."

The voice manifested like God in my cramped cockpit, each syllable dripping with bitter bravado. I didn't realize I was broadcasting my ship's frequency – *sloppy*. I push aside a dingy shirt hung on one of the many crevices of my ship and look out to see the puny outline of a bipedal creature in the far distance. It wasn't hard to miss, this planet wasn't much for sights: besides an occasional rock, the scenery was entirely gravel. The bits of dark gray, in the same place they were eons ago, were graced by the dull light of the creamy purple sky. But that didn't change the fact it was still gravel, only gravel.

I lean towards the transponder and say I'm coming out.

I set a timer for the ship to self-destruct in one hour. I'm sure the gravel would appreciate the change.

I get up and cross the entire cockpit in two steps only to trip over a box of Sharlon spices or metatomic grenades or expired MRE rations or who knows what and grab onto the width of the entryway to my right. My head, reeling from the momentum, looks into the bathroom and finds a stranger. His thin face immediately reminds me of my relentless decaying, a skull tightly wrapped in a sheet of protein and fat. The sunken, stolid eyes that met my gaze were accentuated by puffy dark circles that were the only contrast to the pale face. I grab the white blouse on the floor and cover the stranger as he stares at me as one might stare at their first supernova – horrified awe.

The echoes of my footsteps bounce off the battered bronze walls of the cargo hold to mock me. In the middle of the starving belly of the ship, I listen. There is a small pulsating tick. In fifty-eight minutes and twelve seconds, this fortified metal floor will bend and wilt like a flower facing a winter's gale, rooted now only by a constant stream of voltage that when stopped will ignite the twenty-four drums of authentic gasoline stored underneath me. They can go up to 100,000 credits each on the secondary market, but they'll reach the stratosphere at twenty-four drums.

I flip a tiny analog switch on my wristband of buttons and a hazy green oval flickers on around me. Another button and the ship's tongue lowers with hisses of escaped steam, settling on the gravel with a

soft crunch. I walk down the offramp to see the bipedal creature has made plenty of leeway and is quickly approaching. He's human too. How novel.

The burly man sinks into the ground with every step, and his hurried pace, which he's clearly downplaying, seems to have exhausted him. Hands on his knees, he catches his breath. In one fluid motion he straightens out, gun somehow in hand, and fires at me.

I see nothing but green. There are two distinct thumps, sort of like when I bounce my rubber ball against the walls of the ship, then the surroundings regain their natural hues and I can see the shit-eating grin of my evolutionary brother.

"Showing up to a trade with a block barrier is like going to a job interview with a condom on," the man spits out, figuratively and literally. He's missing quite a lot of teeth. "You ain't that damn special to get any."

He laughs, I laugh – people hesitate to shoot at you when you laugh with them. Granted, it was a force of habit; I won't need the block barrier today. I flip the switch off and everything loses its light green shading. The oaf gives a subtle nod and starts walking towards where I first saw him.

"So. You got it?"

"Wouldn't be here if I didn't," I reply, all tough and indifferent. Just another insignificant stop on a long list of trades. The cylinder feels like it'll burrow through my coat down the surface and into the planet's core.

Nothing to see here.

"Can I see?" The man stops and looks down at me with bloodshot eyes filled with childlike wonder.

"Uh."

"C'mon, c'mon, I gotta check you at the door anyway. You're a professional for fuck's sake, you know the drill," he says with an outstretched hand.

One breath in. I take out the cylinder and hand it over to the man. He's turning it around looking at it from different angles, ponders for a moment, then asks, "Where's the elephant?"

One breath out. And I wonder why there aren't many of us left.

"It's DNA. It's just its DNA, that's all."

"How'd you get it?"

"I found it," I say with a sly smile.

The man finds that amusing. "This your best haul?"

A common question when you bring an especially rare item, one that I've always given the same answer to: "No. I never found mine."

*Even after all these years.*

He raises an eyebrow then starts talking about some trade he...I don't care. He's fiddling with the lid. Not now, not when we're so close. He's trying to pry it open.

"Stop...*please*."

That glare told me people didn't tell him to stop very often. I swallow sand and tell him, "It'll get ruined if you open it, the DNA. Bossman won't be too pleased I'd imagine."

"I work for me," he says with a scoff but then tosses the capsule back.

I catch it and cradle the cylinder like a protective mother; my child will be brighter than I could ever be. The man's already walking away. I catch up with him and muster out in between breaths:

"Seeing as you got to see an elephant for the first time, can I ask: is bossman really an Amygdilian?"

"Shut up."

We walk to the soft sounds of shifting gravel under the purple sky that grew thick and rich like syrup. The hazy spots of lightened lavender must be the nearby stars. A beautiful barren land appreciated only by bastards. Up ahead, the air seems to shift and bend like the inklings of a mirage or like the distortions caused by heat.

"Yeah, he's an Amygdilian," the man mutters. "What's it to you?"

I clasp my hand over the wrist of my right arm, finger resting on the analog switch, and ask, "How come it doesn't kill you?"

The man doesn't break stride. "Same reason he won't kill you: we're useful."

Yeah, so long as I have the capsule. That's okay though, let it have it.

"You must be *swimming* in credits to have to work with an Amygdilian. Awfully dangerous job."

He stops and directs the stony gaze firing from his beady eyes at me. "You got some moral issue here? Maybe something you want to get off your chest?" He says while stabbing me with his finger to emphasize every word, nostrils flaring, brow brimming with sweat.

"I'm cool, all good. Not many of us left to get all worked up over anyway, right?"

His face is a bitter cocktail of surprise and hurt.

"We're here," he replies coldly.

The mirage looks palpable and the air seems to be dancing wildly in shimmering waves. The man is hunched over the controls muttering the basic instructions he was given, and after some deliberation the air is transformed. I'm facing a beaten metallic door. I take one step back with my head tilted up to see the structure materialize into a large dome fitted with massive tinted hexagonal windows. Neat trick.

The man's shoulders sag and his finger hovers over the control panel.

"I don't like these fucks neither. We do what we gotta do to survive."

He presses down on the button and the door opens.

One step in and an instant waft of dank air carrying manure, rotting vegetation, and copper clenches my nose and paralyzes my body. Disgusting, potent, but above all, original. I've spent years breathing in the same recycled air in my ship over, and over, and over again, and to see the cycle renew feels like the end to a decade-long journey I never knew I started. To see towering stems bending at the weight of their swaying green roofs, the twisting highway of vines that greedily infest the walls and floors, the blossomed colors in every direction, and, God, are those birds? Real bir –

"Hello, Adler."

The voice fills the overgrown chamber effortlessly and all ambience silences itself. The muteness lingers as if the room is holding its breath until I speak. I scan the thickness of shrubbery and trees and find a table ahead in a clearing, dimly lit by a hemisphere of encased light resting on it. My legs decide to walk towards it. An old man – a *human* – in a long white coat is sprawled over the table. As my eyes adjust, I notice the blood trickling from his mouth and pooling onto the darkened patch of dirt below.

A bending of space, a trick of the eyes, a darkness in blackness shifts. A towering silhouette takes form, and into the weak light, the Amygdilian steps forward.

Traders like to shoot the shit. You exchange your slice of current events with the goods. Over the years, Amygdilians have been rumored as evolved humans with technological modifications, an entirely new race of ogre-like creatures that destroy anything in their sight, or even as plain robots, disgruntled and unchained from their masters. It was hard to pinpoint what was accurate and what wasn't since most witnesses didn't survive the encounter.

It's large. Humanoid, in the sense it stands on two legs and has two arms, but its entire body is hidden under a metallic membrane. Its torso is covered in blinking lights and buttons spread out in seemingly random arrangements on the scratched silver of its shell. We lock eyes, and I feel the same primordial instinct of my ancestors when they came face-to-face with a lion, a bear, an apex predator. Its empty slits of red cut through me and I look away. The naked head is the only sign it's an organic being – its pale blue skin seems to droop and fold under the weight of gravity, and if the creature moved, which it has not since stepping into the light, I'm sure the skin would sway like gelatin. Where you might imagine a mouth there was instead a copper plate sprawling with tubes funneling what looked like tar to various ports on its body, and with each breath it took, I see a grease-colored bubble swell and shrink behind it in hypnotic rhythm.

“You must be cunningly furtive,” a voice emanates from its torso, cold and imperious. “To last this long without seeing an Amygdilian is no small feat.”

In an instant I become one of the many planted trees. Every breath it takes, my roots sink deeper.

All I can do is stand, be, and die.

“You have something for me.”

Not an observation or a question, this is a command. One that I knew with every fiber of my being was readily – *eagerly* – enforced.

Like a tree to be cut I can only experience the pain, not prevent it.

Soft footsteps approach from behind and I feel hands tug at my coat.

“Focus up,” the man whispers. The literal sounds and their agreed-upon meanings, slivers of normality, are as foreign to me as the very *Amygdilian* that robbed me of their essence. All that remains is the raw swelling of brotherhood I feel for this nameless man guiding me gently to the end of this new reality.

The man walks over and raises the capsule over his head for the creature. The Amygdilian takes the capsule and studies it, and I wonder if it sees through it as easily as it sees through me. But instead of obliterating me, it points towards the table. The man understands. He walks deeper into the clearing with quick glances over the shoulder, as if ensuring each step is to the liking of the master. Tucked away in some shrubbery, he pulls out a large cube he must carry with both arms, made of a material akin to obsidian. It’s set on the table with a metallic thump, and the creature stirs. After inserting the cylinder into an opening, it waves again to the man, another understood command. The man walks down the path of the clearing and soon disappears.

There is a tense calm as birds brave flight, chirping and rustling leaves.

“Would you like to know how many of your kind remains?”