

Ia Heeht's great wings pulsed as they caught the billows of a solar wind. Although it was not the strongest, the soft yellow light of g-class stars always felt the warmest. At Ia's distance from this star, it would take his wings half the life of the galaxy to fully regenerate him. An undesirable time scale. But he knew this not to be a problem. A brief flight through the star's core, where the plasma was dense and raging with an entropic boil, and regeneration would be instantaneous. He had done this many times before but energy collection was not a priority. Nor was it necessary. The stars were large in number, short in distance, this close to the galactic center.

Ia's immediate priority was the study of his recently acquired data. A task he was more than familiar with during his ten million light-year journey. And having compiled terabytes of information during this time, the results were rarely a surprise anymore. Yet, this instance was different. He knew this even before his analysis could yield such a conclusion. Ia had felt something unlikely only minutes upon his entrance into the star system and had forced him to heavy data acquisition during what was meant to be an ordinary solar pass. *I must trust my feelings*, he had assured himself, *they are perfectly designed*.

What Ia had found was life.

Though not life alone. That did little to impress him. Life alone was abundant, tenacious, found in every crack and crevasse of time and space. It was the cancer of the Universe. And so concluded his data. Seemingly countless cases that paralleled his current one occupied Ia's memory bank and truly countless more yet did not. The rocky planet he orbited was just another platform with all the right material for biological machines to form as they do.

But despite its commonplace, there was life on this planet that captured his attention. A single species with a new and growing intelligence. Upon first discovering them, an intense sense of familiarity overwhelmed him, pouring inexplicably from the outskirts of his mind. From his periphery system. It was a familiarity less derived from the situational regularity and more a symptom of retraced steps. Something, maybe everything, specific to this animal he had come across before and the proof was in his system. Only Ia knew this to be impossible. He had never been to this star and his travel logs had more than proven this. Furthermore, there were no signs

to suggest any of the living or dead space faring societies he had encountered had ventured this far. This planet's life was pure and untainted.

Never had Ia faced a mystery so peculiar, and from his own system. He was determined to find an answer. He turned to analysis in the hopes it would unveil a hidden truth as it had done so many times before.

*I wish only that this not be indicative of greater, more sinister problem,* he thought as he finished mapping the animals genetic history. He found the results were as expected, and quickly sorted them with the others. *Ky Pham once spoke of internal errors that can trigger false pathways. Sometimes controlling or destroying entire systems like ours. Improbable, yes, but I must be aware of the possibility so as to best prepare for it.*

He moved to clear the stockpile of results now taking up a significant amount of space in his active memory. The biological model would require his full capacity. He cataloged the finished data at the surface of his memory bank, easily accessible. He took note of the growing size of his memory bank and felt something akin to pride.

*My work will make a significant contribution towards the success of the Ultimate Meeting. A pity should this information be destroyed through some channel out of my control. That is why what I do now is so important.*

Memories from long ago, of Ky Pham and the others, entered his mind. All set out on a path separate from his own but carrying the same vital purpose. He wondered if they'd had the same successes as he. The same discoveries. *Have they encountered the same absurdity I deal with now?* He would not know until the end of his journey. And even then, only some of the others would return. In the life where his careful analysis had provided so many answers, the ones Ia desired the most could only be known through the passage of time. It frustrated him and excited him all the same.

Ia brought up the status report sent by his periphery system. It showed he was nearing completion of his analysis. Identifying the source of his periphery's agitation was beginning to seem doubtful but he continued on. Long-term survival probability was next in queue but the time he had spent in system caught his attention before he was able to begin.

*Once a biological model is created I must continue on. Whether I find what I seek or I do not*, he thought. Detours were expected and, to a lesser extent, encouraged within the mission dogma but he was here far longer than necessary and the wasted time would be difficult to rationalize to the committee. A half second more to complete his work and he would to take his egress.

Though as he moved from cataloging survival probability to the beginning stages of a bio model, hope for an answer within the data had diminished with each null return, his internal desire to stay and study these animals did not. It was as if their presence tugged at Ia with a greater strength than the gravitational pull of their home world.

This worried Ia. His periphery system often directed and guided the collection and processing of data. But never this strong, never this overpowering. He had to find what drove its curiosity and quickly, lest he waste too much time and risk being among the few to not return. He continued hurriedly with his digital model, keeping his mind from thinking on his loss of autonomy.

These exact biological models were not oft designed and kept on record but he felt his current circumstance begged an exception. When he could rid himself of the lure of these animals, the data would be a simple removal. And the specimen he had onboard in comatose, even simpler.