

Chapter Two

The pattering of heavy rain bombards the deck of the boat as it sways in the open water. The horizon hidden from the massive swells. A woman makes her way towards the bow, clinging to the side rail while trying to keep upright. A rogue wave hits the boat on the starboard side causing the woman to slip backwards. Her head strikes the wall behind her and she falls to the ground, losing her grip on the rail. As the boat sways the other direction, she is washed off the skiff and into the water.

She screams out for help as she bobs on the surface. "He...ggg" as water fills her mouth. She desperately tries again. "Overboard!"

A man comes to the deck and looks for the familiar voice. Water pours down his face as he struggles to see through the heavy rainfall. Waves continue to crash into the boat as it sways up and down.

"Hel..." screams the woman as water fills her mouth.

The man spots her and grabs a life vest and rope. As he slides back and forth, he makes his way to the bow. Her head coming in and out of his line of sight with each wave that pulls her away.

As the man prepares to throw the life line to the woman, he suddenly stops. His demeanor shifts from urgent to calm. He looks around at his surroundings and back to woman.

As more water floods the woman's mouth, she sees the man turn back to the hull. Her pleas for help seize as she drifts out of view and into the vast blue field of swells.

Chapter Three

A muffled latching sound is felt in the floor as Del's floor door slides open. Ictamus pulls his right leg upward as he narrowly escapes falling into the opening. As Del's head begins to rise from the dark void in the floor, he sees Ictamus shuffling to catch his footing. He stops before reaching the top of the stairs.

"Have you not slept?" He asks Ictamus as he takes a glance around the room. He notices that, aside from a few containers being out of place, the room was still in good order. He returns his attention back to Ictamus who is now tinkering with the giant metal circular door on the opposite side of the room.

"Slept? You haven't given me 10 seconds to ask you anything and then you lock me in here without a bed, toilet or water!" He says as he attempts to turn one of the several levers on the

door. "I've walked that corridor multiple times and have concluded that this is the way out. So open it or else!" Ictamus says in an aggravated tone.

He turns to see Del staring at him. Even with his mask and goggles, Del has mastered the tone of his face, which in this moment, is very condescending. Del hangs and nods his head as he walks over to the shelf by the wall near the giant metal door. He presses a very visible button on the wall next to it and the entire shelf slides to the right, revealing a bedroom and restroom. Ictamus stops messing with the door, "Huh" he says in an almost defeated voice, "I had a feeling about that button, but I wasn't sure what would happen."

Del leans in Ictamus' direction, "You weren't sure what would happen? But you had a feeling about it? Then, what was going through your head when you activated your device?" He says sternly.

Ictamus begins to poke his head into the room curiously, looking around as he says, "I was thinking...I had a lot going on in my head. I was stressed out about some things and just said fuck it". He sits down on the bed, bouncing a couple times to check the comfort of it. He turns his attention to Del, "Hold on, how do you know about the device? How'd you know that I wasn't... the person you know?"

Del begins to pick up a couple poles that have a length of rope on one end and what seems to be a harness attached about three quarters of the way down near the opposite end. "Aside from your freak out and the panic attack, I could see it in your eyes. Very subtle, but different. Also, a slight change in pitch in your voice along with minor mannerisms." He says as he begins to put the poles into a case that is built into the wall by the giant circular door. As he walks back over to the desk he says, "You're also not the first you to swap your conscience into that body."

Ictamus stares over at Del, wide eyed. "Is that what happened, a complete psyche swap?" As he scratches his head. "So the man you know is currently in my body?"

"Yes, and he knows how to work your device, how to speak your language properly and how to access your memories. Things that you are also capable of, but you allow your stubborn curiosity to dictate your actions." Del says as he opens a coded entry door and begins to pull several elongated metallic objects. As he places the objects in the case, he stops, "Don't get your hopes up that he'll be initiating a swap, because he won't."

"How do kno.."

"HE WON'T", Del interjects, "because he has caused enough damage to himself through the swaps. He swore to me, himself and to his..." he pauses, hangs his head, exhaling sharply through his nostrils, "his wife that he would never swap again and would live out the rest of his life as we're supposed to."

As Del resumed loading the case, now with leather-like bags containing a vibrant pink fruit, a silent static filled the room. Del turns and throws one of the bags at Ictamus. Ictamus catches the bag, "Where is.."

Del cuts in with the answer to his question before he could finish, "Enaid is dead. Now eat. We hatch in 1 ohra and your motor functions appear to be functioning well enough to participate in the hunt."

Ictamus takes his first bite into the fruit and his eyes explode with delight. He announces with joy and an inquisitive undertone, "pianba!?". (Cue single electric synapse) He looks up at Del as if coming to a realization.

As Ictamus finishes the last bite of his succulent pianba slices. On the wall across from the bed he sits on catches himself in a mirror. "Oh" he says as he gazes at a clean shaved-wrinkle-free face.

Del notices Ictamus admiring himself and scoffs. "I take it that you've lost a few years?"

"More like gained a couple decades!" Ictamus replies with a youthful glee.

"If you're insinuating that you've added time to your life expectancy, then that means that you've reduced I.C.'s."

Ictamus exhales with a let down look on his face.

"I'm being patient with you for now. But if I have to keep reminding you of your situation, I'll have no choice but to take other measures to GET you focused and to KEEP you focused!" The emphasis pierces the air and gets Ictamus' attention.

Del looks over to see that Ictamus' eyes keep shifting between Del and the containers on a shelf nearby. He says, "What is it that you have to know?"

Ictamus' face lights up as he begins to inquire about the containers. "That surgery was unlike anything I've ever seen. What kind of solutions are you using?" He asks as he grabs one of the containers from the middle shelf.

"That one in your hand is a sterilizing solution."

Ictamus opens the container and begins to smell but quickly withdraws from the harsh scent of alcohol. He picks up another container.

Del, "Anesthesia...." As Ictamus grabs another, "Machine oil!" He says impatiently. "What is it you think you're going to find?"

“Oh.” Ictamus says, dissatisfied. “I thought there might be some...mir....mira...” he struggles to say miracle because there is no such word in the language that spills from his tongue. “Ma...magical?” He utters with unfamiliarity.

“You are not going to find any substance that you are unfamiliar with because we’ve done a pretty good job at figuring out the ones that work,” Del says as he grabs the two containers from his hands and places them back on the shelf. “The stubbornness of your curiosity is baffling. I can’t even fathom how you were able to make it through adolescence. The undying need-to-know makes you very inconsiderate. To a level that is reckless and borderline moronic.”

Del turns abruptly and places his hands on a table next to the shelf. He hangs his head and nods from side to side. “Where do you think you are?” He asks in a manner as if he doesn’t want to know the answer.

Ictamus looks around the room and says, “Based on the technology, I couldn’t say. Based on the structural framework of this building, I might be inclined to say that we are somewhere in the mountains of Ger...Germany?” As he looks to Del for possible approval.

“You mean Earth?” Del asks.

Ictamus reiterates slowly “G-e-r-m-a-n-y is on...wait!” He pauses and shifts his demeanor to excitement. “Are we not on Earth?” He quickly says.

Del, with his back still turned, says, “That’s what I was worried about.” He turns to Ictamus and signals him to stop with whatever he is about to ask. “D-d-d-d-dut” as he gestures for him to sit down. “Before you go asking ten-thousand questions, let me speak.” Ictamus sits back down, obediently. “No, we’re not on Earth. Milky Way, yes. The earth you know is not even in this universe, relatively speaking. Earth will be similar to yours, but it’s not yours. The you that you are thinking of, is not there because you can’t be two places at once, relatively speaking. The person you switched with, is you. A slightly different you. A you that has been where you are. At least in the same state of.....” He cocks his head, “confusion? At least I imagine it’s a similar state of mind after the first swap.” He loses his train of thought which allows enough of a pause for Ictamus to attempt his onslaught.

“So if earth is a place...” Ictamus says but is interrupted.

A long-haired-late-teenage boy, wearing a similar outfit as Del but without the mask covering his mouth and nose, walks into the room.

The boy begins to speak, “The cells are charged and the herd is headi....” He stops and double takes at Ictamus. He walks over to him, lifts up his goggles and leans in close, looking deep into his eyes. “You’re an idiot!” He proclaims as he puts the goggles back on and walks towards the giant circular door. He leans against the wall and looks at Del. “How long has he been here?”

Del replies, "He got here last night, he hasn't slept and he's going to need to be kept in check.", as he turns his head to confirm that Ictamus is listening.

"Ooh, can I put the coll.." the boy says but is cut off by Del.

"You're not putting anything on or him in anything!" He assertively says. The boy hangs his head in disappointment.

Del, "Ictamus, this is Shiisham(Shee-shum), my son. If I'm unavailable to get you tools or parts, talk to him."

Ictamus nods his head in understanding as an airlock lets out a hiss and gears begin to turn on the giant circular door. Shiisham moves from the wall and walks to the center of the door, watching the gears turn. The entire door begins to turn clockwise. The mechanisms rotate out of view into the floor as sunlight begins to shine on the floor. The light makes its way up Shiisham and Dels body as they both look at each other. As the light blares over the silhouette of Dels shoulder, the beam strikes the face of Ictamus. He squints his eyes from the blinding light to allow his pupils to adjust. Once focused, he sees the two begin to walk outside towards a lush, but storm ravaged landscape. Tree branches litter the ground. Water drips rapidly from leaves gently swaying in the slight breeze. The smell of rain floods Ictamus' nostrils as he begins to make his way outside.

As he limps his way into the warmth of the sunlight, he is struck by a spectacular view of this new world. The skies, a vibrant baby-blue. Ocean water, crystal clear in the shallows and deep blue in the deeps. The plant life that bore its roots into the saturated soil and the sounds that filled the ether stimulate his senses. His knees nearly buckle beneath him as he looks directly up to see three half moons brilliantly illuminated by the sun.

"This would be a lot easier if you had slept." Shiisham says.

Ictamus slowly shifts his head towards Shiisham, slack-jawed with a wide gaze, he was clearly having an ineffable experience.

"Well, you don't need words to move gear. So start loading the trudgers and I'll fill you in a bit more on the way." Del says.

Ictamus begins to take some items to the strange vehicle. It was approximately the size of a mini van, but was more spherical. He wondered how this thing could be a vehicle. It sat on the ground with circular discs surrounding it. There wasn't even any wheels. Del and Shiisham could see the look of confusion riddling his face. Shiisham, with a green-baseball sized orb in his hand, walked up to the trudger, opened the door and got it. He placed the orb in a hole that rapidly pulled the orb into the body of vehicle. They could hear the orb begin to rapidly roll in all directions inside the vehicle. As it picked up in speed, the discs that lie beside the craft began to

levitate, forming what looked like the framework of a dome structure around it. A humming vibration filled the air as the trudger lifted from the ground.

In an elevated voice with a cup around half his mouth, Del says, "Electro-magnets".

Del and Ictamus load the last remaining items into the vehicle and climb in. The vessel drops slightly before bouncing back into its elevated position.

As Ictamus looks around the interior of the cockpit Del says, "I imagine you know how electromagnetism works?"

Ictamus nods his head, still in awe at the levitating craft. Shiisham leans forward, shifting his weight towards the front and the vehicle begins to move forward. The discs that surround the cabin begin to create a rolling ball, with the cabin hovering in the center.

"There's almost no restrictions to the terrain we can cover. It can get a bit bouncy though." Del says.

As they traverse across grassy hills they come to the opening of a canyon and Shiisham brings the vehicle to a halt. He says "The herd is just around the first bend."

The orb that powered the vessel begins to slow as it the trudger powers down. The vehicle jerks in several directions as the surrounding discs' repelling ability weakens and the cockpit drops to the ground.

Del tosses one the poles to Shiisham as he begins to make way towards the canyon opening. He stands beside the craft with another pole in hand as he waits for other members to exit their trudgers. As another member walks by, he hands them a pole and one of the long metallic canisters. Eight people, all somewhere between the age of thirty through fifty, received a pole and canister. Three, all about seventeen years of age, received a backpack. As each member made their way towards the canyon, they checked the rope that hangs from the end of the pole. After several tugs on the rope, they put the harness from the hip to the opposite shoulder and adjusted the fulcrum on the harness so it sat pointed upwards about eight inches from their ear.

As Ictamus observes the others gearing up, he feels a tingle on the nape of his neck. His eyes open wide and he is overcome by a sense that he had done this before.
"Déjà vu?"

Del turns to him and says, "No, that's your conscience making its way around the brain. You'll start to experience that more and more the longer you inhabit this body. You brought your memories and knowledge with you and they'll stay with you as long you focus on keeping them. The brain that your conscious self is in now, still holds the memories and knowledge of I.C. and you will have access to those the longer you stay."

Ictamus replies, "Incredible! So our memories, knowledge and overall experience in life is carried with us. So we're all eternal beings!?"

Del throws a backpack to Ictamus and gestures to him to start following the rest of the group. He says, "Possibly. We still can't say with any certainty that our life force is carried to and merged with another one of ourselves when we die. But, I.C., and now yourself, have learned first hand that we are not the only one of ourselves. Based on his swaps, he suspects that we all will live, have lived, or are living countless lives simultaneously. Each life influences the others in some way or another."

As they make their way through a small group of trees, they come out to find the group at a standstill, all with a fixed gaze around a large boulder.

Ictamus begins to say, "So if...". He is cut off by several members of the group gesturing to him to be silent. He begins to slowly make his way around the group to see what had warranted the necessity of silence. As he peers over the shoulder of a short but clearly muscular woman, he is stunned into a near paralysis.

Approximately two hundred yards away, was a herd of animals grazing on knee-high grass. The massive animals stood around twelve feet at the withers and around eighteen feet in length. Each had two pairs of horns, one that circled around the side of their head and the other protruding upwards about three feet in length. The vertebrae protrudes outward, creating a series of large bumps that run back towards the rump. As the herd indulges on the grass, two of the animals lift their heads and look out to the horizon. Their heads are stopped by the vertebrae in the neck, preventing them from looking to the sky. As one of the creatures glances around the surroundings, it notices the of line of people spaced apart in the distance. The people do not appear to be a threat, so the animal continues to graze.

Each group member that has a pole attached to their harness, attaches one a canister to the end of the rope. Four members move to the front and space out with about ten feet between each other. They widen their stance and firmly grip the end of the pole.

"Third bull to the left." Shiisham says to the group as pulls something resembling a police baton out of his bag and hands it to one of the younger members. He then looks directly into Ictamus' eyes and says with a smirk in the corner of his mouth, "I'm glad you didn't sleep. Now I get to watch you do the dirty work, haha." He laughs in a raspy high pitched cracking tone as returns his focus to the herd.

"Dirty work?" Ictamus says, puzzled.

The four members all straighten up and immediately drop their torso downwards while pulling the pole-end toward their waist. The rope on the opposite end swings outward with the canister in tow. Near the summit of the swing the canister is released with high velocity. Four canisters, all propelled with precision, increase in altitude and towards the unsuspecting herd.

Two of the mammals begin to glance up from their meal as two of the canisters hit the ground near their brother. The herd begins to belt out in a low moan as they begin to run at the group. One of the canisters strikes the side of the intended bull. Three barbed spikes burst through the sides of the canister in a triangular formation and the tail end of the canister collapses in on itself, pushing a syringe into the bull's hind leg. As the bull jerked in fear, the fourth canister came down and struck directly in between the two protrusions. The spikes breakthrough, the can collapses and the syringe is plunged directly into the animal's spinal cord, incapacitating it immediately.

Del's demeanor quickly shifts from focused to anxious as he yells to the group, "WE'VE GOT TO MOVE!"

The group quickly turns and begins sprinting towards the walls of the canyon. The herds' heavy hooves can be felt rumbling the ground. The stampeding animals gain quickly on the fleeing members as they start to scale the cliff sides. Three of the members were noticed by Ictamus. "They went to the wrong side!" He says as he points from a ledge.

"DO NOT STOP!" Del yells to the men.

The men aren't able to make out what Del says over the sound of the approaching wave. One of the men makes it to the wall and attempts to get his footing. As he plants one of his feet, it is taken out from under him as one of the animal's horns sweeps the wall. The animal flips him in the air, back into the frenzy and he is trampled as the animals continue their escape.

The other two men continue to run, unable to spot a climbable area. One of the men makes a last ditch effort to get to safety but is cracked on the side of the head by one of the bulls. The bull pins the man to the ground with his horns and caves in his chest with a single thrust. Blood is spewed from the man's mouth and onto the face of the angry bull as the man gurgles his final breath.

Ictamus stands frozen in horror as he watches the third man fall forward, out of view behind the sea of horns and matted hair. A rolling thunder echoes through the canyon walls beyond the shroud of dust. As fast as they climbed, the group began to descend back into the canyon.

Del puts his hand on Ictamus' shoulder and says, "Things are done a bit differently here on Varecthia. We know the risk and we respect the outcome." He begins to scale down the wall.

As Ictamus gets his feet back on the trampled floor, he turns to see Shiisham. With the pole rested on his shoulder, Shiisham says subtly, "There's sheers and pouches in your bag. Go with the rest of the group and begin dressing the target. Save as much blood as you can and the others will part the remains. We'll be back with the trudgers." He jogs to catch up to Del and two of the other members.

As Ictamus approaches the collapsed bull inside the veil of settling dust, he stops. All the others were standing around the animal but they were staring at him.

A young woman says, "Not quite yourself today, huh?" The others laugh as they redirect their attention back toward the kill. An older man with a prosthetic leg points over at the throat of the animal. Ictamus can tell that this is not the time for procrastination, so he hustles over to where the man was pointing.

"Well?" The man says. "Where's your bladders?"

Ictamus quickly goes to reach inside the pack and drops it to the floor. He kneels down, pulls out one of the bladders and attempts to hand it to the man.

"The boy lost his damn mind!" The man says. The others laugh. "Hold it right there under the jugular." As he draws upward with a syringe like tool. He drops the tool down through the animals throat. The point of the needle penetrates through the other side near where Ictamus held the bag. Holes on the side of the tool allows blood to flow into it, out of the tip and into the bladder.

The woman pushes him to the side and retrieves another bag from the pack. She quickly swaps the new one with the now full bladder and says, "I guess I'm doing the dirty work!" She looks back at Ictamus and gestures for him to hand her another bladder.

After handing over the last bladder, Ictamus looks over the mammal. The creature is massive, weighing easily three-and-a-half tons. The putrid smell of the carcass starts to get to him and he gags as he walks towards the hind end of the animal. He turns to see the feces that matted the hair near the anus. His stomach muscles clench as he regurgitates his stomach contents.

As the blood continues to spill onto the trampled ground, he looks over to see that the others have made their way to the back of the carcass. There he sees them operating something that resembles a guillotine. One of them is directing one end of it. The other end, handled by two members, bear the weight of the machine which is held up by a bracket that rests on their shoulders. The one nearest guides the machine and presses it against the neck between two of the cervical vertebrae.

"Go." The man says. The other two firmly plant their feet and lean into their brace. A trigger is pulled and a two-and-a-half foot guillotine like blade protrudes from the tip and slices through the ligaments that hold the vertebrae together. The pole is then directed to the next spot and, "Go." Ictamus stands back and observes with veneration.

The patter of the trudgers is felt beneath the groups feet as they organize the pieced remains.

"Back trackers!" The old man says.

The others promptly direct their attention in the direction that the herd ran. Through the still settling dust cloud, a rapidly approaching trudger breaks through. The tension eases and the group continues their preparations. The old man reaches into his sack and pulls out several tightly packed bags. He and the woman unwrap the bags and toss them to Ictamus and one the younger members. The bag flies past Ictamus' face, who's gaze is focused on the single trudger. He shifts his eyes over to the young man, mimicking his actions.

"Where's the other trudgers?" Ictamus asks.

The woman replies, "They're not far behind."

The old man follows, "Shiisham pilots them things like he's got a spore in his airway."

"Spore?" Ictamus asks.

The rest of the group look around at each other puzzled.

"Aaaare you alright?" The young woman asks.

Ictamus stops, knowing he has said too much. The group looks at him, waiting for a response. Ictamus, "Uuuh, ye.." just as Shiisham shoves a cloud of dust to the side of the group while stopping the trudger. He opens the door and turns his head slightly downward and towards Ictamus. His eyes shift from one member to the next. He slides the goggles on his forehead down over his eyes.

"You were supposed to be doing the dirty work."

The young woman, arms drenched in blood and with a smirk on her face, chimes in, "He started to, but I know how you are with blood in trudgers. And with him not being quite himself today..." She glances at Ictamus. "I don't even want to ponder the thought of the type of pist off he would be when you make him walk back."

Shiisham laughs as he gets out of the vehicle. "That's why I wanted him to do it." He walks over to Ictamus and tilts his goggles upward, "It'd be interesting to find out his reaction," peers deep into Ictamus' eyes, "with him not being him and all." He puts the goggles back on his face, obstructing his eyes, and pats Ictamus on the shoulder.

"Do you get joy out of pushing my buttons?" Ictamus asks as he turns to watch Shiisham walking away. "Are you trying to get a rise out of me?"

Shiisham stops and with his back still turned, his smile widened from ear to ear. The group stops momentarily and looks at Shiisham.

"I'm just trying to figure out who this new you is." Shiisham says as he gets into the trudger.

Ictamus looks at the other members, each of them redirecting their attention back to loading the vehicle.

As the rest of the trudgers arrive, Ictamus' attention is drawn into the sky as an aircraft draws a line of billowing smoke across the semi-cloudy sky. He's forced to turn his head away from the ship as it disappears into the overpowering shining of the sun. He stares at the smoke as it gradually dissipates into the atmosphere. By the time he turns around, he sees that everyone has already loaded all of the carcass and got into their vehicles. The others begin their way back to the community, while Shiisham and Del wait and talk amongst themselves inside the trudger. Once inside, the conversation ends between the two and the trudger moves forward.

After several minutes of silence, Ictamus asks, "How much is a kill like that worth?"

Shiishams face turns bewildered. He looks over to Del, "Is he talking about currency?"

Del nods, "Mmm hmm." Keeping his eyes fixed on the path in front of them.

Shiisham turns back toward Ictamus and asks, "So, have you all started working on plans to rebuild your society into one that doesn't require money."

Ictamus' eyebrows scrunch inwards, "Society would lose its civility without it. It's a crucial element in maintaining order."

Shiisham turns forward and comments, "If that's what you believe, then your structure will inevitably collapse."

"You're telling me that you don't have any form of tender?"

"Yes." Says Del.

"Everything that's necessary for survival is provided for everybody." Shiisham says. "With stipulations."

"Being?" Ictamus asks.

"Housing and food is guaranteed to those who contribute. We all have a set amount of time in which we work with shelter and a set amount of time for food necessities. 10 hours a week, each of us performs general upkeep on any shelter that is not our own. And 10 hours a week where we are helping plant or harvest the crops, hunting or we prepare and distribute food. Once those

requirements are met, you have earned your meals as well as a habitat for the next 10 days. How you choose to spend your time thereafter, is all up to you.”

“And those who don’t contribute, what happens to them?”

Shiisham points his finger at one of the moons in the sky, “You get some time to consider your options on Metuoti,”. Then he points to another smaller moon to the right of it, “or you can join the party on Lesosha.” He turns to look at Ictamus, “I heard that you have some guilty pleasures in which you indulge on there, yes?”

Del interjects as he nudges Shiisham’s shoulder, “Don’t plant any seeds.”

Shiisham returns to his seat with a smirk. “Maybe it’ll help jog some memory.”

Ictamus’ eyes glance back and forth between the two. He sits in silence, hoping someone will fill him in on what this guilty pleasure might be.

Del peers back over his shoulder towards Ictamus and then back to the open terrain as he navigates the vehicle. Several minutes pass and he says, “You already have the answer. Locked away in the box of your own mind. You already hold the key to unlock it, but you refuse to use it. I can make you use it.”

Shiishams demeanor lights up with excitement as he turns to his father with raised eyebrows.

“No, not yet.” He says sternly. “We have to give him the option to get back on track on his own accord before we can use.....more forceful measures.”

Shiisham sighs with dissatisfaction, melting back into his seat.

“When you made that swap over, your mind and body merged with unfamiliarity with one another. You’re going to be on high similar to an adrenaline rush for quite some time. Ictamus...the real Ictamus said that the rush lasted nearly a year. He said, the experience is what it must have been like when we were first born. Except with cognizance. You feel as if you can see things more clearly, with a deeper understanding of the universe. Only, you’re more confused about what you thought you knew. Then, you begin to question what you think you know. But, once you rest, the epiphanies begin. Your body begins to accept your mind and slowly allows access through the doors to your memories. But the more doors you open, you start to close the doors of your actual self behind you. You can’t help but question who you really are or were. Or if you ever were. I assure you that your memories of where you’re from are real, and where you are, is not where you’re supposed to be.” He turns to see Ictamus, daydreaming through the window, apparent that he had not heard anything he had said. He expels his breath with frustration. Then, he sees that he has Shiishams full

attention as he stares at him with a smile growing on his face. He lowers his voice to a whisper, "It would be fun to mess with him while he's so gullible."

Shiisham jitters with excitement in his seat.

"Nothing that's potentially harmful." He says as he brings the vehicle to a halt. "Make him think."

Ictamus comes to and he looks at Del and Shiisham, "What'd I miss?"

Shiisham opens the door, "It's time you make yourself useful," he says to Ictamus as he gestures to follow him.

Ictamus gets out of the vehicle. He sees another circular door, but there are no walls. At least not the type he's used to seeing. Instead, the door is in the face of a large rock wall. He now realizes that they were not in a building before, but in a bunker. In the shock of his situation, he hadn't turned around to look at the structure they had left.

Shiisham leads Ictamus in through the door and down a corridor with several doors on the left and windows to the right. Through the windows, Ictamus' demeanor changes to awe, as he notices a massive cavity that had been carved out of the rock. The cavern dropped below the line of sight and easily beyond a thousand feet in depth. The cavity walls were smoothed to a near reflective finish. The opening was perfectly circular about 40 feet in diameter.

"What's this used for?"

Shiisham turns back, "You haven't told us yet."

Ictamus stops in his tracks, looks down the pit and back at Shiisham.

Shiisham drops his head while raising his eyebrows, "Aaaaand....you have no clue." He turns and continues down the hall. "If I had it my way, your eyes would look like headlights from all the synapses that would be firing. But apparently my way would cause a mental overload on your psyche.....alongside with hemorrhaging." He stops to see Ictamus still gazing at the hole.

Shiisham quietly walks up behind Ictamus, leaning forward, startling him, "The silo should be done within the next couple years, depending on if it meets your requirements and specifications." He turns and continues down the hall. "Come along. I have a feeling that this will intrigue you".

Ictamus continues to peer at the silo as he proceeds with following Shiisham.

He walks through a doorway and turns to his right. Shiisham is standing next to an open door, gesturing Ictamus to walk through into the dark room.

“What’s in there and why am I going first?”

“It’s not much, but it will get you thinking.”

The reflection of himself in Shiisham’s goggle lenses along with the smirk on his face puts an unsettling tingle in Ictamus’ spine. He walks through the door, his heart pounding in his chest. The threshold seemed to stretch wider with each step, and Shiisham, ever calm and composed, moved with a slow, deliberate grace, his eyes unwaveringly fixed on the void in front of them. The way Shiisham carried himself—silent, multiplied the chill through Ictamus. There was something about his demeanor, something unreadable, that made the very act of stepping through that doorway feel like a mistake.

“What the fuck have I got myself into,” Ictamus muttered, his voice barely rising above a whisper. “Why’s it so dark?”

Shiisham didn’t respond immediately, but when he did, his words were as cold as the air that seemed to thicken around them. “I’m giving you a closer look.”

Ictamus, against his better judgment, continued forward. But as soon as he crossed the threshold, the air shifted. He stumbled forward into a vast, cavernous space, his eyes wide as they struggled to adjust to the dim light. Before him was a narrow ledge, the steel beneath his feet slick and cold. His breath caught in his throat as he realized just how precariously he stood—one step further, and he would fall into the abyss so deep, so silent, that the very thought of it made his stomach churn.

A nervous sweat prickled on his skin as he edged closer to the ledge, glancing back toward the door. His pulse quickened. He turned around, only to find that Shiisham had already closed the door behind him.

“No no no no no!” Ictamus exclaims. His hands trembled as he grasped at the door handle, pulling, pushing, but it wouldn’t budge. The cold metal mocked him with its stillness.

For hours, he stood there, unable to move, his legs growing stiff, his mind racing. Time dragged on, each minute feeling like an eternity. Ictamus couldn’t understand why Shiisham had left him here—had abandoned him to this narrow precipice. The silence pressed in around him, amplifying every thought, every breath, until the sound of a creaky door finally broke the stillness.

When the door creaked open again, Ictamus didn’t hesitate. He rushed toward it, anger flaring in his chest. But it was Del who stood in the doorway, a concerned expression on his face.

“Are you alright?” Del asked, his voice laced with genuine worry.

Ictamus didn’t answer immediately. His chest tightened, not from fear, but from frustration. His hands clenched into fists as he finally spoke, the words heavy with bitter anger. “He left me there.”

He just... left me.” His voice cracked, but the fury in his eyes was unmistakable. “How could he do that? Why would he do that?”

Del didn’t immediately respond, but his gaze softened. He stepped aside, gesturing for Ictamus to leave the ledge behind, though it was clear the anger simmering within Ictamus would not fade so easily.

Ictamus stormed through the compound, his frustration barely contained as he moved with purpose through the halls. Though he wasn’t entirely sure what that purpose was beyond finding Shiisham. His fists clenched, his eyes darting around each corridor as he plowed through closed doors, peering into empty rooms filled with unfamiliar equipment. The compound was a maze of sterile white walls, flickering holo-screens, and the low hum of unseen machinery. The more he searched, the more his irritation grew.

Behind him, Del followed at a measured pace, his expression one of practiced patience. “You need to calm down,” he said, watching as Ictamus hesitated at yet another doorway, scanning a room filled with metallic cylinders stacked in neat rows. “You’ve got work to do. Running around like this isn’t going to help.”

Ictamus ignored him, stepping inside, fingers brushing over the smooth surface of the equipment. There was something fascinating about the precision of it all, the way the Varecthians had constructed their technology to fit so seamlessly into their world.

“You don’t even know what that does, do you?” Del continued, crossing his arms as he leaned against the doorway. “This is exactly why I’m telling you to be careful. You screw up, you cause a disturbance, you walk into the wrong room and touch the wrong thing, and you won’t like what happens to you. You think I’ll allow you to just wander around indefinitely with no regard as to what you might stumble upon?”

Ictamus exhaled sharply through his nose, resisting the urge to snap back. His mind was divided between frustration and curiosity—every room he entered held something new, something unknown. The endless compartments of the compound were lined with instruments he didn’t recognize, data terminals humming with silent calculations, storage racks filled with devices whose purposes he could only begin to guess.

Del sighed, pushing off the doorway as Ictamus paused once more, staring at a wall covered in diagrams and detailed explanations of several plants and animals. “You were looking for Shiisham, remember?”

The reminder made Ictamus scowl, but he turned sharply and pressed forward, now with renewed urgency. It wasn’t long before he found him.

Inside a dimly lit laboratory, Shiisham stood with his back to the entrance, hunched slightly as he peered through a telescope aimed toward the sky. The large overhead window bathed the room in a soft, eerie glow, the enormous planet looming in the daylight.

Ictamus rushed forward, but before he could speak, Shiisham reached into his coat and tossed something toward him without even turning around.

Instinct took over, and Ictamus caught the object mid-air. It's a small, cylindrical device, smooth and cool to the touch.

"I saw how intrigued you were about the moons," Shiisham said, still peering through the telescope. His voice was calm, amused. "Thought you might want to experience one of them for yourself."

Ictamus stopped in his tracks, eyes flicking from the object in his hands to Shiisham's unwavering gaze through the lens.

Del arrived at the doorway a moment later, exhaling as he leaned against the frame and crossed his arms. He didn't say anything, he just watched.

Shiisham finally pulled away from the telescope and turned to face Ictamus, a sly grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "I had to get you worked up a bit so you had a reason to go to Metuoti," he admitted, twirling a small control module in his fingers. "Wouldn't want the ship's diagnostic screening to flag anything unusual. Now, your elevated vitals? That'll give it exactly what is needed to warrant the trip."

Shiisham winked at Del, who merely nodded in approval with a smirk on his face.

The humming of the computer systems in the room filled the air as the three looked back and forth between each other.

"Soooo, why do my vitals need to be abnormal to make an automated ship operate", looking between the father and son with confusion.

Del looks to Shiisham, gesturing for him to return to his work. He puts his hand on Ictamus' shoulder and begins to lead him out of the room. "You'll be going to Metuoti. It's our sanctuary for those in need of some alone time." His opposite hand directs Ictamus through the doorway.

"You'll get to explore some of your curiosities and have some time to think. With an emphasis on time to think." He stops and turns to Ictamus.

"How long am I going to be out there?"

"The ship and habitat will determine that. But you'll get the option to stay or return once you've been deemed mentally stable. But, take as long as you need to get your head in the right place. I can't express to you enough that we have to get you back home. I can only speculate on the

thoughts going through your head and can only imagine what I'd do if I were in your position. Once you learn who I am, you'll thank me for being as patient as I am with you. When you get back," He pulls Ictamus' jaw, forcing direct eye contact, "we work, got it?"

Ictamus assures him, nodding his head, squinting in the attempt to see Del's eyes through his own reflection on Del's goggles.

The gravity of Del's unseen stare was broken as Shiisham came around the corner. "Uh..." pausing briefly, "pew", he exhales.

Both look over at the chipper kid.

"For a second, I thought you two were getting friendly." Shiisham says as he throws several playful jabs at Ictamus. "Sorry, no goodbye kisses today, but I'm glad to see you on your way." He arrives at another large circular doorway and pulls the lever, opening the massive contraption.