

All Your Futures are Belong to Us

By

David Gullen

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After months of calling, I'd had a reply. I was so excited, I had to talk to someone, so I went to Vanhya's party. I wasn't invited, they weren't my friends, they were just the people I knew. I went anyway.

Beautiful Vanhya opened the door, 'Oh, it's you.' She wore a few strategically draped rose and lemon ribbons, her hair sleek and perfect. I had on my usual – flat shoes, a plain dress. She dismissed my clothes from the top step. 'I'm having a party.'

I rolled my eyes, 'I know.'

Deep inside the house, someone called Vanhya's name. At the same time, her Sleeve began to chime. Distracted, Vanhya went back inside. She left the door open, I followed her in.

Everyone was out back, beside the pool, under the palms, it really was a perfect day. I went over to the bar and helped myself to a drink, a handful of canapés. A few of Vanhya's friends looked me up and down like I was a freak, like they were better than me, then returned to their conversations with each other, or on their Sleeves. I knew their names, I wanted to go over and sit down with them and tell them what I'd discovered. They wouldn't care, they'd listen with fixed smiles, then move away.

I saw Wilf. He was tanned, he looked great. So did everybody else – leggy Vanhya, handsome Daihid, her uber-cool black-eyed friend back down the skyhook after another joyride in his space-yacht, the rest of her crowd. Wilf and Vanhya stood very close together. He was being really funny, everyone could hear Vanhya laughing. Daihid kept looking at me, the only one who ever did. He smiled and waved, but he never came over.

I sat on the lawn on my own. The grass was just the right length, with a scatter of clover and little white daisies. I dragged my fingers through the clover, the leaves made a satisfying ripping sound. I thought about the ship, its crew, the captain, what I would say to them when we finally met.

'You do realise you're talking to yourself.'

I looked up, and it was Wilf. His shoulders were broad, his bare, tanned shins lean and hairy, his jaw line strong. When he smiled at me, his teeth were really white. I liked Wilf, I knew he would understand. I too have perfect teeth.

'Wilf, it's here! I've had a reply!'

Wilf looked around the lawn, back at Vanhya, then crouched beside me. 'What is, Appie?'

I laughed, he was teasing me. I liked it when he did that. Then I realised he really didn't know.

'The *Mesopotamia*,' I said. 'The ship from Earth.'

His eyes went wide, 'You mean it actually made it? It's already here?' He wrote something on his Sleeve, then pursed his lips at the result.

'Already? Three and a half centuries, one hundred and fifty light years of sub-luminal space. You do realise it was launched a hundred years before this colony was founded?'

Wilf gave a quirky smile. 'You're full of facts, Appie.'

I laughed at his ignorance. 'Here's another - it's not here yet, it's only just crossed the heliopause.'

Mesopotamia - the biggest artefact mankind had ever built. A miles-long, asymmetric dumbbell, archaic fizz-fuzz engines lay behind a plate-like rad-shield at one end, the crew quarters, cryo-labs and incubators formed a moonlet-sized sphere at the other. From a time before SPQR engines, it was the last, titanic effort of a dying world – planet Earth.

I had been broadcasting twice a day on the orbital array transmitters ever since *Mesopotamia* passed through the Oort cloud, tight-beam signals across a broad swathe of the electro-magnetic spectrum from long-wave radio to laser light. The crew should have been able to receive me, but after so much time who knew what failures they had endured, what jury-rigged substitutes they now relied upon to communicate.

‘What did the message say?’ Wilf said.

Full of delicious excitement I let the moment draw out. Then I said, ‘WTF.’

Tension left Wilf’s shoulders, ‘Nothing else?’

‘It’s enough that they responded. It proves they’re alive.’

‘Appie, it could just be an autoresponder.’

‘I don’t think so.’

Wilf’s mouth twisted, ‘What does it mean?’

I hated to admit it, but I didn’t know. A decade of Cultural Anthropology, Comparative Modalities, and Archaic Dialect, had still not taught me all I needed to know about communication with an island population isolated for a third of a millennium. Two days with almost no sleep caught up with me, suddenly I was close to tears.

Wilf laid his fingers on my hand. ‘How are you doing, Appie?’

I didn’t know what he meant, except I did, and it was upsetting. ‘I’m all right. I’ve worked so hard, I know so little.’

‘It’s still working out for you, staying Delayed?’

I stared at him open-mouthed. ‘What’s it got to do with you?’

Wilf held up his hands, ‘Look, I Delayed too, remember? For five years. We’re the same, you and me, we’ve got ambitions and we made sacrifices. I know what you’re going through, I know what it’s like to see your peer group become adults before yourself.’

‘And now you’re all grown up.’

‘Appie, I’m just saying. When I gave up the Delay there were some distractions, but I didn’t feel like I suddenly got stupid or anything.’ He looked over at the girls by the pool, all self-aware curves and knowing looks, ‘Some things became easier to understand.’

He didn’t know how cruel that was. ‘So what are you doing that’s so important?’

He gave me that self-deprecating grin of his, ‘Sewerage and water treatment. I’ve revised the reed bed ecology - retuned the rotifers lifecycle, widened the hydra’s oxygen tolerances. It’s pretty interesting. I’m recruiting a consortium for implementation.’

It did sound like fun, working with Wilf. And it was important, the colony was growing, systems needed to expand with it. Wilf already had good Rep, this project would seriously add to it.

‘What about them?’ I jerked my head across to the crowd around the pool. Vanhya and Daihid had never Delayed, they just grew up and got on with playing in the sunshine with their friends.

‘Vanhya’s lot?’ Wilf gave a short bark of laughter. ‘Maybe. If they don’t start to work soon, someone will invoke corvée. Everybody has to contribute.’

That was funny. Vanhya’s crowd were so cool, I knew I could never be like them. Perversely, the thought made me glad. I loved the thought of corvée, of them being obliged to do any old job, whether they wanted to or not. Digging ditches for Wilf. Re-energised, I jumped to my feet.

‘The people on *Mesopotamia*,’ I touched the pseudo-gland implanted high up inside my biceps, ‘I have to stay as I am, I can’t let a few hormones mess with my intellect.’

Wilf put his hands on my hips, a confusingly intimate contact I liked but simultaneously didn't want. 'Appie, have you ever thought they might not have made it?'

What an outrageous, stupid, question. I was so shocked, I just stared. 'What do you think I've been doing all my life? I've thought about them every day. They need my help, they've been isolated so long, so ignorant and lonely. They set out as Earth's last hope, their destination a hostile planet. When they find us here, they're not going to know what to do, what to think, what to feel. Without me they'll go crazy.'

Two people approached: Vanhya and Daihid.

'You're disturbing the vibe. What are you shouting about?' Vanhya said.

Daihid looked at me strangely, he was breathing deep, as if he'd been for a run.

'Wilf's perving it up again with little Appie. Wilf, you're such a deev.'

Wilf's arm snapped out, his finger quivered an inch from Daihid's nose. 'You keep your mouth shut.'

Daihid just smiled. He looked at me, 'Are you OK, Appie?'

Wilf took a step forwards, 'Get lost, Daihid.'

Vanhya raised her voice, 'Wilf, don't. If you keep shouting, you'll have to leave.'

I felt my face burn, 'I'm going anyway.'

'I'll come with you,' Wilf said.

'Appie,' Daihid said. I ignored him. He was the one who looked, not Wilf.

We walked past the pool, past everyone, and into Vanhya's house. Acutely aware of the movements of my knees and elbows, I concentrated on trying to walk normally.

Vanhya's stylish house was silent. The whole place was powered by a small SPQR flip-flop: humidity, pool temperature, lighting. Domicile bots paused their activities as we entered each room, and resumed once we'd left. It was the same as my house, except for the visitors.

'What's the ship doing now?' Wilf asked as we passed through.

'Heading towards the sun for deceleration.'

'Another automatic function?'

I didn't answer. People believe what they want.

As a child I'd become obsessed by the facts of the *Mesopotamia*. Built at a time of no hope, it was a planetary End-of-Days project of utter sacrifice nobody had been sure would work. Then, all through the miraculous Great Recovery, the vast ship had crawled through space towards us with its cargo of a million embryos. Up it had come, out of the depths of an immense time-well, and emerged into its future, our present day.

The awesome facts of the project still burned in my mind: a billion deaths for a higher cause. None of our new worlds had any need for sacrifice, certainly not this near-perfect colony. I ached to give myself to something worthwhile, something grander than simple ambition.

'Wilf, I have to help them. Nobody else cares.'

I thought Wilf looked a little sad. 'I wish I could help you,' he said. 'I know how to care.'

He looked so sad I kissed him on the mouth. I'd never done that before, I think I did it right.

That night I hardly slept a wink. I felt a tingle of joy and ran my hands over my body. Wilf and I were meant for each other, I was sure. I fought down a powerful urge to deactivate my implant but knew I must wait. For just a few more months I'd need all my

youthful energy and intellectual resources. The day the ship landed was a day I had waited for my entire life.

It was going to be brilliant.

~

The year rolled on, *Mesopotamia* decelerated around the sun and headed out again, towards planetary rendezvous. Meanwhile, Wilf's project stalled for the usual reasons: lack of volunteers and raw materials. SPQR engines and flip-flops gave us endless energy, the constant constraint on our mineral-poor planet was resources. Materials went to popular instigators with the highest Rep first, Wilf wasn't in that league.

I monitored *Mesopotamia's* progress, ran projections, and continued my research into the chaotic, desperate times during which the enormous spacecraft was built and launched. I also continued my twice-daily transmissions, but there were no further messages. My initial optimism descended into puzzled frustration.

Then Wilf and Vanhya ruined everything.

One morning I arrived at the broadcast array at the base of the skyhook and saw Vanhya waiting in the glass-arched foyer.

'Over here, Appie,' Vanhya beckoned me with a languid wave of her hand.

'What are you doing here?'

Vanhya flicked back her glossy hair. 'I volunteered. You need a project mentor. There was a vacancy, I applied.'

This was dreadful. 'You can't. You don't know anything about linguistic anthropology or archaic mindsets, or-'

'I don't need to. This is all about counselling a junior on their first independent project. I exceed all empathic and social minima.'

'Junior? We're the same age,' I exclaimed.

'Yes, but I'm more experienced.'

'No you're not, you never learned anything, you just did the basic courses.'

'Thank you, Appie, but you might be surprised.' Vanhya looked me up and down.

'Anyway, I meant biosocially.'

I tried everything, Vanhya wasn't having it. 'Either accept me, or call for arbitration.'

She knew as well as me, if I did that the project would go on hold.

'You're just doing this to avoid corvée assignments. You should be digging ditches for Wilf.'

Vanhya studied her nails, 'It was Wilf who suggested it.'

I couldn't believe it. He said he cared, he said he wanted to help me. Crushed by his betrayal, I had no more arguments. 'What do you want to do?'

'Well, Appie, I'm concerned you've become emotionally obsessed with a doomed ideal. Your devotion has been admirable, but it was based on an immature romantic dream. *Mesopotamia* is an antique, a piece of tin. Everyone inside it is dead.'

'What about the course corrections?' I said, 'The braking slingshot around the sun?'

'Reflex systems activated by photon density.'

Vanhya didn't know things like that, someone must have briefed her. My heart sank, Wilf.

'They replied to me, they answered my call.'

'The last spasm of dying circuits.'

It was galling having to justify myself to Vanhya. 'No, it means they're using the original frequencies. That shows they've maintained their equipment. Also, I've proved they use the Latin alphabet.'

'All you've done is confirm facts known for centuries. You haven't discovered anything new.'

Satisfied with her own logic, Vanhya gave my shoulder an indulgent squeeze. 'Appie, you tried, but it's time you grew up. It's time to cut *Mesopotamia* open and see what's inside.'

Furious, I jerked away from her touch and paced between the transmission stacks. I didn't care if she was right, I wasn't prepared to admit that everything I'd worked for, my life, my dreams and hopes, had been for nothing. I'd made gallant sacrifices, my time, my education. My body.

'That level of intervention would be catastrophic. Compared to us, the crew are damaged children, mentally and socially frozen in time. The simple fact of our existence will have crushed their hopes, their reason for existence.'

'You've already done that with your message,' Vanhya said. 'You think they are the children? It was your selfish choice to make contact.'

Her comments cut me to the bone. Had I really caused so much damage? 'How else could we warn them? Nobody else cared.'

'Exactly.' Vanhya made a call on her Sleeve. Daihid's handsome face, encased in an open-face helmet, hovered in the air between us.

'Are you ready?' Vanhya asked him.

'Prepped at the base of the skyhook. Look, Vanhya, are you sure about this? Let me talk to Appie-'

'Appie's fine. The contract's yours. Enjoy.'

It had all happened so fast. I felt numb. 'Vanhya,' I said.

She looked up from her Sleeve, absorbed by the messages scrolling across the material.

'Vanhya, what will happen to the ship?'

'Daihid's going to chop through the spine at the rad-shield with remote drones, then push the engine pod into the sun.' She gave a theatrical shudder, 'Those fuzz-fizz engines are a radioactive nightmare.'

'It's fizz-fuzz. Anti-matter mediated fission/fusion hybrids. It wouldn't work the other way round.'

My pedantic answer earned me a long, patient look. 'Whatever. The rest get chopped up, there's seventeen fucktonnes of recyclables in the spaceframe.'

'What about the embryos?'

Vanhya became exasperated, 'Oh, come on, what embryos? Their technology couldn't protect against cell damage for all that time. After three centuries of cosmic rays all you'd get is freaks, monsters, and spontaneous terminations.'

I just flat didn't believe her, they'd never have set out without solving problems like that. Daihid's ship would take two hours to climb the skyhook, another few hours to reach *Mesopotamia*. There was nothing to lose, I opened a channel and broadcast unscripted spoken word. 'This is NorteChico colony calling *Mesopotamia*. Please acknowledge. You will be boarded in approximately five hours. Please advise if you are able to operate air locks. NorteChico calling *Mesopotamia*. Please respond. *Please respond.*'

Vanhya smirked at me, then returned to her Sleeve. I repeated the message. And again.

Out of the crackling ether came a weary voice: 'This is Penelope Tennyson, Captain of the *Mesopotamia*. Do not approach. Do not board. All attempts will be strenuously resisted.'

Vanhya's mouth hung open. 'Was that-?' She frowned, 'What does "strenuously" mean?'

They were alive! I jumped into the air, excited to bursting point. 'This proves what we always feared. Not only is their language archaic, so is their moral compass. Vanhya, you have to abort the salvage mission before *Mesopotamia* destroys it.'

Pale with tension, Vanhya issued the recall. 'What now?'

'I don't know. If we approach, they'll attack.' A cold chill ran across my back, thrilling, yet dreadful. The *Mesopotamia* Combine had fought three wars during construction. 'Who knows what weapons they've got? Death machines from the Age of Fear, bio-terror, nano-armies. Maybe they'll seed the atmosphere with trans-uranic isotopes, maybe they'll invade.'

Head in hands, Vanhya slumped down in her chair, 'I don't know what to do.'

'Surrender?'

Vanhya's pretty face was drawn with tension. 'What a nightmare. This is going to destroy Wilf's Rep.'

'That's all you can think of? Cast it wide, emergency vote, priority consensus.'

With trembling fingers Vanhya activated her Sleeve, 'I have to declare a global foobar. Me. Who'd have thought it?' Then she gave me a sly look, 'Wait, nobody else knows this yet. If we don't provoke this Tennyson, she won't attack.' She straightened her shoulders, 'For the common good, as a responsible citizen, I'm issuing a Hermetic Notice.'

'You can't-'

'Yes I can. I'm the project mentor.'

'It's too important-'

'Everyone's going to freak out, the whole colony. We'll have planet-wide panic, riots, deaths. This is all your fault, I'm giving you 24 hours to fix it. You should be grateful.'

'What do you mean, I have 24 hours? You're in this too.'

Vanhya's brow glistened with sweat, 'I'm not cut out for this sort of thing. I only wanted to help Wilf.' She collapsed back into her chair, her Sleeve chimed a short pentatonic tune and she jerked upright, 'I should be at Tai-Chi.'

The penny dropped. 'This is all happening because you want to date Wilf.'

Vanhya gave a miserable nod.

'Thanks to you Captain Tennyson is in shock, she's afraid and confused, lashing out like a cornered animal.'

Vanhya turned at the door, 'All right, so I'll resign. Happy now?'

No way was she getting off that easily. 'Then your H-notice expires and I'll tell everyone it was you.'

Vanhya's face twisted into a spiteful mask, 'You freak, you think you're so special.'

She tried to slam the door behind her, but the harder she pulled it the more the dampers resisted. She gave one final tug, and fell off her heel. Scowling furiously, Vanhya hobbled away.

Alone, I tried to think of what to do. Thanks to Vanhya's sexual infatuation, and the dreams of an ambitious sewerage systems engineer, the world was in crisis and its fate lay in my hands. And Vanhya said I was crazy to Delay for so long.

The transmission room felt oppressive, claustrophobic, thick with psychic bruises from Vanhya's self-pitying angst. I went out into the foyer, across the plaza to a pavement café. I tapped in an order for a Moccachino and almond croissant on the table, then patched my sleeve through to the space arrays and sent a tightbeam message to Tennyson:

'The boarding ship has been recalled.'

There was no reply. I gave it another minute then sent, 'What do you want to do?'

Despite her threats, I felt sorry for the *Mesopotamia's* captain, frightened and alone in a universe that had stopped making sense.

Tennyson's throaty voice came over the band, 'What's your name?'

'Apple Riquez. I'm a cultural anthropologist specialising in first contact.'

'Who's in charge down there, Riquez?'

'I am.'

'You represent the government?'

Her mindset was so primitive, her assumptions so backwards. How could we understand each other's worlds? I wondered if we'd ever be able to really communicate, a true meeting of minds.

'I'm working alone,' I said.

Tennyson said nothing. I'd begun to worry she'd broken contact, when she said, 'I want to come down.'

My heart was in my mouth. 'Of course.'

'Tell me where to land.'

'If I do that, everyone will know you're here.'

Again, that pause. 'This is still a secret?'

'You are, yes.'

'Who else is aware?'

'Um...'

'Nobody?'

'A couple of people. We're liberal techno-anarchists, decentralised and devolved, we-'

'You don't have a government,' Tennyson was incredulous. 'Nobody is in charge.'

The waiter brought me my coffee. 'One moment,' I said to Tennyson, impressed by her leap of reasoning.

'What's wrong?' Tennyson said. 'Who was that?'

'Just the waiter, I...'

'Where are you?' Tennyson demanded.

'Captain, I'm sending a shuttle to collect you. We'll meet at the base of the skyhook in a few hours.'

'Look, Riquez, I'm not the real captain.'

This was great, it was vital we established mutual trust. 'Thank you for your honesty. Can I speak with her?'

'No, you can't. He killed himself.'

~

It had to be her. Broad-shouldered, with brutally close-cropped brown hair, she wore a bacterial mask and a one-piece overall with a ridiculously small collar, no cuff straps, and what was really weird, no Sleeve.

She stepped out of one of the dozens of sky-hook paternosters and looked around, shoulders hunched, her eyes wide, an animal in the headlights.

'Captain Tennyson.' I held out my hand, she took it limply, then gripped hard, as if her life depended on it. I saw she was wearing latex gloves.

Daihid followed behind, diffident and silent.

We stood in the main concourse of the skyhook. Crowds of passengers for the big ships to the other colonies queued on the upward-bound sides of the paternosters. Tennyson's costume drew some odd looks, a few people splayed thumb and forefinger as they took pictures. I hoped they would assume she was a performer or a specialist technician.

'Over here.' I led them to a booth at the side of the concourse.

I'd had to involve Daihid, I didn't own a space yacht, and I couldn't fly one. Daihid was already in orbit, it seemed he was under Vanhya's thumb, and, I half suspected, some strange fascination with me.

For the first time I imagined these odd, emotional relationships as a web of obsession spread across the word, each thread tugging at the person on the other end, old threads falling

slack, new ones spun out, sometimes snapping or deliberately being cut. No wonder people got distracted and made mistakes. I

thought Delay would keep me out of the web and unattached. I was wrong, but it meant I could now pull on a few threads of my own.

'Daihid, you are wonderful,' I said. 'Thank you.'

Daihid was normally so cool, so poised, his black ringlets perfect. I swear he looked flustered.

'Appie-' Daihid swallowed, then blurted out, 'Vanhyta lied to me. I'd do anything for you.'

'Right now I need you to go back in orbit. Just in case there's another visitor.'

'Yes, Appie, isn't this amazing? I never realised, I mean-'

I pecked him on the cheek. 'Thanks, Daihid.'

Captain Tennyson stood at the door of the booth. I joined her, and we watched Daihid merge with the transit crowds, step onto one of the paternosters and rise up the skyhook. Tennyson's gaze followed the skyhook up into infinity, a quarter-mile wide carbon-fibre cable tapering to vanishing point. Her head tipped back, she staggered, I caught her elbow and led her to a chair, tapped the table for privacy, and the windows opaqued.

'You're traumatised by Cultural Overwhelm,' I told her. 'Don't forget to breathe.'

'Outside. The sky. It's been too long.' Tennyson shook her head like a bull, 'You're Apple Riguez?'

'Yes. Why the face-filter, are you unwell?'

'Alien bacteria.'

Of course. That was why she didn't want boarders. It was fear of contamination, not aggression.

'You can relax. We're inert to native microflora.'

'WTF.' Tennyson's shoulders sagged, she stripped off mask and gloves. She looked exhausted, her wide, expressive mouth a tight line, her brow tense with aggressive suspicion.

I wanted to hug her, to help her. It was why I was here. I reached out and she snatched her hand off the table.

'Captain, Penelope, let me help you. I've studied xeno-contact, intellectual dissonance. You need zen-therapy, regressive deprogramming, hemispheric normalisation-'

'How about a drink?' Tennyson growled.

'Alcohol? A good idea, I'll have one too.'

After two double whiskies Tennyson got her teeth unclenched. 'No government, huh? I suppose you fixed all the problems, a utopia without discontent or crime.'

'Less of it. Governments don't solve problems, they cause them.'

Bleakly, Tennyson stared down at the table, 'You said it, sister.'

Emotionally, I empathised. As a scientist, meeting her, seeing her reactions and behaviours was intriguing, fascinating, and more than a little exciting. 'You're angry because we survived.'

She rubbed her mouth, a gesture I was to learn often preceded transgressive speech. 'What the fuck are you doing here?'

'The colony of NorteChico was established-'

'No, no, no,' Tennyson shook her head like a punch-drunk boxer. 'We were the last, the only ones to get away. Earth was screwed, the atmosphere, the biome. Game over.' She waved her hand through the air, 'Game over.'

'We fixed it.'

She glared at me, 'Impossible.'

'Well, it happened. SPQR technology saved us. You'll have to get used to it. Sorry.'

'WTF,' Tennyson said again, and swigged from the bottle.

'What does that mean? Double your teeth.'

Whisky sprayed as Tennyson snorted laughter.

'Did I say it right?'

'Yeah. Spot on.' She gave a sour, distant smile, then dabbed at the whisky-pattered table with her finger. 'How do you open the damned windows?'

I showed her how it worked and the glass de-opaqued. Tennyson looked out across the concourse, through the doors at the tree-lined boulevards and plazas. She seemed to crumble, to shrink in on herself, our world, our civilisation, a crushing, agoraphobic weight.

'Listen, kid, no offence, but that's what you are. I want to talk to an adult.'

'I am an adult. I'm Delayed – postponed puberty. Lots of people do, it favours intellectual achievement when the mind is at its developmental peak.'

'Double your teeth, you still do that here? That was just EarthGov propaganda to keep the population down.'

I was surprised the technique was known so far back, but she was completely wrong. 'It's a well-established educational paradigm.'

Tennyson shook her head. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty seven.'

'Two centuries crawling through space and I end up with a freak grown up kid.'

That hurt. She was the reason I'd Delayed, but there was no way I was going to admit that now, I wanted to hurt her back. On the verge of mocking her for getting her own

journey time wrong, I remembered she'd have experienced significant time dilation. 'You're always saying unkind things.'

Tennyson gave me a sharp, bitter look. She inclined her head, 'Sorry, kid. It's me. I'm pissed at life. Seriously.'

I had to make allowances, it was her who needed handling gently, not me. 'That's OK.'

'Apple Riquez. Crazy name, crazy girl.'

'My parents chose my name.'

'What did you do it for? Why did you come here?' Tennyson's voice slurred, head in hands, she mumbled, 'Of all the planets, in all the systems, in all the Milky Way, everyone lands on mine.' She wiped her mouth and scowled at me, 'Why couldn't you sadistic bastards go somewhere else?'

It was an awesome experience to sit across the table from someone with no understanding of the modern era.

'We did. Listen, I'm sorry, and I understand reality has confronted you with undeniable and highly uncomfortable data. Synapse modulation can help long-term, but right now your id is paralysed by loss of self-esteem. Through no fault of your own, you've strayed from your life-journey's happy path into a zone of negative fulfilment.'

She looked up at me like she hadn't been listening. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, it's a crude metaphor, but in layman's terms, culture shock-'

Before I could move, Tennyson, grabbed my shirt and half-dragged me across the table. 'Not that jibber-jabber. You said you went somewhere else.'

'Yes,' I squawked. The table edge dug into my stomach, it was hard to breathe. 'So far, we've colonised every earth-normal planet in a sphere with a current radius of 57 light years around Sol.'

Tennyson mouth sagged open, the strength left her limbs. Released, I staggered back. Tennyson looked into nowhere, her skin a waxy grey. A brushed steel cylinder about the size of my thumb swung out of her neckline on a thong. She clenched it in her fist. For a moment I thought she was going to tear it off, instead, she gave a soft, sad, introspective smile, and tucked it back inside her top. 'Pooned,' was all she said.

At that moment I knew I had her. At lowest ebb, bereft of aggression, she was open and amenable to the extended hand of friendship. I'd trained for this all my life, our fluid conversation proved my studies of ancient dialect had not been wasted. The right phrase at the right time could cross cultures, reach out across time and space.

Now was such a time.

'All your base are belong to us,' I said.

That was how I got my broken nose.

By the time I'd recovered, Tennyson was gone.

~

The next time I saw Penelope Tennyson, she'd just been released from pending custody. A lot had happened in the two days since she'd punched me. Of course everyone now knew everything, in fact Tennyson and the *Mesopotamia* were a crazy, colony-wide sensation. Although I was *persona non grata* to half the population for my perceived meddling, through some strange alchemy, the other half treated me like I was freakishly cool.

Tennyson's pictures were everywhere. The shots of her fighting on the plaza had gone super viral. I watched them again and again, looking for clues.

It was the first time I saw her smile.

I'd also done more research. What I found gutted me to the core. Tennyson was right about Delay, there was no evidence, no science. I found the answers buried in archived records from the first days of the colony. Delay was a scam, a needs-must propaganda coup from Earth's bad old days. We'd bought into the lie and built it into our culture.

Yesterday I couldn't imagine ever showing my face in public. I ate ice cream, I took painkillers for my broken nose and played old, sad songs. That evening brought rain, a heavy, persistent drizzle. I listened to the music and stared out the window. In the morning came the invitation to join the dialectic intercourse on Tennyson's transgressions. And mine.

I thought things through and grew angry. I'd been a fool. We'd all been fooled. History had played us some cruel tricks. I disabled my implant and walked out, head high, determined to defend Tennyson and myself.

The vote was one of the biggest there had ever been. Ten to one, Tennyson was exonerated. By a whisker, I avoided censure and permanent allocation to corvée.

'Double your teeth, that looks painful,' Wilf studied my bruised and taped nose. 'Captain Tennyson, welcome to NorteChico. I hope I don't say anything to offend, but have you thought about your ship?'

'It's not my ship,'

'But- Oh, OK, I understand, a commonwealth possession of the crew.'

'There is no crew.'

'So it *is* your ship?'

Penelope Tennyson bared her teeth, 'Go away.'

'Yes, of course.' Wilf backed away hurriedly, his eyes on Tennyson's clenched fists.

Tennyson's eyes were on me. She studied my nose, then held out her hand, 'Sorry about that.' This time her grip was firm, her gaze frank and assured.

'Forget it. Somehow I needed it. A painful wake-up call.'

'Thanks. You're OK, kid.'

Vanhya still hung around, 'So Delay was a scam. That's quite funny.'

'Only if you're a sadist,' Tennyson said.

'Yes, absolutely. So, what will you do now, where will you stay? If you need somewhere-'

'No need,' I broke in, 'The Captain is staying with me.'

That night Penelope Tennyson told me what happened to the crew.

'We never expected to survive. We'd set out knowing we'd never see our families again, that within a few years we'd be the only humans alive. It was too much to bear. One by one, people gave up. After the captain's suicide we decided anyone who wanted could take the big sleep - permanent cryo-storage.'

I tried to imagine what it was like to be the last person on that vast ship. 'So you'd wake everyone up when you arrived, start the incubators, embed the embryos.'

'Once a decade we'd activate a hundred embryos. After the fifth run it was obvious none of them would survive the voyage. Our technology was flawed, there was no way we could compensate for cell damage.'

'The crew?'

'We had facilities for embryo storage, not bodies. Cryo was a one-way trip.' She looked right through me, 'It's a damned sight easier to pretend you're going to sleep than step out of an airlock. It's easier to watch, too.'

Tennyson knocked back her drink and pulled out the steel vial hanging around her neck. She held it up, between thumb and forefinger. 'This is the last of the failed embryos. Ashes and dust.'

'Where are the rest?'

'I launched them into your sun during the slingshot. A mass funeral, back to stardust, a second exodus. Take your pick.'

My own life fell into shocking perspective. Tennyson was more damaged than I could begin to imagine. She'd refused cryo-sleep, a euphemism for self-extinction, and clung on through sheer bloody-mindedness. Alone. Her vial contained nothing but dead dreams.

'That's all over and done, Penelope. There's a place for you here, a home. Please.'

'Thanks, kid,' she said, but her eyes were far away.

Tennyson tried to forget, but we wouldn't let her. She changed, but the colony was changing around her. Everything she needed to leave behind was foregrounded in a wave of retro-fashion and archaic vocabulary. It's hard to fit in when half the city has copied your hairstyle. Double your teeth.

By the end of the year I was almost out of Delay. The changes in my body had been rapid, dramatic, and, I have to admit, mainly enjoyable. 'Strenuous' was voted word of the year, 'Double Your Teeth' had spread from our colony into the interplanetary standard lexicon.

Daihid and I hung out a few times. It was OK. He spent most of his time in orbit, running sight-seeing tours around the ship. It was Wilf who made the effort to keep in contact. We'd sit around the table, drink whisky, and talk about anything. We talked, and Tennyson drank. She questioned Wilf about modern technology, he was keen to explain.

'These days you'd only need a little ship. With a 3D printer and a supply of rare earths and metals, you could make whatever you want on arrival.'

'What about energy? You'd still need the fizz-fuzz.'

'Every house in the city has a SPQR flip-flop, all the energy you need.'

'Spacetime Quantum Redux,' Tennyson said slowly. 'I'm still not sure-'

'We discovered reality is a closed-loop cascade of finite states, mediated by gravity – that's where all the dark matter was hiding, and the dark energy too. If you flip through all the states you flop back out with a load of potential. Encase a ship in the SPQR field and you can hold it in a realm where the speed of light is three times higher than normal.'

Tennyson screwed her eyes shut, 'If you say so.'

'Limitless energy, the discovery that saved Earth.' Wilf edged his chair round the table, 'Captain Tennyson, Penelope. About your ship.'

Tennyson rested her fists on the table. 'It's not my ship. I told you.'

When Wilf had gone, she poured herself another shot. 'I don't want to integrate.'

'What, then?' I said.

'I want to get the job done.'

'Penelope, I'll help if I can, but how can you? Perhaps a memorial? Closure.'

Tennyson poured neat whisky down her throat, 'What have you done with your life, Appie? What have you achieved?' She reached inside her shirt for the vial holding that last embryo. 'This is all I have. I can't rest, I can't sleep. When we launched, we swore we'd find a second home or die trying. Everyone else died, so it's down to me. I need to say I found another earth, that I stood there and kept my promise. Then, finally, I can lay this thing to rest.' She gave me a hollow-eyed look, raised her empty glass high into the air and slurred,

'It's not too late to seek a newer world...' She frowned, her memory uncertain, 'Not now that strength... To sail beyond the sunset, and all the western stars.'

'What's that?' I asked, intrigued by the echo of some ancient ceremony, but her head had dropped onto her folded arms and she was asleep.

I sat beside her for a while. I went outside and looked up at the night sky, the great band of galactic light across the heavens. In the middle of the night I woke, and wondered just exactly what I had achieved with my twenty-eight years.

In the morning I sent Daihid a message on my Sleeve.

'Appie,' Daihid's face was like a ray of light.

'Daihid, I need your help.'

He had that wary look that said 'No'. Then he sighed. 'What can I do?'

It took a while, but he made the arrangements. I knew it was right, yet when it was done, I felt unbelievably sad. Daihid brought over the contract, and when I told Tennyson what it was, she draped her arms round me and wept. After she signed it, the colony owned *Mesopotamia*, fifteen million tons of refined raw material, and she had a SPQR starship. It was petty, and it was personal, I was pleased Daihid had the Rep, not Wilf.

Tennyson was transformed, a new person, alive for the first time. The skyhook that had so cowed her on arrival became a second home as she familiarised herself with her new ship.

I never thought about where this was going. Of course I knew, I just never thought. Tennyson still drank, some days it made her boisterous, other times introspective. One evening we were sitting outside. Overhead, the station at the top of the skyhook shone silver as it caught the last of the sun. I realised Tennyson had been looking at me for some time.

'Come with me,' she said.

I didn't know what to say. It was too big, too sudden, I wanted to say yes, but I was scared. I said nothing, and that was answer enough.

Daihid took me up to see *Mesopotamia* in his space yacht. We swung around the vast, lead-grey habitation sphere, the surface scarred and pitted by its long journey, then out, high above our planet.

'It's beautiful,' I said.

'A big world. We've hardly explored,' Daihid said.

I looked back at the *Mesopotamia*. With a ship like that, you could go anywhere.

Daihid cleared his throat. 'I'm not Wilf. I wanted... I hoped, now you're through with Delay...'

I kept my mouth shut. I'd felt like I'd made enough mistakes.

'One world's enough for anyone, Appie,' Daihid clutched my hand, 'Share it with me.'

Tennyson slipped away to her ship at dawn. I woke, and she was long gone. On the table was a bottle of whisky and an empty glass. A single shot had been taken from the bottle, the cork firmly back in the neck. Held to the table by the bottle was a scrap of paper marked with coordinates for Kepler-22b in Cygnus – the far galactic west.

Time passes. With so many people coming out of Delay, there's going to be a population boom. Vanhya married Wilf, he's an important person now, supervisor of a dozen projects. The colony is thriving. Daihid goes out on his wilderness expeditions, a year, two years at a

time. When he comes back he stays with me. In between, I wouldn't say I was lonely, but I am alone. Everyone seems to have forgotten me again.

While Daihid explores our world, I've travelled to a dozen others. Away, I miss my home, when I return, the echo of travelling haunts me. Then I think of Penelope Tennyson and her long, long mission. That final question of hers.

What exactly have I achieved?

In my sixth decade, monopole wormholes were discovered. It's going to take a few years, but they promise near-instantaneous travel, anywhere in the galaxy. I wonder what Tennyson would do if she arrived at Kepler-22b and found it inhabited, how she'd cope with being leapfrogged by technology for a second time.

She'd laugh and curse, but I also think she might be expecting it. After all, she did tell me where she was going.

I think she'd cut a deal, trade on her name, her legend. She'd swap ships and engines, and push on. She'd set a course for Caldwell 12, twenty million light-years from home. Far beyond the western stars.

I could meet her at Kepler-22b. Catch her up. Find out if her offer was still open.

Either way, she'd appreciate a decent bottle of scotch, a familiar face to share it with.

That urge to roam. She left me with such a hungry heart.

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I was chatting with my son, Tom, and we got onto the pace of technological change. Long-term space flight seemed problematic to us, because once you've launched you're stuck with the technology you started with. 'Wouldn't it be funny,' Tom said, 'if you set off to colonise a planet and when you got there other people had already arrived.'

I started to write that humorous story, then tore it up and wrote this one instead.

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