

ADAGIO

By

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Tobias sat on the red-stone grave marker on the side of Graveyard Hill and watched as Forrest tortured the rocks with the portable generator he had taken from the cargo bay. Torture is what Lady Name called Forrest's game. Lady Name was convinced that Forrest was insane.

Tobias raised a grimy hand and rubbed his eyes. Hell, Lady Name was wig-picker bait herself. That's why she was called Lady Name. It was a temporary label for the woman until she could figure out just who the hell she was. Or at least until she would say who she was. Cage and Forrest thought she had amnesia. Tobias didn't buy that, but he didn't care.

He lowered his hand and let his gaze wander past the main shelter dome until it came to rest upon the remains of the ship. Three kilometers behind the cargo vessel was the jagged ledge that had ventilated

the command module as the ship ground to a stop. Through the rents in the command module, he could see Lady Name. She was silently watching Forrest. Motionless.

It was entirely possible that Lady Name would kill Forrest. A matter of indifference to Tobias. Somewhere below her in the twisted metal, Cage would be nervously working on the computer. Death still seemed to matter to Cage. His nerves were the direct result of Lady Name frequently sitting just out of his field of vision, staring at him, sharpening her knife upon one of the dead red stones.

The dried and cracked crust that had formed over the surface of the red dust when it last rained was almost all gone. The little bit of wind, the motion of the rocks, the feet of the humans had eroded the crust. And it had been such a long time since it had rained. When they had constructed the main shelter dome from the cargo-bay supplies, it had been gleaming white. Now it was covered with dull-red dust.

It seemed like years had passed since they had put up the dome and installed the nutrition system. Twenty meters in diameter, it was large enough to shelter all five of them. Lady Name was the first one to move out and erect an individual shelter. There had been fifty of the plastic-plank shelter kits in the cargo bay. Now they each had one, only meeting in the dome to eat. The fact was that they could no longer stand each other.

The whisper of feet dragging in the dust interrupted Tobias's thoughts. Tillson. The footsteps stopped. .

"Is it possible, Tobias, that God has done this to us

to provide us with a challenge against which to test our virtue?"

Tobias turned to his left and glared up at the chaplain. Tillson was naked again. "Stick it up your ass, -Howard."

Chaplain Howard Tillson nodded gravely. "You are right, of course. You are very wise, Tobias. Very wise."

The chaplain turned and stumbled his way down the back of Graveyard Hill, his droopy buns jiggling with each step.

Tobias again pondered the fact that Tillson had a woman's ass. Another fact to ponder was that rescue had best happen before Tillson's ass got to look much better. He hollered down the hill at the jiggling ass, "Tillson, put some clothes on!"

The chaplain stopped, turned, looked up at Tobias, and nodded. "You are right, of course. You are always right, Tobias."

Placing his hands upon his knees, Tobias pushed himself to his feet and dusted off the seat of his flight suit. He turned and looked down at the grave marker he had been sitting on. Osborn's marker. It was a smooth, red stone just like Mikizu's.

They had to use only the red stones for grave markers. They didn't walk off.

The gray stone Tobias had originally used to mark Osborn's grave was now several meters downslope, running like hell, Forrest claimed. It had taken the gray stone five of the planet's month-long days to race the short distance. Gray stones, white stones, green stones, black stones. They littered the red landscape. They were alive. The red ones didn't move.

They were dead.

Osborn was dead. And Mikizu. He let his gaze wander two meters to the left to another red stone. When Mikizu had piloted the ship, shearing it off that ledge, he had lost his head. Tobias knew because he had carried that head to the grave while Forrest and Cage carried the pilot's remainder.

Too quick, Tobias thought. Too quick and clean a death for you, Mikizu. Tobias unsealed his suit and pissed on the pilot's grave. When he was finished he stumbled down the hill, entered his individual shelter, and flopped down on his cot. He closed his eyes thinking of dead red grave markers.

Osborn was dead. Mikizu was dead. Mikizu was no loss. If it hadn't been for him they wouldn't be stranded. But Osborn. Tobias wished Osborn were still alive. He'd know what to do. But Osborn had to be a hero

He had sat in the sputtering flashes of the emergency lights, watching Osborn's eyeballs leak. The chief engineer was in the wreckage of the engineering deck, inhaling vacuum, the seat of his trousers puddling with piss and blood, the fluid from his eyeballs dribbling down his cheeks.

There had been plenty of time for Osborn to get on his suit. The hull damage in aft engineering had dumped only the pressure from that compartment. The rest of the ship lost pressure only because of the warped bulkhead seals. It took minutes for the ship to lose cabin pressure. But Osborn wanted to flick switches, punch buttons, and twirl knobs. The rest of

them probably owed him their lives. The asshole.

"Tobias?" The headset in his suit spoke. It was the pilot, Mikizu. "Engineering? Osborn? Tobias?"

Tobias answered. "What?"

"Osborn?"

"Osborn's dead."

A brief pause. "Tobias, I need to know the power situation."

Through his suit's faceplate, he glanced at the remains of the engineering board. "I can't help but believe, Mikizu, that you know just about as much as I do about that."

"The bridge panel is dead."

"No shit." He leaned back against the bulkhead, glanced at Osborn, and closed his eyes. "We're all dead back here, too."

"I need power if we're going to go down."

"Is there any point?"

"Forrest thinks so."

Forrest. Second pilot. A little bastard but smart. Tobias shook his head to clear it. Time to knock off the smartmouth.

"Main and auxiliary plants are down. Whatever it was that came flying through the hull took out the engines. I couldn't sell what's left of them for scrap."

Another pause, this one longer. "What about the fuel cells?"

"They're okay. Osborn got the lines shut down before too much fuel escaped. What's Forrest got in mind?"

Forrest's voice entered his helmet. "We can try for a dead-stick landing. If you can rig the steering jets, Tobias, the computer says we have a chance of

making it through the atmosphere."

"How much of a chance?"

Forrest laughed. "Don't ask." He became quiet. "We have a better chance at making a landing than we have trying to stay alive up here. Can you rig something?"

Tobias looked around the engineering deck, the challenges of practical necessity temporarily crowding out projections of disaster and demise. With the board shot there would be some wiring to do. He'd have to work off the batteries. And some plumbing, not to mention readjusting the steering jets to use main-plant fuel. He didn't really know if that could be done. But there was something else. The entry heat would turn aft engineering into a furnace.

"Forrest, I can make a try at the steering jets, but something has to be done about those holes in the hull."

"Get to work on the jets. When you're ready, I'll help you with the holes. We can snatch some plate from somewhere."

Tobias pushed up and began working his way toward aft engineering. He loved doing wiring in atmospheric long johns. It was like doing watch repair while wearing a pair of boxing gloves. The failing gravity would just make it interesting.

He punched the switch, and the hatch swung slightly open and jammed. With his foot he kicked it the rest of the way open. He stood in the hatch and looked into the darkness of the engine room.

The only light came from the holes in the hull. Tobias knew that some of those flickers were stars, but most of them were too bright for that. The bright

ones were the remains of the crumbled planets that formed the Oids Belt in orbit around a sun called Mantchee.

Merchant crews don't like the Oids Belt and never go there. The union even got it in the contract. Asteroids, planetoids, and paranoids. Tobias still had one of the buttons that says I AVOID THE OIDS.

But there were passengers and parts to pick up and deliver to strange and wonderful places, and a pilot who believed in shortcuts more than he did in minimum safety or union contracts. Tobias swore that if he and the pilot managed to live through the landing, Tobias's first planet-side act would be to murder Mikizu.

First things first.

He returned, grabbed Osborn, and dislodged the engineering chief's body from the rapidly freezing fluids that were pinning his ass to the deck.

Pulling the body to the hatch, Tobias pushed it toward the large hole at his feet.

The still form somersaulted slowly toward the hole and jerked to a halt. Tobias pulled the light from his belt and aimed the beam at the opening.

The back of Osborn's head had been speared and snagged by the hole's ragged edge. One of the thick splinters of metal protruded from Osborn's left eye.

Someday the geniuses will figure out how to puke in a space suit. He turned away.

"this thing will serve us if we obey it"

"how will it serve"

"it will stop pain and death"

"this thing brought us pain

and death"

"we must obey"

"this thing now wants us to kill"

"Forrest is still torturing the rocks." It was Lady Name's voice.

Tobias buried his head more deeply into his pillow. "If you don't get out of here, I'll rip out your spine and strangle you with it."

No footsteps moving away. He could feel the woman's hurt gaze on his back. The flimsy shelter almost radiated with terminal sulk. Tobias chased away his nightmares and rolled over on his cot. "Go away, Lady. Take up a hobby, go play with yourself, anything. Anything but tattling on Forrest. I don't find forty-year-old children amusing."

"I am not tattling, Tobias. I am reporting. One of your men is torturing the rocks. Those rocks are alive."

"Lady, first, they are not my men. If anyone is in charge, it's Forrest. Second, I don't care about the rocks. I really don't. My only problem is keeping sane until someone picks up our signal. Rescue, Lady. Think rescue."

"No one will pick up the signal. Forrest told you it can't get through the radiation."

"You don't know that. Forrest doesn't know that for certain. There's a chance."

She stared at him for a moment, almost looking sane, then nodded toward the shack's doorway. "What are you going to do about Forrest?"

He turned his back and burrowed into his pillow. "Nothing."

Footsteps, finally. .

The beacon signal would get through. It had to. Then a curious thought entered his mind. He felt he should be rooting for the beacon signal's success. A moral thing. What generations of humans would say was the thing he should be doing right then. The curious thought was that he didn't really care whether the signal got through or not.

soon the dark"

"soon we kill"

"it is the wish of this thing"

Mantchee rode half-hidden by the horizon. Tobias entered the main shelter, the red glare of the weeklong sunset casting the interior of the dome in blood.

They were all seated around the low table. Lady Name, as usual, was watching Forrest. Forrest was entertaining himself with his own thoughts while Tillson struggled, probably uncomfortable with the unfamiliar feeling of wearing clothes. Nelson Cage was heavily into a wiring diagram, the symbols and the problems their relationships represented providing as much entertainment for him as the rocks did for Forrest.

As he pulled a ration pack from the dispenser, Tobias heard Cage announce. "I have the computer

working."

Tillson: "God doesn't like computers."

Lady Name: "What are you going to kill time with now, Cage?"

Forrest: "Break it, Cage. Break the computer and fix it again."

Cage's face flushed red. "I don't know what's wrong with you people. After five months of hard work I've managed to-"

Forrest leaned forward holding a finger before his lips. "Shhh." He brought his finger down and smiled. "No one cares, Cage."

Tobias lowered himself into the chair to Forrest's right, sipped at the acid-tasting hot beverage, and gnawed on a nutribar as Cage leaned back, his voice becoming brittle. "We can use the computer-"

"For what?" Tobias shook his head as he bit again at the nutribar. "Except for getting rescued, all our solvable problems are solved. We have oxygen, water, rations, and a livable temperature spread. The only things in short supply are patience and sanity. Do you have any games you can play on that thing? We could use some entertainment."

Cage snorted and sat back in his chair. "Games," he repeated in disgust. He looked over at Lady Name. "At least I know who you are now."

She looked away from Forrest for a split second. As she resumed her watch on the pebble persecutor she replied, "Cage, you haven't a clue who I am."

Cage smirked. "Barbara Striker. Doctor Barbara Striker. I managed to retrieve the passenger manifest. It says you are Doctor Barbara Striker, a biologist formerly with the Dison System colonization effort, currently relieved of your post because you are a fucking crazy."

"Words." She slowly turned her head toward Cage. "I'll be using the computer."

"You will not! I just finished repairing it."

Lady Name grinned as she stood and walked from

the dome, obviously headed for the wreck and the computer. Cage leaned toward Tobias. "You must do something!"

Forrest chuckled and shook his head. "Calm down. Let her play with the machine. It's got to be better than having her perched like a vulture on my shoulder all the time."

"What if she breaks it?"

"Then you can fix it again. It really isn't very important."

Cage stood abruptly and walked rapidly from the dome. Again Forrest chuckled. "Cage is on his way to the ship to lay down the law to Lady Name."

"Yeah, and when she flashes that blade of hers he'll be back with a wet crotch." Tobias pointed with his thumb toward the door. "How come you aren't out playing with your rocks?"

"Things are arranged."

"What's that mean?"

"I have initiated certain things out there. I'm teaching them to serve. When it becomes light again you should be able to see how my subjects have responded."

Tobias finished off the remaining portion of his nutribar and tossed the wrapper on the plastic floor. If Forrest wants to play god, at least he doesn't make a lot of noise. But they're all crazy, he thought. Every single last one of them. Am I?

There was a scream from the wreckage, and a moment later Cage could be seen, holding his arm, running toward his individual shelter. Forrest nodded, his eyes still closed. "It looks as though they've decided that Lady Name gets to use the computer."

He opened one eye and aimed it at Tobias. "Is it true that you piss on Mikizu's grave?"

Tobias finished his beverage and placed the cup on the table. He sat back, clasped his hands over his belly, and watched Mantchee slip a little lower behind the horizon. "Every chance I get."

"now we kill"

"the not green should know why we kill"

"tell them to ask this thing"

The dark came. Tobias tossed beneath his thermal blanket, trying to sleep, flying in the face of the fact that he was all slept out. Had been slept out for hours. Probably days-those twenty-four-hour spans of time they call days on a planet whose memory had grown dim. Back on a planet in a time when there was youth, ideals, dreams, plans. The excitement of school and training.

The monotony of space. All of it reduced to keeping the power plants in second-rate ships coughing along in exchange for a paycheck and a pension that he didn't think he'd live long enough to collect -

"To hell with this." Long ago Tobias had lost the ability to entertain himself with his own company.

He sat up, still wearing his filthy flight suit, and slipped his feet into his icy boots. The smell of his own body hung around him like a curse. There would be enough light from the Oids to make it to the place where the stream was aboveground if he wanted to take a bath. He shivered at the thought. What the hell. Everyone was being tracked by his own shadow of funk.

Keeping the thermal blanket wrapped around his shoulders, Tobias stepped outside. The Oids were bright in the night sky. Maybe they should use the computer to plot the Oids. There was a lot of crap out there, all in the same orbit. Some fine day maybe one of those three-hundred-kilometer-long chunks of rock might slam into the middle of their camp. He spat on the ground. "And if we knew, what could we do about it?"

There was a light on in the wreckage of the ship. Tobias began moving his feet in that direction. The

other individual shelters were dark. The main shelter had a light on, but no one was inside the dome. The open cargo hatch in the belly of the ship glowed with a dim red. Whoever was in the ship, it wouldn't be Cage. The computer man had a thing about conserving the ship's batteries. He would never leave on a light that wasn't needed. As though it made any difference. The batteries would outlive them all.

Tobias entered the cargo bay and began working his way around and through the jumble of opened containers and their scattered contents.

Most of it had been destined for a low-budget evaluation mission on some steamy planet out there somewhere. Everything anyone would need to learn the learnable about a planet and then screw it up. They had found the shelters and rations there.

Forward of the cargo hatch another light burned above a stack of strange equipment that Tobias had never seen before. Must have come from the cargo. Cables ran from the stack through the crew's quarters toward the cockpit. He entered the corridor to the crew's quarters, his mind thumbing through the obvious as he trudged up the slight incline to the cockpit.

If a full crew had been on board, maybe. If Mikizu hadn't overestimated his and his ship's abilities, maybe. If they'd followed company policy and stayed the hell out of the Oids, maybe. If they hadn't been ordered out of their way to pick up the passengers, maybe. Maybe. If. If ending it on this dreary rock wasn't such a fitting end to a dreary life. If.

He could hear no sound forward except for the almost inaudible whine of the power converter. He stopped at the hatch to the cockpit and peered in.

Lady Name's back was toward him. She was sitting back, watching, almost hypnotized by the patterns appearing upon the display. Every few moments the image would switch to columns of figures and then back to the patterns.

He stepped into the cockpit. "Hey, Lady. What're you up to?"

She whirled about, the needle-pointed blade in her right hand. As he froze, a slow grin appeared on her face. "You shouldn't sneak up on me that way, Tobias. You almost got to do your pension as a eunuch." She lowered the blade. "Why are you here?"

His gaze still fixed on the knife, Tobias worked his way to the commo station couch and sat down. "I couldn't sleep anymore. Thought Cage's machine might have something to read."

She turned back to the display over the keyboard. "This terminal is busy."

"Are any of the other stations hooked up?"

She didn't answer. He watched her for a moment, then turned his attention to the display. "Does that have anything to do with the gear you've hooked up in

the cargo bay?"

She nodded toward the display. "Those are the thought patterns of one of the green rocks. I have one of the small ones in a sensory chamber. When I can get the main sensors hooked up, I'll be able to receive from any rock in sight."

Turning her head away from the screen, she fixed Tobias with a hate-filled glare. "You refused to do anything about Forrest. Now I'm taking matters into my own hands."

Tobias shook his head. "You be real careful, Lady Name. You keep this up and you just might buy a real case of the crazies." He nodded once toward the screen. "Once you have all of that data, what are you going to be able to do with it?"

"Communicate, Tobias. Communicate."

"Talk with the rocks? Hell, if they communicate at the same rate that they move, you'll be an old woman before you can get a hello back. And if you can communicate with them, so what?"

"It looks as though they conceptualize and communicate faster than they move." She faced the display. "Forrest is doing terrible things to the rocks. I've been watching him. On a primitive pain-pleasure level, he has divided some of the rocks into armies. And he is forcing them into situations where they must fight each other."

"Fight?" Tobias burst out in laughter. "That has to be the action event of the century. Hell, Lady, I've been here just as long as you, and I don't see any war going on."

"It's there all the same. Once I can communicate with the rocks, I'm going to teach them how to fight Forrest."

Tobias glanced at the other terminal in the cockpit and decided that trying to read in the same compartment with Lady and her shiv would not exactly be the ultimate in relaxation. There was another terminal in engineering. The ghosts in engineering, however, had been sufficient to keep Tobias out of there since he and Forrest had dragged Osborn's remains from the compartment. Suddenly he felt very tired. Perhaps even tired enough to sleep. He got to his feet and slowly made his way out of the ship.

As he stood in the dim, red light outside the cargo hatch, he noticed one of the white rocks. It was rounded and about the size of a pillow. It had been there ever since-

No, he thought. It's closer to the hatch now. When we landed it was farther away. He shook his head. Another recruit for Lady Name's liberation Army. He muttered as he walked toward his shelter, "Enlist now. Avoid the rush later."

As he passed the main shelter, he glanced in and froze as he saw Tillson's naked body hanging by its neck from a piece of cargo line tied to the dome's center brace.

He entered the shelter and lowered himself into a chair as a feeling of absolute desolation invaded his soul. What's the point? What is the point of any of it?

"Isn't that just a tad ghoulish for entertainment, Tobias?" It was Forrest's voice. He was standing in the doorway. Forrest nodded toward the body. "Just look at that. The man was totally incompetent. Look at the way he placed that noose, straight up the

back."

Tobias closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of his chair. "It seems to have done what it was intended to do."

"True. But old Tillson must have done quite a mambo before he died. His neck isn't broken, Tobias. He danced. He danced for a long time."

"I guess Tillson just wasn't much of a hangman."

Forrest snorted out a laugh. "He wasn't much of a chaplain, either. He just wasn't much of anything."

There were sounds coming from behind Forrest. He turned and Cage pushed past him and came to a halt as the body came into his view. "For God's sake." Cage looked first at Forrest and then at Tobias seated in the chair. "For God's sake, cut him down!" He moved toward the body.

Forrest studied Tillson's still form. "Wouldn't it be amusing to leave him there for Lady Name? We'd all be eating our rations as though nothing were out of the ordinary, and in she'd come. What would she do?"

Cage finished righting the overturned chair next to the hanging corpse. "Give me a hand, someone."

Tobias pushed himself to his feet and headed toward the door. He paused next to Forrest. "Help him. Help him you sonofabitch, or I'll kill you."

A breath of amusement passed over Forrest's face as he walked over to Cage and began helping him take down the body.

Outside, walking rapidly away from the camp, Tobias felt the angry sickness forcing its way through his wall of control. He began running into the dark.

"why must I die"

"ask this thing"

"I asked this thing and no answer"

"ways of this thing are mysterious-die"

The second Earthday into the new sunrise. Tobias stood on Graveyard Hill next to Tillson's grave marker, staring at the long shadows cast by the rocks below. One of the shadows moved. His gaze traced along the shadow to its source. It was Forrest moving among the rocks.

Tobias squatted, leaned his forearms upon his knees, and clasped his hands together. Curious that no one had questioned whether Tillson's suicide was in fact a suicide. The body had been taken down, planted, and never mentioned again.

Tillson's mind had gone, no question about that. His shelter had been littered with incoherent scribblings. Mostly theological squirrel droppings, a rambling eternal justification of the author's existence. There were occasional moments of apparent lucidity. Relative lucidity. All things being relative.

Most of Tillson's lucid moments were crowded with the pain and anguish of a man who knows he is losing his mind. Fragments still teased Tobias's mind.

"Forrest explained that each rock is a small community of the creatures. A community of individuals

bound by their physical nature and shared nervous systems to act for the community's welfare, much like the cells of a human body. Each rock, then, can be treated as an individual. The rock color is a genetic

thing and has no other significance. The rocks cannot perceive anything that doesn't stay still for at least the equivalent of nine Earth days.

"He dispenses pain and death to the rocks according to whether the rocks have acted in accordance with the signs he has made. It must be terrifying to the creatures. Signs suddenly appearing out of nowhere. Signs that, if they are disobeyed, instantly reap horrible consequences. The creatures must believe themselves to be in the grip of spirits-terrible gods.

"Forrest is teaching them good and evil. Doing what Forrest signs is the good; disobeying Forrest is the evil. Before Forrest these creatures had no conception of good and evil. The horrors of moral commandments whose reasons for existence must be taken on blind faith. I wonder if the rocks will survive morality as long as humans have.

"A few moments ago Forrest showed me something. It was a green pebble the size of a blueberry. It seems that several of the rocks, acting in concert, prepared a platform and placed this pebble upon it. Then they left the platform. It must have taken many weeks. But there it is. The faithful tithing to their god. They prepared an altar and placed one of their members upon it. A gift. A virgin thrown into the volcano. A lamb pumping out its blood in the temple. The rocks have learned how to sacrifice.

"I am an obscenity."

There was no possible way of knowing how long after writing those words that the chaplain had hanged himself. Or had been murdered.

"I am an obscenity."

Tobias looked down at Tillson's grave marker. "This is a hell of a place to try and judge an entire life, Howard."

A whoop of joy came from below. Tobias turned his head to see Forrest running among the rocks. And the rocks he was running among were of only two colors, green and red. Everywhere else there was a fairly even mix of white, green, gray, and black, as well as dead red ones. But in Forrest's little community the only ones left living were green. The green rocks, in accordance with their god's wish, had killed those who were not green. There had indeed been a war.

Tobias reached down and picked up a small white rock. The terror, the passion that must exist in those very slow creatures. The pain of those who sacrificed one of their own number to Forrest. It wouldn't be a sacrifice without the pain of loss. And the pain couldn't exist without some form of love.

What about that little green pebble? The article of sacrifice? If the others had time enough to move away from the platform, so did the pebble. It had been green. Alive. It had faced the horror of the unknowable. And it had stood there, waiting for Forrest.

Courage?

He suddenly felt guilty about holding the white rock and tried to replace it exactly from where it had come. But he couldn't remember which side had been up. He stood, wondering how he would feel if the

next instant he found himself standing on his head.

He headed for the ship, being careful where he placed his feet.

"the green kills ours- why"

"the gray must kill the green-how"

"this thing serves the green"

"this thing will serve the gray if the gray obeys this thing"

Tobias sat in the commo couch and watched Lady Name alternately punch buttons and refer to the notes that she kept on slips of paper in her right breast pocket. The sensors he had installed above the cockpit seemed to be working, whatever it was that they did.

"There." She pointed at the incomprehensible scramble of numbers on the display. "That's the key. We'll be able to talk to them in a bit."

"Forrest can already do that."

"Our way will be much faster. We won't have to fuck them over and wait for them to deduce the message. Direct, communication." She faced Tobias. "Did you find the portable units?"

He nodded toward the rear of the cockpit, where two heavy-looking, brown metal cases stood. "What do we need those for?"

She turned back to the display. "As soon as Forrest figures out what we're doing in here he'll turn this computer into rubble. Once I have the data milked and processed through this thing, we won't need it anymore. I'll enter the translation codes into the portable units, and we can use them. I hope they're still working."

"They don't look damaged." Tobias looked back at

the units as he felt himself squirm in his chair. Lady Name's use of the pronoun we made Tobias more than a bit uncomfortable. After all, she was crazy.

"Why don't we just kill Forrest and be done with it?"

"We aren't murderers, Tobias. We are the good guys." Tobias glanced at the knife resting on her lap and raised an eyebrow. She nodded and reached for the keyboard. "Hide the soft suits and portable units while I try it out and see what happens."

"the gray also seeks the signs of this thing" "this thing serves the green-we obeyed"

"still the gray seeks the signs"

"this thing will not betray the green"

"This thing will betray you."

"who signs" "Truth." "we obey this thing"

"this thing will not betray us"

"This thing will betray you."

"who signs" "Truth."

"truth is what"

"I am."

"does truth serve the green"

"Truth serves truth. Will the green serve truth?"

"the green serves this thing"

"The gray serves this thing. Truth is stronger. Serve me."

"truth what have we done" "what have we done"

Lady had been right about Forrest going after the

computer. While they had been pulling down rations in the dome, the circuits had been trashed. Shortly after, Cage wandered off in the distance beyond the ship. Tobias had followed the man's footsteps in the red ash, between and around the endless rocks, until he came to a bottomless chasm. It was an opening that looked as though real gods had scarred the floor of the plain with a huge razor. The footsteps went to the edge, and that was that.

So long Cage.

From the entrance to the dome, Tobias watched Forrest study his subjects in the dying light at the end of another week-long sunset. He was seated on top of one of the large red stones. Surrounding him were nothing but red rocks. All quite alive.

Lady Name had told them: "You must fight this thing, not each other."

"how to fight this thing"

"Play dead."

Tobias chuckled as he gnawed at his rations. Forrest's new army, as well as his original force, were immobilized. They wouldn't fight. Lady Name had given the green the command to tell the gray about truth. The word had even spread to the white and the black. If you don't fight, you don't have to kill. If you don't fight, you don't have to die.

Tobias laughed out loud. Play dead; turn red. It would be a simple task for the rocks, requiring only the sacrifice of each rock's surface members. The surface dies, but inside they live. And growth takes place

against the ground.

He saw Forrest's head turn slowly in his direction. The small man studied him, his face as expressionless as one of the rocks. He called out, "Tobias!" He held up the current generator. "Tobias, what if I kill them all? What if I just go from stone to stone and give each a little shot?"

"Then you'd have nothing left to play with except your radish, Forrest. Your game would be over."

He lowered his shock stick and grinned. "You joined the wrong side, Tobias."

Tobias laughed and turned into the dome. He finished off his nutribar, tossed the wrapper on the floor, and flopped down in a chair facing the doorway. He had taken to sitting and sleeping facing doorways. When someone's out to get you, paranoia is just practical thinking.

He glanced at the position of Mantchee and frowned. Lady Name was going to meet him to explain the new sequence they were going to initiate. She had determined that the rocks had the ability to excrete their waste products in the form of a highly corrosive vapor. It wouldn't kill the rocks. Their ability to obtain what they needed from the atmosphere wouldn't be affected. Creatures with lungs, however, would die.

The soft suits and respirators would leave only Forrest inhaling acid. The only real problem was trying to convince the rocks to do it. Lady Name suspected that for some reason, the rocks might object to wandering around in a cloud of their own shit.

The doorway darkened. It was Forrest, and he was holding something in his hands. He squatted in the doorway.

"You know, Tobias, there were many times in my life when I thought I had all my ducks in a row. When I thought I was on top of everything. It wasn't always true."

Tobias hooked another chair with the toe of his boot and pulled it closer to him, crossing his legs at the ankles upon it. "Welcome to the club."

Forrest looked down at what was in his hands. "It might not be true for you."

"Just stop fucking with the rocks, Forrest, and it'll be all over."

He glanced up and grinned. "You think so?" He placed what was in his hands upon the floor, stepped upon it with one foot, and lifted as the sound of a sharp crack reverberated around the dome.

He stood and tossed the object across the space that separated them. Tobias caught it with his left hand as Forrest turned and left the doorway empty.

It took a moment, but Tobias recognized the object. It was the hilt of Lady Name's knife.

"there is a new one"

"it is this thing"

"it signs as truth signs"

"it is this thing stronger"

"there is a sign"

"truth do you sign"

"Truth is dead."

"truth cannot die"

"Call truth and see."

"we call truth - truth see our sign - truth"

"Truth does not see your sign. Truth is dead."

"who do we serve now"

"You know me."

"this thing" "must we again kill and die to serve" "You know me." "we know you"

By the light of the Oids he had found her among the mountain of red rocks beyond the ship, on the way to Cage's Chasm. That's where she had stashed her half of the equipment. Her soft suit had been slashed, her respirator broken. Her portable communication unit was missing. She was dead. Tobias extinguished his light and turned away. Forrest must have taken some time to mutilate Lady Name's body. Had Forrest found the other suit and communication unit? Tobias looked back toward the gentle silver gleam of the ship. To Hell with it. Let Forrest play with the damned rocks if that's what he wanted. What did Tobias care? Keep going with the rations, stay out of Forrest's way. Wait for rescue. Simple.

He turned back, knelt on both knees next to her body, and clumsily began pushing the red ash over her. "You dumb bitch. You dumb crazy bitch."

"what must we do to atone"

"There is another. Kill it."

"to kill what we cannot see-how"

"Find a way."

The edge of another new sunrise. Tobias looked through the dome window at the pink of the slow dawn. How long had it been since he had seen

Forrest? Back when the man had broken Lady Name's knife. He frowned. Had only one night passed, or was it two? Or three?

He sipped at his steaming beverage, lowered his cup, and looked at it. Somewhere back on Earth there was a person with a degree in nutrition who had never stepped outside of his or her environmentally controlled city. That person had invented N-669 Beverage, Survival, Hot. More than likely that person

had never tasted N-669 Beverage, Survival, Hot. At odd moments Tobias had a fantasy about finding that person, cramming a funnel down his or her throat, and pouring in ten or twelve liters of N-669 Beverage, Survival, Hot.

A sound. He slowly looked up and turned.

The sound had been something between a groan and a creak. He looked up at the inside of the dome. No problem there that he could see. His head turned toward the doorway. As he took a step toward it, half of the dome came crashing down to the floor next to him; it knocked him clear across to the wall of the undamaged half.

Another crash. Another.

He cleared his head, opened his eyes, and watched the open sky in horror as a ten-meter column of rocks teetered, then came falling toward him.

He scrambled to his feet and leaped into the rubble to escape, a deafening roar and a choking cloud of dust overtaking him.

The sounds stopped, and the dust settled. He opened his eyes and chanced a glance at his surroundings. The dome was nothing but rubble crisscrossed by collapsed columns of rocks. He pulled himself to

his feet, climbed up the rocks and rubble until he stood on top. Except for where he was standing, the landscape was unchanged, the long shadows of the morning pointing away from the bit of Mantchee that showed over the horizon.

"Forrest!" Forrest was nowhere to be seen. "Forrest!"

Tobias took several deep breaths and looked down at the destruction of the dome. Without the dispenser what rations he could rescue from the wreckage would last only a few days - Earth days at that. Without the dispenser . . . he looked at the empty cup still gripped in his hand. So long N-669 Beverage, Survival, Hot. There were no more dispensers or rations in the ship's cargo hold. The equipment used to tap into the groundwater supply had been crushed along with the dispenser.

Tobias began gathering up the few nutribars he could find and reach. Already his mind was planning what he would do once he broke out his own portable communication unit and set up his command post. There still remained Lady Name's stunt with the corrosive vapor. Tobias didn't wonder about being able to figure out how to get the rocks to do it. He had to. But first there was food, water, shelter to arrange. Time. It would take time. But he had nothing but time. He spoke in mutters as he worked.

"I'll get you, Forrest. You miserable little son of a bitch. I'll get you."

"we have found truth"

"is truth dead"

"truth is dead-it is a strange creature truth-soft

small and made of food" "what of the other this thing wants us to kill"

"we do not know-some toward the beginning of the new light sign about another there far below the

surface dead-in the mound are the two who appeared when this thing first appeared -they are dead"

`four of them-still there is this thing" "there is a sign"

"Forrest. Answer if you're reading. Forrest."

"who signs"

"I look for the one called this thing."

"truth is dead-you are not this thing" "are you the other"

"I am God. Where is this thing?"

"who is god"

"I am. God rules all."

"are you like truth or like this thing"

"No. I have more power."

"even we can see this thing"

"If you cannot see this thing we have more power than god"

"Serve God or you will suffer."

"this thing already provides us with what you offer us god-we serve this thing"

"You must serve me."

"Communicate. I am stronger than this thing. Answer. Answer. Answer."

From the top of Graveyard Hill, Tobias surveyed the results of his efforts. He was standing in the center of a circular enclosure of red rocks, a triangular piece of the dome serving as a roof. Inside were some cushions from the dome and a panel he had

grabbed from the ship. The panel controlled the array of debris-impregnated seismic charges surrounding his position on the hill. If Forrest or any of his followers wanted to get at him, they'd need a guide to get through the fireworks.

Next to the cushions was a stack of the seismic charges rigged with adjustable time-delay triggers. They were in case Forrest told his rocks to do the falling-column bit again. The soft suit and respirator were still in their containers, in case Tobias ever got some of the rocks to see things his way. Next to the soft suit were his container of water lugged from the surface stream and his supply of ration bars. In addition to the ration bars, he had managed to salvage four containers of the powder that the dispenser used to make up good old N-669 Beverage, Survival, Hot. Vitamins, minerals, and old underwear. He wondered what N-669 would taste like cold.

Next to the rations, on the other side of the cushions, stood the portable communication unit. Tobias bit

the skin on the inside of his lower lip. What did the rocks mean when they said they could see Forrest?

He leaned his forearms upon the edge of the red wall and scanned the area behind Graveyard Hill. Forrest was nowhere around. Not even a footprint. And for the rocks to see Forrest, he would have to stay substantially in one place for the better part of nine Earth days. Tobias looked farther to the right, moving his position until he was overlooking the camp. The shelters had been in place long enough to be seen. And the graves. The ship.

He studied the wreckage of the ship. To the rocks it

must have appeared out of nowhere. Huge, gleaming. Silver. A color the rocks had never seen before. And then they began getting signs. Certain actions in relation to the signs brought death. Other actions did not. They learned the penalty of disobedience. Good and evil came to stay. And it all began after the ship appeared.

Tobias nodded and sat on his cushions, energizing the portable communications unit. "Oh, Forrest, old buddy. Do I have a numnum for you."

"who signs"

"God."

"we serve this thing"

"I have found this thing. If I kill this thing, will you serve me?"

"we see this thing-this thing now sees what we think"

"I see what you think. Will you serve me?"

"we see this thing"

"I will kill this thing and appear to you. Then you will serve me."

"we wait"

The directional indicator on the portable unit and a quick move enabled him to triangulate the positions of two of the rocks with which he had been communicating. After marking them, it took only minutes to rig the ship. Remote-controlled seismic charges next to the half-full fuel cells. Tobias quickly searched the crew's quarters and scanned the cargo hold for anything additional that he might be able to use. There was a three-wheeled motorized "mule." He energized

it and drove it over and around the mess in the hold until he was outside, next to the marked rocks. He worked the forks of the mule beneath first one rock and then the next. With the rocks secured, he drove them to the top of Graveyard Hill and parked them where they could see both the ship and the inside of his bunker. Moving the rocks would add some time to the demonstration, but he would be too vulnerable in the open.

His preparations completed, he sat down and waited. If he stayed in the same place, in the same position, with only brief absences to piss on Mikizu's grave, the rocks would see him shortly after they were able to perceive the ship. The only problem was boredom. But there were entertainments. Keeping

alert for an attack of some kind by Forrest. That and the voices he was beginning to hear.

All a part of going crazy, he reminded himself. Still he wished the voices were loud enough for him to understand. Who knows? His insanity might have something interesting to say.

He sat back and stared at the two green rocks he was trying to convince. A thought passed his attention, and he began laughing, "Talk about your hard sells!"

When he calmed down, he began to wait.

"who signs"

"God. I have moved you."

"your power is great"

"Do you see this thing?"

"we see this thing"

"Do you see me?"

"we see you god -you are very small - this thing is much larger"

"My power is greater."

"this thing has moved us without us seeing the move- what you have done is no more"

"Will you serve me on faith, or must I kill this thing?"

"you must kill this thing"

Mantchee was slowly moving toward sunset, but enough time remained. Tobias pressed the remote trigger and watched as the ship disappeared in a sheet of light and sound. Too bad, he thought as he watched the heat carry the flames and black smoke high into the shimmering red of the sky. It's too bad that it happens so quickly. If they could see it, the flaming death of this thing would impress the rocks.

He sat back to wait. It would take another nine days for the rocks to see that this thing was destroyed.

The portable communication unit began making strange buzzing sounds. He looked at the operation panel inside the case. The only image on the screen above the tiny keyboard was an instructional line: SWITCH FUNCTION TO NORMAL RECEIVE.

He did as instructed and sat back in shock, withdrawing his hand as though it had been burned, as an angry, deep snarl came from the unit's speaker.

"Tobias! Tobias, I'm coming for you! Do you hear me?"

After his shock passed, Tobias grinned. "Is something wrong, Forrest?"

"The ship! Why did you blow the ship?"

"I think you know, old thing. Shall I put on a nice,

hot cup of N-669 when you come calling? By the way, old thing, what are you using for food these days?"

The unit was silent. Tobias laughed as he switched the function selector back to the rock channel. It didn't seem so long a time. The nine days. The voices provided some entertainment. Still, they were muddy, too distant. But at times they even seemed to sing. Especially toward the end. Strange songs. Forrest never did show.

"It is time to decide."

"this thing brings us pain and death-god what do you bring us"

"The good."

"god we will serve you"

"And now will you have faith in me?"

"god we will have faith in you"

"Tell the others. All must serve God."

"god we will tell the others"

Does perception of time adjust to the local framework of time? Tobias let the thought sit just behind his eyes as he made his weary way to the stream. There didn't seem to be enough time in the day to do everything. Lug water, eat, talk to the rocks, and try to get them to understand about the acid vapor. He had gone back and dug up Lady Name's body, hoping there would be some clue in her notes. She must have had some idea about how to get the rocks to expel the vapor. But her breast pocket was empty. If anyone had those notes, it was Forrest.

But it was the feel of the dead breast behind that pocket that captured his attention. Hard. Unyielding.

He uncovered it and found it to be made of gray stone. Her entire body had been replaced by the gray. Back at Graveyard Hill, he uncovered part of Osborn's body. He had been replaced by gray and green. He didn't bother to check out Mikizu. Whatever the rocks were doing, they were only doing it to the dead. That was none of his concern. Not yet.

He came to the bank of the stream and lowered his containers to the ground. The stream was dry. He climbed down the bank and dug at the cracked surface of the bed with his hands. Dry.

He sat back on his heels, his gaze resting on the distant hills. That's where the water comes from, he thought. And that's where Forrest is. That's where he cut it off.

And that's where I'm going to kill you.

The light and the dark. Days. It seemed that so much time had passed that he ought to have forgotten what he was trying to do. At moments he would forget.

He finished securing the portable communication unit to the mule next to the driver's seat. In the vehicle's tiny cargo bay were the remainder of his rations, the water containers, his soft suit and respirator, and his supply of bombs. He looked back at the two green rocks that had been keeping him company for-

How long? He looked at the communication unit. There was a date- and time-indicator function. He didn't know the date. For some reason it seemed important to know.

He opened the unit, energized it, and switched the function selector to date/time. The figures were unreadable, a smear of flashes, as though the indications had been recorded in time lapse and replayed at normal speed.

The reflection of his image in the screen showed the face of an old man.

"god"

"What?" Tobias looked up and around. He looked back at the communication unit. The function selector was still on date/time. The voices again?

"god"

He looked again at the two green rocks.

"What?"

"take me with you" "Why?"

"there is a new one more powerful than this thing"

The rock on the right. He didn't know how, but he knew that was the one that was talking to him. Have I slowed down that much, he wondered, or have the rocks finally gotten it into high gear? Or have I lost my mind?

"god bring me" "Why?" "I can help you"

"Help me to do what?"

"I can help you fight Lucifer"

So Forrest is calling himself Lucifer. Tobias leaned against the mule and looked toward the hills. He nodded. "Sure. You come."

And he saw the rock move.

It seemed to flow across the red dust. A balloon filled with water. Light and dark. Rapidly shifting shadows. Time. Again light, the dark, light. The rock was now next to the mule.

He watched Mantchee streak across the sky, leaving him not in day or night but in half-light. That fast, he wondered, or have I become that slow.

"Am I seeing this as you see it?"

"I do not know how god sees"

Tobias pulled himself into the driver's seat. The brace he had grabbed came away in his hand. The metal of the mule was pitted, corroded, like lace. The supplies, the soft suit, the water containers-all dust.

He stood naked, a film of gray over his skin. He sank down next to the green rock. "I can't make it. Too tired. Too old."

"we will carry you"

Tobias watched the landscape move. Green, gray, black, and white globes flowing around the red. Rapid rivers of shapes. He felt himself lifted and carried. In the sky Mantchee was an even bar of yellow light against the dim pink.

As he was moved along, floating upon that softly undulating river of life, the edge of a thought-what would he do when he met Forrest?-came and left many times. My mind, he said to himself, really is going. But Forrest will be just as old, if he's still alive.

He was at the hills. He could not push himself up to look. The rocks rose beneath his head and shoulders.

"Forrest."

There was no answer, except for the stinging pain all over his body. He watched his skin peel and blacken, curling away to expose the bones beneath. The acid. Forrest taught them to shit acid.

"I can't fight him. I am dying."

"god you must live-become as lucifer"

"I am God. Good cannot become as Lucifer. I am good."

"lucifer says he is the evil-is good less powerful than lucifer"

"I cannot change my purpose."

"change not purpose-change form-become as lucifer"

The thread of a thought spoke to him. Lucifer has no protection against the acid. Then what has Lucifer become? And what must I become to live?

"I am afraid."

"god-you want us to have faith in you-have faith in us-become as lucifer"

There was not enough tissue left to force air through vocal cords that no longer existed. His thought was his response. Very well. I will become as Lucifer.

He stood, his height above the crest of the hills, his reach wider than the plain beneath his feet. Beyond

the hills a massive head leered back at him. The face was rot, corruption, evil.

"You are God," it hissed.

"Lucifer."

A glow invaded the engineer's heart. He reached out his great arms and wrapped his fingers around the monster's throat.

When they came to investigate the weak, garbled signal from the Oids Belt, they quickly located the beacon. It was from a type of commercial cargo ship that hadn't been in use for over a century. Of the ship, passengers, and crew, the only trace remaining was a curious statue of two naked human men, in mortal combat, standing upon the bodies of five other humans, the sculpture surrounded by a wall of red masonry. The local life form informed them that the statue was titled "Equilibrium."