

The Man from Titan

Last moments are an interesting thing. You understand that you're fading into oblivion, but there's a suspended disbelief still. The brain, or at least mine, refused to comprehend the universe telling me, "You're dying, Marcus. Welcome home." Maybe it was taking so long to understand because the flesh simply refuses to let go; rather it must be taken by the old invisible specter and his scythe. I didn't see him even in that moment, as I lay warming up in my depressurising suit so very far away from home. It was nothing like the ideal moments I'd imagined: in my bed, surrounded by family, loved ones, and grandkids. Maybe my wife too, if I was going first, which I always hoped would be the case. She didn't like the dark, so I always walked into dark rooms first. At least I will have done that part, huh, Amina? Ironical though, since I still hated bees from the scars they gave me, and she gardened with them in tandem.

My body was getting warmer still, but my body continued to sink down into the lake. I saw fires raging at the top, and pieces of metal coming down to join me in my grave. Maybe I could convince them to form into a casket around me.

I'd given up on swimming to the surface, for I'd find no air to relieve me once I broke the top of the water, only clouds of nitrogen in the sky, and an overbearing nosy Saturn staring down on me, watching to make sure I'd choked on its child's frozen air. I would not give it that satisfaction, even if my colleagues couldn't. Most were probably still trapped under the facility, others sent to God knows when and where, definitely oblivion. The warmth of extreme hypothermia set in, and I smiled, knowing that Saturn would not see my end as I fell into the Kraken Lake.

Does time stop when you die? It felt as though it did, since as soon as my eyes closed, they were jerked open again. I was lying on a bed, with white linens and white walls. There was a small circular window on to the right, a tall door to the left, and a metal circle plate next to the bed. I myself was naked, apparently alive. Everything still there, skin still dark brown with white palms and foot soles. I was bald now, however, including the rest of me. I shivered, and tried to lift my legs out onto the floor, to look out onto this world where my state of being was part in flux.

My steps were heavy, but not overly burdened, but the window was too high for me to see out of, probably even if I stood tip-toed. I dare not try, seeing as I've only escaped death moments ago, and I'd rather not give this body's balance a reason to fail me. I decided to pace around the room instead, better than sitting on the bed doing nothing. This is when a voice appears from the nothingness of the white walls. "Please be seated, your attendant will be with you shortly." it said.

So someone is here after all. I respected the monotone demand, and waited for my hosts, doctors, whoever, to appear. Eventually, the door to the left opened, and a small gunmetal robot walked in. It's shorter than the average person, bi-pedial, but with legs that stop at a point, rather than feet, all with a column for a body. The top of it's head juts out from the column, looking like it would fit well if lowered into the body. The face it presented was black, with two blue pixelated eyes and a small mouth. It's face was a screen, and it wore a smile to greet me.

"Hello!" it said. Just as quickly, it turned to the wall and a grey panel of knobs and buttons slid from a gap that appeared.

"Is this color an acceptable pallet? Or would you like a different one?"

I didn't respond fast enough for it, I guess, because it turned again and asked, "Are you well?"

"Um. Hello. Can you make the walls a bit dimmer? And why was that panel hidden?"

"Of course." His carapace opened on the sides and spindly arms came out to play with the knobs. "And would you have not touched it if it'd been available?"

I was embarrassed at the question, because I definitely would have touched them. The walls turned to a brown color, the light warmed, and I was able to get my bearings a bit better than in a starkly white room.

It spoke again, "Also, we can have garments fashioned for you, if you'd like."

And like Adam, I was suddenly ashamed of my nakedness, my hands moved to cover things that these people had no familiarity with. "Yes, actually, whatever is available, I suppose."

A front panel of the robots' body slid down this time, "Will these suffice?"

It was a one piece jumper, colored the same as my skin. But my feet were still uncovered, and a bit cold. "Something for my feet maybe?"

"Certainly." The small door closed and opened again, "How about these?"

Slippers, also the same color, and softer than any memory foam or cotton.

"Sufficient?" the bot asked.

"Very. Now what?"

We decided on a tour and chatted. The bot, whose name was some glutral sound I couldn't pronounce, said I could call it whatever was comfortable. I settled on Rupi, and it was Rupi. The guide asked for mine, which I freely gave.

There were other rooms, or at least grooves in the walls that looked like doors similar to my room, and the hall was the same gunmetal color as Rupi, with extremely tall ceilings. I saw why when walking past another duo; a bot like Rupi, and a freakishly tall being that floated off of the ground. He said the lights were there to boost my regeneration process, since I'd apparently been dead for a long time.

"You'd been fossilized." Rupi said. "We obtained your fossil from the Dutaal Trading Post. We have revived many, but never any of your kind."

The shock made my feet trip over themselves, "Fossilized?"

Rupi only turned his head, "Yes, your records are spotty, but it seems you were excavated after about one hundred thousand years. Different civilizations held claims over you after different trades and thefts, but you ended up with us after all of that."

"So everyone I've known is gone."

"Probably. But it would probably be better to explain in a more comfortable place to rest, after I've shown the surroundings of the facility."

And so we walked in silence, as I'm sure Rupi knew I had to process the mountainous weight of the time he'd told me I'd missed. My attention was stolen when we came to the end of the tall, arched hallway to an opening. I saw a waterfall and rock cliff at the very end of the hallway, but heard no sound from the rushing water. Rupi swiped his "hand" and a rush of energy covering the seemingly open doorway appeared, quickly dissolving away, accompanied with the rush of noise from outside.

"Forcefield?"

"Very good!"

His response felt a bit condescending.

We stepped out into the pavilion, at least that's my best guess at what to call it. The waterfall was directly in front of the "Vitality Center", Rupi said. The building itself was also gunmetal and seemed to be built out of sheets of gleaming steel. Light bounced off of the surface of the plain, square rectangular building, and I had to look elsewhere to get my eyes to adjust. It was then I realized that it was warmer out here than it was in the building, and looking up I saw a star through a clear glass dome, but there was no blue sky to see. But there was a familiar red planet, with a whirling red storm whipping away on its surface.

"Is that... Jupiter?"

"Jupiter?" Rupi's eyebrow flicked into an arch. "Oh yes, the gas giant! It's done us a very good service here, plenty of hydrogen and helium for our research and fuel."

Confusion set in across my face, and Rupi could tell.

"Don't worry, we'll get you the answers you need. Just keep walking with me. There's a small building on top of the cliff that should have some assistant information. Or at least, it'll be a better explanation than what I can give."

There were other buildings around, and they were also extremely plain. Just geometrical shapes; standard square, cylinder, and a couple of pyramids far off. The pathways were marked with a random assortment of spirals, all of varying sizes etched into the white metal walks. I saw other bots that looked identical to Rupi with their pointy legs and no feet. Some were walking with other lifeforms, all vastly different. One in particular scuttled on all fours close to the ground, and left a trail of clear slime behind it. Another was more avian looking, but had two sets of wings, the end of one wrapped around the "hand" of its Rupi as they walked, the bird-creature

on skinny legs, and obviously skittish. The plants around were dark, appearing black and grey underneath this bright star, that which I knew now to be the Sun I remember. Their leaves were long, seemingly by hundreds of feet, slithering along the edges of the white walk, up and around buildings. The only things that provided color here were myself and the other seemingly-organic beings. I saw others being taken around, some sentient, and others appearing not. A floating, delicate looking one, with two bulbs that pulsed along the visible spectrum of light for me where it's head would be. Rupi said that it pulsed in the ultraviolet as well, so I should keep my distance when conversing with it. There was another down a smooth slope to the ground level, aquatic apparently, since its Rupi was spraying a continuous jet of red water from its above the creature, slicking the floor in a track of mess as he walked.

Rupi noticed my wondering eyes, seemingly reading my mind. Maybe he could and he was just entertaining me?

“Yes, everyone here is sentient, just like you, Marcus.”

We reached our destination; a long, rounded top building, covered too in those black and grey plants, but the exterior of the building itself was white. This world truly.

“The answers to your questions should come from the builders of this place.” Rupi said, pointing towards the door.

The doors slid open silently as he spoke, and it was pitch black inside. The bottom of my sandal-slippers squeaked on the floor as I stepped in. As I stepped forward into the maw, the lights flicked on, illuminating the curved hallway that was suddenly longer than it should have been in warm lines running down the middle of the arched ceiling. The doors shut slowly behind me, and the last thing outside I saw was Rupi's simple smile.

There was only one way forward, and no one tried to murder me yet, so I walked towards the back of the room, and where my feet met the hallway's end, I was also met by my reflection. I didn't like my lack of beard and hair, since it reminded me of being younger, and I was certainly anything but. A voice chimed through the air, different this time, huskier and deep.

"Please step through."

My eyes darted and my head spun to catch the announcer, but I forgot where I was. Constantly being watched, and never knowing from where. Rights to privacy did not come with the passage of time. Then again, do I have any "rights" to any such thing now? I'd find out soon enough, because I'd slipped on the presumably clean floor and was falling mirror-door backwards from my spin.

I found myself in a room lit, this time seemingly with natural lighting. The floor that I landed on was polished dark wood, and turning around again, I was staring into the face of something organic. It's face was tri-horned, with two jutting from the top, and one from it's chin, all of it looking scaled and cragged, with a flat nose spread across the front. A large metal strip covered what I can only assume to be eyes. Four arms the same texture spread out, jutting out from the seamless holes in his long purple tunic that seemed to form to his body until reaching his knees. and the being welcomed me as it stood up, intimidatingly taller than me. The light came in from tall, narrow windows behind him, and danced into my eyes from the glass desk in front that hovered with no legs.

"Hello Marcus," the thing said, from it's small mouth with a rumbling depth of voice.

"Has your attendant been hospitable?" It's teeth were sharp, definitely carnivorous.

I scrambled myself upright off of the floor, but my mouth wasn't as fast to readjust itself.

“Um, yes. Rupi’s been good. Who are you?”

“You’re not going to ask ‘How do you know my name?’” it said, with a pitch perfect impersonation of my voice.

“No.” I stammered. “I’d assumed someone was watching, and it looks like it’s you. So who are you?”

The alien sighed, and started walking around to the desk to greet me, his steps heavy on the wooden floor.

“I manage this place. You can call me Gedru. Rupi told me that it would probably be better that you get your answers from someone else organic-related than them.”

He was so close to me by the time he finished his sentence I’d started backing up towards the wall.

“Afraid?” Gedru, said. “And based on where your eyes are looking, you probably are imagining me as something horrific.”

“Imagining is a light word. Waking up alive somewhere that’s not my home filled with things I’m having trouble grappling with would do that, I assume.”

“No, I mean literally imagining. My people are seen as observers wish to see them. Try for yourself.”

I was hesitant to close my eyes in front of the monster manager, but I saw no reason that he’d eat me if I dropped my sense of sight for a second. I thought about what I could imagine him as.

When I opened my eyes again, a duplicate of myself stood in front of me, but in a long white robe instead. I kept my eyes open this time, and thought of someone else hopefully less

disturbing. Gedru's hair grew from what would be my bald one into kinks and coils, into a short dark afro. Its face became hers, with a wide nose prominent on the face. My chin sharpened from its broad start, becoming only slightly more pointed and refined. Her eyes became dark and bold, the ones I remembered...

"Marcus, what are these tears?" she started.

I stumbled over with tears in my eyes trying to hug my wife, but I was stopped by a solid mass before reaching her. It curved around, like a person's body, but extremely smooth, with nothing to catch my fingers.

"Someone close to you?" Gedru said. Its eyes turned down, and bit her lips. "You shouldn't think of loved ones when you see me, Marcus. We were good hunters for a reason."

I used an arm to wipe my eyes of embarrassment and confusion, "Is that why you work away from everyone like this?"

Gedru nodded, "Let's go over everything." It waved his hand, and the room changed. His desk disappeared, slipping from a solid state to liquid, and then seeping blending into the brown of the floor. A small grey pillar rose from the floor between us. A projection of the star system beamed into the room, with each world orbiting a large red giant. 4 main planets, it seemed. Maybe it is a different star system after all. Rupi said I got traded a lot, so it'd make sense to be anywhere, and not much sense to still be in the same solar system. Maybe it was better that way; for me to be away from everyone and everything. If I was fossilized, then human society must be unrecognizable anyway. I'd be a freak at best, and a complete outsider at worst. Then again, what was I here?

I stared at Gedru and its movement of Amina's arms and hands. I watched as her face contorted in concentration, and how her fingers and movements moved. She was too graceful, too smooth and fluid to be human, but if it wasn't convincing at first glance. It must be lonely for Gedru to be like this. Isolated, wherever we are, from all of the others. I blinked away my grief and Amina, back to the first image of them that I met, preferring its foreignness to anything from my time, particularly illusions.

"Nanites?"

"Good eye." Their voice had the same tone as Rupi.

"Now then. We are here, in Star System 53." Their arm pointed at a small green dot in the projection. It was around a smaller world that orbited a larger one.

"We're in orbit around this satellite right now. The actual installation is on the surface below. A water world, but the facility is anchored into the seabed below."

"Rupi never actually told me what type of place it was."

Gedru tapped their chin with a long, scally finger, "A living archive, essentially."

Our conversation was mostly him explaining and me asking questions. He took care to not be too elementary with things after I told him what I did so long ago for work. Its arms turned and flailed much like a human would when talking, and it was easier to relate to it, at least a little bit. His space was on an asteroid placed in orbit around this moon, around this planet, in some corner of the universe. Scholars from around the galaxy would soon descend upon us to interview, to study, to learn what they could about the past and the secrets that time had buried, straight from the sources of those who lived in the old oases that had since run dry. We were to give the future the knowledge that time had locked away behind its doors. The information on

galaxies and things long unseen. But where were we exactly? And when? I tried to give approximations for how our experiences of time differed, what a “year” meant to both. Gedru waved their hand and my file appeared with the projection, my face static in an identification picture. Next to it was a photo of a rock formation, and I realized that it was my skeleton embedded within the rock. My casket and grave presented in front of me.

I hadn’t noticed that Gedru’s deep voice had stopped, until they addressed me directly again.

“Marcus, are you ok to continue?”

I walked closer to the projection of my face and my rock-casket. Bones poked out on top of the rock rectangle, and I raised my hand to touch the image, but Gedru’s hand was there swooping down in front of me to get my attention.

“Paying attention?”

I laughed to myself, “No, sorry about that.”

Gedru looked over at the photo of my non-living self, “Yes, I’d imagine that everything is still a bit jarring. It was for me as well.”

“So you’re alone too, then.”

“No. Just outdated. My species still lives, about one-hundred thousand years removed. Their society is completely different than what I remember. Nonsensical to someone like me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. They’ve prospered in their own way.”

I made no mention of his self-omission.

“Regardless, this meeting is about you.” they said, clasping their rough hands together.

“Right. Can you tell me just how long I was gone?”

“From our best estimates, you’d been fossilized for about fifty thousand years. However, we cannot accurately determine your true age. Your records are checkered, with different people owning you for measures of time, as Rupi told you. I should tell you also that the galaxy has never had a true hegemon. There has never been a galactic power or stabilizing empire. Essentially, you are ancient and passed around goods at best. Some records say that you were held in time-status chambers to preserve you as well, which further muddies the situation.”

The room began to spin again, and the floor suddenly seemed less stable. “Can I have something to sit on?” I said.

Gedru materialized a foam thing for me to slump into, and I clasped my head between my hands as the seat contorted around my body, which was much more comfortable than my life at the moment. Thrust into time with no way to figure out just when and where I was. The universe’s devilish odds had given me nothing but uncertainty. I looked back up at the planet chart of the star system we were in.

“Gedru, can you pull up a view of where this star system is within the galaxy?”

“Yes, that can be arranged.”

Suddenly the hologram changed into an ellipse galaxy, not the familiar spiral that would have helped me out at least a little bit.

“What about the local cluster of galaxies?”

They panned the view out further. “Look for yourself.”

Gedru was right, not a single neighboring galaxy that would be familiar. Not even Andromeda. When I realized the next possibility, my heart sank into the pit of my stomach. I asked Gedru to tell me how old this galaxy was.

“About twenty and a half billion years old.”

The breaths I drew and the rocking of my body were my own foolish attempts to keep it together. I’d been gone for at least eight billion years.

“How old is this star?”

“A little over twelve and half billion years.”

We kept talking, but Gedru only gave vague assurances to find answers to the rest of my questions. No information they had would be off limits to me, and I would have a nice living space within the archive. There was only one question left.

“Can you bring my wife back to me?”

Gedru’s face turned down, and their brow furrowed. If they had a mouth, it would be frowning.

“No. At best, we can clone you and make it look like and behave like her, but she’ll be a different person entirely. We can only bring back ones who have some sort of genetic material left to harvest. It’s actually a wonder that you remember her at all. It’s rare for past memories to be so accessible.”

Rupi showed me to my living quarters after my meeting with Gedru. It didn’t say much of anything, only asking “Did you have your questions answered, Marcus?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

My living quarters were human sized, but not particularly homey. Unsurprising, given my situation. As I looked at the black and grey ivy covered walls, the grey floors and bed, and out of the circular window that was finally low enough for me to see out of. Those next few weeks, I was inundated with visions of Amina. These persisted for days and weeks after, not including the fact that Gedru had to have a day/night cycle installed to my windows to offset the perpetual day light from the red giant above.

Time was simply a daunting thing to even consider at this point. I did come out of my cave now and again to explore the habitat. Rupi accompanied me most of the time, and I cycled between hating and appreciating the companionship. It was getting better at noticing my emotions, which was again great, and frightening. I did my best to hide my frequent tears from Rupi, but something akin to tissues would frequently materialize as I sat alone inside my quarters.

When would I be useless to them and this museum? What would happen when they extracted all of the knowledge from me that they could? Rupi assured me that nothing would happen, but its digital face was just that. Calculated precision at hand to lie if it had to, and I would be none the wiser. Could I trust him to be autonomous? To make his own judgements independent of what Gedru told him?

I tried to muster up the strength to work on anything in vain. None of my research would be relevant to an institution with the capability to resurrect and traverse the stars. I was able to give Rupi a rough enough description of canvas, instruments, and paper to get something made to play around with. I was able to get nutrition cubes edited to taste somewhat like food I remembered. If I wasn't painting badly, I would walk around the facility with Rupi, who also

served as a translator between the resurrected and their own guides. I talked with former rulers who'd been immortalized in death, enslaved peasants who'd somehow been found in their owner's tombs without the owner present. Others were victims of natural disaster; one from a volcano near his village, the other left behind during a planet evacuation after a meteor strike. And now we were all here, the lucky dice rollers, no one to judge our failures or triumphs if we chose not to share them. We had to overcome whatever our brains had put aside as they died now, and figure out how to live again. Sometimes, they would ask about myself, and I would tell them I was a scientist.

“Your people must have had great respect for you.”

“Not really, generals got paid better.”

The visitors that Gedru talked about came later, seemingly scholars from worlds far off. We could see their ship up above our heads, docked with what I assumed to be Gedru's space and office. They asked me questions about humanity and myself, and I gave the best answers I could.

“We were flawed. Now I'm alone.” I'd say.

They would just scribble down and jot their notes, moving on to the next artifact.

I'd stare a lot from atop the cliff in front of the small building that Rupi originally took me to; up at the gas giant I believed to be Jupiter that rotated around, the clouds around its equator zooming faster around than those above or below it. Rupi would sit with me and tell me about the other moons too. We'd listen to the water rush below from the perpetual waterfall. It would listen to my frustrations and anger, pointed at the universe for forcing me back. I would request to be left alone by the scholars, for they would never take me away from here. They

noted my pleas, they wrote and heard my cries. They studied our pain and never remedied it. I would stomp, I would yell, and would thrash and snarl out my hatred for being stuck on this water-rock. Rupi's face would never change, always smiling, until its blue smile would make my face run red underneath.

The river of my anger had faded as the weeks passed, and as I learned more about the star system we were in. I had to tamp down hope for as long as possible, at least until I could meet with Gedru again. I made sure to eat my nutrition cubes as scheduled, now that I had something to try for. Rupi previously had to knock and remind me, unless I wanted to be augmented to no longer need to eat. Self-starvation would not work then. I would bide the time. I'd sent Gedru many requests for a meeting, along with my theories and plans. About how I was certain of our position in the universe, and that I was so cursed to be back in the solar system I'd called home so long ago.

Four planets remained, seemingly doppelgangers of the ones from before. The one I disliked most had lost its rings by now, and a moon was sacrificed to Uranus to give it its new crown as the jewel. Their colors, the wisps of brown and cream on the first, gold and yellow with hexagonal auroras on the second, and blues of the third and fourth all but told me. The only other thing was the moon I had been on before, which could be a jungle by now.

Unfortunately, Rupi only told me that they were "still looking over the proposition." At least, until he gave me a final message from Gedru.

"No."

I woke up again in the Vitality Center again. I looked around the room, and there was Gedru, seemingly looking directly out of the window that I couldn't reach. He turned when he heard the shuffling of my sheets, and walked towards me.

"You must feel very strongly about this." Gedru asked me, looming over my bed.

I looked over at the window that I can't reach, for a long time to find my own answer.

"I want to take a ship, and look for my people."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll throw myself off the cliff again until I can leave."

"Impossible if you're locked in this room instead."

"You could. But what fun would that be? Not like you'd get many visitors for a husk of meat."

Gedru looked at me intensely, their gaze piercing through the metal-strip and pouring over my body, the one they'd had to make additions to in order to bring me back again. I knew that they had dominion over me entirely, but I had to try.

The mouthless one spoke again, "You would be surprised, but take Rupi with you. I have no use for artifacts that don't know how to accept their position."

Rupi walked in after he spoke, and stood there smiling with its square blue eyes.

"My handler, then?"

Gedru had started out of the door, "Rupi was the one who wanted to bring you back, Marcus. I would also rather not have my ship driven into an asteroid. Bring it back in one piece."

I looked over in fury at the small robot whose smile refused to fade.

"I will travel with you anywhere you wish to go, Marcus." Rupi piped in.

“And if I humbly refuse your company?”

“Then you are not allowed to leave, as Gedru has told me to more strictly monitor you either way.”

I rolled my head over to try and look out of that window that was too high for me to see out of. I knew I was in the same room as before, from when I first woke up. I decided for the bland white ceiling instead.

I whispered, “I hate you Rupi.”

The silence was indicative of surprise from the both of us, I think.

“I know. But we’ll work on it.” it said.

I knew it smiled as I laid there, knowing my anger and only analyzing it. It would smile too while we journeyed throughout this system and beyond. I was forced to choose life, and I would use this time up until my last grain of sand. To search with rage until my heart stops beating again.

Rupi’s pointed feet tapped as they crossed the floor, until his bleached white body stood in front of that window.

“Do you have a first destination or action in mind?”

“The moons around this world, then the one’s around the next planets.”

“And you think you can find something there?”

“For a species as concerned with immortality as mine? Maybe here, maybe elsewhere, certainly somewhere. We built a probe that carried a simple disk that remained readable for a billion years over hundred years before I was even born. We sent a lot of bottles into the dark

sea, each bottle a little more sturdy, each parchment of paper more shielded against the corrosive sunlight of time. Something has to have lasted.”

As we crossed into the ship Gedru had prepared for us, I looked at them again. The same eyes under the metal strip, glaring at me with an expression I could not discern. They were frustrated with me, certainly, but still curious about what I had to offer. I was only an artifact, along with the others, but what better way to drum up visitors than a live show through the galaxy? That’s the only reason I was being let go, and the reason why he was sending Rupi along. I wouldn’t escape his gaze until I died or until they did. With such a long lifespan, I’d have to kill them to make that happen. I would be sure not to return until I could accomplish that. We would start with the forest moon under the world I think I died under, and make our way from there. He said nothing as the ship’s hatch closed.

Rupi asked for what we would do next, after the forest moon.

“To Dutaal after that. And then the next and next.”

“Searching for a speck of nothing in the waters of everything.” he said, with his digital face turned towards the bay window. We launched out into space, forward again into time.