

Iman

His name was Iman, but he did not know this. He had been alive in this particular body 35 years, 50 days, and 6 hours. He had no true knowledge of the passage of time, only that life seemed to have started this morning, when he awoke from a dreamless slumber six hours ago, at 6 a.m.

Iman's chambers were small but he knew nothing of cramped confinement. His clothing was bland, bright orange, and new, but he had no words for color or any knowledge of the newness of things. His chamber was a padded 12 x 12 cell with a comfortable bed, a private toilet, a shower, and a food dispenser. Somehow he knew how to use all of these things, but did not recall having ever used them before. The padded walls were mahogany in hue. The floor and ceiling a cool blue. The room felt oddly restrictive to Iman, but he did know why.

A side panel of the wall slid open and a table with a chair slid out, both bolted to the floor. He instinctively went to the food dispenser, removed his tray of the first meal he could recall of his life, sat down and began to eat it. It in fact had no taste, but he did not know this.

When he was done he stripped off his sleep wear, his thick hairless skin sliding easily out of the garments. He took a shower, washing his bald head and smooth white body without understand why he did it, just that he felt he must. The shower gave him strange comfort, and sadness at the same time.

Stepping out of the shower he got dressed and waited for the door to his chambers to open. He did not know how he knew someone would come, and was shocked when the door opened and a strange creature stood outside. Had Iman any access to a mirror, he would have known that this person looked similar to him, but differed in one fundamental way; he was not nearly indestructible and his skin was not perfect marble white like Iman's own.

Other differences would make themselves apparent as Iman worked deep within the Martian caves, helping to mine the expansive veins of Gold and Titanium found there. As the day wore on he realized there were two types of creatures here: his kind and their kind. Their kind were like the one that had escorted him from his chamber to the vacuum car travel tube that led to this mine. They were shorter, somewhat pushy, and dressed in nearly identical dark clothing. Their eyes did not glow in the dark, and they needed a portable artificial light source to see anything.

They forced Iman to work with a sort of mechanical handheld drill scoop and pick axe, even when he was very tired. They carried a rod that, when pointed at him, compelled him to obey their commands and rewarded his efforts with a renewed infusion of strength and clarity. Sometimes Iman would disobey just so they would point their rods at him. The rods were heavy and black and they looked dangerous. They even glowed a bit with black light in the dark. Otherwise, they were featureless and worrisome.

The creatures that had brought him here worked him very hard. Toward the end of the day fatigue began to set in, but it seemed to be mostly in his head, not in his body. Frequently, Iman had to rest. His muscles were fine but his vision blurred and he seemed to lose contact with his body more frequently if he worked too long without a rest period.

The creatures did not appear to mind that he rested, and Iman instinctually knew when to begin working again.

The creatures seemed to require many more breaths per minute to live. Iman breathed only once every thirty seconds or so, except when at full exertion. Then he breathed as much, and heavier, than the creatures did.

Iman had a sense that he was here for the purpose of mining, though it did not give him the same pleasure of taking a shower like this morning, or of eating his breakfast. Yet here he was.

The creatures uttered unintelligible sounds, and Iman knew it was a form of verbal communication, though he could not understand the meanings.

The mines were dark and low places. They smelled bad, that much Iman knew, and it was very cold. His kind communicated non-verbally, through body gestures. The work was simple enough, and the guidance of the creatures clear enough, that this was sufficient.

During his journey to this mine, in which he was chained to his seat, he and his escorts had traveled briefly on the surface of Mars in a vacuum car. The ride had been mesmerizing as Iman stared out the window. It felt like he had seen this before, but then it all felt new. Iman stared in wonder at the expansive horizon, red frozen desert, and beautiful sun still rising in its morning climb. Then the entrance to the next travel tube swallowed them up and they plunged to an unknown depth on their way to a destination which was still a mystery to Iman.

The creatures seemed to have a hard time staying in the mines for any length of time, and were constantly rotated out with new creatures. When the same set of creatures showed up again to relieve the other creatures, Iman instinctively knew it was time to quit working. He found it pleasurable to stop the hard labor.

Iman was seven times stronger than the strongest and meanest creature with a rod, though he was at least three feet shorter. Iman found the observance of the creatures while he was working somehow unpleasant and he even resented it. Why were they just standing there watching while I work? Eventually the next question came; why am I doing this?

This is when he would stop and receive a sampling of the rod. Then such thoughts seemed trivial and he could focus on the work at hand.

At the end of his 12 hour mining shift, Iman and the others like him were escorted to another set of vacuum cars. They crossed the surface of Mars again, this time beneath a startling darkness punctuated by a beautiful display of illuminated dots and a pale swath of cloud that ran from horizon to horizon. Then down into the subterranean travel tubes plunged the vacuum cars. During his ride through the tubes, with their lights flashing by at even intervals, Iman wondered if he would have to return to the mines again someday, and he wondered where this vacuum car was taking him. He was relieved when he stepped out into the rocky black and red corridors that wound their way to his chamber. His escort waved his black gloved hand over a panel in the polished rock wall beside the white door. The door descended into the floor, allowing them to pass into Iman's chamber.

“Shower, then go to sleep,” said the creature, clearly uninterested in Iman and anything to do with the chamber. How did this tall and dark skinned, brown-eyed creature

know about the shower? Even more interesting, how did he know that the creature had just asked him to take a shower?

While in the shower Iman began to realize that something was terribly wrong. This life was not normal, but he did not know why.

Still, Iman did as he was told. He put on his sleep wear, and climbed into bed. He went to sleep immediately as the creature tapped something on his wrist. Iman realized just before falling asleep that the creature was called a human, and he was called a Transplant.

“Iman is secure” said the guard out loud. His earpiece relaying the message to Martian Federal Prison Command. “The unit is performing nominally.”

“Roger that” came the response. “We see that the Man Proper is still in stasis. You worked him pretty hard today. Some synaptic slippage.”

“Yep,” snapped the guard tersely. “We call it fatigue. He got tired. So what? Anything else?”

“Out,” was the only response he got, which was fine with him.

The Man Proper, thought the guard as he left the padded chamber. He would never want to have his mind separated into an Android’s body for any reason.

He could not imagine what it must be like to inhabit a body so strong, but have no frame of reference for the experience, or any other for that matter, because the system re-set your memories every night.

It was more humane than 21st century prison. At least here Iman’s time was served out in days that always felt like the first day of being alive. The only horror of it would hit him when Iman’s body was revived. On that day, Iman would remember every day and the entire experience of being incarcerated, of performing forced hard labor, and of being allowed no visits by his family because his Android self did not require it nor have any knowledge of Family. Only a limited set of memories were allowed in an Android Transference, and most of those were subconscious learned memories like using a toilet, taking a shower, or getting dressed. Very limited language assets were allowed. On migration of his mind back into his waiting body, all the compartmentalized memories would be merged into a coherent timeline for him to feel the full punishment of his incarceration within the space of a few seconds.

The guard had been present at numerous revivals. The prisoner’s screams as they regained coherence were easily the eeriest sounds on Mars. Long, intense and painful. As mournful as the howling emptiness of a dust storm blowing through an ancient cave. Then nothing but whimpering for a few days while the prisoner’s mind pieced itself back together. After that, they were tame and kind as kittens for the rest of their lives. Not too bright though.

It was the humane thing to do. After all, what human being could possibly be taken out of society any other way without prison riots, disobedience and undue psychological stress that could cause an even worse person to leave the facility than walked into it? No, that was the 21st century way of doing things. Barbaric.