

A quick hit to the pineal gland.

CLEAN THINGS UP,  
ONE WAY OR ANOTHER



PLEASE NOTE: These visual aides are subject to time delay.  
Do not accept them without hesitation.

-Eed.

#### I. The Off-worlдер

It was after a long stint in Las Cruces, New Mexico, working for a small magazine, that I became notorious for the cynic you see before you.

Las Cruces was and remains the #1 testing site for both iridium deposits and nuclear testing, in fact you probably heard about it from Howard Cosell, though even he and the team in Manhattan have had details redacted.

These irradiated environs led to a subculture unlike any other, and I did my best to soak it all in while waiting for my scholarship. Nights at The Hungry Mosquito, Las Cruces' macabre watering hole, quickly turned me into a wordsmith who could lay down 10,000 for a modest fee.

One night I showed my acquaintance from the dumping grounds, Berkowitz, my newfound talents. He was stocky and imagined himself a long-lost descendant of Pancho Villa. I looked around in the reddish hue as people snacked on opium and told him that what I was about to accomplish would make him rethink the way he saw the world. He was almost completely sober, having ordered only one bowl of fried chum and a glass of mojito.

"Watch this," I instructed his eyes very carefully and kept him to the task at hand. I ducked my head below the table. Time passed. He grew impatient and looked under the table to see what I was doing.

I wasn't there anymore.

He sat up and I was squatting on top. He asked how I did it and I told him the answer in terms he could comprehend- that I had waited until he ducked under, at which point I snuck up behind him where he wasn't looking and s

stepped onto the rungs of his chair as leverage. He nodded, took another quick sip from his drink, making sure not to mix the layers, and told me that I was an idiot.

In these simple terms he knew what had happened. What he didn't know, of course, was that as he had waited I had visited a friend of mine who broadcasts political messages in a cryptic fashion, wearing arcaic insignia and a nice suit from Woolworth's. He calls himself the President of Dreamland, and he takes his job very seriously.

"How's the testing going?" I asked as Berkowitz tugged on the sleeve of an irate waitress. The ambiance was palpable, the moment ripe, one of those captured moments that stays in your head forever even if you desperately want it out. Across the room a downtrodden vagrant pulled the curtains over his head like an ostrich. Berkowitz took another sip.

"We have it down," he revealed, knowing full well behind those expensive glasses that he was giving away confidential information. "Twenty new variations, all of them guaranteed to make the teeth fall out. Currently being offered to three of the highest bidders in the Military-Industrial Complex. The boys at Rancho have it on the wire that we can take this stuff, bottle it up, give it to the Soviets as dishwasher and toothpaste, and they won't know what hit them. Slap a label on there, printed to the highest standards, of course. Battle by proxy." He covered his mouth. I was a journalist, he knew, and we were always dedicated to rooting the truth out, one way or another we would find it like bloodhounds on the cold slopes of Everest.

"I'll let you off the hook here," I mumbled casually. "Just know that the next time we meet here at the Mosq I may bring some of my friends from the zine along, They'll be anxious to hear what you have to say. Probably make an editorial about it. For now, however, as you were." He cocked his head to the side and made a shooting motion at me with his fingers.

"How do you know there'll be a next time?"

We left it at that.

And that was how my time in the desert went. Below those crags anything felt possible, from attempted manslaughter with my Chevy in the dead of night to rush-hour lunchtime rushes. The ppaks soared above me and I was their vesse carrying water in a little stream down to the thirsty people below, who yearned for assurance and satisfaction.

And I would have stayed were it not for the Martian who convinced me that only independent journalism right from the pen to the ear was the most respectable and dignified kind, that middlemen could stretch words and add some in there (in some cases, had been proven to.) My friend the Martian who I only met once never told me any of this directly but convinced me of it through his sheer charisma.

They say the oppressed are often the best at telling jokes because they have endured the most suffering, and the Martian was one of those people who fit those criteria. He was lanky, about seven feet tall, with blond hair that reflected the sandy environs from which he arose, not unlike the rocky highway-strewn wasteland I found myself in. That was, I suppose, why he chose to call the Land of Enchantment his home during his tenure here.

I saw him first walking through the town of Raton at 11 p.m. I knew some attributes were off, his feet were one hair's breadth too narrow, his gait was one of an entirely separate vertebrae. Call me a people person, I have seen a hundred men and women off the record and on, and they didn't walk like that. Anthropologically speaking, this man was an anomaly. My headlights reflected in those eyes of his, aquamarine from dry canals of the bygone days when his planet teemed with life and the ichthyosaurs ran amok.

He waved and smiled, I waved back and continued on for about a block. At the time I had been cruising and was trying to clear my head of unnecessary information I had picked up during my latest visit to the space

And by this point he was near the Raton movie house, passing under the marquee, so I knew that he must be going somewhere and I was wandering on aimlessly nearly a hundred miles from my post so I knew a few more wouldn't hurt. I ambled over and rolled the window down

"Need a lift?"

"Sure I do."

"Where? Got half a tank."

"Need to reach the national Observance Of The Union. Think you can get me there before 10?" The National Observance was an installment I had seen on my way up north, a couple miles down on Route 68. I opened the door and motioned for him to step in, and then the tires gave way and I turned onto the interstate and we were blazing along as the brushes whipped us.

"I'm a Martian," he screamed. I rolled up my window so I could hear him better. It was claustrophobic in here with this lanky being, whose blond hair and piercing ocular receptacles were made even stranger by his brow, which I hadn't seen at a casual glance. It jutted forward at least half an inch. He tapped his spindly fingers on the dashboard.

"Do tell, I replied with a smirk. "Thought we only had lunar colonies up there by now, few airtight domes."

"That's what they want you to think," his expression turned to disgust. "Fucking bastards have been aiming at us since one of your years ago. They drop right out of the sky on us, keep us guessing and destroy our villages. Mine hasn't suffered the same fate, but I know other villages that have." This was a new one on me. The tone had shifted from an irreverent jaunt to a somber funeral march in under 15 seconds. I distracted myself from his monologue by looking out at the scenery. God, it was beautiful to see the sun setting behind those ridges, and the brush hanging still in the arid vacuum.

"Grew up on the southern edge of the Coprates Chasma," he stated with a haunted stare. "We never guessed you people would come in such force, on in so many numbers. Thought you were an agricultural society, like ours. We had telescopes, certainly, they could detect the lights of your cities and we knew you were maybe a hundred years ahead, had a technological boom. We had no idea how far ahead you were."

We passed the small hamlet that was Redford. It had once been a hub of mining. Now the quarry pits were dry and the buildings were centuries out of date. Some were built during the Spanish period.

"The people who sent me here as an exchange student of sorts are called The Consortium," he went on, pulling a napkin from his shirt pocket with the Raton Stop-N-Eat insignia on it. "You might know them as the Deep State, or the Iron Mountain Committee. From what they told me in my briefing, they had existed in some capacity since the foundation of your air and space travel bureaus. How accurate the information they fed me is, couldn't say." He took a pen out of his wallet and drew a small symbol, then passed the napkin for me to study. The symbol looked like a mushroom tilted slightly to the left, with 2 small oblong dots on either side of the stem.

"This is their logo," he related. "See this, it'll be them. They were kind to send me here and allow me to engage in your civil customs, it was voted on by a very narrow margin." I nodded, I knew how bureaus could operate, had learned this during my stint in Orange County, California sitting on the Council- the minutes were read in a fashion that could replace any sedative on the market. I handed the napkin back to it. He tore it up and threw the scraps out his window.

By now the desert chill was setting in and the landscape that had been a blazing skillet now became a frigid tray. With no vegetation, the earth was reduced to its bare components- rock and shrubbery. The road stretched on for miles. When I got back to Las Cruces they would have my head for my extended leave of absence. Probably smuggle something disgusting into my toothpaste.

"Exchange student, eh?"

"Something like that."

"In that case," I extended my hand towards him, "Welcome to Earth."  
"Oh no," he pulled back and put his hand up as if he was defensive. "I'm scheduled to leave tonight. They're very strict about what I say and do, where I go. I was only in Raton because they had allowed me 5 hours leave. They probably track my position by satellite."

"In that case, goodbye."

"What is your life like, here in New Mexico?"

I thought about his question for a moment. Between my gap year, my time hanging around in Orange county and my work here, I had built up a sort of reputation as a nomadic jack of all trades, albeit a lackluster one. We whizzed by several reflors.

"I guess you could say I'm also a prisoner of the state," I responded slowly and carefully. "Not officially, although it sometimes feels like it. Every morning I get up, walk through two laboratory doors, into a large room full of men and women who work on complex apparatuses. In some areas I run into red tape, in other areas there are doors that read "RESTRICTED ACCESS ONLY." More often than not I sign contracts which are meant to assure the people I interview that I can't disclose certain details." The Martian's forehead moved in and out, and the veins on his wrists thumped.

"Excuse me," he said, retrieving a small bottle from his sleeve. It was beige and he popped a small capsule out of a slot on top. "Oxygen tablets. Need to take one every 30 minutes or I'll suffocate. You were saying?" I gathered my thoughts and proceeded.

"Sometimes it's easy," I continued. "A straightforward job. Sometimes my agent, who works at the offices of the zine, takes care of all the heavy details and rhetorical roadblocks so that I can enter the building with a fresh impression, without worrying about getting cut up into little pieces and tossed in a ziploc bag into the Rio Grande. Other times, I spend nights in my temporary lodging filling things out, dotting the boxes and checking the ts. It can become redundant."

"We have something similar, though less abrasive," he replied. "We call it the Office of Public Affairs. You go in once a year and fill in ten basic questions about your living status. How much grain your farm has produced, how many young you have, whether you've visited any neighboring provinces, and a few others. It takes around 15 minutes." My palms sweated and glued themselves to the steering wheel. Mars sounded like a veritable paradise.

"Of course," he went on, his eyes becoming vacant and dead again, "The Earth Men are gradually phasing the Public Affairs out in favor of a new procedure they call Manifest Intervention." He put his hand out the door and his fingers flapped around like chinese wind socks.

"So much for a Martian utopia."

"With every month the immigrants come, they come in metallic hulls and ellipsoid crafts with names of Earth cities on them. Some carry the names of great Earth figures. One is named the Winston Churchill. It crushed the water fountain in the Eos City center."

"I'm sorry about that, really am. We can screw things up, I tell you. Few years back we made movies about your people leading a hostile invasion. Tables have turned, I guess. Maybe one day we'll exchange enough technology for the premises of those films to become realized."

"We have no desire to conquer," he stated plainly. "Our numbers are few such that prior to the ravaging of your people we had no need nor want. Upon my return I will not be greeted as a valiant traveler but as a traitor whose pact with the Consortium is yet another piece in the puzzle that will render Mars a dead world." He wiped his eyes, which were leaking red fluid. We continued on. Night had fallen and the shadows were inescapable. The moon made itself known over some cirrus. The lunar colonies could just barely be discerned over the Sea of Tranquility. A second colony on the southern tip of the Mare Criseum was also visible, but only with binoculars on an especially clear night.

I popped a tape into my 8-track player after yet another long pause. The Martian was curious about the device and its many functions, he ran his appendages over it and brought them to his chin, which was abnormally tapered. We sat for a while enjoying the music. It had cost extra to get the 8-track deck installed, man at the car lot had seemed hesitant about giving the car up as it was, much less make renovations to it, but it hadn't failed me yet and I had a box of them in the back.

"Human culture interests me most," he said. "Your constant need for closure and for progress, your desire to discover the universe's ultimate truth. On Mars we have no such desires. We accept things as they are, our research stations are few and our satisfaction with the present state of being is omnipresent in all facets of our daily routine." That much was obvious, for someone who had been through an alleged genocide, he was in pretty good shape, save for when his pupils contracted and the fire went out in his eyes. I didn't like that, it gave me the creeps.

"You say this Public Affairs office takes records," I remarked. "Surely there's a motive of curiosity there, your people want to know where you came from, how many years you've been around, and through looking at records of the past they can extrapolate the future." He scratched his head and thought about this for a while. I was willing to bet that Mars and Earth had more in common than he was willing to admit, that we were kindred souls once you took away all the excessive bullshit about what a peaceful and civil race they were. Having been to 26 states at this point in my life, and 3 countries, I was convinced that it was the same all around, short end of the candy bar or otherwise.

"Yes," and then he paused. "That is true, but..."

"Answer me something else," I went back. "How many wars have been raged across the Martian soil over resources. I've seen the latest reports, your world isn't exactly a jungle. You have farms, sure, but grain is scarce. Most of the soil is infertile save where the canyons are, streams maybe half a foot across. Surely that's not enough to go by. So you get crafty, resources are in need so you achieve resourcefulness, start wars over sex and lust and greed, someone in the Valles Marineris makes war on a neighboring tribe who just so happen to live on Olympus Mons and think pretty highly of themselves, high and mighty you could say." My friend was running out of ideas now, he was really at a loss for words. He tapped his long spindly little sausages on the dashboard, searching in vain for an excuse.

"That is how it happened, in a sense," he began. "But their numbers were great and we had to defend ourselves. We had no other recourse..." He stopped and raised his brow. He knew I was aware of what had transpired, before the humans ever landed, before the first gun had fired a single shot, that the history of his people was one of bloodshed and chaos.

"How did you know?"

"Call it intuition or call it dumb luck. I don't care."

The tape reached its crescendo as the jazz flute soared up, and we were doing at least 75 mph in a 60 mph zone. I realized I had forgotten to switch on the headlights. They came on, illuminating every dust particle and amplifying the eerie ambiance of the scenario we found ourselves in. The Martian looked up toward the rim of the Santo De Cristo range, which let off a refractory scarlet tinge created by disturbances in the Earth's atmosphere. Right now the particles of the sun were hurtling toward us at a breakneck pace, same as during the day. Same as anytime, really. Cells were always being struck by stray photons or particles. It was like a shooting gallery. One of my uncles got a bad sunburn once, after that I never questioned the power of invisible dots. Three hours at McGregor's Pond and his back looked like something you'd find at the Replomat.

My neck had a crick in it. I suspected this had something to do with the phase shift I had endured earlier that day at the Raton Mini-Mart. I had been searching for a bag of my favorite Mexican candies and had been struck by the outer reaches of the space, had nearly been sucked into the haunted Italian coastal town of Ciopro which only made itself known to drunken sailors. Would have been a real catch to pull myself out of that one.

My friend looked over at me as I adjusted the position of my seat. The tires skidded slightly and he jostled around. The road wasn't very well-paved here, in cracks you could see thistles blossoming. It was in a gorgeous state

of decay.

"What was that?" my cosmic friend inquired.

"Nothing," I replied with a nonchalant rapport. "Things happen to me sometimes, don't know what it is or who else goes through them. It's how I knew about the war that nearly decimated your people, that it lasted 30 of your Martian years, from the ice caps to the colonies on Phobos, that it's the underlying reason your people are only on the agricultural stage, you're the bastard offspring of what was once a great Martian empire."

"You couldn't have known that. Surely you work with the Consortium, you're an inside agent sent by them to catch me. Trying to get me to admit to these things so they can use it in their propaganda. I have admitted." He buried his face and pinched his narrow proboscis closed. I reached over and put a firm hand on his shoulder. He looked up at the sky and seemed to be counting something out. Maybe his taxes.

"Never heard of this Consortium before today," he looked reassured. "I don't know what they told you, or what you told them. Only that there are secrets on the Red Planet that you're not willing to give out, and I can respect that. Nobody will hear it from me." He let out a sharp breath. We probably were under satellite surveillance now, they had probably forced him to get a chip installed or something.

We drifted on toward the horizon as if were gliding on a current of air, and the world seemed to consume my vehicle into an empty void of darkness where the world was nothing more than a dismal plain of charcoal, and the sky was the only real feature, an incredible bowl of universal radiance. Felt as if the dark flat void would tip over on a whim and we would fall thousands of miles until we struck the viscous membrane of that spatial exterior.

"There it is," he said wistfully. His mind was going places. "Up there, left side of the constellation you call the Scorpion, unusually positioned for this time of year. Always had a keen sense of astronomy. On my world the constellations are off ever so slightly, each star altered by a millimeter or so such that what you see as a scorpion, we see as a long worm creature with antennae. We call it Lycaeum." I took the 8-track tape out of its slot and returned it to the showbox with the rest of them. The back seat was covered with accumulated dust. When you're in New Mexico you can't avoid it.

"Beautiful planet," I said, straining my neck to make out the one he was pointing at. "How can you tell it's Mars?"

"Intuition, he replied. "As with your intuition. Not the reddish hues or the amount of light it emits. Rather, the feeling of longing I get when I stare at it for too long. You would be able to detect Earth, too, if you were on Mars." I suspected he was telling me the truth, giving me things straight, although I still knew that every word he spoke was filtered through a planned web of deception and subterfuge. That was fine by me.

"Tonight I go back," he said. "I will live a life of exile with my home on my back, people will spit at me in the square. I will be home but it will be different, the people in the huts will not let me in, the breeders will shun me like the plague. I will be home, but I will be alone there as I am now, alone in the middle of an empty world." He was onto something, it had been about an hour and the illusory infinity of this road was enough to drive anyone to insanity if they thought about it long enough.

I remember a few key details, the sort of thing you would need to keep in mind for later, were the evidence ever to be declassified. For instance I recall how he had something stowed away in his front pocket next to his lapel, a compact tape recorder or camera. It was the age of miniaturization, after all, and I wouldn't put it past the Consortium to supply him with a means of documenting his travels.

I also remember vividly the odor he gave off. It was like week-old cologne. Maybe it was the natural pungency of his species or perhaps it was really cologne. Either way, it was distinct, and left an impression on my mind, which at this point was throbbing with all the implications of his voyage. Not only was the Moon being stripped for resources in the guise of quick tourism, but now the red planet- and all this within 5 years of us landing on the moon. It was enough to make anyone start salivating at the mouth, all the juicy details that came to mind, the sordid gossip that would erupt, maybe even get Ford thrown out off the deep end.

But I couldn't. Not to him, they would probably kill him if word ever spread. Journalist though I was, I was bound to oath and sworn to secrecy, and in under 2 hours in the twilight haze of New Mexico had become enmeshed inside a conspiracy of immense proportions, the likes of which only I and maybe a few others were privy to. This was insider information.

The road continued on winding and desolate, and while there were a few minor hills the immediate surroundings were flat, I mean FLAT, I mean F-L-A-T. A gap in the yellow lines was a welcome diversion, although they usually only signalled the presence of another road which went way off into the distance where only unseen predators and dead cities waited.

My companion said little during this section of our trip. I had gone to Raton that morning and had seen this area as it really was, large and expansive yet with recognizable landmarks and guidelines, waysides and stops. In a short amount of time that recognizable slice of Americana had given way to a foreign concept, a riddle that perplexed us both. This was not the world I knew, and my tank was getting dangerously close to running on empty. Fumes in the rear, as Lucky Autobahn once remarked, that linger just long enough to reach the pump, and serve as a blessed reminder of how precious our coal deposits are. I pressed on, harder than I had taken this lemon for a long while.

It was going to prove its worth tonight, every mechanism in it was stirring in anticipation, feeling the curves and hugging the dips with those cheap tires. And all the while my friend remained perplexed by the meaningless nature of his existence, his planet, and how he came to be.

To be honest, I enjoyed watching him squirm.

After a while, though, things began to make themselves clear and I could no longer deny my immediate reality, whatever it may have been. The road tapered off and I found the car stranded on a rocky plateau. My friend was gone. Outside was the expanse of the endless night, and below me I could see a few miles of barren rock with a repulsive gray color, which dipped down because this body was not a geometric sphere but rather a potato of crevices and sulleys.

It was Phobos and it was the Space Between, but it was also of course Phobos, and to my right I could make out the red world and its gleaming towers of sapphire and steel, its cities and its roads. And I was a member of an elite squadron who were to disable the outpost of the elite and bring them to justice. The car floated out into the emptiness and I was next to my compatriots who used the low gravity to their advantage. They knew me, and I knew them, and we fought valiantly though our chances were slim and our opportunities were scarce,

And the war lasted for a long time and

TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST IT WAS KIND OF A BITCH, WASN'T IT?

YES! A REAL PISSER!!!

I snapped back and found myself in the car, the engine made the noises of abject defeat and my friend was swinging the door open and closed. He stood outside looking for people but there were none.

"Out of gas?" I slammed my hand onto the dashboard and drew back because after visiting the space my bones were always a tiny bit weaker. "Knew I should have filled up before we left Ration, I just KNEW it. We'll never get to your destination in time." The lights made a futile gesture and then, like the rest of this rotten slab, they shut themselves off. My eyes adjusted to the night and I could make out a few bushes beyond the edge of the road, but that was about it.

This was as near as I would come to seeing infinity- the road leading off in one direction forever, off in the other direction for just as long, one car and two people, and all around us no sign of civilization. No telephone poles. No signs. No fences, cattle ranches, even light pollution. Only the road, looking like something out of a berserk mathematical thought experiment.

"We still have time," he looked at his watch. "They'll wait for me as long as I don't show up. They want me back, they would never leave without me." He motioned toward the direction of the monument with a spindly arm and we started walking. I brought along a jug of water from the trunk. We would need it if the sun came up.

"The car?" he inquired.

"Forget it," I said. "It's insured, I'll get it towed tomorrow from Las Cruces." Soon enough it faded out and we were alone with only the stars to see by.

"Explain to me this," I supposed. "Why does this Consortium allow you out on the streets among Earthlings? Clearly you're not human, a cursory glance could tell anyone that. Why not keep you locked away in a room somewhere? Some reclusive underground bunker, and bring you food and newspapers from there?" I could barely make his face out, but his mind was working.

"For acclimation purposes," he responded. "People see me and assume I merely possess a genetic defect, a ligament suspended. They'll be seeing more of us in the years to come, but due to my early introduction they won't think twice about it. Eventually once our numbers here reach a few thousand, the Consortium claims they'll break the news to the people of your world and we can live in a sort of mutual symbiosis after that." He looked skeptical as he said that. Probably didn't buy their silver-tongued horseshit any more than I did, but he had been given strict guidelines to paint them in a positive light and couldn't exactly do that when just an hour before he had been talking about the oppression and invasion. He was in a double bind, and was sweating a light green oily substance because he was nervous. They would probably shoot him if he was bugged. The Feds were known for that.

"Looking forward to it," I said. "Years of isolation have rendered humanity depressed and nihilistic. We need a reminder that we're not alone, that we have people who have been through the same experiences as us and bring us closer on an Interstellar level.

"A noble ideal," he replied. "It's a shame we as a people base our behavior on nihilism. During the war we tore through things like butter, destroyed cities knowing that in the future they would be rebuilt by more competent people, showed very little regard for life or limb. We do not care."

"You cared enough to go to war. Nihilists don't fight for principles."

"I suppose that much is true."



what a sick  
illusion.



For the first few miles, walking was hard. I was out of shape and the little walking in Mexico had been limited to brief strolls for information and supplies. Walking on the train like this was grueling.

Soon, however, it became an ethereal undertaking during which I learned just how far the human body was capable of traveling. For miles me and the Martian traversed that lonely country road, on into the wee hours of the night. Every so often he would glance at his watch, pause, and look up at the stars as if trying to gather a sign.

"Always thought you would have some kind of antenna," I quipped.

"But you," he said. "Tales of men who lived with so much fur that in the summer they would beat their chests and howl at the sky to relieve tension." I hadn't noticed, as visible through his shirt

was visible through his shirt. I could tell he had no chest hair. My companion remained, taking those unsettling strides with his long feet, and humming a tune I didn't recognize. It was in a minor key and sent shivers up my vertebrae. Sometimes I try to remember how it went, but I fail every time. My personal theory is that it was produced using flaps and folds of the larynx which we don't have.

This is not to say his tonal inflections on or even dialect were foreign. If I were to be blindfolded and hear him next to someone pulled off Madison Avenue, and judge them sans appearance, I probably wouldn't recognize a man. Then again, all the guys at Madison Avenue are probably aliens. You'd need to be out of touch with humanity to conceive of something as banal as The Four Roses Club.

A strange question entered my head. "What are the people like at the Amazon?" I had always wondered that and figured this would be my only opportunity, at least until more Martians were sent over.

"I met a girl from there once," he said, again looking out toward the little red spark. "Where I come from we call it the Further. She was nice, we hit it off. Almost met face-to-face, but she stopped speaking to me on the Scanner and I never really bothered to ask her why. Might have found someone else."

"You mean you never met her in person?" I inquired. He nodded his oversized head. "That's incredible, to be able to carry on a conversation using only technology. Our scientists are making rapid advancements in that field. Last year they came out with a gadget called the Videophone. 400- picture quality isn't the best, but we are getting there." He wasn't having any of my unbridled optimism. We trudged on. The water was becoming a burden, so I offered him some.

"Can you drink this stuff?"

"Martian water has a different chemical composition, but I've tried yours and it seems safe. Pass it."

He took the bottle and shoved the cap into his mouth. His lips made a pouting noise as he sucked all the water out- very slowly, I might add- and then he exhaled and blew the cap back up. It was a disgusting procedure to observe, but he appeared refreshed and invigorated.

Time for another oxygen tablet.

And so it went. I crinkled the bottle and even though we couldn't see the Martian getting close. I was no longer in the space and the noise had died off. I was feeling lucid, perhaps even more lucid than I had felt in months. I was connected to my surroundings, and furthermore I was an active participant in them.

rd- I wasn't used to it, my body I had done during my stint in New Mexico around Las Cruces to gather information and supplies. Walking on the train like this was grueling. undertaking during which I learned of traveling. For miles me and the Martian traversed that lonely country road, on into the wee hours of the night. Every so often he would glance at his watch, pause, and look up at the stars as if trying to gather a sign.

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"You mean you never met her in person?" I inquired. He nodded his oversized head. "That's incredible, to be able to carry on a conversation using only technology. Our scientists are making rapid advancements in that field. Last year they came out with a gadget called the Videophone. 400- picture quality isn't the best, but we are getting there." He wasn't having any of my unbridled optimism. We trudged on. The water was becoming a burden, so I offered him some.

"Can you drink this stuff?"

"Martian water has a different chemical composition, but I've tried yours and it seems safe. Pass it."

He took the bottle and shoved the cap into his mouth. His lips made a pouting noise as he sucked all the water out- very slowly, I might add- and then he exhaled and blew the cap back up. It was a disgusting procedure to observe, but he appeared refreshed and invigorated.

Time for another oxygen tablet. And so it went. I crinkled the bottle and even though we couldn't see the Martian getting close. I was no longer in the space and the noise had died off. I was feeling lucid, perhaps even more lucid than I had felt in months. I was connected to my surroundings, and furthermore I was an active participant in them.

He had a kind of in- planet was one without val and had walked out relative f that the Martians were a who carved their way up the underground lakes, before t This visitor had seen the e Not many historical figures long since dead.

And if his people would Consortium, then surely the need, even if their populat around- because needs aren' the most passionate desires

His people may once have was a new agent in the reci of what we had done was as hated him, they would hate

This fiery desire would planet. They would use our into theirs, create offensi alleys when the Earthlings drive us out or come to Ear happen long after I was dea inevitability. As his peopl because eventually it will

My thoughts went back to event, I realized. All thos last a decade, maybe half a the Manchurians, or they wo while the immediate effects year, soon enough the state placidity. It would be no d the Sun went Nova.

It was a comforting noti

The Martian told me of o

He told me how he worked it was fine enough. They ha mills that broke the rocks and as malleable as clay.

He told me about his cou on Deimos, who felt more se recruits on Phobos, who by scrap of the battle from de fabric craft, long forgotte tablets that had been unear current age that told an Em been an aquatic paradise, c the moons had been common. Wonders in the Martian Capit

Despite my cohort's reluc among the Martian people, I for. If they didn't, after all killed themselves.

And the long night contin klooking at his watch becau

fectious perseverance to him. Sure, he said his es, but he had been through a turbulent era ly unscathed. I knew from the way he carried himsel proud and honorable people, an ancient people ladder of evolution on river basins and on he ice caps formed and the planet turned to dust. nd of an epoch and the beginning of a new one. can claim that. Only Charlemagne, and he's

treat him as an outsider for his pact with The y held values and lived with both want and ion was low and there was enough food to go t always created from raw material. Sometimes, can be those of the mind.

cared as little as he said they did, but there pe now, an unexpected splash of vanilla. The impact critical on their end as it was on ours. If they us, too. For what we had done, what we had taken. give way to anti-human sentiment across the own technology against us and turn our weapons ves and draft resistance plans in secretive back weren't listening. And then they would either th and destroy us. All this would, of course, d, so I had nothing to fear. But it was an e said, the present is not worth worrying about end and give way to something new.

our own war in Manchuria. What a pathetic e lives lost for something that would at most century at best. Either we would win and conquer uld win and seize America, and in either case, of the power shift would be felt for perhaps a yea of affairs would revert back to its mundane iffereent. Nothing new under the sun, even when

on, albeit a sociopathic one.

ther things that night.

the crops, sifting the red sand around until d entire machines to perform this process, whole into little pieces, made them as smooth as flour

sin, Ferial, who worked on a geologic plant parated from his home than even the lucky this point had been tasked with salvaging the ades prior. Ferial had taken up an ancient n. He had discovered this craft through some thed on Deimos, tablets from long before the pire so far back in Deep Time that Mars had oated with green foilage, and travel between Ferial had sold the tablets to to Hall Of tal, which was located at Terra Sabaea.

istance to admit the interesting things that went on would say they definitely had something to live all, it followed logically that they would have

ued and I lost track of time, and he stopped se as far as either of us were concerned, time had

Now you might well be able to picture in your mind's eye the uncanny allure that came from within me to observe the martian's every facet, because what I was currently witnessing was not only a historic event but also a look into comparative genomics. It's not often one is able to observe freely the evolution of a lifeform that grew in a wholly separate environment. This was why he was as lanky as a rake- because the comparatively low gravity of Mars had stretched him like taffy, and made him both depressed and high-spirited that some day his ship would come in.

There were other telltale indicators- so many I doubt anyone would buy The Consortium's misplaced ligament excuse. He clearly was not a person of this world, you would think twice if you caught a glimpse of him while buying a scoop of ice cream at a Dodgers Game, or if he was sitting next to you on a ski lift, or even for that matter if he were in the car ahead of you on a ski lift. The point being that our minds are keen at determining our own kind, and if they should catch wind of these tallow walkers among them they might give in to the lesser impulses.

I knew that on his planet woodwinds were the most common musical group, and that on a clear night with an unimpeded sky you could hear the eerie wail of an unattended concerto in the village green, that the musicians sat and played for hours on end, giving the Martian towns their charm and reputation. I could not say with certainty which towns were where or how many there were. Or which were larger.

I knew that if you were on Mars at the right time, on a chaise lounge with a cold alcoholic beverage in one hand and a visionphone in the other, you could watch the sand ships as they carved neat lines in the dust, hovering three feet or so overhead- that you could lie back and have the monoliths pass over you without a second thought. They were on their way to deliver supplies and didn't notice you anymore than an Earthbound locomotive concerns itself with a wayward penny on the track.

I could see the way he breathed and I knew that he sucked the air in sharply and that, even without the oxygen tablets, his kind must have developed with only one lung- in that thin air with the particulate, nobody would need two. One might think a martian would need four lungs for extra processing, though that would be redundant. Our lungs take in delicious and full air, and we relish every breath because it gives our system the power of determination and confidence- on his world, which was in many ways a pale and all too familiar reflection of ours, breathing was yet another biological function, to be dealt with accordingly by one apparatus.

There were musicians and music on his world but the melodies were uncanny to me because they were sterile- or, at least, I was unable to fully appreciate their beauty and depth. On Mars there were no Theocrats and no matters of the soul. Processes were quick and efficient- before the Consortium had arrived, that is- and nobody had any reason to believe in that which did not make itself readily apparent. Conflicts were created only on social ideals.

It struck me as contradictory, that there were so many apparent flaws in the way he described his environment, although I suppose that's what happens when you live your life somewhere, you come to accept it as the status quo and don't stop to consider all its peculiarities and blatant contradictions. Then a vessel of transport snags you up and carries you off to the Canary Islands of the South Seas, and culture shock sets in.

In the bags directly beneath his eyes I saw the girl who dumped him, her image crisp and sharp on the Visionphone. She was also someone with great complexity and a tendency to overthink all available options. Her brow was smaller, though I can't say whether this was true for all females. She had synthetic-looking blond hair and a necklace of exotic minerals that we stuck on our hunk of granite and shale could only postulate about in regards to the incredible chemical composition.

She had concerns about his viability. He had concerns about her promiscuity and in the end she turned the visionphone off and he resigned himself to the reality of the situation- that she was too good for him and he knew it. To dull this inconvenient truth, he went to the food repository and removed a bot bottle with a clear viscous substance inside it, and drank long and hard. All this as a sand ship passed by only a mile away, a silhouette in the night, a passing reminder that the world would go on regardless.

I wondered, too, what sort of angle The Consortium would take when exhibiting Martian society to the general public. These were not noble savages who fought back against colonization with strength and will, but a people with long problems of their own who cared not who ruled over them and even cared little about the condition of their world. In that way, they were not unlike us. If they had been technologically superior and invaded Earth, we would likely be indifferent for the most part. In this the modern age, wonder and awe had given way to passivity and banality.

I found it ironic that this traveler who signed on to explore Earth so he could expand his perspective- a trait most of his people likely did not possess, the desire for new sensations- would be labeled a traitor simply for agreeing to board a flight. The real ones to blame were those who had signed the deal with the first Consortium squadron to land, who upon seeing the vessel emerge from the sky had come forward with a contract and legal paperwork in hand and said yes, please subjugate us. Surely if this man's peers were willing to spit on his shoes whenever he passed by, they had a sense of decency. Would this decency not be spent more effectively by going after the spineless cowards up top?

We would have done the same, of course. One world was blue and the other was red, but we were virtually tomato tomato save the absence of belief and the physiological characteristics.

You take the sort of vapid mental clarity that arises on a pristine and undisturbed New Mexican night and what you have is a blanket of waves- waves from the farmhouse 20 miles off whose sole occupant only visits the General Store once every month, the wave from the local radio station that sits unoccupied for decades in a field full of broken glass but continues transmitting from its vacant studio, waves from the ceaseless buzz of the neon tubes at the garage in Taos, all of which attack you brain like a spider and reveal to you just how easy it all is to grasp.

The Martian was looking at me funny, though I couldn't see it in the empty nothingness. I saw onlt his silhouette as he leaned closer and asked in a polite, concerned tone,

"You alright?" He offered me an oxygen tablet.

"Yes, fine," I said, declining his offer. "Your tablets won't do anything. It's not them. I mean, it's not you. It's only in my head." I massaged my temples. In high school that strategy had always seemed to work, when I first started seeing the pipes that led to the water fountains, when in the middle of a lesson on microchips I would leave my body and see things from the point of view of a water molecule traveling from the water tank in the furnace room to the spigot of the fountain. however, as luck would have it, it was unaffactive now.

The pain continued as we made our way over a small crest. To our left we saw the first glimpses of civilization, a ground wire leading up and off toward the horizon. My head was like a balloon, my cheeks were red and I was going into a fever. I began taking off my shirt. The martian didn't react- he probably hadn't bothered to memorize the number of emergency services, and even if an ambulance did arrive there would be very little they could do to help me. All we could do was keep going.

This agony I went through as the waves cascaded between my ears gave me a newfound appreciation for those who had fought on Phobos- on either side, ~~peace~~. To TAKE ONE WRONG JUMP AND FIND YOURSELF CAREENING DOWN TOWARD YOUR

on one side and, on the other, to be let off into the neverending abyss was terrifying and exhilarating the

And amid the waves, the veritable tsunamis that crashed without end onto my head, reminding me that we weren't alone out there and never would be truly alone so long as the electromagnetic spectrum kept relentlessly and ceaselessly barraging us with its mindnumbing noise- not us, me, I should say, he was immune to it all- Amid the waves were the noises.

They crawled their way insidiously through my canal past wads of spent earwax and then up the nerves to a point where they became all consuming and the night became a discordant symphony of high latitudes and resonant harmonics that would not end until I forced it back inside.

Through sheer willpower and the temple technique, I somehow managed to push the thoughts back in, growing ever smaller now as their tangible mass and weight collapsed like a singularity, going in further and further until the unseen waves became a speck, an infinitesimally small grain of sand. There was clarity. There it was, sound as ever.

"Better now," I said, straightening up. "Let's hurry, wouldn't want to keep your people waiting." I couldn't be sure but I think he smiled. We both quickened our paces to a brisk jaunt, and his kneecaps folded in ways I had no idea kneecaps could fold.

And I wondered what my publisher would think about me leaving my car out on the highway where anyone could loot it and sell it for scrap metal. He would probably have a fit, but his reaction wasn't what concerned me at the moment. Had to make it to the National Observatory.

Tomorrow when I came into the offices the people would look at me blankly. I was already in danger of losing my security clearancem, Berk and the rest were sick of how nosy I was, how wont to queries I became, and how well I could drink any of them under the table until their lips became loose like salt water taffy. Soon, they would formulate an excuse. Something to have me removed, off the job, and then the magazine would lose its lead stories, its front-page attention-grabbers, not that Las Cruces had much of a loyal readership, of course.

There were looks here and there, weren't there? From Berkowitz, from Mahoney, all of them looking at me whenever I came into those rooms, they knew I was a foreigner in their realm, that their purified machines and lethal solutions were no match for the endless stream of journalists who were guaranteed access on some level or another.

I was an invader.

And as my friend sped up and began jogging, I began jogging with him, and soon enough we were both tagging along in the cool night air and while he couldn't breathe the atmosphere without the assistance of those tablets I'm sure he enjoyed the simplicity of our terrestrial mix. Mars had once had something like it. Long, long ago, before the sand ships were conceived and before even the great empires of antiquity, when in the wild jungles savage beasts drank from streams and two-headed gibbons swung from tree to tree without reservation. Before memory, before thought.

It came to me as the rush approached that this could be the last time I saw the world in an untouched state. The Martians were coming, and before long these untouched colorless plains could become research facilities similar to the one in Cruces, or motorists could observe tourist traps- see the martian skull, witness the Martian miracle!

Or there would be towns out here, towns for families of Martian pioneers who, like my companion, longed for something more. They would be treated as second-class citizens like all immigrants in this nauseating hypocritical nation of ours, earn minimum wage and need a constant supply of these oxygen tablets, which were ironically named because they contained Martian things, not oxygen. The immigrants would need a good supply of those, at least until they adjusted or The Consortium came up with a better option.

I wondered if this was how first contact in the Americas has felt, how the natives knew when they saw the Nina and the Pinta coming over those hazy

caribbean shores that they were nearing the end of the time they knew, that change and a disturbing amount of it was on the way.

Or did they, like the Martians had when The Consortium approached for the first time and began mercilessly slaughtering the people, see the arrival of the Europeans as merely another worldly event- The Europeans not as Gods to be worshipped, only as another enemy from slightly further shores? Surely the latter. The men were not Centuars and their boats were not otherworldly vessels. They were men on boats, and they carried with them animals that were slightly larger than llamas.

But regardless, that was a time or irreversible change, of no going back, of holding the lutch in one hand and the stick shift in the other, and of a deep-seated knowledge. Knowing your doom was at hand- or at least the dissolution of your society. That was a terrifying thing to consider.

See me, says Oppenheimer as the bomb goes off and the fire extends for miles over the desert. I am become sandwich, destroyer of the Taco Hut.

Me and the martian slowed to a halt to catch our breath. For someone who couldn't breathe this air, he was holding up pretty well. He was in good condition, there would be no autopsy performed on him. For those who were transported later on in worse shape- perhaps the same couldn't be said in their case. There would be new times ahead.

And I was the first to witness them, same as the unlucky Taino man who stepped a little too close to the Santa Maria and got his head blown off by the gunfire. I was in on a secret, by helping this stranger out I had become privy to something meant for only the highest levels of Internal Affairs, and over the next years the Martians would multiply in number and I would sit idly by as Martian technology and Martian customs became a part of our way of life. I would see them in movie theaters, in cafes, and all the while my countrymen would go on living without care or need.

Maybe in the future this road would be dotted neither with tourist traps or Martian settlements, but rather cults that preyed upon the weak and naive, that sold the impossible promise of providing a way out from the corrupt invaders. In circles and rituals my people would gather, turning to the Gospels of Luke or John and drawing from them verses that sounded roughly like the events of the day- and then they would go out, find some otherworldly straggler, and hang him next to the side of the road- maybe under the very telephone poles we were passing by now- as a warning to his kind, that he was not welcome and that the Coven of the Righteous Peacekeepers would defend their ignorance and vanity until the last one was shot dead by the National Guard in a seige that would last 51 days and end in 76 deaths.

You might be wondering how these numbers and figures spring so readily to mind. Imagine eating an apple and knowing before you bite through the crisp skin how it will taste. Imagine the apprehension of that taste. You know it won't be full of worms, or at least that the likelihood of such a thing is very slim. Go ahead. Take a bite. It'll be delicious.

Apples to apples, dust to dust.

There were no cars around at this late hour. No hitchhiking when there are no cars to hitchhike on. Books and guides make it sound easy, but highways are long and open and they cover more area than any other facet of America's infrastructure with the exception of the lunar colonies (and, I suppose, the secret Martian colonies.) All you can hear are the crickets and the husky wheeze of your own breath, and the wind as it gushes around you. Far away there are mountains that you'll never climb because they're an entire day's journey out and by the time you reached the base you would be too tired to hike to the summit.

Not unlike Olympus Mons, the mountains of New Mexico are fragmented and often tell an intriguing story. I learned that when I visited a pueblo complex, that the mountains speak volumes and hold secret knowledge, and if you catch them on the right day they look like a model railroad set.

I looked up at the lunar colonies with a brand of perverse satisfaction. According to the Martian principle, they would one day be desolate. With no real efforts to purify the air and no recourse in the case of a major disaster, all those buildings could be smashed to bits with something as inoffensive as the Perseid meteor shower. And if they were— just going by hand here, as the case often is— then you would see hundreds of lunar inhabitants suffocating as the vacuum of space pulled the oxygen from their self-contained habitats, the trees in the parks withered and died— not that they would have lasted long, of course, being so selectively bred with virtually no oversight— and the towns would become like lost ruins on the ocean floor, quiet and inactive, only known to the perpetual rotation of the sun and moon, the corpses gradually sifting away into granular moon dust like the rest.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

"What do you know about them?" he asked, snapping me from my sadistic reverie. "The colonies, I mean. Photos? Accounts? I think I saw something about them in a tabloid at the Raton mini-mall. Rumor mill, of course." He was right about that. Official transmissions only came every 2 weeks at best— and stories of wild parties and increasing paranoia among the lunar people who colonized that godforsaken globe 5 years earlier seemed as common as bacteria in an agar repository.

"We know something is deeply wrong," I admitted. "Well, me and a few who occupy my status as seekers of the truth. It's hard to say what. NASA makes every message public information, and in the dialogue from the colonists you can hear tones of anxiety, of stress. Taking 7 aspirins a day. Misplacing their belongings. Going to sleep in the low gravity and feeling like someone they knew a long time ago was watching them. These are common enough here, but there's something about living in a self-contained facility all the time that increases our predilection for terror." How I hated the responses we had been given by evolution. Once we had required them for survival, but we should have outgrown them by now because there were no jaguars lurking in the jungle— none that we knew of. My friend nodded.

"I felt that way upon arrival," he muttered quietly, looking over his shoulder as if someone could hear. "They first take you directly from the ship to a long white hallway with a door at the end, and they ask you questions in a small room with one table and one door— how long you plan on staying, for what purpose, how you respond to the Terran environment, and so on. Then they leave you there for a while so you can stew in your own thoughts and then they come back in, tell you there's only a little more paperwork you'll need to complete before they can let you go, a few more tests—" He tried to hide it beneath that jacket, but he was shivering. His pupils dimmed.

"What do these tests entail?"

"Endurance, mostly. They have a huge indoor track, a mile long, and all the walls are a sickening shade of yellow, and they stand there and watch and take photos as you run. Every now and then one of them will say something in the other one's ear. They take detailed notes but according to the contract I signed I can't view any of them. Such is the price of expanding one's limited horizons, I suppose." With a sigh, he slumped forward and his arms sagged ever so slightly.

It did sound similar in many ways to the lunar transmissions. Paranoia and a multitude of other delusions and neuroses that arise from a lack of novelty of variation in the daily schedule— always being monitored in some way, never having time alone to gather your thoughts and organize them, must have felt how I did when the waves came sometimes.

And still the lunar hype continued, the rumor mill ~~spun~~ and gave new wild predictions on who was sleeping with who up there, who would have the first child and what it would mean for our collective future...

Yes, said all those of my ilk who cared not for substance. Will it be Bowers and MacArthur, or the burgeoning new couple of Caronet and Werner? Trap them in there like rats in a cage and observe as the relationships form and develop, the ebbs of friendships curve and then break off, all for your viewing pleasure, your amusement...

On Mars, there would be no such trivialities. Mars would be a world ruled with an iron fist and a tight hand, a new world where gossip was useless and productivity was emphasized, and though The Consortium believed this would ensure their victory, the Martians would only smile in the airless still heat because they knew that The Consortium's delusions of grandeur were all for naught once entropy consumed everything and the sun went nova.

Because for millennia the towers had stood and for untold millennia more they would stand in the red dust, swirling over their silver spires which had become crimson with beautiful, consuming rust. An artifact that was rarely visited, always just out of reach, but clearly visible, like those peaks away far off in the distance. The towers would call to the people as they performed their menial tasks in the buildings, supplied goods and services. The towers The Hesperian Structures would become a symbol of Martian identity.

And one day a traveler whose name was for the most part wholly insignificant would make the journey out himself to at last find the fabled structures, and his human coworkers would tell him not to go, that the journey was too great and that while making it he could fall into a canal and be devoured alive by a blood-worm or chokee on the emanations of the sulfur pools but the towers would continue drawing him on regardless with their lustre and craftsmanship, a glint on the shores of a dead province.

Like elusive jewels he would set out with barely a scrap of food, if only to climb their turrets and see them before they rusted altogether and became scarlet minerals like everything else, and he cared not if he made it back to the town safe or living, he had to make it and return would only be a bonus to the thrilling escapade that would come when he caught them up close. So he traveled for miles and saw the flat land and his destination seemed to grow a little every day, that on the fifth day they could be seen without magnification. Mostly he walked at night when the things were out and the sand was cool below his feet, and in the day he studied the texts pertaining to the structures and slept.

In these texts came the words of the old masters, which had been erased or abridged by the archivists, and from them he saw the ten sages of Janat and the old dragon of Dyre who slept in silence at the base on Mons and told of the vanishing of the plant life and the advent of the wasteland, of the last green tree to fall dead. From these, too, he gleaned knowledge from Cobery the old master who gave him a purpose and a meaning in a life that had otherwise remained uneventful.

And he grew tired and thin as he walked and his bones grew brittle, from the movement his systems began to fail and his fat began to cannibalize itself, but although he was in near-constant pain he was happy because the towers grew nearer and within them he could sense something wonderful.

And finally he found himself at the edifice, a thing so old and fortified that it lacked explanation, an anomaly rising from the dusts and sands that coated it and hummed around it like insects, and he gazed up at it, the way it curved and veered in unpredictable directions and the way it hung like a dagger in the auburn skies gave him the realization that this had been built even before the off-worlders came, that it had been hewn from a metal that the off-worlders had hauled away in barrels and cartons, and that somehow they had missed this instance of classic architecture though it could be seen from the town as clearly as a pocket of shimmering crystals. Perhaps it had been mere oversight, he thought.

He entered the doors of the thing like a child taking its first steps, and the interior defied all his expectations because in addition to being



illuminated through the use of an arcane technology, it was also clean and well-kept. His forefathers had been craftsmen who knew how to shield themselves from the periodic storms, and went so far as to install double-layers of scaffolding. He did not breathe as he entered the sacred ruins.

And in the room upstairs, he found texts that were more arcane and unknown than the ones he possessed. Many were written in the old tongue and told of the armies that had fought out there on the tides of kings and heroes. And as he perused these on their shelf, which was hewn from stone and set in the back of a quiet aperture, he would sit, sometimes for hours at a time, on the floor, with the history of his world arranged around him in a complex and precise mathematical pattern, and he would remain there for 6 days and in that time he would become forever changed by what he saw.

He ran his fingers over the floor, again and again, and learned the runes and repeated the mystic incantations, taking special care to use the old tongue and have the syllables rise deep from his chest, and the tower began to appear brighter and more endowed every day, the pillars grew in height and the rooms, which had already been magnificent and opulent, grew out like cotton balls soaked in water, and soon the rust fell off and was blown out by the winds, and the people in the town remarked upon how the faraway edifice appeared with specs, that normally it was merely a geographical oddity but now it was erupt with splendor.

And on the 6th day, surrounded by effigies and thoughts, he saw the room fade away and in came the mist, which fogged his vision and made everything turn a soft, pale shade of gray. The shelf vanished and the windows that let in the sunsets vanished, and it all became a void where his nerves were turned off and his limbs hung static and nether.

In this state he witnessed the accumulation of Mars, the protomatter came together and coagulated and swirled in a dense dark circular arrangement. Next came the age of the long sleep, when the red planet waited for micro organisms to land on its fertile surface and sprout. It waited for eons and the traveler hung suspended, watching and saying nothing as the world turned and the sun shone on one side and night fell over the canyons and plateaus, which were altogether removed from the ones he knew.

Now came a sound like the thunder of a galloping sand ship, and mighty asteroids of particulate and fury smashed into the surface of the planet, which promptly repaired itself and went about its business as usual, though with the asteroids had come one spore from the Gliese cluster, and this spore would soon give way to a menagerie of unimaginable proportions...

And the remnants of the asteroids evened out and became Phobos and Deimos, the two guardians of the nocturnal who hung in the air, blissful in their mutual coexistence and elevated proximity. And they swung like penulums around the traveler, who gazed in dumbfounded awe.

Now came the long, long age of the tropics, which were mentioned seldom in the oral or written histories but which had their basis in fact. Seas formed and geysers that rose up from jets 100 feet high were released, the grass grew long on the shores and the trees became like immense beanstalks, and all around he was overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of life- from small predators that ran scampering on the ground to giant reptilian things that could be seen looking out toward the distance a mile away. And Mars was indeed alive, and it called to him with a heart-rending poignancy he had never known, the heartbreak of lost opportunity, of these things being seen only in a passing fossil that gave little clues, and was rejected because it had no significance to the present...

And then came the great descent.

A world living became a world dead as the tropics receded, first slowly and then in a massive movement, the seas withered away and the animals fled screaming in packs as their habitats became useless.

And confronted with this recession, he began to realize that the books and scholars of the modern period were correct, that life ultimately had no significance and that all was destined to end, and the planet writhed in a confused blaze as the last forests fell and the martians became the dominant lifeform, and the world became a brilliant though waning rouge.

From the dead seas they walked in small tribes at first, then they grew taller and their fingers went like thread, and they formed councils and small settlements near the ice caps. Now came the age of the canals, the water flowed like sweet nectar through blood vessels carved into the mud, it went down in aquifers of indeterminate age to the first towns and villages, some of which had long since been wiped out.

The empires rose and fell, and his pupils dilated.

Now the towers were built from mines that went deep into the caverns of the world, towers of silver and gold, metropolises that were the pride of those who lived near them and became vital hubs of commerce and world affairs. Many of them exceeded 100 stories, their spires pointed and crafted with the skill of a marksman. He passed over the great cities and saw them as they passed into night, and knew that while the jungles were absent, this was an equally prosperous age, if not more.

But things became dismal on Mons, the people of Mons became hungry with power and declared that they should have the capitol, that their height was a strategic advantage and that their centralization and stratification gave them prestige and influence over those below. The people of Olympus reveled in their mad grandeur, delusions that cropped up first as light implications soon became actualized ideologies, ones which declared that the people of the valleys and plateaus were useless and without merit, contributed little beside work, and that the capitol was a sham created by a sinister organization with ulterior motives.

So the armies came marching down from the peak in rows of thousands, inhumane weapons in hand and feet stomping like a venomous caterpillar, they descended on the capitol city and took it for their own, plundered the buildings they didn't approve of and brought the remains back to Mons where they coronated a sinister figure clad in golden robes and a red crown that hung too low over his brow for it to be visible.

The people across the dead seas and canal networks did not take kindly to this bold affront, they formed armies of their own and ascended Mons to confront the elites. The armies soon took their conflict to the skies, and air battles roared across the atmosphere in a ceaseless spectacle. From strange craft that remotely resembled sand ships, fumes billowed out- and then came the war on the moons, the vicious battles on the two sleeping giants that killed many on both sides indiscriminately. People hung onto the rock like flies, but they spun out and were lost, became dismal stains on the surface or shot into the great infinite.

In the end a weapon was used, a weapon so powerful that even the great grandson of the sinister gold-robed figure questioned whether its use was necessary or justified. But tempers flared up and the activation of the agent was deemed mandatory, and the clouds of all-consuming death coated the world and a long period of decay set in. Most of the livestock fell victim to the billowing smoke, the cities were evacuated in favor of the caverns, where malnourishment and unknown illnesses caught many and rendered them pale and deathlike.

The traveler saw this and wanted to scream but couldn't, the space was everywhere and his limbs would not move. He hung limp as the empires fell and the planet entered a third epoch of silence and desolation, where the red world was beautiful yet unsettling, an uncanny and indescribable sense of Martian identity was ever-present. A people united and divided who stood tall and proud on a world which should have rejected their existence but still they hung on, against all odds.

Now came the most recent period, that being of unification. The people signed laws, re-organized, and the old guidelines of indifference which had defined his people from the outset were reinterpreted to reflect a more pacifist outlook.

For thousands of years his eyes grew numb as the town he had been conceived in took shape, brick by brick, and the people went about their business and regularly checked in with the office. His mouth was dry and his skin was beginning to peel off. He felt nothing.

After centuries of harmony and placidity, the people from the blue world beyond the rim came from the depths of the void, their rockets hurtled past the far side of Deimos and their exhaust was visible as they set themselves down gingerly. First one ship, then more, all crowded with tourists who took pictures out the windows as they went in and veered ever closer.

He saw them arrive and swarm the world like a fleet, and his town changed in subtle ways- the Office was removed, new buildings and offices were put up, the signs on the roads were altered with Earthen subtitles. And the arrivals kept coming. Soon he saw the people he knew, the ones who told of a quiet night on Earth and the human experience, what it meant to be human and how he was incapable of understanding.

And then he saw something else- a quiet night on Earth, in a country on one of the northern landmasses, two silent figures hurried along what looked to be a long stretch of pavement, the stars above their guide, the breeze and the calming whirr of cicadas a welcome antidote.

He was back in the tower now, and his bones were stretching out through his skin, which had lost its tallow. He was dying, he knew, and the silver went above for at least a mile and he could see the intricate patterns carved into the steel supports, the circular portmanteau that defined his people. His ribs were dangerously close to cutting through. He didn't care. He knew his purpose. He languished along the useless academia and smiled as the lands outside faded and night fell over the countryside.

My friend pointed with those long fingers of his.

"There," he said, quietly.

The National Observance was a lot to take in at night. By day it was merely a minor diversion on the Raton route, but by night it became an ethereal vision, something beyond what was normal. An arrangement of sigils and symbols that would outlast the Vatican.

And lining the short runway that led off the main highway, illuminated by the sort of lights you might see in a strip mall, were the flags of all the different nations- France, Biafra, Taured, Manchuria, Japan and the USSR. The Union was commemorated in full force here. I walked a little closer, felt one of the flagpoles. It was icy and bitter.

They ran like a platoon along the edge, and way off, about 100 feet in, I could make out the Visitor's Center where they entertained guests and gave tours, which included courses on the history of the Union, how it had been created after the Great War to ensure diplomacy and cooperation, although this last point had seemingly been forgotten by President Ford.

"It's odd," he said, twirling around and trying to take it in all at once. "So many regions, so many nations. Why haven't your people become one, lived under one capitol? It improves efficiency?" Down the road the light in the Visitor's Center turned itself off. I wondered if anyone was present at this hour, and if they were in on the Consortium's plans. They probably wouldn't bother us, the Observance was public property.

"That's hard to say." He was still. "We enjoy autonomy. We also like sovereignty, the ability to choose which region to live in, which customs to follow, is a right and a privilege we hold dear."

"But separate centers of power create division," he said, looking up at the myriad of areas. "Our people were once like you. Mons wanted everything, they pillaged the old Capitol. Today the ruins of the Capitol are little more than a heap of rubble that even archaeologists find little value in."

Those are your people," I continued. "We operate differently. In a sense, we already had our conflict. It was called the Great War, it took place around 30 years ago. A madman named Joseph Goebbels, who like the residents of Olympus fancied himself superior to all other man, began a campaign of invasion and destruction. After that, we decided that changes needed to be made if we were to continue." I pointed at the flags, one by one.

"That one there," I said, my finger making a gesture at a flag with golden hues and purple stripes, "Is the flag of Modern Germany, a unified land with one of the greatest economies of the Hemisphere. 30 years ago Goebbels had squandered resources, left his citizens to starve and invaded another nation we call Britain. Bombed it, destroyed the morale of the people who governed it with ruthless propaganda. He was defeated, though, because like the inhabitants of Mons, he had one fatal flaw. His arrogance." The Martian looked confused. He stared up at the light, which buzzed. There were some moths darting around it like guppies swarming around an angleworm.

"But the Inhabitants of Mons won the war."

I thought about what he said for a moment. Surely this was too good. Had the man I had been chatting with all this time been a fascist? Was Mars indeed as corrupt and broken as Earth? Why hadn't the space accounted for this discrepancy? I saw him in a new light. I decided to press on.

"What you see here is the beginning of unification," I said. "We came together to form the Union. It doesn't stop wars, we still engage in smaller conflicts all the time, some of which are in their own way even more brutal and merciless than the Great War. But we try to stand our ground. Keep our eyes open and our desks open, and find solid ground between us and them." This was all a blatant lie and I knew it, and I sounded like a Union mouthpiece but what my associate had said still had my mind reeling with ominous thoughts and dizzying speculation and I wanted to remain optimistic without throwing the events of the evening under the bus into a sour mood.

"I wonder where my transport is," he mused, looking up at the stars yet again, hands in his pockets, head tilted way back. "They should have been here by now, and as I said they would never leave without me." He was right, the road was empty and the lights were all you could see by. The fields were close to invisible and it was so late even the peaks were becoming unseen, indiscernable against the galaxy above. The moon was no help.

"Maybe they never came," I suggested.

"What does that mean?" he said, cocking his face in my direction. His brow was furrowed. "Why would they leave me here to fend for myself? I have very little money, no experience, rudimentary knowledge of your customs at best. I've had enough of your smug attitude and your childish grin, you speak on things you cannot understand and determine that which nobody could. You are a charlatan." Maybe he suspected me of being an undercover representative of the consortium. The seconds ticked away like molasses and we both searched each others' souls.

"I think you've been duped."

"We'll see about that."

We both went over to sit on a nearby rock and wait. He was getting nervous now, his pupils had gone dark and that colorful perspiration appeared again. He absent-mindedly fumbled through his jacket for the bottle of oxygen tablets and popped one. His expression grew to horror as he realized he only had 3 left. He began stammering something, then stopped.

"Pretty easy, really," I said. "They drop you off, tell you to go have fun, see the restaurants, but supply you with only enough supply of this highly unique and volatile substance to last a day. Then they leave. You don't know

where their headquarters are or how to get in contact with them, they drove you out here in a van with all the windows boarded up so you couldn't see out and then they dumped you off. It's Genocide 101, Man. Lure your target in with false hope and impossible promises, then deplete them of vital resources and deny responsibility." He fumbled with the bottle, looking inside, knowing that he only had an hour and a half to go. He stared at the label, turned it over a few times, and then turned his gaze to the rocks and pebbles below his shoes.

"No," he said, still in chronic denial. "They were competent people, everything according to a regimen and a schedule. You- you're telling me things to dissuade me from being loyal to them, someone else put you here, perhaps one of their rival agencies..." I slapped my palm hard against the rock and shook him violently by the collar.

"You've been had!" I yelled with impressive force. "Up shit creek without a paddle! They cut you off! In a little while you'll be as good as a salmon on a beach, gasping for what he can't get! I'm not one of their enemies, or your enemy, or anyone's enemy. I'm just someone who's seen a lot and knows a shell game when it makes itself apparent. This is one." I put my arm around his shoulder. He was crying softly. Perhaps it was better this way, he wouldn't live his life as an outcast but as a medical specimen. The Consortium would come around tomorrow with a hearse, carry him back down to the basement and take samples...

"But why? For what reason?" he croaked.

"We aren't nihilists," I said, looking out over the edge. "We do things with agendas. Not always justified ones. But we have reasons, and sometimes they involve irrational campaigns. Yours is one of a long line." He nodded and looked at the flags waving in the light breeze. He was coming to terms with it now, it made a kind of sense.

"They should have been happy with what we gave them," he muttered under his breath. His pupils went back and his breathing got imperceptibly heavier. He popped another tablet and wiped his hand on his jacket.

"What was that?"

"The people down in the valley. They were never satisfied. My grandpatriarch says they were a race of primitives whose capitol was little more than a hut and some savage temples. Said that they kept asking for things from Olympus, took without giving back, greedy hands that opened and never closed, mouths to feed, always breeding, always reproducing..." The end was coming, and he was offering me his last testament. One of eugenics.

"You didn't buy into any of this, did you?"

"I tried not to," he said. "My matriarch, on the other side, told him to stop, that he would scare us. But I liked the stories. Took a kind of pleasure in the tone of voice he used. One of conviction. So unlike the bureaucrats and useless weakings of the Office. He was a man from another year when blood ran in thick strands down the mountain." He paused, trying to gather his thoughts. His brain was frying, neurons were collapsing. Too much stress, not enough time to get it all out in.

"My sibling plugged her ears," he continued. "Told herself that what he was saying was foolish, she had close companions who lived near the old capitol and reprimanded him on what he said, that times had changed and tempers had died down. But from his recliner he went on, and I sat enthralled as he discussed his troop advancing down to the unsuspecting people below, how he took things of immense value from the shops without hesitation and carried the bounty back so that we could enjoy what the inferior race could never fully appreciate." His lips were swelling out. Only the wind now, and the clarity of the air. A little oxygen, a trace of nitroge, hydrogen. All a potent blend that would rush into his lung and kill him. Given the way the conversation was headed, I didn't think that was such a bad thing.

"In -primary education," he said, "I became acquainted with a group of rebellious sycophants who shared the beliefs of my grandpatriarch. Unlike him, however, they were young and privy to the viewpoints of the opposition and had taken his doctrine and molded it into a new sort of concealed jargon by which they could communicate these forbidden ideals among themselves. And I attended their gatherings and wore some of their clothing and became invested in the system of the 5th Enclave of the Mountain. That was what they called themselves, they were enviable and attractive."

"Did you try to get out?"

"Yes," he said. "And I was successful. But only after a long internal struggle, a bitter battle that was more painful than perhaps even the battle of Phobos. The kind of thing where you have to inspect yourself closely in the mirror and determine what path you want to walk down."

"Earlier tonight you told me you were on the Valles side of things," I chimed in. He buried his face into his hands and stomped onto the ground with those flat feet and trembled as the nausea set in.

"We were! My matriarch was from a proud, long line, who lived in the Capitol during its heyday, and their records told of a Governance so well run and peaceful that the trees grew fruit every year and the beasts were allowed to roam through the streets freely without risk. But my grandmatriarch and grandpatriarch said that it was only a heap of worthless rubble run by incompetents... I didn't know what to believe. I turned to what had pacified and satisfied my people throughout time. Our indifference. I came to grips with the possibility that maybe neither account was wholly correct and these things, which I could never appreciate due to my limited scope, had no real bearing on my surrent state. I lived a satisfactory existence, one with enough resources and prospects. And so I pushed my dealings with the Enclave from my head, cut ties with them, and became a neutral third party who cared little about holding onto the past in one direction or another. And when the Earth men came in their craft, I remained indifferent, and told myself, again and again, that the occupation was inconsequential, that come war or come peace it would all be over eventually..." He took a deep breath, one full of phlegm and hesistance. I crossed my legs and lay back in a reclined position, the rock pressing into my dorsal muscles. The galaxy was beautiful tonight, a swath of dots and pinpoints, and all of them surrounded by fallible people who made mistakes. What a self-contained little bubble we found ourselves in. How very convenient.

"And now this indifference has led you here." The flags rippled. "I can't tell you how to make decisions in life, who to trust or where to look. But you put blind faith in two groups. One of which almost ruined your life. Now this second one, who will ruin your life. That sounds like a life wasted to me if I'm going by what makes an existence valuable." He nodded, slowly. The Visitor's Center remained dark and distant, a cold edifice beyond the rows of suspended fabric. And here we were, bathed in light. His joints began convulsing, his pupils retracted further still.

"I regret nothing," he said and smiled. "I recanted. Few can claim that. Most who join a system in their youth remain with it, expose themselves to nothing. I took risks. I challenged the ideals and foundations of my people, i saw my world for what it was. I lived decently. I was born after a great catastrophe, yet I saw none of its impact. I am lucky." He shook the bottle around. One tablet inside, rattling like dry bones in a casket. He looked at the tablet with an intense concentration, studied its curves and structure. The bottle was opaque and elliptical.

"So long as you tell yourself that, that's fine," I responded, still lookin up at the galaxy in all its majesty. One shooting star caught my eye foir a split second and then it was out of range. "At least you had someone to tell all this to. Probably kept it hidden for a long time. Luckily I collect stories like yours. I'll keep yours stored."

He began shaking like a leaf now, the convulsions set in and the effect was remarkably similar to Delirium Tremens. His veins began throbbing and his pupils became so small that they were tiny dots in an expanse of white eye tissue. He held onto my arm and gasped.

"I'm blind," he said. "Tell me, what has happened out there?" The sun was close to rising by now. The countryside was brightening, the morning fauna made their appearances. About half a mile off I could make out a herd of deer moving toward their watering hole. The breeze ended and the flags ceased their incessant undulations. Behind us, a prairie dog made a sharp chitter. He moved toward the sound.

"It's morning now," I said as he trembled. "The sun is out, about 65 degrees right now but it could easily reach 95 where we are by noon. You'll be gone by then, so enjoy the cool temperatures while they last. That reminds me, what's the temperature like where you come from?" His breathing was labored. He took the last tablet and swallowed it. His pupils came back one last time and he saw the sun as it crescendoed into a vibrant collage of reds and oranges, bathing the world in dewdrops and warmth. He seemed to drift out of the cold abyss and into a kind of melancholic peace, a state of reconciliation and finality.

"It's arid," he said. "Been that way for as long as any of us can recall. No rain, no snow, only the canals from the ice caps. A desert. 110 degrees during the day, dips to 30 at night. Though we're better suited to it, you know. The Consortium has trouble with it. They stay in their facilities most of the day, only check on us at dusk and dawn when the temperatures suit them- and wearing pressurized helmets, of course." He was looking out at the herd. It was gently lapping up moisture from a small pond.

"If you ever see her," he begged, "And she'll have on a necklace made of Emerald and her name will be Yonicet- please tell her I meant well, that when we split it was for her own good. For her sake, and for mine, for our overall clarity and well-being. Tell her."

"I will."

"If you ever see her."

His grip on my arm loosened, and his pupils went inward again, back into what he called a skull. His arms, which were already like those of a skeleton, cramped and convulsed, and his left foot twitched ever so slightly. His lips were dry and his tongue had jagged cracks embedded in it. He only had 10 teeth.

"You know what's funny?" he said as he stared right up at the sun.

"What?"

"Your world and mine- we both share the same star- Sol- the red giant, the creator of life- in my people's tongue, Hesperiad- though from here, it looks so very different, so much larger- so much brighter- that it may not be the same star at all- no, not at all..."

He fell limp in my arms.

I inspected him for a while. Those fingers that didn't move, the way the nose was long and pointed. He was light. I carried him some distance along the road, looking up at the flags as we passed them, his appendages swaying to and fro. I set him down beneath the flag for Laxaria.

He was so quiet, and it seemed as if the old adage about the soul having a measurable weight was true- in this state it was no more than an object, a mass with one lung and an unusual brow. A genetic defect, they would say when they went into the bookstores and cafes. Now, though, only one, who would never see or enter any location ever again. He had stepped firmly into the Space Between. I made the sacred rites here with careful consideration for his heritage- he and his ilk cared not for rites or passages, after all. But I performed them nonetheless. A quick hit to the pineal gland.

The temperature was rising fast, so I decided to leave as soon as possible and formulate a clever excuse when I got back to Las Cruces, say my car

operate, had learned this during my stint in Orange County, California

ran out around 20 miles north of the Observance and I had to get it towed. This would be a believable cover story. My publisher, Gabriel, wasn't usually one to ask questions, although he did ask that the senior staff, of which I was an honorary member, call in ahead in case of an emergency. I would find a payphone somewhere. There wasn't one at the Visitor's Center. No water, either. It would be a long and dry hike back, one which could test the limits of my endurance unless I passed a convenience store.

The row of insignia took on another ambience during the day- at night it was an eerie oddity, but now they were majestic, soared like birds on their long staffs. If only Shipwreck Kelly were here, I mulled with a soft chuckle. Then I remembered the cadaver behind me and realized that if The Consortium were to arrive soon, they would find me and know of my involvement. Had to leave. He was bugged. They knew where he was.

Of course they did, this is where he was always meant to be.

I doubled back and positioned the body so that it would appear as if he had dropped from fatigue rather than being gingerly set down. I also ripped his jacket to give it a scuffed look. Finally, I took the bottle of tablets, which he still held in his rigor mortis fingertips, and put in near him. A little residual powder was on the inside, I spilled it out in a line to indicate a head-on collision with the ground. I once knew someone who took a forensics course at summer camp and told me every detail while filled with lager. This was the best I could do under the circumstances.

The dust, I figured, would wipe away my fingerprints- or at least obfuscate them... soon cars would be arriving, whether they were the van of The Consortium or a honeymooning couple on their way to Santa Fe, I didn't care to stay and find out, because I could be framed for murder. They had friends in high places, he had said. Could track his position by satellite, could easily manipulate the courts to accuse me of the murder of this poor deformed freak. I sprinted off.

I got a few hundred feet before the heat really set in and I slowed to a light jog. The Observance vanished from sight as I went over every hill, looking for cars. I would probably hitch a ride, look in the windows first to make sure it wasn't them. They could be in disguise. They probably knew who I was, wouldn't bother to take me in, because who would take in a madman with delusions of space travel? They had bigger fish to fry, no need stepping on the little people who made it all possible.

This program made possible by viewers like you.

As my feet moved forward in the searing noontime rush, I considered what they would do with the body. They would scoop it up, haul it into the van. Not a hearse, a van, the image popped into my head and I was convinced that was what they had, white van with tinted windows, some dents on the back, inconspicuous and invisible to the common observer.

They would then take the body a few hundred miles to their base in Nevada. Of course it was in Nevada. There they would perform a thorough search, inspect the bloodstream for toxins or secretions, make a game of the lymphatic nodes too, while they were at it. Maybe in the same empty room with the racetrack he had told me about, in the middle, where normally you'd have a football field or some hurdles. Or off to the side, in one of the corners. A table set up to feast upon death, surgeons and agents all prying in for a closer look. Then, once they felt they had made a satisfactory report to their superiors, the waste would be carried off in a plastic bag and hauled to the incinerator, and the next Martian exchange would walk in through the swinging doors, eager for the opportunity to understand a new way of life.

"Come in," they would say, smiles aglow on their cheery corporate faces.

republican

friend looked over at me as I just did the... seat... the tires skidded

They say the oppressed are often the best at telling jokes because they have endured the most



I caught a ride about half an hour later when a cadillac with a wood finish pulled up. The guy who drove it was a soft-spoken scholar from Berkeley who smelled of some strain of marijuana I thought I could identify solely by aroma, though I never could. He dropped me off at Las Vegas, where I made the call at a truck stop. Me and the scholar then drove to Las Cruces. He told me he was headed for El Paso to conduct a seminar on sociology and military techniques. I offered him some insights.

At the end of the day, was what they did in the organization I was inspecting much worse than anything The Consortium did to their test subjects? Some of the things Berkowitz and the rest of them had shown me were so vile that they churned one's stomach, they rivaled the testimonies at Nuremberg. Even had friends at The Consortium, I would bet. Berk probably kicked back with some Consortium lackeys every weekend over coffee.

And these were the same people who had killed that man out there. It was indeed a small world, and with every day the threads came together into a pale tapestry. The known universe was, in fact, getting so small with each passing day here in NM that it was starting to approach the borders of claustrophobia. Too close, too well-defined.

This was partially due to my abilities, every day people noticed that something wasn't kosher in my cranium. I could see through walls, gather attitudes, distill recollections, and with every visit to that little corner or niche of discarded reality, or whatever it was, at the end of the day, speaking in purely scientific terms- it ate away at me a little as a person. Was that why, when I saw his body and carried it around, I felt nothing? Was I still who I had been on the night of the Prom, when Gomez and I saw eye to eye for the last time? I had felt something then, I told myself. Sure I had. I wasn't in Las Cruces then.

The Scholar said something to me on the way into Las Cruces that really caught my attention- he mentioned something about a program he only called "The Method," that it was used by a few Government bureaus, in particular the CIA, who needed to know which candidates were applicable for the position. I forget what The Method entailed, but it involved probing the subject's mind gingerly during a light psychiatric examination to find their worst fears, then confronting the subject with those fears at a random moment off-duty and seeing how the subject would react.

He said, stroking his beard, that he had seen one of these in real time. He sat behind a panel of buttons and switches as a CIA official pressed a button which dropped the subject, who was at the time going to the store, into a subterranean beehive. The bees swarmed all over her, stinging her, all over a woman and at that point he had left the room and you only knew what I'd seen a woman. And I wished I could tell him, or you, that you only knew what I'd seen a woman with a few bee stings on her face wasn't all that bad, after you witness the death of someone on a hot day next to civilization, knowing there's nothing you can do to stop it, and the people responsible for it will likely never come forward...

And then we got to Las Cruces, home of the big stone hotels with the ornate balconies and the world-famous Hungry Mosquito, and I said thanks and wished him good luck on his seminar, and we parted ways amicably. I trod along those streets for a while, thinking long internal monologues about what I had witnessed out there and looking over my shoulder every so often, just to make sure.

After I got back to my apartment and downed a bottle of Four Roses, passed out on my four-poster king-size mattress and shut my eyes, aware sleep was still a long ways off despite my not having slept in over 24 hrs, I briefly considered becoming a conspiracy nut but decided not to because it would be too much work and I knew The Consortium was so real, they didn't even qualify as a conspiracy of any kind.

Because when you got right down to it, I thought as the road outside brought in the placid noises of late evening traffic, what made them the embodiment of pure evil here on Earth wasn't their secrecy or their callous disregard for life, the way they sent tourists out into toxic air to die. What made them such was their smug attitude and no-nonsense approach to any problem- they walked along tubes with fists at their sides, facing the challenges that crossed their path with vigor and the utmost confidence. And that was why I was here.

To expose them, to make their dealings known, print them everywhere from the two-bit operation I was part of then to the Albuquerque Time and the Santa Fe Report, then to a page 93 article in Penthouse and finally up to the Wall Street Journal. But I would abide by what the martian had told me and leave all details vague, hint at something without outright stating it, leave clues and ciphers. Let the conspiracy nuts form their own opinion and cobble together their own bulletin boards.

This was my first mistake.

Because as I lay there on the soft cotton velour, my muscles recovering from the desert walk, I saw ahead into the next day. And then the next week and then a few months beyond that, the images fluttered before my eyelids and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make them stop.

I was walking down the street on my way to the offices, papers in hand. The piece was something about community organization and little league. not the sordid material my fanbase had come to expect from me, but a decent piece nonetheless.

There on the streets were people who looked somewhat human, but had something remarkably off about them- walking into stores, gazing into windows, one even had a dog with him. They had protruding brows, thin noses and limbs, unusually long feet, and their knees bent in ways knees shouldn't bend. There I was in the middle of the street, and here were seven, maybe eight humanoids among the crowd.

Something was rattling around on all of them.

They said goodbye to Mr. Drummond at the liquor mart and Gene at the mercantile, and then gathered in one spot on the autumnal pavement, as the beautiful ornate towers loomed overhead. Eight humanoids in a row, all waiting for some momentous event, an unprecedented occasion.

From down the road came a white van that made a strange noise and emitted strange vapors from its engine, with tinted windows and no license plates. It came over the crest of the hill like a bus on the route to Hell and scooped up all eight humanoids, who walked willingly into its sliding doors like flies onto flypaper. Then it sped off and left only dust and discarded soda bottles in its wake, and I was transfixed.

It was still the same town it had always been, right down to the lettering on the signs downtown, the antique lamps upstairs and the thin coat of grime on every surface, same searing sun, and then beyond the town border there was still the facility, and soon I would walk through the same security clearance and see Berowiz. Same Berowitz, smiling at me while also holding a bitter grudge against me for what I did. And over there was the same magazine house, always in print since its first issue dropped in 1931. The cars were the same, parking spots still empty on a good day, and the alleys were still full of yesterday's garbage, apple cores and fish skins.

As I looked at the way my bottle of Four Roses served as a kind of prism for the beam that struck through the shutters on my window from the cricket-filled nocturnal ambiance that permeated this dark garden of truth, I knew that the images imprinted on my corneas and making their presence in my hippocampus known were indeed about as genuine as images could get.

I stood in autumn while other people with roles to perform swept by me in a hurry, and the white van made its way around the corner and disappeared all eight faces faintly visible pressed up against the back as if someone was holding them at gunpoint, no silencer necessary because the van doubled as a silencer, I realized that it was the same town.

I, however, was on another world.

