

Through Alien Eyes

by

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THROUGH ALIEN EYES

I only become aware of the danger when I feel a sudden jolt of intense pain that almost knocks me out of the sky as long as long, curled talons dig under the scaled crest on my back, piercing into the soft flesh underneath.

In an instant, I realize my mistake.

I allowed myself to become preoccupied with the sensation of flying, with the feel of unfamiliar wings, with the stunning panoramas offered by a volatile alien landscape. I did not notice when my shadow, flickering over the fissure riddled moonscape below, was eclipsed by those of three other *apatiko touai*, the huge predatory birds of the moon of mu Arae.

Nor did I hear the bellowing warning cries of the *apatiko*. *Apatiko* ears are small, basic structures, not much more than holes tucked into the temples of elongated skulls with a small single columella in their inner ears. With my primitive ears and the rush of sulfur laced winds as I glided over the cracked landscape below I did not hear the warning caws of the other *apatiko*.

Now, it may be too late.

A dim red sun smolders sits high in the sky behind me. Its wan light filters through bilious clouds tinged a sickly yellow from the sulfur taint and ash gray from the choking soot of the belching volcanoes that pockmark this turbulent alien moon. The umber light filtered through the smoggy atmosphere casts my shadow onto the broken, scabrous landscape of blasted, blackened pumice below me as I glide on volcano-fueled thermal currents, pumping powerful wings that propel my great bulk through the dense atmosphere.

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Below me, I see three similarly shaped shadows chasing my own. Their shadows are dark spear and dagger shapes and flicker faster over the fissure riddled landscape than my own and I know I am in trouble.

“Eury! Eury! You ok?” I hear Sonja’s familiar, comforting voice echo in my mind. A microphone can be lost too easily, so the words are transmitted electronically, relayed directly into my alien brain.

All communication is done through this technology facilitated telepathy. The device that enables this telepathic communication is called a NET, a Neural-Electro Transmitter. The NET embedded in my apatiko brain reads my brainwaves and deciphers my thoughts, translating them into electrical impulses that are streamed to Sonja and the rest of the team at our base camp, down below in low red foothills at the base of this volcanic mountain.

“Yes, yes, I am ok,” I think back, trying to infuse my thoughts with assurance but knowing that inflection and nuance will be lost in the translation of thought to data to language. I don’t want her to be alarmed. I had a hard enough time overcoming her objections to letting me jump in the first place.

Consciousness transference, or body jumping, has been around for years. It started with the imaging of human thought and memory electronically with the ultimate goal of beating back the ravages of time and old age by preserving a person’s consciousness electronically and perhaps even ultimately thwarting at last our own inevitable mortality.

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This became possible with the NET, the rosetta stone that allowed us to translate electro chemical impulses of thought into digital data that could be preserved and manipulated by human technology of silicon and wire.

Brain surgeons could download a patient's entire consciousness while they performed surgery without risk of disrupting neural pathways. Once the procedure was complete, the upload would reconfigure the healed brain, reattaching and rearranging neural pathways, translating data back from the digital language of ones and zeroes into the chemical language of synapses and neurons.

Of course, it wasn't long until someone tried to transfer consciousness into a new body not their own – a cloned body, or a donated host body – making the tantalizing fantasy of immortality a possibility for the first time in human history.

The leap was later made to transfer human consciousness into animals. It was a new kind of surreal safari that enabled thrill seekers to achieve an experience unlike anything else – at least, anything human. The thrill of the experience was impossible to recreate in any sim or holo program.

No human could replicate what it felt like to be a gorilla, swinging from mist-covered trees in the mysterious Congo jungles. Never before had a human felt the anticipation in a tiger's tensed muscles and growling stomach as it crouched on tall rocks, readying to pounce on unwitting prey. These "safaris" had become commonplace on Earth; whole families would take holidays together, transplanting their consciousnesses into a pride of lions or a pod of dolphins.

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But now our team is taking the concept further – transplanting human consciousness into alien life forms. We call it Xeno-Consciousness Transference or XCT.

It is still experimental and dangerous, but body jumping enables us to experience first-hand the life of an alien creature, to understand how alien physiological processes evolved in an environment completely different from Earth's.

As we developed the technology to explore nearby stars, the whole field of xenobiology exploded. So far, Earth governments have explored a mere dozen or so of the most promising stars in proximity to Earth – Alpha Centauri, Epsilon Eridani, Tau Ceti, Gliese, Lacaille, and a half-dozen others. The proliferation of diverse life on the rocky planets, asteroids, even in the roiling atmosphere of some of the gas giants, is mind boggling. Even from this tiniest corner of our galactic neighborhood a cosmological rule has emerged – life is endemic to the universe and it will find a way to evolve and thrive. From the microscopic jelly fish floating in the high atmospheres of the gas giants of Teegarden's Star, to the strange worm-like creatures living in the dark frozen depths near the volcanic vents of the icy moons of Tau Ceti, it is clear life will not just evolve but flourish even in the most remote and foreboding of places.

The advances we've made in biology and medicine, in geology and chemistry, have grown exponentially in relation to the myriad strange life forms we've encountered. The past decades have brought a new Golden Age of scientific discovery.

From our study of alien life, we have invented a way to regenerate human cells – effectively arresting the aging process caused by the erosion of telomeres – by extracting the gooey secretions of a type of sea anemone that grows in the dark, frigid waters

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churning under the frozen crusts of Europa. We've developed a new kind of gene therapy that can effectively prevent heart attacks by growing musculature around arteries that enables the arteries contract of their own volition, pumping blood in the event of heart failure. That breakthrough came from studying of the massive squid that live in the ammonia oceans of a large, asteroid-pummeled planet orbiting 55 Cancri. The list goes on.

Body jumping into these extraterrestrial creatures, where feasible, has accelerated our discoveries. We are advancing our knowledge of xenobiology, alien habitats, and alien geology at an unparalleled rate compared to where we'd be with our conventional observe, record, and conjecture methods.

Life thrives in unbridled cacophony in the universe and the possibilities for discovery are unbounded. Our study of this abundance of strange, new life has given humanity the keys to unlock the greatest mysteries of the universe – to break free from the false tethers of mortality, to repair the ravages of time and old age. Each new species we encounter offers a new opportunity for revelation into the inner workings of the universe – a chance to ferret out its riddles and master the tools of creation.

And so, we jump.

Brian has done a xeno body jump twice before, as have other members of the team.

I had resisted volunteering for a jump for some time – mostly at Sonja's request. She has never been comfortable with the idea of consciousness transfers and the idea of jumping into the strange mind of an alien creature does not sit well with her. It has been a source of contention in our marriage.

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“It’s unnatural. It’s cruel. It’s a sin.” She would argue. I respect her for her beliefs and love her for her passion. But as a xenobiologist, the tantalizing prospect of experiencing an alien world with all the heightened senses of an alien creature in its natural habitat presents an opportunity too remarkable to miss.

How better to understand the lion’s primal desire to hunt the gazelle than to become the lion? Imagine crouching in the tall yellow grass of the savannah stalking your prey, tensing at its scent as it approaches unwarily. Live the thrill of the chase and the burning pain from the exertion of the pursuit as you run down your prey, to taste its sweet, hot meat, shorn from its haunch with your own teeth.

How better to fully understand the exotic life forms we’ve begun to encounter on a dozen worlds than to actually live as one of them for a day or even an hour? What better way to understand their biology, their psychology, how they interact with their ecology, than to see their world through their own alien eyes?

Sonja finally relented to my impassioned arguments and I put my name on the list of volunteers for upcoming jumps.

This is my first.

“Eury,” says Brian, the team lead, his voice shocking me out of my reverie. “You have to get out of there. I think you’ve accidentally flown into the apatiko hunting ground. They are very territorial. They’ll rip you to pieces!”

As if it could overhear my telepathic conversation and wished to emphasize the warning, a second apatiko dives down at me, raking its talons across my right wing, shredding membrane and bending the pliable cartridge of my meters-long wing.

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I cry out in pain, and even with my small ears, I hear my bellowing, alien cry of pain and surprise echo across the canyons and crevices of the volatile volcanic moon.

Instinctively, I retract my injured wing, trying to tuck it closer to my body to protect it and immediately lose lift and start to tumble from the amber sky.

I spiral toward the rocky surface and I can see every detail of the red and black igneous rock of the lava flows on the ground below and I realize the apatiko have some kind of telescopic vision. We do a thorough study of each alien species before attempting a body jump. In our survey, we missed this feature of the apatiko's biology. It makes me wonder what else we may have missed.

The scientist in me, not smart enough to be paralyzed by terror at my current predicament, guesses this is an evolutionary trait to aid in the apatikos' hunting and to help balance out the creatures' poor hearing. Through my alien eyes, I am able to see each razor sharp rock, each cracked and broken boulder of the volcanic moonscape below in stunning detail.

On the ground, I see the shadow of a third apatiko wheeling around me and I am reminded of an Earth hawk circling a mouse caught in an open field. It is preparing for the kill.

I am being hunted.

The scientist in me observes this and marvels that these great birds hunt together as a pack.

Then fear overtakes me.

Dormant, alien instincts take hold and I unfurl my injured wing, catching thick air despite the pain as the wind tears at the ragged, raw nerves.

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I push unfamiliar muscles against the wind and start to wheel away. I see long, dark shadows on the ground below flickering across the rugged terrain in pursuit.

“Eury, fly! Fly!” shouts Brian, his voice echoing in my mind.

I try, but it is difficult. In many ways I am a stranger to my own body, a newborn babe still getting the feel of broad, awkward wings of membrane and scale and long, gangly legs with hooked, talon-tipped claws.

I struggle with my torn wing but eventually my wings catch air and I soar into dark, billowing clouds laced with sulfur and ash. The apatiko hound me and now that my speed is slowed by my damaged wing, I am no longer deafened by the rush of wind and can hear their sharp caws behind me.

Again I am jerked in mid air by an unexpected collision and feel another sharp pain, this time in my thin, talon-hooked back legs that dangle behind me as I fly. My legs are useless and vulnerable while I am flying I realize, unless I can position myself above my pursuers and pivot my legs with their sharp talons below me and use them to attack. But consider this, but dismiss the thought of turning around and trying to attack. I am outnumbered and awkward in my own body. My only option is to fly fast and hard and try to out fly my pursuers.

I feel another sharp pain in my legs and I crane my long neck and look back, under my beating wind and see it, a large apatiko giving chase, its long serrated beak covered in ochre colored blood. My blood.

For the first time, I am truly afraid. I may die here, I realize. I may die trapped as this monstrous bird before I can make it back to the base camp, back to my own body, pecked apart by these predatory birds on this smoggy, volcanic moon.

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“You aren’t going to die, Eury,” Brian reassures me and I realize that in my fear and stress I transmitted my thoughts over the NET back to the base camp and I am ashamed for showing my fear. I need to be strong. Strong for Sonja. It’s not right to put her through this. She never wanted me to do this jump in the first place.

“Eury, do you see the river ahead of you and to the right?” Brian asks.

I look to my right and see it, a long, red, serpentine river rolling down from the volcanic mountains.

“Yes, yes, I see it.”

“Make for the river, Eury. We think that marks a boundary line of the hunting territory of the apatiko chasing you.”

The red river is still several kilometers away, but having a finish line in sight gives me hope and hope gives me strength. I beat my wings faster, straining unfamiliar muscles, racing for the red river’s edge.

The apatiko caw angrily behind me and the two behind me nip again at my helpless legs. I realize they are trying to saw off my rear talons with their razor-edged serrated beaks to literally remove one of my means of defense.

Below me, the shadow of the third apatiko, the one circling above me, coalesces into a squat torpedo shape. I realize he is diving and the charcoal sun high in the afternoon behind us turns his shadow into a thin, dagger. I watch in horror as its shadow races across the rolling lava flows on the ground below toward me.

I beat my wings faster and feel muscles in my sternum and wings start to burn and then go numb from the exertion.

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The shadow of the apatiko above disappears altogether and my human reasoning tells me this is because it is nearly on top of me.

The winding, burgundy river looms larger. The river is cloudy with ash belched from the volcanoes and dust eroded from the high, volcanic peaks.

With my keen, telescopic vision I can see fine details now – strange, slug-shaped shadows of fish hiding under the red banks, tiny pale green grasses clinging to tiny fissures in the igneous rock and swaying in the thick air.

With a last effort I push, straining toward the river's edge. I brace for the inevitable impact, the feel of a hard, sharp beak piercing scale and muscle, meat and bone.

Behind me, I feel a whoosh of air as the apatiko narrowly misses me as it plunges. I feel my damaged legs scrawl along its side and brush its wings as it plummets toward the ground in its killing dive.

I hear its keening caw in frustration and anger and turn my long neck to look back. I watch as the apatiko flaps its wings wildly as it tries to break its decent. It pulls up at the last moment, narrowly avoiding crashing into the sharps rocks of the valley floor.

The other two apatiko bank in the sky, one wheeling to my right, the other to my left. Their cries of frustrated aggression join the keening wail of their companion.

I wonder why they give up the chase. Then I look down and watch as my shadow glides across the surface of the roiling red river.

I am safe.

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An irresistible urge percolates up inside me, an excitement and a need to bellow my prowess to all rivals. The human part of me tries to quell the urge but it is not to be denied.

I scream my own victory cry at my retreating rivals.

This is no mere carrion crow's caw. This is the tremendous bellowing of a mighty creature. I can feel the vibrations of breath in my ribs as I scream into the wind-whipped sky of this alien moon. My breath rushes from deep within my rumbling belly up through my great throat and out of the apatiko's version of a syrinx and I roar.

"My god, Eury, was that you?" asks Sonja, clearly alarmed.

"Yes. Yes, that was me. I am sorry." The truth is, I am not sorry. I am victorious and unabashedly proud and I wonder if it is truly me that is feeling this euphoria or if it is some lingering vestige of the apatiko rearing up from somewhere in the nest of neural hardwiring of embedded instinct not completely erased during the transfer that is swollen with pride.

"That was close, Eury you ready to head back?" asks Brian.

"No," I say honestly. Despite the scare and my close brush with the territorial apatiko, the feeling of flying as one of these monstrous birds is indescribable.

"I have never felt anything like this," I think back, sending my thoughts back to Sonja, Brian, and the rest of the team.

I crane my long neck and look out over the gorge below. I wheel in the sky and look back toward the volcanic peaks behind me. In the distance, I see the beginnings of the red river that crashes and meanders through the valley.

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Our camp is set up at the edges of the river. I follow its snaking trail up through the foothills to the foot of the mountainside with my keen eyes and remember my revelation about the apatikos' vision.

"The apatiko have some kind of telescopic eyes," I relay to Brian. "I can see details as small as a finger a kilometer away."

"Really?" says Brian, our team lead. "That explains how they are such effective predators. You should have a pretty good sense of smell as well from what we can tell."

"Yeah, crap hearing though."

Then I see it, almost seven kilometers away, down on the mountainside near the edge of the red river, nearly hidden by boulders and cliffs, the small silver tents of the base camp where Brian and others wait for me.

"I see you."

"That's incredible. We see you too, but you are a hulking, solitary figure in the sky."

"I think I want to fly some more."

My wings ache to soar on sulfur currents blowing across the volcanic landscape.

As I fly I feel warm, ash tinged wind wash over my body. The hot breeze feels good and I feel the wind lift me into the thermal currents as I flex my wings.

"You O.K.?" asks Sonja, concerned.

"Yes," I think back, "Just enjoying the view."

I fly high over the rough, boulder strewn valleys, the XCT base camp is kilometers behind me now. I feel the air push and pull at me, the strong wind tries to tear

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me from the sky, but I am stronger, my wings are supple and bend the wind to my will, despite the gash in my right wing.

I start to sense something else. New senses are turning on one by one, like an old spaceship whose systems power on, one at a time, to prevent overloading ancient circuitry. I realize I am picking up a mélange of scents on the wind as my new alien brain figures out how to process the sense of smell.

The first and most overpowering scent is the putrescent tang of sulfur on the air. At first, the human part of me gags on the rotten egg smell and I start to retch, convulsing in mid air. I instinctively contract my wings in a very human response. Two instincts wage war against each other – vestigial apatiko instincts lingering despite the mind wipe battle with my human instincts. The apatiko instincts prevail and I straighten my wings in time to correct and stop my fall.

I get used to the rotten egg smell quickly and soon find it comforting and familiar. The apatiko in me recognizes the smell of this moon. I am used to the way a person gets used to the particular personal smell of their own home that they do not notice but that is immediately recognizable to a visitor – the smell of dusty old things, the cooking smell, the smell of smoke tainted walls. The unique smell of this moon is not alien to me. Not to the apatiko me. This is my home.

“Eury, you ok?” asks Brian. “We saw you tumble again. Maybe you should come back. You might be more injured than you realize and if you die while you’re an apatiko...” He left the thought unsaid, but I did not need him to complete it. There was no need for him to.

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“Yes, yes, I am ok. I just lost my concentration. My sense of smell just kicked on I think. The smell almost gagged me.”

“Be careful, Eury. You are starting to scare us.”

“It’s amazing, Brian,” I say, trying to change the topic. “I can smell for miles. Christ, I think I can even smell you.”

“That is disturbing. You’re not in danger of submerging are you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Submerging was the term that had been coined to describe the very real, though remote, risk of having your own identity subsumed or swallowed by the host body during a jump. With human consciousness transfer, this was not so much an issue. We’d mapped every synaptic relay of the brain and when a personality was transferred into a host body it was always a pretty clear bet nothing remained of the host – no lingering memories, no lingering consciousness – that could create any kind of identity crisis.

It was harder to do with the human-to-animal transfers and there were cases, though rare, when body jumpers submerged – the animal consciousness reasserting itself and swallowing the human consciousness that had been grafted onto the animal brain. In those cases, the human identity lost control, fading into the background and eventually becoming only a flickering, lingering memory – an echo of humanity in a dark corner of an animal mind.

It had happened only a few times, but once was enough cause to be careful. I could see, now, how easily it could happen. It was an even greater risk with alien animals where the neurology of the animals was even less well understood.

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My stomach roiled. It felt like a great, white furnace full of molten steel was churning in my belly and suddenly I realized I was hungry from my flight from the rival apatiko.

Not just hungry. Ravenous.

Again, I smell the base camp. I am downwind and can smell the distinct smells of the dozen or so men and women there. I can smell the sweat rolling of Brian, the familiar scent of Sonja's perfume, the coffee on the tech's breath, the faint vapor of morning vodka coming through sweating pours of the doctor standing vigil over my prone body lying in stasis in the one of the tents.

For an instant, an instinctive thought flashes through my mind and I wonder how these strange, small, and smelly creatures would taste. I quash the apatiko instinct and inhale deeply of the rich air and pick up a tantalizing sent farther down, off the low plains twenty kilometers out from the foothills huddled at the base of the craggy volcanic mountain the apatiko call home.

I fly towards the smell, swooping down over low, rolling fields covered in a thick fields of tall grass nourished by the rich volcanic soil. Ahead, I see the source of the delectable scent – a herd of earthy smelling creatures, a couple of hundred of them, huddled together against the wind, chewing on the tall grass stems. They have a heady, meaty smell and I image they taste of soot and grass. Before I realize what I am doing I hear them bleat in fear and see their plump, soft, white and tan colored bodies scurry as they try to hide in the tall grass. The next thing I know, I feel one slide down my gullet in one swift gulp – a tasty, furry treat feeding the furnace of my hunger.

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“Oh, Eury, did you just eat that?” I hear Sonja ask. Her revulsion even comes through the NET.

“Yeah, yeah I did.”

“Eury, should we be worried?” Brian’s voice this time.

There were danger signs for submerging – generally, engaging in animal acts a normal human would find unappealing or revolting. Preying on animals was one. Sniffing spoor was another. As was marking territory. And mating.

But I don’t think I am in danger. I can feel some vestigial instincts of the apatiko still crouching in nerves or laying dormant in unused synaptic pathways. But all the higher functions are mine.

I am still me.

Confident in my humanity, I reply. “No, no. I ok. Just hungry. What are these things anyway?”

“I forget their exact name. We’ve been calling them potstickers because their only niche in this world appears to be to fatten up on the grass that grows on the volcanic plains and to serve as dinner for the apatiko. The things breed like rabbits though. That seems to be their only evolutionary defense – to outbreed the apatikos’ appetites.”

“Well, the apatiko are onto something. They are tasty.”

I realize I am still hungry and I fly higher into the sky, swooping in a circle to make another pass at the fat, slow moving creatures scuttling and bleating in the grassy fields. One of the herd is slower moving and has become separated from the others. I swoop down and pluck it out of the grass with my sharp beak and I hear it cry out in pain.

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Instinct takes hold and I shake my powerful neck once. Twice. The creature goes silent and I swallow it whole.

Then I wheel and search for another. Then another.

I feel I could eat the whole herd. And I almost do, until the herd, what's left of it, scatters into the grass and become too difficult to hunt even with my keen vision and acute smell.

"Eury, you ready to come back?" I can hear the worry in Sonja's voice.

"No."

"Eury – come back." Brian's this time. I can tell it is not a request.

"Ok. Alright. Guess my eating habits didn't sit well?"

"You nauseated Sonja and a few of the others. Don't expect any kisses when you get back."

"So, how am I doing?" I ask, inquiring about my real body, my preserved physical self, lying in stasis back at the tent.

"Your vital signs are stable."

"Good, want to make sure I have a place to come back to. Where do I go now?"

"Land in the field just across from the base camp, in the crook of the river's bend and we'll jump you back."

"Sounds good." I wheel in the late afternoon sky, flapping my wings slowly, and roll. As I do, I can feel the red dwarf sun in the distance warm the scales of my belly and the heat feels good on my bloated stomach.

It is a good day to be an apatiko.

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I turn and start flying slowly back toward the low foothills where the XCT base camp sits perched in the crook of the red river, where my body rests, kept warm and alive by machines and stasis equipment. Keeping a light on for me, as it were.

My body lies there, brain dead, devoid of thought or reason, stripped of all my memories, all my thoughts.

It is one of the rules.

There three fundamental rules of body jumping.

The McMillan Rule. Simon's Rule. And Bobby's Rule.

The first rule, the McMillan's Rule, was simple scientific practicality. The donor brain had to be similar in size and function to the transferring brain.

It was one of the early attempts at jumping that gave rise to this rule.

She was Ms. Ellie McMillan, a lonely old woman living alone after the untimely death of her husband robbed her of her dreams of children in a too-large house for just her with only a bevy of cats, for whom she had a profound affection, for company.

According to the story, an unscrupulous doctor, willing to break all ethical rules and moral compunction in order to bilk the poor, lonely woman out of her sizable fortune, facilitated the window McMillan's desire to have her consciousness transferred into her cat. The reasons for this were never quite clear – except perhaps that she was senile and eccentric and what senile and lonely cat-loving widow wouldn't like want to spend an afternoon lapping fresh cream or napping in the sun as a pampered feline – with disastrous and unfortunate results for both the widow and her cat.

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The important lesson of Ms. McMillan's tragic story is that we'd found that the donor brain could be larger because we could always burn away unused parts of the brain. However, the donor brain, as in the case of poor Ms. McMillan's cat, could not be significantly smaller – it had to be at least large enough to contain the jumper's thoughts, memories, hopes and experiences – all that sundry collection of stuff that makes up identity, or consciousness, or soul.

The second rule, the Simon Rule, was born more out of social convention, some might even argue superstition. It is certainly not rooted in science.

There is to be no duplication of consciousness.

There are two ways to do the consciousness transfer. You can simply transfer that person's consciousness, erasing as you go, transferring the data, the memories, the electrical impulses – some, like Sonja, say the soul – from one body to another, or from a body to a storage medium. Or you can create a complete backup of a person's mind, identity, consciousness – whatever you want to call it – all that unique stuff that lives in the human brain that makes a person an individual.

This is the way it was done in the early days.

It made sense of course. The idea was to create a backup, like a tape reel, of a person's consciousness, so that a person could live on even after death to be reborn by having their stored consciousness resurrected by being transferred to a new host body. Backing up your memories, your thoughts, your identity the way you might back up data on a hard drive.

But something happened.

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Most of it is anecdotal and there is no scientific basis for the horror stories that pervade popular culture so pervasively they've become urban myth.

The prevailing thought is that if you make a copy of your mind, it should simply be a duplicate you – it should have all the same memories, thoughts, ideas, dreams of the individual replicated.

But in the early days of the first procedures, grim stories flourished of duplications gone awry. Whenever a duplicate copy of a person's consciousness was made, without simultaneously wiping the individuality of the host, the copy never seemed to be the quite the same. Stories grew of doppelgangers who were subtle imposters of copied individuals.

The first case and most famous case was Simon.

Simon, so the legend goes, was one of the first to have the procedure done. He was a terminal case, a brilliant man with a malignant tumor, struck down in the prime of his youth and accomplishment. The tumor was deep in his brain where no laser or scalpel could reach without doing irreparable harm to his magnificent brain.

A copy of Simon's mind was made, a record of all his memories, dreams, ambitions and skills. Everything he had ever done, everything he longed to do, translated from chemical reactions firing between synapses into electrical digital data and backed up onto a computer.

The doctors performed their work, able to safely sluice into Simon's brain knowing that whatever damage they may be doing, all Simon's thoughts, memories, and skills were safely stored in softly humming electromagnetic medium and could be restored.

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The surgeons, free from worry of having to work around Simon's brain, were able to make quick work of the tumor. In the mush that was left, they laid the seeds of a new brain, lacing stem cells harvested from Simon's own body in his skull that would grow new brain matter. In a matter of months, a new brain, free of malignancy, fresh and unwrinkled, unmarred by scalpel, untouched by any memory or thought, rested in Simon's skull.

And then they transferred 'Simon's' consciousness back. But what they had preserved was not Simon. And what they transferred back into Simon's body was not Simon either.

He had all Simon's memories, many of the same dreams and skills and hopes.

But, according to his family, he was not Simon.

Simon, according to his wife, never tied his shoes before putting on his tie, like the new Simon did.

Simon, according to his son, never looped his j's when signing his name, like the new father did.

Simon, according his daughter, never took his eggs with ketchup, like her new daddy did.

Whoever now lived in Simon's body, had access to Simon's memories and dreams and hopes. But he was not Simon.

Simon, according to his family, was dead.

Six months after his surgery, Simon's wife left him.

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Nine months after his surgery, Simon took a shotgun and placed it against his temple, where his hair had only just started to grow over the scars left by the surgery. Simon pulled the trigger, blasting his new cancer-free brain out against his bedroom wall.

And that was the second rule. Simon's Rule: consciousness would never be duplicated. It would only ever be transferred.

Somehow, for reasons the scientists could not adequately explain, creating a copy of person's consciousness destroyed the person's identity in a way that defied scientific explanation.

The third rule is Bobby's Rule. This quite just rule engenders few qualms among the public, scientists, or body hoppers. Its purpose is to prevent the murder of personality by wiping a sentient individuals mind clean to transfer your own into their physical form.

In the early years, it was an all too common practice as unscrupulous people used the technology to trade in their bodies for new ones, either trading in their old physical or disease ridden forms for young, supple healthy bodies – never mind the living mind that may already be in residence. The technology, in its infancy, and the unscrupulous elite who were wealthy enough to take advantage of the technology, together perpetrated one of the most heinous genocides in human history.

After millennia of crushing the poor of the developed and developing worlds under cyclic debt in a system that routinized poverty, after sucking whole regions dry of every natural resource, the wealthy few then turned their eyes to the one last thing the poor and oppressed could call their own – their identities.

Like medieval vampires of legend, wealthy old denizens of the developed world swooped upon the disenfranchised poverty stricken youth of the suburbs and ghettos.

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They came in black helicopters and their henchmen would round them up, not to force them to work in textile mills or shoe factories as in earlier years, but to usurp their young bodies as hosts for vampire minds.

It was a disgusting crime of endemic proportions to which the good people of the world turned a blind eye to because of the promise of immortality.

The backlash came with the well publicized case of ‘Bobby.’

Bobby was a young boy from with dark hair, an infectious smile and mischievous eyes. One of the body snatching outfits, operating under the euphemistic name Chrysalis, came to Bobby’s remote village in their black vans and helicopters. The outfit determined he would make an excellent candidate. His family had no money, no connections. He was young and healthy. And he would not be missed by anyone other than his family who were of no import.

The outfit swooped in and stole Bobby from his family and whisked him back to a laboratory in the States to have his mind wiped, his very identity raped and destroyed, so his body could play host to a client’s gnarled old soul.

Why the story of this one young boy should spark such calamitous outrage when tens of thousands of other young impoverished innocents had been abducted to have their bodies used as living vessels for the minds of the frightened and dying wealthy wasn’t clear. It was, perhaps, just the fortuitous and random attention of the media coupled with the fickle attention of the public. But Bobby’s story sparked an outrage so intense it shut down the whole endeavor of body hopping for a generation. The good people of the world stood up in one voice and said – enough.

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And that is Bobby's Rule: no consciousness transfer into another sentient creature.

Unfortunately for Bobby, the righteous outcry came too late. Bobby was gone. A decrepit and despicable dying old buzzard had already taken up residence in Bobby's skin. The wealthy body snatcher was just a few days after the story of Bobby's abduction broke, face down in a culvert, his new hijacked young body beaten to a bloody pulp by a gang of vigilantes.

For a generation following Bobby's story, the technology was taboo.

Until the Rules.

And that is why my body lay back against the red foothills in the XCT camp, mind wiped clean, body perfectly preserved, awaiting my return.

I beat my huge wings lazily, fanning orange and grey colored clouds of sulfur and soot. I am in no hurry.

I land in a clearing of rock and low scrub in the elbow of the river across from the base camp. I watched as the technicians approach me warily and I beat my wings once before folding them against my body just to watch them flinch and to see the wind from my wings billow and blow against them.

The technicians wheel a large device next to me cables snake and run the length of the field to a white tent set back about a hundred meters. I know they connect to a similar machine next to me, next to my body. The techs come nearer, approaching warily. It is hard to overcome the instinctual fear of such a large and ferocious looking creature engenders.

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“Eury, can you bend down,” asks one of the techs, reaching, straining upward to affix electrodes to my temples, to the temples of the apatiko.

I comply and bend my head, lowering it so the technician can reach. The yellow scrub that grows in the volcanic soil here tickles the underside of my beak.

As the technicians work, I watch my family, standing over by the tents. I am upwind now and can’t catch their scent, but I can see them clearly with telescopic eyes. I look at Sonja’s face, zooming in so I can see every precious line, every beautiful pore on her face even from a hundred meters. I will miss this.

“Ready?” asks Brian.

“No,” I say honestly. This is addictive.

“Well, ready or not, its time for the transfer. We don’t want you submerging. Your buffet of that herd had them worried.”

I hear the worry in his voice and wonder what it must have been like to see me, dark wings wheeling against the backdrop of the smoldering, volcanic sky, plunging into the tall grasses, attacking and feasting on the strange, plump cattle that graze there.

I wonder how close I might have come to surrendering my identity to the lingering instinct of the apatiko. But I dismiss these thoughts. I am me. I will always be me.

I feel a strange tingling at first and then the sky starts to spin. I feel drunk and my body starts to go numb, first my legs and arms, then the numbness creeps across my chest. I can’t breathe. I start to panic and I try to remind myself this is natural. Or at least this is what is supposed to happen. The numbness crawls up my neck and I feel

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myself start to topple over, alien ground rushing up at me. But I am powerless to stop my fall. I see the techs back away from me.

The panic wells within me. I am afraid.

Then, I am no more.

The numbness swallows my mind and my eyes go dark. There is only blackness.

Distantly, I see a pale grey light, a slightly lighter shade of blackness against infinite dark, like the hint of light around the bend of a long tunnel.

I feel strange, unfamiliar sensations. I feel small and light and warm. My stomach feels full and cold, in comparison to the roiling empty inferno of the apatiko. My brain feels gluey, like a great, complicated machine coming slowly unstuck after years of disuse and neglect.

“Eury, Eury? You hear me?”

“I hear you,” I mumble through a stale, sticky, sour mouth.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I am recovering from the worst hangover ever.”

“Sounds about right.”

“I want to do it again.”

Brian laughs.

I feel a strange sensation, a tactile pressure, a reassuring warmth on skin. I look over and see Sonja holding my hand, a strange look in her eyes. She is happy to see me. But I can tell she is worried.

It’s hard on a marriage, I suppose, to see your spouse transform into a monster.

I try to smile reassuringly and squeeze her hand. “I am ok,” I say.

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She smiles but I see the tears in her eyes.

It's three months later. Sonja and I have returned to Earth and to the normal routines of our daily lives.

Sonja and I are doing better. She was distant for awhile after our trip to mu Arae. I tried to talk with her about it, about what was bothering her. She tried to explain it to me, but she couldn't seem to find the right words. Something about life, and souls, and God that, despite all my education, I find too esoteric to understand. Perhaps my education is too practical to understand arguments of faith.

I've never had her convictions. For me, if it is not measurable, demonstrable, repeatable – it is fancy or imagination.

Despite the chasm in our world views, gradually, we've gotten better, perhaps because the memory of the experience has faded. Or maybe it's me. Maybe I am more myself now, after a few months. Some people say that when you do a body jump, you take a bit of the creature with you when you jump back. Mostly, this notion is dismissed as urban legend by rational scientific minds.

But tales persist of people who body jump into apes and come back with an urge to groom their mates, or come back from a jump as a bear and are wildly territorial, or as tigers with an urge to mark their territory or hunt their own meals.

Perhaps a bit of the apatiko stayed with me, lingering somehow, contributing to the faint, underlying revulsion that Sonja seemed to feel towards me for those first months after my jump.

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It's breakfast and the two of us are in the middle of our familiar morning routine of work, coffee, and breakfast, when the video monitor chimes. I get up from the table and walk over to the wall to the video monitor and press the button that accepts the call.

I see a familiar face on the monitor screen. It's Brian.

"We've got another potential candidate for a consciousness transfer. You game?"

Immediately, unthinkingly, I reply.

"Yes."

I hear a soft clang behind me, the sound of a dropped spoon loosened from shocked hands falling to the floor.

"It's a fish this time, a very different kind of experience. Not so much a fish, a reptile, kind of a cross between a crocodile and a whale that swims in a deep, liquid methane ocean of Zeta Tuscanae. It's like nothing we've ever seen before, Eury. They are fantastic creatures. We've completed the preliminary analysis and think we could be ready for a test jump in a few weeks. Interested?"

I pause and look over my shoulder. Sonja holds her empty hand, halfway between plate and mouth, mouth half-open in an expression of dismay and horror.

Her eyes plead with me. "No," they say.

It only takes me a second to decide. I pause and turn back to the computer screen. I can feel Sonja's eyes on my back, pleading.

I have say only two words. "Yes" and "When?"

I am selfish and reckless. I know this. And she's known that about me since the first days we met in graduate school, so many years ago so it unfair for her to blame me for my self-involvement and irresponsibility now.

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This is too amazing an opportunity. As a xenobiologist, to be able to not just observe, but to experience first hand, such diverse and truly alien creatures, to feel what they feel, to see what they see. It is an experience and opportunity I cannot let pass by. I am hooked.

I can only hope she forgives me.

I am sure she will.

The trip to Zeta Tuscanæ takes weeks to plan and months in transit. The world around Zeta Tuscanæ is a frigid and foreboding place.

It is called Diros.

A frozen world, far from the bright, yellow sun of Zeta Tuscanæ, in size it is comparable to Mars but in composition it has more in common with the Jovian moon Titan, with a heavy, rich atmosphere of nitrogen and a vast hydrocarbon sea of liquid methane. A steady rain of hydrocarbons falls on the frigid methane seas. The atmosphere is a poison and the temperature equally as lethal. It is a challenging world for the expedition, but Brian assures me the XCT team is well equipped to handle the challenges posed by this inhospitable place.

The interstellar ship parks in orbit around Diros and we take a shuttle down to the surface.

The advance team has already set up the XCT base camp on the frozen coast of an immense hydrocarbon sea. Diros is not tilted, like the Earth, so its seasons do not vary between the northern and southern hemisphere. The only change in season comes when

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the planet swings closer to its parent star on its long, eccentric elliptical orbit around Zeta Tuscanae.

We've come in early spring, when Diros' path around the sun is only mid-way between the dark, frozen winter at the extreme outer when the temperatures are warmer but the hydrocarbon shores are still partially frozen, allowing us to set up camp on the methane ice.

The frozen shore where we make camp has a beautiful view of the treacherous sea. Above the sea, the sky is the color of burnt umber from the hydrocarbon atmosphere with thick, frothing clouds of methane and ethane. The methane sea itself is clear and viscous, but reflects the ginger sky. A steady rain of methane and ethane patters hydrocarbon sleet onto the base camp.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" I ask Sonja, as we wait while the techs unpack the additional gear we brought.

For the most part, most of the equipment will remain on board the shuttle craft we took to the planet's surface, but the XCT team is setting up a few other modules, metal structures this time not tents. The atmosphere is too toxic, the temperature too cold, for humans to be exposed to Diros' atmosphere. She nods and stands without saying a word. She is despondent and distant again.

We put on our suits and go through the airlock. The ground here on the frozen shore has a strange feel to it. The ground is mostly frozen water ice with a methane slush covering a ferrite core.

"It reminds me of walking on a giant orange slushy," she says, smiling, I am sure, despite herself. Her arms cartwheel as she tries to keep her balance on the squishy shore.

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I laugh and lose my own balance, arms pin-wheeling, and fall on my backside into the hydrocarbon permafrost of frozen methane and water ice.

Sonja laughs. It is good to see her happy.

She walks over and extends her hand, still smiling. “That’s what you get for laughing at me and not paying attention,” she says as she helps hoist me to my feet.

“I know, I know.” She’s right. She’s always right. For a second, that thought gives me pause. She has reservations about this excursion, even stronger than last time. Maybe I should reconsider. But it’s too late. We are here. We are ready. Even now the team is prepping the boats that will take us out to the deep waters of the methane sea to hunt our quarry. And this is a very unique species and this is only my second jump into an alien creature.

The truth is I can’t wait.

“Come on,” I say, still holding Sonja’s hand. We walk to the sea’s edge. The waves are high in the relatively low gravity and they crash against the soft, frozen sludge of the sea shore. Standing, we both sink slightly into the soft ground until our feet hit solid rock hidden underneath the frozen surface.

“Can we sail on that?” Sonja asks, pointing at the wild sea, her dark eyes clearly worried. She is an adventurous spirit, she had to be to put up with me all these years. But for all the things we’ve done – solo-diving off the peaks of Olympus Mons, bobsledding the cracked, icy shelves of Europa, she is still afraid of drowning. I wonder at the countless, reckless things I have made her do – no, that she has done willingly – not because she wants to, but because I want to. Because she loves me.

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“It looks worse than it is,” I tell her. “It’s the low gravity coupled with the thick atmosphere and the relatively low density of the liquid methane – it whips the waves high but we have good, light ships. We’ll be ok.” I reach out and take her gloved hand in mind and squeeze hard, so she can feel me the pressure of me through the thick suit.

Frown lines crease her forehead and she chews her lower lip the way she does when she is worried. “It will be ok.” I try to sound reassuring. “It’s not even real water,” I say cajolingly. The truth that I don’t tell her is that it’s actually far worse. It’s much colder and only half as dense, meaning she’d be even more likely to sink under the umber colored waves than she would on the water oceans of Earth.

“It’s not that... Eury, I have a bad feeling about this one.”

“I know. But this is important, Sonja.”

“Eury, it’s just that – these creatures are so alien. What can we really know about how their minds work?”

“Brian and the others have already run tests and we’ll do a whole other battery of tests before we go out. I wouldn’t attempt it if it wasn’t safe.”

“And what about the creatures whose minds we erase?”

This is a well-worn argument. I have nothing to say against her objection. It is too expensive to download the animal mind, to preserve it. When the body jump happens, the human subject’s mind is copied, but the animal’s mind is wiped. When the human jumps back into his or her own body, there is no animal mind left to transfer back into the animal host. It is, for all intents and purposes, only a carcass at that point. It’s one of the reasons for the Moral Rule.

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Some animals, those with some functions ingrained into their brain stem, heart and lung function for example, can live awhile after the human host is jumped out because the mind wipe during the jump doesn't erase some of the hard wiring in the brain stem. But even in those cases, the animals are little more than living, breathing brain dead shells.

In early days, they would simply be left to die of exposure. Now, animals used for body jumps are routinely put down after the jump is completed and the human mind is transferred out of the animal body. It's much more humane.

"Sonj, they're just animals."

"They are living beings, Eury."

"I know. Look, after this one, I let Brian or one of the other techs be the guinea pig next time, ok?"

She bites her lip again but nods.

We look out across the great roiling orange methane ocean and clouds of tangerine and lemon methane and ethane.

Sonja grips my hand and looks at me with dark eyes. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

We are on the turbulent hydrocarbon sea. We have three boats. The first is the hunter and is on point scanning the stormy sea for our quarry with sensors and radar. The second boat carries most of the crew and equipment. The third is a backup, in case of emergency that carries repair and communications gear. And medical supplies. Just in case.

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The ride is wild. The ships are lightweight to contend with the low density of the methane sea and large to cope with the tremendous wind churned waves in the low gravity. Still, we bounce and our suits and face plates are sprayed with viscous methane.

We are hunting for the *cetus krakoadev*, the great half-whale, half crocodile creature that roams the methane seas of Diros.

The krakoadev defy easy categorization. They have the characteristics of fish, mammals and reptiles on earth. In appearance, they mostly resemble a cross between a whale and a crocodile and grow up to thirty meters in length.

The light ships bounce high on tall waves. As our boat is thrown up high onto the top of one of the wave peaks, Brian points to the horizon. “There! There!”

We look to starboard and see a dozen black forms in the distance. From here, they look like long, dark reefs breaking through the surface of the orange sea. Then, vast spews of liquid methane the creatures use for ballast are blown up from the dark shapes, the fountains of ejected liquid methane giving away the location of our quarry. Similar to whales on earth spraying salt water out of blowholes, these creatures similarly expel out the liquid methane out through pores in their neck and breathe in methane atmosphere.

I hear a sharp intake of breath of the suit’s intercom. “My God, they’re monsters, Eury.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“They’re impressive, I’ll give you that,” she concedes, “but beautiful? No. Eury, please. Rethink this.”

“It will be ok, Sonj. I promise.”

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“I told you they were incredible, didn’t I?” Brian’s voice this time, crackling of the intercom.

“Yes. Yes. Incredible,” I agree. And they are. They truly are.

Mostly, the krakoadev swim in the deep methane seas, preying on a variety of abundant and diverse creatures that thrive in the frigid ocean – large jelly fish and an array of cretaceous creatures, most of which grow to tremendous sizes in the vast, low gravity oceans of this strange world. When they dive beneath the waves, they are nearly invulnerable. The deep, dark seas of this world are their home and they are well adapted to the black depths of the ocean bottom.

But, when they surface, they are exposed, at least for the fifteen minutes or so it takes them to fill their huge lungs with methane air.

The krakoadev are creatures of habit. They tend to fish an area for days or weeks, rising in the same spot every eight hours or so to refill their lungs, migrating only when they have diminished their food supply in a particular area. They are also canny, never eating the food stock down too far, always leaving enough of the seafood for replacement population, so that the stock can replenish its population within the long Diros’ year when the krakoadev will return to this same part of the sea on their long migratory trek that will take them across the circumference of the world encircling ocean.

As we approach the still black forms bobbing in the raucous sea, they start to disappear under the choppy water.

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At the look of disappointment on my face Brian says “It’s ok. We just caught them at the end of their inhalation cycle. They’ll submerge. But they’ll be back in about eight hours. It’s like clockwork. They are nothing if not predictable.”

We check the time.

And then we wait.

Brian is proved right as dark shapes emerge from the dark waters in the middle of our small flotilla of ships exactly eight hours later and geysers of liquid methane spew high into the sky.

The krakoadev seem to take no notice of us. We are not swimming in the water, so we must not be food.

I am proud. I hired Brian ten years ago, straight out of grad school. He is my protégé and, in many ways, I consider him the child Sonja and I never had. I trained him well.

“Ok, we have about fifteen minutes. Let’s go.”

Fifteen minutes is not much time to complete the consciousness transfer. If the krakoadev submerges before I am fully downloaded and the transfer is interrupted in mid-stream, the results could be disastrous. Death at worst. Severe degradation at best – degradation meaning brain damage. Memories, instincts, brain functions could all be lost.

We work quickly.

Brian and the techs attach the cables to a kind of harpoon and select their target, a large male the XCT team has been studying for months. The male is in its mid-years,

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about sixty Earth years old, in apparent good health for one of its kind, and unmated with no offspring relying on it to provide food or protection.

“Fire!” Brian gives the order and half a dozen cables spring out of harpoon guns. Some of the guns bury electrodes attached to cables deep into the temples of the great creature. Others imbed gear and chips into the creature – the NET device, a GPS, a chip that will monitor the health of the krakoadev, and an array of other sensors.

The ends of the cables snake into the powerful computer that will hold my consciousness and then upload it into the host krakoadev once the mind wipe of the target creature is complete. Already, electromagnetic signals are being sent into the krakoadev brain, snapping synapses, erasing memories, effectively giving the great hulking beast a lobotomy without doing irreparable harm to the creature’s brain structure so that my own identity can take its place.

The team attaches similar electrodes to my temples that will perform a similar function on me, mapping the trillion synapses, recording every impulse and then translate the electro-chemical processes of my brain into a digital code and then download it onto a computer, erasing my thoughts, memories, and instincts as it goes. Once the target krakoadev brain is wiped, my consciousness, the full record of who I am is then uploaded.

“Ready,” I hear Brian confirm.

The tech near me looks at me. The question unspoken, but clear in his eyes. “Are you ready?”

I nod.

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The tech gives the all clear and Brian attends to the machine, the computer that will store the peta-bytes of information about me – about all of me. My hopes, my memories, my personality. Every thought, every impulse, every experience, mapped, translated and recorded.

I feel the familiar drunken sensation and the world spins. The sky grows dark and I feel like I am falling. My vision grays and then goes dark.

Dimly, I am aware of voices. I can feel the pressure of rubbery hands all over my body.

What are they doing? I wonder. What's happening to me?

I recall they are here to help me. This is supposed to be happening.

Then, a numbness creeps in. First my hands and feet. Then my legs and arms.

The numbness spreads.

The sense of me vanishes. Eury is gone.

Only animal instinct remains. I panic. I don't know what's happening. I feel like I am drowning. I can no longer breathe.

An undeniable impulse to rage, to struggle to fight wells up, the shell that once was me tries to convulse, but there is nothing left to command limp limbs or flaccid muscle.

The darkness swallows me.

Time ceases to have meaning. There is only darkness, but then a dim strange flickering red light suffuses. There is no sense of me yet, only sensations – I am trapped, I am choking. I am drowning. It is a feeling of alien-ness, otherness. I feel phantom limbs that do not obey commands. Instead, I feel awkward new, numb, rubbery limbs. I

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feel trapped, as if I have been buried alive in a cage of twenty tons of meat and bone and muscle.

I panic and thrash again, but this time alien muscles respond.

I open strange eyes and I see a dim world of strange objects. My eyesight is poor, I see only shades of diffuse, blurry gray. However, my eyes seem to pick up every nuance of motion. My human mind, trained in xeno-biology understands. In the dark waters of the sea depths, there is little need to see color. It is a far better evolutionary change to be able to see motion, especially when most of your prey or potential predators breathe through gills like fish on Earth, requiring them to constantly move in order to run ethane of the membranes of their gills.

With my motion sensitive eyes, I see each drop of sea spray as it spirals into the air. On the water, I see light gray shapes bobbing on the waves. I see a dark ocean, and brightly illuminated figures hunched against the dark water. I see those next to me, my pod. I see the gentle heaving of their respiration, the barely discernable ticks and flips of their giant webbed flippers.

They react to my thrashing and start to pull away in alarm. They don't know what I am doing.

In the distance, I see dark boats on the water with strange, small bright shapes on them. They are the same color as the crunchy things I eat in the shallows near the coasts. But they are not in the ocean, so I know they are not for eating.

Then, I remember. Those are my friends. That is my family. I remember. I am Eury.

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The creature next to me seems familiar. She, I know somehow it is a female, twitches a flipper ever so slightly. My human eyes would not have been able to detect the subtle movement. It is a kind of sign language. Somehow, I know this. She is asking if I am ok.

A part of me wants to bellow, to rage, to thrash. No, I am not alright. I am not alright. Something is terribly wrong. I am possessed. I am disposed. I am displaced.

Then I realize the voice screaming inside my head isn't mine. It's an alien voice. Someone is in here with me. Or I am in here with it.

“Eury, Eury, what’s wrong?”

“Something’s wrong.”

“We can tell by your thrashing.”

I realize I have been churning the waves, wrenching my immense body back and forth in the choppy sea.

“Brian, something’s wrong. I am... I am not alone.”

A strange, haunting but melodic song plays through my mind. It is short, like a burst of barely remembered music playing across my memory. Just a bar or two, enough to get a sense of the melody. But the entire tune remains elusive. It is language I realize. And, upon that realization, my alien brain translates the alien song into English words.

“What are you?” the lyrical voice playing inside my head asks.

“Who are you?” I reply, thinking in English that seems halting and broken in comparison to the lilting, haunting song-language echoing through my mind.

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“Eury, who are you talking to?”

“Brian, are you getting this?”

Eury, we’re pulling you out. Your krakoadev vitals aren’t good. You need to calm down or we think you are in danger of bursting your hearts.”

“Just a second.”

“Eury, no – we must’ve missed something, the mind wipe must not have been complete.”

“What are you? What’s wrong with me?” asks the alien voice singing inside my head.

“I am human. I am Eury,” I think back.

“What is human?”

I imagine the gray shapes on the gray boats on the dark sea, and the smaller, darker shapes standing within them. I picture this in my mind.

“What have you done to me?” it asks.

“How to explain? How do I explain what I’ve done?” I am ashamed.

In all of human exploration of hundreds of worlds within a hundred light years of Earth, we’ve encountered dozens of planets harboring all manner of life. But we had yet to encounter a sentient species. Until now.

I chuckle to myself in my alien mind. What a terrible way to make first contact.

“Eury, what’s going on?”

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“Brian, I am not alone. The creature’s consciousness is still here. We’re sharing its body.”

“Oh, my god. Eury, we’ll get you out. Just hang on.”

“What have you done to me?” The krakoadev asks again.

Not know what else to say, “I think back, who are you?”

The creature’s mind, or the part of my mind the creature still inhabits, grows still and quiet. I think that it is thinking over its response. Then it replies in song. It is a song of sibilant and sorrowful notes, but it ends abruptly as if in mid stanza.

“My God, Eury, are you ok?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I am ok.”

“What’s that noise?”

“It’s music. It’s telling me who he is. He is singing his name. But something is wrong.”

Next me, next to us, the other krakoadev start thrashing. Three of them break off from the main pod and begin swimming around the boats, in way that reminds me of sharks circling flailing prey. They know something is wrong with me, with their pod mate, and they’ve taken notice of the tiny human’s on the fragile ships as the likely cause of their companion’s agitation.

The krakoadev closest to me floats closer, flippers flickering rapidly in the water, spraying a fine mist of cooling liquid methane over my scaled torso.

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The krakoadev stops singing, but I realize something is wrong. I know intuitively that the song was stopped short. Far too short.

The song of the krakoadev, my human mind starts to understand, is very complex, like an encoded radio signal, its song is a complicated aria that contains a great deal of information in a few short bars. The kradoadev song is comprised of a myriad of notes, each note has a different meaning. In five short minutes, the krakoadev started to sing a song that was to start with it's own name and then trace its lineage back through the names of its mother, grand-mother, great-grandmother, going back ten thousand generations over a hundred thousand Diros-year period. And Diros years are long years. The krakoadev, I start to understand, can remember the names of their ancestors. All of them. And their names are incorporated at the beginning of the song and they sing backward through time, back through their mother's line. Back to the first one who gave birth to their kind. I also understand that this song typically goes back ten thousand generations, covering a span of almost a hundred thousand years and takes several Earth days to recite. This kradoadev's song was much too short. It cannot recall its name or the names of its ancestors.

"I do not remember," I hear its voice inside my head. "I do not recall my name."

I hear the krakoadev's voice inside my head. "What is wrong with me? I cannot recall my ancestors. I cannot honor them."

"I don't know," I lie.

"Who are you?" It asks.

"Eury," I say. "Son of Phoebe," I add lamely, unable to match the grand, sweeping, elegant beauty of the krakodev's attempted response to the same question.

THROUGH ALIEN EYES

“You are only the second of your kind?”

“No. There are many others.”

“Why do you not honor their names?”

“I don’t remember them.”

“Then you dishonor them.”

“No, we just don’t have as complete a memory as you seem to.”

“Why do you swim only on top of the water?”

“We don’t swim at all. We walk on land.”

The krakoadev reacts to this strongly and for an instant it seems to seize control of its body and I feel a strange, not unpleasant wracking sensation and my flippers flick the water sending sprays of freezing liquid methane cascading over his sister and my crew, my friends, my wife, on the bobbing boats. It’s laughing I realize. As the strong emotion subsides, the consciousness of the krakoadev seems to recede and once again I am in control of our shared body.

“What are you?” It asks again.

“We are humans.”

“And you are land swimmers?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve never heard land swimmers and we’ve swam the seas for many thousands of seasons.”

“We don’t come from this world.”

The krakoadev’s mind grows silent and I can tell it is contemplating what this means.

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“You come from there?” It asks, and in my mind I see the blazing stars in the heavens, as seen through krakoadev’s eyes from the watery surface of methane seas.

“Yes. You know of the stars?”

“We sense them.”

“You know there are other planets, other beings there?”

“Yes, we thought there might be. We cannot see that far and have no way to swim there. The oceans don’t flow that far. We’ve tried, but we only swim in circles. You are lucky to be able to be able to swim between worlds.”

“Yes,” I think back. “Yes, we are.”

“Eury, are you ok?” asks Brian.

“Yes,” I think back, thinking in English, directing my thoughts out rather than in.

“I am ok. I am, I am talking to it.”

“Oh, my God Eury. I am so sorry.”

“It’s ok... I think.”

“Eury, I think the other krakoadev know something is wrong. They are circling the boats. I think they are getting ready to attack us.”

I look with my dim eyes at the black and grey scene unfolding on the turbulent surface of the cold ocean.

“My friends are worried the others that are circling are going to attack them.”

“They should fear. We are the mightiest creatures in the sea.”

“Can you tell them to swim away?”

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“Why should I?”

“They have done nothing to you.”

“You have invaded me, you have usurped my mind, robbed my of my soul. We should rend your pod-mates into meal.”

“We didn’t know. I didn’t know. I am sorry.”

“You should have known.”

“My friends, they have a machine that can transfer me out of your mind, to leave you alone.”

“It is too late.”

“No, no it’s not. Trust me. We have done this before.”

“You’ve done this before?”

“Yes. Not to you. Not to your species. But to others.”

“Monstrous!” The krokaodev rages, its anger swelling, allowing it to take back control over its body once again and froth the sea with wild swings of flippers and tail.

The other krokaodevs began to circle more swiftly and closer to the boats, some even nudging the boats lightly with their heads or thwacking the sides of the ships with powerful tails.

“Please,” I think at the krokaodev. “Please, we meant no harm.”

“You’ve robbed me of my memory. You’ve stolen what is most sacred to me. Why should I forgive you? It is a great crime what you have done.”

“My friends, they’ll remove me, if you let them alone, we’ll leave you in peace.”

“But you’ll leave me without my memories?”

“I don’t know,” I confess.

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“I’d rather be dead.”

The krakoadev, its strong emotion taking over our shared body again, and it wrenches its immense body back and forth, venting its frustration on the sea.

Eventually it exhausts itself. It seems to make up its mind about something. I can feel it concentrating and feel it supplant me somehow, taking control over its body. It makes a warbling cooing sound that rumbles from deep within its immense barrel chest. The other krakoadev stop their circling. The three who were circling the boats pull father away. But the other krakoadev, the one next to me, remains near. I can tell the krakoadev finds its presence comforting. But also sense it cannot recall why.

“Eury, Eury, what’s going on?”

“They aren’t happy about my visit.”

“Eury, let us get you out of there.”

“Yes,” I agree. “Get me out of here.”

We wait in the tumult of the frothing, frigid sea of liquid methane. A steady patter of freezing hydrocarbon sleet falls on the silver ships of the expedition party and on the half-dozen or so krakoadev, still laying half submerged in the tossing waters. They have not surfaced though it has been over an Earth hour since my transfer into the krakoadev.

The krakoadev has grown silent. I sense he is waiting, warily, in the dark corners of our shared mind. I am uncertain what he is thinking. It is a peculiar and unnerving sensation, sharing the creature’s mind. I have access to some of its, his, thoughts,

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especially when he is agitated or experiencing strong emotions. And I can understand his thoughts, read them. I understand him intuitively, as if his shared experiences are mine. To some extent, I suspect, the too is able to access my thoughts, my memories. It is a strange sense of mingling of minds and tangling of thoughts that, I worry, may be driving me insane.

The exact science of what has happened is unclear and it is that mystery that Brian and the XCT team have been trying to unravel for the past hour.

What went wrong? What peculiar architecture of the krakoadev's brain allowed it to hide, to persist, despite our very thorough process for wiping the krakoadev's, mind before the transfer? And why did our team not discover that the krakoadev were sentient creatures? I have my suspicions but have not shared them with the team.

We would never have attempted the transfer had we known. I have tried to relay this to the krakoadev, but he has not acknowledged my entreaties. I am not sure if he heard or if he understands. His mind has grown silent. In some ways, I find that almost more unnerving than having his voice in my mind. Alarming, periodically, I lose control of my body, its body, a sudden heave there or a powerful flick of my tail, a wave of one of my, one of our, massive flippers. It is a terrifying feeling. The strangeness of possessing this massive alien body is disorienting enough, but losing control of these new appendages, moving of volition not of my own makes the experience all the more disturbing. My fear heightens as I start to suspect what it is the krakoadev is attempting. It is testing to see if it can regain control of its physical body.

“Eury, Eury, you there?” It's Sonja's sweet voice. “Yes, I am here, I reply.”

“You've been quiet. I was worried.”

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“I am ok for now. Thank you.”

“Thank me? For what?”

“For not saying I told you so.”

“It’s no time for that. Don’t worry. Once we get you back where you belong, there will be plenty of time for me to remind you that I am always right and that you are always wrong.”

“I know. How’s it going?”

“They’re almost done.”

“How’s it looking?”

“I don’t know. They seem to think that if they can get you in, they can get you out. The krakoadev are more complex than they thought. I could kill them. I told you they were being reckless.”

“Mistakes happen, Sonj.”

“This was a big one, Eury.”

“I know. I know.” Bigger than you know, I think, but I try to keep this thought to myself and wonder if the krakoadev or Sonja hear it anyway. If either of them do, they don’t communicate anything in reply.

“Eury, you there?” I hear Brian’s voice this time, transmitted electronically into my mind.

“Yes, I am here.”

“Well, we see what we missed. The krakoadev mind is unlike any other we’ve encountered. Their brain function is bifurcated. What is contained in the structure of the

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brain is just memory. No higher brain functions are processed in the krakoadev brain. The higher brain processes, reasoning, analysis, locomotion, bodily function are all retained in the creatures spinal cord and elsewhere in its nervous system.”

It is what I was afraid of.

“Essentially, we wiped the creature’s hard drive, Eury, but left the processor and operating system intact. Its consciousness persists. In the brain wipe, we only erased its memories.”

“We gave it a kind of permanent amnesia.”

“Yes.”

“But it is still conscious.”

“Yes.”

“He knows who he is?”

“Well, no. It knows it exists, it has an identity. But it has no memories of its past life.”

“Is there any way to retrieve the memories?”

“No. They are gone. I am sorry.”

Great black sadness wrenches up from the core of me, subsumes me, as the krakoadev takes back control of its body in a fit of emotion. It twists itself in the waters and flails, churning the methane sea into froth.

The krakoadev was listening.

“What have you done?” It cries and I can hear a mournful bellow, a haunting melodic burbling cry echo over the rushing waves of the white-capped sea.

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“What’s wrong, Eury? It’s good news. We think we can transfer you out. And the krakoadev will still have the higher brain functions that allow it to live. It won’t die Eury. And we’ll get you back where you belong.”

Through disorientating haze of the creature’s pain flooding through my mind, its mind, I start to comprehend the magnitude of what we have done to this creature.

“Oh. My god. You don’t understand, Brian. You don’t understand what we have done.”

Through a flood of emotion coming from the krakoadev’s mind, I start to perceive the loss it feels.

The krakoadev mind is not like a human mind. The water-born creatures have no way to record events or write their history down. So instead, they have adapted their minds to serve as a record of their people. Their higher brain functions moved to their brain stem and spinal cord. The krakoadev immense brain was utilized only to record memories, memories which were passed down from generation to generation.

I share what I have started to sense through the krakoadev’s pain.

“Brian, this krokodev remembered, used to remember, every sight, sound and smell not only of its own long life, but the lives of all its ancestors. In a very real way, the creature’s ancestors lived on through its memory in the same way it would live on in the memory of its own children when mated. When we did the mind wipe, we erased not just his memory, but the memory of ten thousand generations of krakoadev who lived on in his mind. Countless experiences, histories going back to before the dawn of humanity,

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skills and knowledge passed down through genetic memory hard coded into DNA from one generation to the next, obliterated in minutes. A hundred thousand years of mirth and love, of sorrow and pain, carefully recorded in chemical lithography mapped on the krakoadev brain to be preserved for posterity in synapses and neurons. Ten thousand lifetimes of stories consigned to oblivion.”

These memories were the most precious of the krakoadev’s possessions, I start to understand. He would commune with his ancestors, they would live on in his memory. Oftentimes, ancestors would sign songs, immense ballads, dedicated to their progeny that would be retained in their memories and passed down from one generation to the next. All these memories gone. All that was left was an empty hollow place, where the krakoadev’s joy once lived. I sense the krakoadev trying to recall a particular song, a song from its other, a song to him, telling him all her stories, all the comforting things a mother would tell a son. A knowledge that such a song once existed lingers in the krakoadev’s mind, but the tune of the song itself lingers just outside memory, a forgotten tune beyond recall.

Another wrenching sensation wells within me and I hear myself, the krakoadev body, bleat a terrible noise. And I realize it’s crying. We’re crying.

Diros is not a large world, but it is old, and rotates slowly. The Diros days are long, almost 36 Earth hours. We had started our excursion at the break of dawn, but now the star, Zeta Tuscan, is low in the twilight sky, turning the sea and horizon a dark, plum color.

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The XCT team continues its testing. They are trying to ensure that jumping me back to my body will not pose any danger. To me or the krakoadev. The krakoadev seems not to care. It appears to be lost in its sadness.

We continue to float in the choppy sea, cold spray of liquid methane sprays from the sea and a hydrocarbon rain continues to pelt the turbulent waters.

The other krakoadev stay near. They know something is wrong, but at least they no longer circle the boats.

In the dim amber light of the Diros twilight I start to perceive something with my motion sensitive eyes. The krakoadev, I notice, is moving its flippers in a repeatable pattern, patting and swatting at the water.

In the same way I am able to understand the krakoadev's thoughts, I am able to access the krakoadev's language ability and start to understand this is a kind of sign language that augment's the creatures song language.

I try to tap the krakoadev's language center and find I am able to do this by concentrating. I realize the creature next to me is talking to me.

It says, through its splashing sign language, things I don't understand. Others, however, are clear. "Are you ok? What's wrong? Why are you not swimming? What have the surface swimmers done to you?"

I test out moving a flipper. The krakoadev relents and does not fight me, giving me control over the krakoadev body.

I splash back.

And start to communicate.

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“My name is Eury,” I say. A human thought flickers briefly through my alien mind for just an instant and I consider saying, in the krakoadev’s splashing sign language that would say “we come in peace.” Given the circumstances, I feel that would ring hollow. Instead, I splash, “we have made a horrible mistake.”

It is dark now and I can feel my body, our body, the krakoadev’s body, start to grow cold and cramp with the strain of floating for so long. The krakoadev don’t need to swim in order to breathe, they breath like whales through porous blowholes on the sides of their neck, but they are designed for swimming in the deep ocean, not for floating.

I wait expectantly for the results of the team’s tests, longing to leave this hulking, cold body and this dark, frigid ocean. I have never spent so much time outside of my own body before. I long for the feel of my own limbs, to see out of my own eyes. To be alone in my own mind.

I learned much for the other krakoadev near me. She has grown silent now as night has fallen. Even with our keen motion-sensitive eyes, we cannot see in pitch dark, so our sign language no longer works. For some reason she will not sing to me, though I hear her and the other singing softly between themselves, long sonorous songs. I hear bits and pieces of their song and understand some... stanzas for lack of a better word, that I hear over the chop of the sea and the sounds of my companions on their metal boats. They tell stories of longing and loss, sharing the pain of the lost ancestral memories.

At first, I thought that she was a mate. The XCT team did their work in that regard at least – the krakoadev whose body I now share had no mate. The female who guards him is a sibling, his sister. The other three krakoadev are nieces and nephews. I

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also learned his name – Aeetes – at least that is the closest pronunciation my human mind kind translate.

They are his family, his clan, his pod. And they will wait for him until he is ready to swim again, they said. No matter how long that takes. They rely on him for protection, though the females of their species are larger. The males are born to fight and are expendable.

I asked what these leviathans could possibly need protection from, but she did not answer.

I haven't heard from Aeetes. He has remained silent in his own mind, mourning the loss of a hundred thousand years of memory. So we wait in the darkness and the silence, unbroken except for the lapping of frozen waves, the patter of sleet on water and the hulls of alien metal ships, and the occasional mournful cry of a grieving family.

“Eury, Eury. Are you awake?”

I start, shaking my alien body in alarm. I realize I have been sleeping. It is a strange sensation to sleep while floating. We continued to tread water even as we slept.

“Eury, I...”

I can tell its bad news. Brian, ever the clinical professional, is rarely hesitant.

“What is it?”

“Eury, we don't think its safe to transfer you out. The physiology, the neurology of the krakoadev are, well, it's different.”

“What do you mean? Dammit, Brian, we should have ever neuron mapped before attempting a transfer. It's a little late to start identifying differences.”

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“I know. I know – we just... missed it. We didn’t expect for some of the krakoadev higher brain functions to sit in other parts of its nervous system.”

“But, I thought if you could get me in, you could get me out?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s what we were hoping. We are concerned that there is a problem. When we transferred your mind, your consciousness into the krakoadev...”

“His name is Aeetes.”

“What?”

“His name is Aeetes.”

“Oh. My god. You know it’s name?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Its... his sister told me.”

“His sister?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Well, uhm. Anything else I should know?”

“No – go on. It’s just... its not an animal, Brian. It’s sentient.”

“I know. Look – when we transferred you into the krak... Aeetes, something happened to your brain functions.”

“What do you mean?”

“They got split. The krakoadev brain is split into two parts – memories are stored in the brain, higher brain functions are hard wired into the creature’s central nervous system, the brain stem and spine. When we transferred you into the creature, only your memories appear to be preserved in the brain.”

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“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we think we can only transfer your memories out.”

“Meaning...”

“Meaning you won’t have any higher brain function. You won’t be able to issue commands to your body. Your heart won’t pump. Your lungs won’t breathe. You’re on life support now, but we are concerned if we transfer you in this state, you could die. Or you’d have to remain on life support indefinitely. Or at least until we could figure out a way to transfer you into a new body.”

“And what about the krakoadev?”

“His higher brain functions are tied to his memory in a way we don’t understand. If we transfer your memories out, he will die. He would live for awhile, but eventually he will likely get lost or wander away from his pod, or die of exposure. He’s forgotten who he is, what he is supposed to do. His instincts are there, but little else. He’s like a two-year old in a massive, massive body.”

“So, if we try the transfer, I am brain dead and may die, and he is a wondering amnesiac who will likely die himself?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s about it.”

“But it’s dangerous for me to stay.”

“I know,” says Brian’s voice inside my head.

“I know,” says another voice, a melodic alien voice, whose body I now share.

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It's dawn now. I can see the dim shape of the female krakoadev, Aeete's sister, in the water beside me, the methane sea lapping against her great, scaled ribs. I see his two nieces and one nephew far away, half-submerged, watching, waiting.

"Eury, Eury? You there?" I hear a voice, an actual voice, not an electronic telepathic transmission. I look up. They've brought the boat closer. I look up and see the silver ships and see the movement of fine, black hair around a pale oval head, moving like a halo in an alien breeze.

"Yes. Hey, Sonj."

"Hey Eury. Morning."

"Morning."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

I feel something, light and tickling, the soft brush of a butterfly wing, barely felt. I look up and see they've brought the ship closer. Sonja is reaching out, her hand resting on the thick crust of my massive brow.

"Beauty and the beast, huh?"

"Actually, I think I prefer you in your current form."

"I thought you said they were monsters?"

"Your green skin and huge flippers are growing on me."

"Then come down here and give me a kiss," I joke.

"Eury, what are we going to do?" she asks, serious now.

"You're going to leave."

"I can't leave you."

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“You have to. Brian will find a way to bring me back safely. But we’ll do it right.”

“Why don’t we transfer you – your on life support already?”

“Yeah, but I’d be effectively brain dead, sustained only by machine. I don’t want that.”

“But we could take you back to Earth. We could find a way.”

“But then the krakoadev will die.”

“I know... but...”

“He’s a sentient creature, Sonj. And he’s in here with me. We destroyed his memories... so many memories Sonj. A hundred thousand years obliterated in not much more than an instant. I owe him. I can’t leave him.”

“What are you going to do? Just... swim around as this... this thing.”

“If I have to. But some of the team will stay. They’ll watch me Sonj. And Brian will work something out. Something to save us both.”

She laughs. I can tell she thinks I am being reckless again.

“It will be ok. You should go now. You’re going to be running low on air.”

“I love you,” I say. “And I know you must love me. To put up with me for so long.”

“I do you know.” She touches my brow once again. With motion sensitive eyes I see drops of tears fall and mingle with hydrocarbon sleet fall into the sea. Then she moves away and another face takes her place. “Dammit, Eury, you sure you want to do this?”

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“It’s this or be imprisoned in my own body. And be responsible for killing the first sentient alien first contact. Yeah. Yeah, I am sure.”

The ships start to pull away. I see tiny figures wave goodbye. I see a halo of dark hair swirl around a pale head.

I wonder if I will ever see her again.

I am alone.

“You are not alone,” an alien voice sings in my mind.

“I am sorry.”

“I know. Where do we swim now? What do we do?”

“We live,” I reply. “And I will atone for what we have done.”

“How will you do that, Eury, son of Phoebe?” I am not sure if he means how will we live or how I will atone for robbing this great creature of his memories.

I pause for a moment. “I will help you make new memories,” I think to him.

“We’ll start now.” I ask for permission to assume control of our shared body and Aeetes releases his hold. Taking control, I splash my giant flippers at the krakoadev next to me.

“This is your sister, Aurates,” I think to Aeetes.

The great krakoadev Aurates splashes her flippers in reply, spraying droplets of liquid methane water high into the air.

“And you are Aeetes.”

Aurates and her children begin to sing a long song, a song of memory and ancestors.

“And this is your story.”

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The krakoadev dive, still singing, into umber colored waters to continue their migration around the great methane ocean of Diros, the dim yellow sun of Zeta Tuscanæ sitting low in the afternoon sky.

We plunge into the liquid methane sea after them and follow their song into the depths.