

The Ups and Downs

by
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Brancusi sat back with a jerk, startling the kitten.

He rubbed his eyes. He had been projecting himself into his cityplan design! It was such a vivid experience - he had almost caught a hint of baking bread - and as he looked at the screen he smiled.

To ease his cramped muscles, he stood up and walked away from his workstation. He felt satisfied, but tired; he had put in four hours with barely a movement of his body, and that had no doubt helped push him into his oddly dreamy mind-state.

Pausing only to turn on some music, he went to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a chilled white wine. As powerful chords from a thousand years before burst into sound around his head, he stared out through the picture wall. The grey fog of Antarctic morning had given way to a glorious midday that shone with vibrant wholeness. In the distance, he could see some of the Families drifting across the grass to the lake, kids turning exuberant somersaults a few feet above their yapping dogs.

Soon, he and Kaeti would have kids of their own, and then life would be complete...

Except for this damn headache. Brancusi shook his head, but that only made it worse. The light outside grew brighter, the music harsher. Working too hard... Tears came to his eyes, and he lay down on the settee and the shivering world grew darker as the room slid from sight...

A spasm in his leg woke him. His back ached.

He opened his eyes to a throbbing darkness slashed with light from a hand-carried lamp. He didn't know where he was.

A pain in his arm nailed him to something and he growled, grabbing and missing as the hypodermic was removed. He looked up into the one eye of Clegge.

"Careful, Brak," said Clegge, his teeth gleaming with menace. "You're moving out. Save your strength for the long drop."

Clegge moved over to - to Corin, and jabbed him too, and then left. Corin stirred, but did not wake.

Brak looked round the bare cell with a sinking heart as real memory seeped up, prodded by the chemicals...

Kaeti and the kitten and their plans... They had seemed so real, and yet the more he tried to hang onto them the more the memories twisted and evaporated into nothing, leaving just a sense of loss and the knowledge that he was trapped in the hiberhold of an interstellar convict transport beyond hope.

And now he remembered being locked in for the long haul... and the trial, and the look on the faces of the crowds in the gallery... and the crime he had committed, now he remembered that too, and shuddered. No wonder he had been sentenced to Foul.

Brak hammered on the viewport cover; last chance to see the place from above. After a couple of hefty blows the cover shot open, letting in light from the local sun, and below, the browns and greys of Foul itself...

Odd, the sun. Were they moving towards it? No, it was expanding, getting whiter, brighter, hotter, and Brak stood transfixed as he realised the ship was falling into the exploding star and this was it...

And Barker fell out of bed.

His pyjamas were wet with sweat in the darkness of the winter night. A dream! By far the most vivid he could recall. Relief coursed through his body, but his heart was still thumping. It was amazing he hadn't woken his wife.

He untangled his feet from the sheets and stood up. He picked up his dressing gown and padded out of the bedroom quietly. He needed a drink.

It was dark and cold in the hallway, and he felt his way carefully to the bannister. Grabbing it, he stepped slowly down the stairs, expecting at any moment for some forgotten obstacle to hit him in the face.

What time was it? He could hear the old clock measuring out its loud, patient ration of seconds in the sitting room, a welcome reminder of normality. Felt like 4 in the morning.

It was even colder in the sitting room, almost icy. Cold moonlight streamed in through the windows, and he could see snow outside, piled unusually high for October. By the dim light he could see the time - nine o'clock. Odd. Something must be wrong.

He looked at the clock, and as he did he noticed that he could smell gas. The gas fire? He looked down... just in time to see a little spark.

The fire was trying to light itself! He had never seen anything like it. Spark, spark! Spark!

And then the gas caught and the fire blew up in a shattering explosion that propelled Barker across the room, and he banged his head on the heavy coffee table.

Berrac relaxed. There was real frost on his eyes, but through his barely parted eyelids he could see people moving as if at a great distance. All wore masks. Someone shone a bright light at him.

"He's coming round," said a voice. Tubbeh?

"OK, Dr Berrac!" said someone else. Rundgren, project leader. "You're back in the real world now. No sudden movements. Take it easy..."

Berrac smiled. He was back; but those projected lives were more realistic than ever! The dream state was so concrete, the assumed personalities so anchored in their histories, it was hard to believe it was all a generated-dream simulation.

"So how was it?" asked Rundgren.

"Outstanding... Except at the end, the system was speeding up; I got into some locations and out quickly and very violently... I feel like I died several times." Berrac thought a moment. "And you know, for the first time I felt like a vampire, like these were real people whose life force I was sucking..."

Rundgren and Tubbeh exchanged glances as they helped Berrac stand, carefully.

All around the circular lab people were watching impassively. Technicians, mainly, but in the gallery there was a silent group of serious-looking men all dressed in black. Berrac looked over at Rundgren, who tilted his head warningly and winked.

Tubbeh helped Berrac into a wheelchair, and, with Rundgren walking alongside, wheeled him out of the lab at a brisk pace.

"You were in for nine hours," said Rundgren. "And you're right, we had a flutter in the later stages, so we pulled you out. Those guys watching - they're military."

"Are they!" Berrac thought this over as they went down the corridor. "Despite the convention?"

Tubbeh started pushing the wheelchair faster. Rundgren broke into a trot to keep up.

"Yes, I'm afraid so!" he said. "Nothing we can do about it." Tubbeh was actually running now...

"Hold on," said Berrac. But Tubbeh paid no attention. With Rundgren's assistance he got the chair up to full speed and sent it flying into the entrance doors in the lobby. Berrac's head smashed into the plate glass, and his chair tilted and he hit the marble floor, hard. Dazed, unsure what was going on, he could see that where there had once been grass and trees and parked cars outside there was now an empty red desert. And two suns?

The last thing he saw before blackness claimed him was a leather boot.

Bra'akka awoke with his back against the cold cliff, stung by ice particles whipped by a vicious wind. He looked up at the remote High Stars but found no comfort there.

Sleep while the vile dogs of Telaar were after him? Madness!

Clutching his twinblade close to his chest he stood and started running north again, running to where he hoped home would be.
