

“Are you kidding me?”

A trio of plantoids stood in a ring before a small case that rested on a barrel. The case was open, vials and liquid and metal glittering inside. All of the faces were perturbed, some more than others.

“What now?” the one in the spacer's suit just sighed.

“It's just juvenol-17!” a plantoid, a younger one, exclaimed.

“Didn't the seller swear it was vitacyl?” a middle-aged plantoid in a strange bodysuit spoke.

“Yeah, of course the fucker did...” the young plantoid sighed. “Should have known that the price was too good to be true...”

“The hell are you going on about? You are the one who suggested this guy.” the spacer's eyes narrowed on the younger plantoid.

“I mean, yeah, but we've been on this planet for a few days! How the hell am I supposed to wrangle up black market suppliers out of nowhere?” the young plantoid shrugged, turning now towards the spacer with a furrowed brow.

“That is literally your goddamn job! How much was it, anyway?” the spacer shook his head.

“450 Cr.” the young plantoid mumbled.

Suddenly the one in the bodysuit laughed.

“The pickings we had on Tyshi were cheaper than that.” the man giggled to himself, and only himself.

“Fuck.” the spacer spoke. He breathed in deeply for a little while. He then looked toward the younger plantoid. Every few moments, the gaze would drift from him, and then return. He was shaking his legs rather unevenly.

“Look, Vas. You know how this works. I fly the ship. Aspher uses psi. You find us the supply. And I don't know about you, but I think that last bit has not been so tight recently.” the spacer's eyes narrowed. He moved forward a little, and Vas shrank back ever so slightly.

He just kept staring for several seconds. Eventually, the spacer backed off. Not that the anger had dissipated. It was just that it was difficult to concentrate on when the shakes were more pressing.

“What are the side effects of juvenol-17, anyway?” the spacer asked, not even looking toward either of the other two men.

“Migraine, pottassium depletion...” Vas started to speak.

“So more of the fucking same, right.” the spacer's shaking only increased, and his gaze did not move.

The two men just looked at the captain for a while. Eventually, he spoke.

“Get me a vial.”

Vas said nothing and retrieved a syringe from the case. He handed it over to the spacer, who snatched it up and began to self-administer it almost immediately. All could ready their veins in under three seconds, at this point.

Aspher did not say anything, but he too wandered toward the case and got his dose of anagathics from it. Vas just sighed to himself, but he roused no words. He could go for many things, at this point.

All three men took their anagathics, their shared drug, their shared immortality, their shared addiction. They had not known each other for long, only a few years. These kinds of arrangements were loose and the emotional bonds even looser. None quite cared to know much of the others. Still, securing expensive and rare anti-aging drugs was easier with three than with one.

Cilo, the captain, finished his administration first. He packed up the case and began to take it with them to their starship, which rested right by them on the pavement of the groundport. Aspher and Vas followed soon after into the confines of the tramp trader.

Cilo went straight to the helm. Aspher and Vas lagged behind.

“This is second-rate shit, Vas.” Cilo said loudly, not bothering to look behind himself.

“Better than the damn enema ones on Vrinsi, right?” the edges of Vas' maw curled.

“Don't remind me.” Aspher muttered. A few seconds later his voice returned. “Do feel free to piss off Cilo, though, if you really want to.”

“You know I am too tired to care right now, Aspher.” Cilo said, and entered the helm.

It did not take much time for the spacer to start up the vessel and begin the long journey to their next destination. Hopefully Nenti would prove a more promising system. If not in anagathics, then hopefully at least in cargo. Really, one of the saddest things about this whole thing was that they could not just huddle around one supplier. They needed to fund their immortality, after all.

The tramp trader reached orbit quickly. Vas just went to his stateroom and Aspher retired to his meditations. Leaving Cilo all alone in the cockpit. Not that he cared.

Sitting there before the void, unpleasant but familiar thoughts began to make their way into his mind.

How did it get to this?

He had not really been like the others. At least, he liked to think that he was not like the others. He started anagathics in his thirties, so he wasn't like the usual vain type. And he supposed he did not fear death. Why, then, did he slave after the stuff like his days were numbered? Perhaps he was just addicted to the drug itself, he thought. On a chemical or psychological level or something. He smiled a little. That might make him better than some other anagathics users.

Then there were the other ones. Like that damn kid Vas. Cilo really wished he could hate him more, but he was just too useful. Even with his screw ups, he was better at securing a supply than he was. Hell,

sometimes they even got the cutting-edge stuff from the coreworlds. Still, it did not change the fact that he was annoying as hell. Cilo could tell by the look that he had started anagathics in his mid-twenties, the wealthy bastard. Or, formerly wealthy bastard, rather.

And Aspher? Well he was actually something of an enigma. Half the time it was hard to think that he was actually addicted to anagathics. In any case, psychic powers were handy in a multitude of situations. There was a reason he kept him on board.

The rest of the trip passed by quickly. Cilo activated the displacement drive and the three loitered around for a few days. They had to take a dose each day, of course. Juvenol-17 was a daily thing. Every morning, Cilo would feel nauseous right before the sink in his fresher unit, but he had been through worse. He was mostly just glad that the shakes had gone away. Most of the time the men kept to their own company. There was precious little love, and not even hate. Sometimes, though, they spoke.

“So, why do you do it, Aspher?” Vas asked one day. The three men were sharing drinks around a small coffee table in the lounge. They were sufficiently inebriated to enable conversation.

“Do what?” the psychic asked, looking toward a man who looked radiant even in destitution.

“Anagathics, of course.” Vas just smiled at the man, shaking his head.

“Oh, right.” Aspher paused for a few moments.

“Because I fear death.” he responded.

Vas just laughed a little. Cilo had to admit that he was also confused.

“Really? A damn psychic is scared of kicking the bucket? You types tend to be mystical and all that stuff.” Vas kept giggling a little, letting loose a hiccup every so often.

“The dead are not silent.” Aspher said lucidly, and the air became still for a while. Vas stopped laughing and the two other men looked around with some trepidation. The silence was soon broken by Vas.

“So, umm...what else do you want to talk about?” he asked loosely.

“I suppose I could flip it on you, Vas.” Aspher spoke crisply. “Why do you take anagathics?”

“Because I want to look young forever, of course!” Vas just laughed, genuinely for once. “No deep reason or anything, I guess I am just a vain degenerate motherfucker!” he laughed to himself like a boy on alcohol.

“I would not give yourself that much credit, Vas.” Cilo said.

“Well I apologize, captain.” Vas said in only partial jest. “I presume you have met far more unsavory types here on the starlanes.”

Cilo said nothing, and remembered glittering years as a merchant captain.

“We should get to work securing our next batch.” Cilo said, changing the subject. The man turned toward Vas.

“Do you have an idea, Vas?” he asked.

“I am glad you ask, captain.” Vas gave a certain smile, one that Cilo remembered heralded things good and bad alike. “I do in fact have an idea.”

“We're waiting to hear it, then.” Aspher spoke.

“Hehe, oh God, you are probably going to hate me for this one, but then you will love me for it...” the young plantoid steadied his breath before continuing to speak.

“I know a guy on Nenti. A guy in high places. I cannot go into how I know him, but what is important is that I know him.”

This was starting off pretty basic, Cilo thought. Probably some other socialite drug dealer Vas knew from his days as a dilettante. It was predictable, but Cilo could go for some velozen right about no-

“-Ancient anagathic tech-”

Cilo came back to full awareness. He looked straight at Vas.

“You know we are not doing this, Vas.”

“Goddamn, you don't even let me finish! He really does know where the hulks are located, it would be worth a shot t-”

“Do you really think...wait, what?” Cilo stopped, mostly befuddled. Vas just sighed.

“As I was saying, this guys knows a system where Ancient ships have been spotted. Right on our side of the border. I mean, who is going to tell an Ancient where to park their ships? In any case, there are apparently artifacts in that system that scavengers seek out. According to rumors, there are some Ancient anagathics stashed away there. If we are even luckier, we can secure the ability to synthesize even more of them.”

“So.” Cilo began. “You want us to visit a place swarming with scavengers and possibly Ancients, for the opportunity to pick up whatever kind of anagathics our elders on the border had.”

“Yes.” Vas said straightforwardly.

Cilo was silent for a long while.

“How far is this system from Nenti?”

“A parsec away.” Vas responded.

Cilo thought for a moment, and replied a second later.

“...You've got a visit to your friend. I expect data.”

Cilo stated. And all three began to sober up.

The trip to the highport was brief. It took around six hours to go from the rim of Nenti to its populated heart. The visit itself was even more brief. Cilo unloaded the radioactives whilst Aspher delivered the mail. Vas just idled on the ship.

The three did not take the elevator down. Instead, Cilo set a course for Groundport-3, and broke into the atmosphere of the world. Aspher scrolled through the ship's library whilst Vas related what he knew of the place. Cilo just listened as he guided the ship down.

Nenti was a high population world. It was not the most impressive of city-worlds, but it was certainly more of a sight than the three had been seeing recently. The geographical distribution seemed standard enough – continents and water dotted the planet, of course – but it was difficult to discern such details across much of the world, which was a grey glittery haze. To the north Cilo could spy the matte green expanse that indicated untouched woodland, but it was not long before he could not spy that at all. The ship drew further to its destination. Evidently the system boasted industry and a good selection of minerals in the belts, which led to it being a trade hub amongst nearby systems. Cilo was really more surprised that it was a sweatshirt world. Then again, it was not like that mattered much when 90% of the population spent all of their time indoors. Spires were evident now; great spindly constructions that jutted out from gargantuan towers that erupted from out of the earth. Through the ever-present smog, one could spy walkways and monorail lines that connected each of the massive arcological centers. Apparently Vas had spent a good amount of time here back in the day, schmoozing it with the city's socialites. There was a racing scene that was popular in the great northwern wilderness, and Vas had participated in it back in the day. His performance was part of why this contact had been so impressed with him. Cilo still thought it had something to do with the prominence of Vas' family.

Cilo brought the ship into the hollow of a superstructure that served as a groundport. He landed the ship in the slot he had been assigned by the port authorities and went through the usual routine. As he prepared to lock-up the ship and deal with customs agents and all of the other wonderful rudiments of the merchanting life, Vas tapped away at his communicator, hooking into the city's dataweb. Within a minute, he began chattering on the device.

“Heh, yeah man. We're here in the groundport, do you want to head over to...nah don't worry man, your suite is fine!” Vas spoke to his contact, and Cilo only sighed. Aspher for his part remained silent, staring off blankly towards the interior of the groundport complex. Vas got off of the communicator soon after Cilo finished settling the ship.

“Looks like we got a date. Habitation complex nine, upper spire. Hopefully it'll be a nice change of scenery for you boys.” Vas smirked.

“We are here for business.” Cilo said, turning his head straight toward the man. The face was tired.

“Right, right...” Vas backed off.

Together the three exited the ship and began the trip to the contact. Cilo easily found this to take more time than their descent. While there were speedtreads and the like, most of the journey out of the complex consisted of exhausting walking and elevator rides. The three did not have access to any of the

small motorized vehicles that many of the citizenry used, and thus they had to rely on their legs for the most part. A reprieve came when they reached the groundport's monorail situation. After purchasing transport, they began the far more speedy journey to the habitation complex. This only took a few minutes.

When they exited the station they had arrived at, the three were confronted with even more people. The whole place was like a teeming hive, with countless citizens walking through the countless halls of the arcology-city like most people walk through their homes. Cilo had seen this before, of course, but he was not a city-world native. These kinds of places still annoyed him.

Aspher guided the party here, consulting with Vas for information regarding the suite whilst he used clairvoyance to determine the most efficient route. With some effort, the party was able to avoid many of the larger crowds, and use some of the shortcuts that normally only natives would know. Finally, after a long elevator ride, the three arrived at a stately penthouse floor. They walked through the hallways before them, spying the rest of the city beyond glasteel windows. Vas took the lead here, walking down a still-familiar path until he reached an onyx door. Moments after the group arrived, the door slid open.

“Well well well, we've got the old venzo back on Nenti once more! And I see you have brought friends this time...” a thirty-something plantoid in loose, colorful clothing spoke, standing right behind the entrance. The man wore dark glasses, and only appeared partially lucid.

“Back indeed, Davi! Though I am not sure if a decade ago was really a long time ago...” Vas shook his head, smiling.

“Oh you baby-faced bastard, you are like forty something now, right? Not all of us count time the way you do.” Davi said, but he was smiling.

“Yes, yes. Well, speaking of demons, that was actually related to why we were here.” Vas said.

“Of course, of course, this a serious meeting, not the kind where I bore your friends with speeches. Come in, come in...” Davi gestured for the three to enter, walking inside himself.

Cilo had seen better, but this was still good. There was a small wood-panelled entrance hall, with a living room to the right, and kitchen further ahead, and some sort of patio deck past that. It seemed as though a hallway to the left led to bedrooms and the like. Most of the place consisted of synth, of course, but the hard-edge was delicately rounded off in a multitude of ways. Flowering plants, living ones, rested in vases around the home. Cilo thought that they might have been imported.

“So so, what can the devilish Davi do for you?” Davi asked, turning back toward the three once he reached a space in-between the living room and kitchen. The voice was more firm, but it still seemed disconnected from the world.

“Davi, do you remember when you mentioned that old Ancient-occupied system close to Nenti?” Vas asked.

“Hah, yes.” Davi said, grinning and slowly nodding his head. “I thought you would never actually make the trip.”

“Well, circumstances have changed my risk-assessment procedures. We were planning on rooting through some of their hulks and installations for anagathics.” Vas said.

“I cannot say I would have expected much else from you.” Davi laughed a little. “I can give you the nav coordinates, though. I said it was an open offer all of those years ago, and it still is.

“Well that is good.” Vas nodded, running a hand through his head's leaves a little.

“Indeed so. I can also give you data from the system itself, and some advice regarding the scavengers and all those other types that tend to frequent the system.” Davi nodded in some slight haze, pulling out a processor unit and tapping away at a screen. Cilo felt a buzz from his pocket. He must have uploaded some files to his computing device.

“I will give you the basic rundown. The system is hot. Scavengers have already picked clean most of the interesting sites, and they still frequent the system to this day. Then there are the pirates who prey on the ships that visit the system. You do not really want to meet either. Especially not the latter.” Davi went on, gaze now flitting amongst the objects in the room. “Ancients also visit the system on occasion. If you pick up any foreign signatures, scam.”

“That is still a part that I am confused about.” Aspher spoke up. “It is difficult to believe that the Ancients would leave their borders, let alone fire on our vessels. They have not contacted us in centuries.”

“I never said they fire on ships they find.” Davi pointed out. “But ships who get close to their vessels do not return to tell the tale.” the socialite said with uncharacteristic lucidity that was almost unnerving.

“All that being said...” Davi turned around, now walking towards the glass doors that separated the house from the exterior patio. “Get ready for the best anagathics of your life! I expect your leaves to stay as light as they are now when I am an old man, Vas...” Davi laughed a little, lost again somewhere else.

“...Will do, Davi.” Vas said quietly, nodding softly.

“Hah! Well then, I suppose I should not keep you lads waiting. Also, I have some guests to entertain, and I am not exactly sure if this is your scene...”

As soon as Davi finished his sentence, the front door opened. A stream of plantoids in exotic and garish dress started to enter the room, talking amongst themselves and waving at the host. Hardly any paid any attention to the three wanderers.

“It is fine.” Vas said. Something happened to his face as the guests arrived.

Chatter began to fill the air. Cilo got a whiff of something expensive and undoubtedly illegal. The captain looked toward both of his companions, and without a word, the trio exited Davi's domicile.

The trip back to the ship was only slightly shorter than the trip to the suite had been, but it felt far less demanding than that latter one. The group took little time at all to leave the groundport. Cilo directed the ship back to orbit and then began the longer journey to the system's rim. Cilo's calculations of projected fuel use indicated that the ship had enough hydrogen to make the jump and make a jump back

to Nenti, should fleeing be necessary. He supposed that he should have been more concerned about the threat that his system could apparently pose, but really, he found it hard to feel many strong emotions anymore.

After around six hours, the ship reached the border of the system. By this time, Cilo had already managed to plug in the nav coordinates that Davi had given them into the ship's computer. It only took ten minutes to initiate the jump, and begin the journey to the system. It was known by the name of Basin.

Over the course of the displacement, the days passed by as they usually did, for the most part. All three men partook of their anagathics, on schedule. Cilo could feel the side effects lessen with every passing day, or rather, notice how he grew more resistant to their effects as the days passed on. It was kind of funny to think that he had seen so many types of them over the years, really. Pretty much the only anagathics he had never gotten his hands on were the home-cooked street trash that some of the most desperate addicts resorted to, and the state-of-the-art serums that the richest coreworlders had access to.

The meetings that the three had now were somewhat more serious than their meetings usually were. They went on over the information that Davi had provided, practiced donning their vacc suits, and discussed plans for dealing with pirates. It was really almost too casual, Cilo thought, but at least it was something. The plan was decided upon; the three would comb the debris field in the system's asteroid belt for an Ancient wreck that looked relatively untouched. From there, they would try to access what they could, even if it was not directly related to what they were searching after. Money was still money. Aspher considered the probability that any given ship would actually have usable anagathics, but it was not that significant of a problem. Really, it would be better for them to obtain machines and data for actually manufacturing anagathics. Provided, of course, that they could obtain or synthesize the materials used in its fabrication. Each of the men also did their own things, of course; Vas practicing with a flechette pistol, Aspher engaging in clairvoyance tests and similar other things. By the time the ship arrived in the Basin, the three were as ready as they could be.

Cilo engaged the scanners once the hum of the displacement drive died down. Within a few minutes, he found the debris field mentioned in Davi's records. He set a course soon after, directing Aspher to watch the scanner display while he guided the ship. They were lucky; it did not look like any other ships were in the system at the moment.

It was after four long, tense hours that the ship arrived at the debris field. One of the scanner screens lit up into a web of green filaments. Cilo decoded the images and discerned the positions of ships. Wrecked, Ancient ships. It was hard not to stare, really. The composition of the ships was almost totally alien to the composition of his race's ships. Many of the materials were unidentifiable. It was really quite something that this site was so obscure.

Cilo drew himself out of his trance rather quickly, all things considered. Though no other ships had appeared on the scanners yet, it would still be a four hour trip back to the jump point. If any came in during this interval, things could easily get dicey. While Vas inspected the vacc suits and combed through the ship's locker for some last-minute tools, Cilo assessed the maze of data on the screen before him, trying to decide upon a suitable ship to explore. It was clear that many were picked clean. Most of the ones that were not were surprisingly unremarkable as far as Ancient ships typically went. It was difficult to determine what types of ships he was looking, even when consulting the ship's library. A few he thought might be scout ships, research vessels, or military frigates, but determining their nature and what each ship could contain was still a difficult task. Even when Cilo found a ship that he



thought might have anagathics or useful data, it was often too picked over to be worth considering. It was with Aspher's advising that Cilo was finally able to settle on a ship to explore. A little ways away was a small, tapered vessel composed of a strange, shining artificial alloy. It was still unpowered, of course, but it looked to be more intact than other vessels in the debris field. After only a few minutes of consideration, Cilo made his decision, and announced it over the ship's intercom. Aspher continued to monitor the scanners for any sign of other ships, whilst Vas scrambled to get the group's equipment ready. Cilo brought the ship close to the alien wreck, settling the vessel with finesse. He began to initiate docki-

Cilo felt a hand on his shoulder.

The captain immediately looked up. Standing there was Aspher. His eyes stared off.

“They are here.” he said. The numbness was surreal.

Cilo's eyes immediately went to the scanner. It only took a second for his heart rate to spike.

There was a vessel on course for their ship. Nothing about its specifications looked familiar. It was coming in fast.

“I thought you we-” Cilo was cut off.

“My eyes were on the thing the entire time. It just appeared.” Aspher said.

Cilo scrutinized the display screen more. The object was far beyond the jump point.

“We have to get moving. Now.” Cilo said. Aspher wasted no time in taking his station once more.

Cilo got back to the pilot's seat and began to start up the ship. They were in a compromising position. They would have to get away from this hulk and back to the system's rim soon. Cilo quickly got to work getting out of the docking position, edging the vessel away from the wreck.

“Get back to the helm, Vas.” Cilo spoke tersely over the intercom. “Vessel of foreign specifications is coming in hot. Likely an Ancient ship.”

Before he could receive a response, Cilo shut off the intercom. He prepared to accelerate, when he noticed something.

The scanner said that an object was right by the ship.

How, how cou-

He was out right after.

The brightness was the first thing he realized.

Cilo snapped his eyes open. Above was brightness and light and metal. Cilo could feel that he was laying down, laying down on something soft. He grumbled, his consciousness ebbing back into the world of men like molasses. There was dizziness, and the world was a difficult enigma to understand.

It took conscious, deliberate effort for Cilo to focus his eyes and mind. He still could not sit up, yet, but memory of the past was coming back in short, anxiety-filled bursts, and the material before him became more and more clear. It had designs upon it, winding lines and patterns etched with mathematical precision onto a silvery expanse. Cilo remembered this material, from his days in anthropology class.

Cilo rationally knew, of course, the most likely situation he had ended up in. But that knowledge did not quench the fear. Panicking, Cilo started to force his body up, but for the most part, this only increased his dizziness. Moving his limbs felt like moving weights. There was a lethargy that had overtaken his frame, a frame that now seemed alien in some indescribable way. Cilo tried to steady his eyes more, blinking in an attempt to wear away the fogginess that tinged the edge of his vision. Down below the ceiling there seemed to be a...way in which light was refracted. It was difficult to describe. On the wall that he could see, there appeared to be no door. Light was present in the room, but it did not seem to be coming from anywhere in particular. Cilo forced his head down, to the side, and he was able to make out some sort of soft mattress that he was resting upon.

Cilo's mind began to race. He was almost certainly aboard an Ancient vessel, now. Aboard a ship that could either accelerate at a phenomenal speed, or jump into significant gravity wells, or both. And he had fallen unconscious on the ship itself, before there had been any sign of invaders or a boarding party. He struggled to reassert control over his limbs, but a frightening thought came over him. If they had subdued them so easily in their own vessel, how much easier would it be here, in their own territory? Cilo tried to push the thought away, but it remained.

Cilo held there for a while, just looking around the environment and trying to overcome whatever weariness had overtaken his limbs. Yet there was something else pressing into his mind, something that had come to his awareness almost immediately upon his return to consciousness. Something did not feel right. He would blink or wriggle a little or clench his fist and it would be off. It was something bone-deep, a wrongness that was difficult to pin down but undeniably present. It was with trepidation, then, that Cilo began to look down. Not at the environment, but at himself.

Cilo was not able to withhold the gasp.

Before him was a shiny, sleek, and yet interiorly fuzzy body suit, which protected tiny legs. Tiny legs. Ones that were far smaller than his own. Cilo felt his grasp on consciousness falter at this point. They were plainly there, the little feet that jutted out, ones which moved when he moved his own feet. But to associate that with his body. His own body. Cilo could not process the matter. He stopped supporting his head, and it fell, to the left side of his body. There was an arm, covered by a sleeve of that same body suit he had seen before. It was thin, lithe. But most of all there was that green, that unmistakable, slightly striated green that he recognized immediately. The thing was small. Way too fucking small. But it was his own damn hand!

Cilo began to hyperventilate. Perhaps at another time he could have recalled his old spacer training. But at the moment he could not summon it. There was a stinging to his eyes, and light, and the world was getting lost in a watery blur and-

“Shh. It is alright.”

A voice came into Cilo's mind, like something from out of the world. Cilo had received telepathic

messages from Aspher before, but this was on a whole other level. Cilo felt his body still, even as his lungs and chest still seized. Through the teary mess of his eyes, he could see that a portion of the wall was absent. There was something there at the bottom of his vision, something that was getting closer. Somehow, Cilo did not feel fear.

Lights appeared above Cilo. Three lights of different colors that moved around in a gentle circle. About them was a hood, and below them was a strange metallic torso covered by cloth. Two black appendages approached the refractions of the light that Cilo had seen before, and the plantoid noticed the striations change. He was in a chamber, he realized.

Cilo did not react when the translucent pod that he was resting in opened. He did not react when the black, tubular limbs began to approach him. He did not react when the entity before him scooped him up, bringing him close to their warm frame and cradling him in their arms. He just stared into the lights that lightly swirled, and which were more comfortable than most faces he had seen before.

“There there, child. We do not intend to harm you or your friends.” the voice in Cilo's mind came back. Cilo noticed the lights of the entity change as it did so.

“I...I'm little.” Cilo sniffled.

“I am aware.” the entity said.

Cilo began to notice the entity moving, moving toward the wall that he had previously spied inside his bedchamber. As they did so, a vertical section of the wall slid down almost in an instant, and the entity stepped outside towards shining hallways. Cilo could scarcely see with all the light around him, but the entity seemed to know where they were going quite well. Cilo could not see much between his angle and his blurry eyes, but he saw walls pass by him, various etched designs flowing by in a way that was visually comforting. When he could manage to move his head, Cilo could sometimes see more of the hall; spy a panel with some illuminated image, see another one of these aliens exit out of a room, or notice some odd architectural structure jutting out from a wall. But for the most part, Cilo was just a passenger.

When Cilo noticed the entity pass through another one of the doors that dotted this place, he began to look down. And face another scene that dazzled the mind.

Before him was a small silvery room, much like the other one that he had previously seen. On the ground, a small mattress rested, embedded in the ground. It was surrounded by a short fence of advanced synth. What was more surprising, though, was the fact that three young plantoid toddlers sat in this strange pen. They were the first to react.

“Oh, he's finally up!” a high-pitched voice came out. It was coming from an almost sickeningly cherubic face. Wait, that tone. Could that b-

“No need to embarrass the man.” another one of the children grumbled. God, that was Aspher...

“Ah, so this is the guy you were talking about!” a third, mysterious plantoid spoke. He rested the furthest away from Cilo, but he was still close to his friends. They formed a ring of sorts.

The entity began to extend their arms. They crouched slightly, if they could truly crouch, and Cilo

began to see the cushion of the pen before him. The alien quickly yet delicately brought him to the floor, and set him to rest in the playpen. Away from the alien, all of Cilo's repressed anxieties began to well up once more. He breathed rapidly. Reaction was difficult.

"In any case, it is good to finally meet you Cil-" the stranger was interrupted.

"WHAT IS GOING ON?!" Cilo screamed as much as his lungs could manage.

Friends who were decades younger than they were supposed to be shielded their auditory membranes, but Cilo could feel little guilt.

"Calm down, young one." Cilo perceived the entity's voice in his mind once more, and he steadied his breathing. He scooted around a little bit to face the entity more. To his left were his friends and a stranger. Straight before him was...well, an Ancient. That fact began to settle into Cilo, and suddenly, he began to feel very small in another way.

"We will provide you answers to your questions. Please, begin your inquiries." the voice returned.

"Al...Alright." Cilo spoke, quiet but forceful. He managed to look up toward the lights of the alien, and steeled himself.

"...Why are we babies?" the question still felt surreal to ask.

"Consciousness transfer to a clone body has been effected. This procedure models that which one of the individuals currently present experienced in the past." the alien answered. Their lights still changed color.

"C'mon, thought that would be obvious, captain..." Vas mumbled.

"Can't you just pipe down for one day?" Cilo shot a glance at Vas, and the boy shrank back a little. Cilo then turned back toward the alien.

"Alright. That still does not explain why you decided to do this to us, though." Cilo spoke.

"Heh...well..." the foreign plantoid pushed his fingers together a little. "...I may have something to do with that..."

Cilo's head shot toward the plantoid.

"What?"

"I...can explain. You see, I am Yaniz Vaquel, the archaeotechnologist..." the plantoid boy rubbed the back of his head.

"...The archaeotechnologist." Cilo spoke blankly. "That is how you are going to put the fact that you're...Yaniz Vaquel?! The one who is responsible for 90% of our history classes on the Ancients?! The one who made first contact?!"

"Geez, geez, you don't need to get so dramatic over it..." Yaniz mumbled. "...but yeah. I am him." the

plantoid smiled lightly.

"I...God this is just a lot..." Cilo sighed, rubbing away some of the wetness that remained close to his eyes. After a few seconds, Cilo recomposed himself. Then came another question.

"So, why are we babies?" Cilo looked straight at Yaniz.

"Okay...well..." Yaniz smiled a bit awkwardly. "First off, I did not specifically request that. That is just what they decided to do to you. That being said...they did get the idea from me."

"...How?" Cilo asked blankly.

"Well...I am sure you remember of how I disappeared under mysterious circumstances around five centuries ago?" Yaniz spoke.

"...Yes." Cilo responded.

"You see, that was when I embarked on a personal expedition to find their craft once more, after they had decided to cease communications. They were, well...they were the Ancients! What else was I supposed to do? It was not like I was just going to take their leaving us in the dust lightly." Yaniz shook his head a little. "So, I got on my yacht and tracked them down. They uh...did not really like how I violated their policy of non-interaction, but I refused to leave them. After some...serious haggling..." Yaniz briefly looked off toward the Ancient in the room, before he blushed slightly and began to speak again. "...I was allowed to stay! Only, well, they had some conditions..." Yaniz trailed off.

"Basically, they did not want me to be able to contact our civilization under any circumstances. And they wanted to generally limit my movement and ability because of general captive reasons...though they had good intentions, I assure you! So they were deciding on the best way to handle things and then one of them...um...read my mind..." Yaniz looked down now. The blushing was intense.

"You...wanted this?" Cilo asked. Somehow, it was hard to even be surprised.

"You don't have to say it out loud!" Yaniz huffed. "...but yeah. And it turns out they liked that solution and so they decided to use that on you when you started poking around the hulk!" Yaniz beamed a little.

"I don't even know what to say man." Cilo said, empty in some strange way. The child's eyes drifted back up towards the Ancient who stood beyond the playpen. There was serenity that Cilo had rarely ever seen before.

"So...we got turned into babies because we were going to investigate an old Ancient ship." Cilo said. The ridiculousness did not even hurt now, really.

"Pretty much." Yaniz nodded. "Granted this is just a temporary measure, to disable you before you can be returned to your own ship."

"Wait a minute..." Cilo began to speak, memory flooding back. "We got knocked out before they even got on the ship. If they did not want us spreading Ancient tech, surely they could have...I don't know, figured out some solution that involved taking us aboard their ship as babies! We probably know way

more about their civilization from that measure than we would have from another one!” Cilo shouted.

“Well, there is a reason for that...” Yaniz drifted off. “...It would probably be best to let Tenu explain the...offer, to you.”

Cilo blinked. The presence of the alien touched his mind soon after.

“I have already relayed to your friends what I am about to tell you. All I want to hear is your honest answer.” Tenu spoke. Cilo looked on.

“Would you like to be returned to your former bodies and ship, with memory of this encounter wiped, or would you like to stay here with us?” Tenu asked. Their lights were tighter than usual, Cilo thought.

Wait. What kind of question was that? Cilo did not consider himself overly interested in Ancient civilization. The three of them could just...

Wait.

Cilo looked straight up at Tenu. He hardened his gaze as much as he could.

“Tenu.” Cilo steadied his breathing. “How has Yaniz lived for this long?” the boy asked.

“You should already be familiar with the answer, Cilo” the voice drifted into his mind like a soft wind in the breeze. “After all, you came for it.”

He.

He should have known.

“We have anagathics too, Cilo.”

Cilo felt a tightness in his chest. His rate of breathing was starting to rise again, even as he stared into the lights of Tenu. Goddamnit, it could not be coming down to this...

“L-Look. I...I really want anagathics, sir...” Cilo's voice trembled. The alien peered a little closer at him, perhaps in concern, but for the most part, they remained an enigma. “...but I cannot live like this. Please, just give us the anagathics, and some way to make more of them, and, an'—”

“I apologize, Cilo, but we cannot.” Tenu responded simply, and sadly. “We cannot allow our technology to reach the younger races. We could wreak terrible damage.” the lights of the alien began to move slower in their rotation.

“S-Sir...” Cilo blinked a few times. He could feel something develop in his eyes again. “It is really, really hard for us to get anagathics. We have to do a lot, and, an' sometimes I am not sure if we will always be able to do it...”

“I know.” Tenu responded. The entity's form tightened a bit more, as though they were gathering their limbs closer together.

“P-Pleaseee sir, I don't want to be a baby again!” Cilo fully broke down. Tears began to stream from his face, and onto the shining synthetic bodysuit-sleeper which he now wore. Tenu just kept looking on at him, his face-lights coiled into a tight ring. Cilo felt the presence enter his mind softly, this time.

“It would be for the best, Cilo” Tenu said, and Cilo began to slowly look up.

“Your lifestyle is not sustainable. You know that. You can have a better life here than you could ever have there. But it is your choice. If you do not wish to remain here, we will not keep you.” Tenu spoke, and the world waited.

It was difficult for Cilo to think. And to breathe. And for him to do a great many other things. Vas and Aspher looked on at their friend, concerned. Even Yaniz was getting worried now. But Tenu still waited there, as patient and enigmatic as ever. Cilo fell somewhere else.

Cilo remembered when he joined the merchant service. It was right after business school. He went to the highport, and they accepted him, and he began to journey to other worlds. He saw so much more than just his homeworld, so much more than just the one little rock he had seen for his whole life. He travelled and he saw many great sights and he moved up the ranks and life was just great.

Then he was offered a little vial of kezcin, and he tumbled down into darkness. Why did he accept it? He didn't know. Why did he keep taking it? He didn't know. Why did he keep taking it now? He didn't know.

Cilo had ruined his life. It was all his own fault. He hated himself. He lived for a high that he did not even feel anymore. And it was all because of his own actions.

Cilo wanted to reject the alien's offer. He wanted to punish himself, and finally die like a man normally does. He wanted to find freedom.

But he could not muster up the strength.

“...I'll stay here.” Cilo said in the quietest tone he could manage.

Tenu said nothing. The other two had already given their responses. The Ancient felt grief, but he thought he would have felt that towards either response. Gently, the Ancient extended an appendage, beginning to pick up Cilo once more.

“Come. Let us begin your new life...”

When man next met the Ancients, everything had changed. Men were different. Their past was a hazy blur, like a dream that fades quickly upon waking. They had not forgotten anything. Their horizons had broadened until many other things were small in comparison. They remembered that they had never been mortal.

The first delegation came aboard an Ancient ship. It was for ceremony, of course. They had communicated long before their first physical meeting, and man had advanced such that they were practically equals to the Ancients. This was just a formality.

As strange, suited men and women entered the receiving hall, Tenu stood quietly in the back. He held

Cilo in his arms, who was fast asleep. He was an important guest, being a specimen of man who had joined with their civilization long before the rest of his descendants had followed.

Cilo had really surprised him, in some ways. They gave him the opportunity to live for the rest of his natural lifespan around two decades after his entrance. But Cilo had always rejected it. He got his anagathics in patches, nowadays, little synthetic constructions that had no side effects. He still liked his anagathics.

Vas was far more lively. Always talking, busy doing something fun, the usual. Aspher took his time to learn all of the knowledge the Ancients had accumulated regarding psychic phenomena. He was less scared of death, now. Tenu thought that he might choose to go without anagathics soon. Yaniz, for his part, was pretty much the same as ever. He and Cilo still played a lot together.

Cilo did not aspire to anything in particular. He hung out with friends who were far more invested in wringing out Ancient civilization for what it was worth. But mostly he kept to the presence of his Tenu and he lived.

Cilo chose to live. And it was his choice, Tenu knew. It was always his choice.