

Nature Preserve

Era: circa 1990

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The ship wasn't behaving the way it was supposed to - there was no doubt about it. It was shaking and Reeve knew its nervous system was firing haphazardly. The central computer had been warning him for over an hour that it was suffering from hydrogen deprivation. There wasn't enough interstellar dust in this part of space for it to ingest.

Hours before, Reeve had switched to the auxiliary hydrogen tanks and they too had run dry. If he left the vehicle without sustenance for too much longer, he'd have to depend on manual control. Even that was only a temporary solution. Eventually the drive mechanisms, the whole ship would stop functioning.

"Star charts, Markie," he said to the ship's computer. "I need you to down-load copies of the local star maps into my notebook."

He was on the edge of a nature preserve. He could tell that from the coloring in the star chart and also from the label, "Sinsone Park"... which meant there were strict ordinances against him going into the region.

Nature preserves were gene pools, spatial regions that were free to develop according to the dictates of nature, without interference from any of the Big Six. They were inspected periodically by scientists and were generally regarded as large-scale experiments. This particular one incorporated about thirty stars on the outer edge of the Parochial Arm.

How had he gotten into this mess? No one in their right mind would take a tailing ship between the spiralling arms of a galaxy. There wasn't enough space fuel. He knew that as well as any other pilot.

"You can't run forever." His mother's eyes were misty, clouded with a film as delicate as the fabric of the dress she wore. The rainbow colors of her complexion fluctuated with the emotion she poured into her warning. "You're looking for freedom and you're never going to find the kind that you're after. You want freedom so complete that it allows you to deny reality, to ignore the identity of the world you're dealing with. It doesn't exist. But you have to learn this for yourself. I know that nothing but reality can teach you. Not the law, not anything that chains you, and certainly not your mother."

He hovered over the atmosphere of the planet, inspecting the delicate colors of the land/water mixture below and realized that the variety probably indicated the existence of multi-celled organisms. He didn't have to land because he could get all the hydrogen he needed by skimming the atmosphere, yet he was enticed. This was a nature preserve, whose life had developed independently of everything he had ever experienced... What would the organisms be like?

"I don't love you."

"You never told me this before."

"Once I thought I loved you... before I knew you."

"And now that you know me, you don't love me?"

"How could I really love you? I didn't know that you would refuse to sit on the Council of the Politic. Or that you would leave me for months at a time without telling me where you were going... that you would love your books and your adventures more than me. You can't fulfil my needs."

"Please don't leave me."

"You're weeping. Yet what I do is best for both of us. You'll never be free to find your life if I hold you here."

"You're the only one who cares. Please tell me that you care. I need you to care."

"You don't need me Reeve. You need someone else... someone who thinks like you do."

He stood before the glob of jelly, watching it ooze around his foot. The organism was real. It could crawl and it could sense its environment, its membrane a spaceship hull suited to the atmosphere of the planet.

With tentative fingers, Reeve adjusted the helmet on his space suit. He had done an analysis of the atmosphere before he left the pod and had found that the gas pool had too little oxygen for his breathing comfort.

Around him, the foliage of rooted organisms shaded him from the central star that blazed in the sky. A scurrying puff-of-fur skimmed across his feet. He looked tentatively at the reddish soil, then sat on it, trying to forget himself in his new environment.

"They're machines, Reeve... very complicated machines."

Reeve fingered the fur of the small tara, felt the undulating warmth of its body as it laid beside him. "If a tara is a machine, then I'm a machine, too."

"Yes of course. You're a machine that's capable of loving and being loved, of making mental models of the universe, of becoming infected by other machines, of doing a hundred and one things, but still a machine."

Reeve looked at his teacher, a young man barely older than himself, a technocrat of superb skills. "And you're a machine too."

The young man closed his eyes, breathed heavily. "I'm a machine, too. We're all machines. That's why the Big Six stay out of the nature preserves. Leave nature alone and she'll make an array of machines in 500,000 years that would take our best scientists a billion."

"In a way that doesn't make sense," Reeve countered. "Why can't we do better than nature?"

"Sometimes there are so many possible outcomes, you can't predict which one will happen. Kind of like, you can't stuff all the thousands of genes of an organism and all the pieces of information about its environment into a mathematical equation and find out whether or not the result of the combination is a claradon. But you 'can' put the genes together and let nature figure out for itself what you get. It's a pre-determined result but you can't predict it."

"We'll be able to predict that stuff some day. We'll be able to make any kind of organism we want instantly."

"Maybe, but I'm not so sure. How do you predict the outcome of some series of events when you have to deal with thousands of pieces of input and a minor change in any one of the pieces can totally change the result? The only way of predicting what will happen is to live through the experience."

"So you figure the nature preserves are a good idea?"

"In my opinion they are. They're great big genetic labs... our gene pool."
"So you agree that our pilots should stay out of the nature preserves?"
"Why? Are you thinking about going in?"

There were two of them. The organisms were bi-pedal and taller than Reeve by a foot. Their limbs were bulkier and each had five digits attached to its upper limbs instead of the four that Reeve had. No suction cups on the digits either. As the organisms worked, they took turns making gurgling noises and often stopped to pay attention to one another. Eventually Reeve realized that they were communicating in much the same way as his species, but without benefit of an external speech box.

Reeve watched in fascination as the pair hauled pieces broken from some rooted organisms into a central clearing, and stacked them so they were shaped like a triangular surface of revolution.

Reeve noticed the opposable fifth digit that they used to grasp the machine parts. He almost fled when they fired the structure they had built.

The fire made him feel vulnerable, until he realized that the lower oxygen content of the atmosphere protected him from the dangers that fire represented at home.

"I'm a machine. I'm not morally responsible for what I do. Why can't you love me the way I am? You keep expecting me to change. But I have no free will."

"You are a machine, Reeve and you are not morally responsible for what you are. I agree. None the less, I have to treat you as though you are responsible."

"Why do you say that?"

"The actions of a machine are controlled by only two things. One is its identity and the other is its environment. I have no control over what you are, over your parts and the way they work but I can have an effect on you through the environment that you're exposed to. Your environment is my only means of control."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Even what you say is pre-determined. You are a machine, too. How can you decide things like that?"

"Maybe you're right Reeve; maybe it has been pre-determined that I should treat you as if you are morally responsible for your actions. But I don't care. I'm still going to treat you that way."

"I don't see why you would do that when I'm not to blame."

"I do it because I have to. It doesn't matter whether we have free will or not, Reeve. I still have to treat you as if you do. The only hope that you will function differently as a machine comes from the hope that I can influence you if I change your environment. The question of free will doesn't matter in the end, because whether we have it or not, I still have to treat you the same way."

"I thought you loved me."

"I did. I do. I don't know. You cause me so much pain that I can't take any more. You don't see the world except through your own eyes. If you go away again, I won't be waiting when you return. I intend to live for myself from now on. I'm only sorry I didn't decide this earlier."

Reeve turned on the universal translator. It flared its nostrils as it absorbed hydrogen and oxygen from the atmosphere, then it listened to the bi-pedal machines sitting by the fire. The translator deliberately cross-correlated their vocal noises with their actions. After two hours, the translator began to flash half-formed messages across its screen... preliminary results.

The organisms were discussing some flat finned pieces of flesh that they were burning over the fire. Eventually, they stuffed the flesh through a hole in their heads, then continued their utterances and gesticulations, undoubtedly communicating with one another.

It was only when the last rays of star-light shimmered off the metallic surface of Reeve's pod, that the two bi-pedal organisms spotted Reeve. He was pleased that they had noticed him... and his ship.

Intelligence intrigued him. He was getting tired of the tara and thought he'd like to return with a couple of new pets... new machines. The nature preserve was an ideal spot to capture one.

He held out a hand toward the organisms. They backed away...

Then one of the bi-pedals pointed a stick toward him. Reeve noticed the stick had a series of symbols written on it. Reeve reached toward the bi-pedals to accept the proffered object. Quite suddenly, the stick exploded.

Reeve broke...into a lot of pieces. He was dead... a discombobulated machine, too fractured for re-assembly.

As a result, true to the intent of the Big Six, the essence of the Nature Preserve was maintained, for Reeve could no longer capture the bi-pedals.

Was the whole thing pre-determined?

Was Reeve discombobulated by the stick or by these other machines... the bi-pedals of the blue planet?

Was this a murder mystery to be solved by the Nature Preserve Scientists... the guys who started the preserve off with the command, "Let there be light!"?

Do any of these questions matter?



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