

BY FAR AND AWAY

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ONE



ANOTHER ORBIT

THEY SAY when one is drowning there's a lot of struggling initially. Resistance. Then, gradually, the person gets worn down, the struggles cease. That's how Tyler felt. He was drowning.

For years now he'd lived in another time and place than he belonged. One of his favorite Sci-Fi shows, *Quantum Leap*, ended on an episode where time-traveling Sam Beckett, who just wanted to go home to his own time, was told by God he always could have gone home if only he'd chosen to.

At the start, Tyler imagined he, too, was here for a purpose. To right wrongs in this world or himself. But trying to get back home, to understand it, became exhausting, so he just stopped.

When had that happened? Year two? And here he lay, resisting the start of day one hundred of his tenth completed orbit around this world's primary star.

A chime sounded next to Tyler's head, pulling him from his thoughts. On Earth things like this could be ignored, silenced, or snoozed. Not so on Irizan, a world that functioned much like Earth but wasn't the same.

“Tyler-Zan,” a coolly modulated voice that reminded him somewhat of Scarlett Johansson addressed him. “Your sleep cycle is complete. You have forty-five minutes remaining to hydro-debride, garb, and ingest your morning sustenance ration before you must board the shuttle to the launch site.”

“Thank you, Irizan,” he muttered.

“Forty-four minutes, Tyler-Zan,” the planet-wide AI informed him. “This would be the second time in three revolutions you are delinquent in meeting your timeliness obligations.”

Tyler sat up from the sleep capsule and pushed off, staggering in the same groggy state he did every morning toward what amounted to a bathroom. Under his feet, the smooth underlit flooring was cool, but not cold. The room was perfectly modulated to a comfortable temperature. As he walked, the walls, which were formerly deep indigo hues, shifted to brighter shades of blue and settled on something akin to a noon sky as they emitted light for him to find his way.

Doors slid open on his approach, and though several yards away from it, the Irizan equivalent of a shower switched on and adjusted the water temperature in expectation of his arrival. If he were to stop now it would shut off until he started moving again and adjust temperature and start time to match his preferences. Early in his exile, he’d tested and probed the AIs precision and decision-making, being fascinated by it. Now it was just a daily annoyance.

In fairness, he, too, was probably much more interesting to the AI, before it quantified and tabulated everything that could be known about him. Even now as he reached the bathroom and approached the analog of a toilet, he resigned himself to the indignity that his urine would be analyzed for mineral composition and charted against his daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and lifetime trends. While he showered, a breakfast

tailored precisely to his biological needs would be prepared for him and waiting, warm, on a counter.

Stepping into the shower after removing his clothes and dropping them into the clothing renewal receptacle, he closed his eyes and let the warm water spray directly in his face. Every day was a struggle, but a launch day twice as much. Not the least of which, because he knew *she* would be waiting to speak with him. As she did every launch day.

“Warmer,” he instructed.

“Microcellular damage will occur at temperatures in excess of—”

“Warmer, please?” he tried. However, the AI had originally been designed, such overtures did impact its decisions, and its decisions frustratingly were effective law.

“Temperature increased three degrees Celsius.”

“Thank you.”

“Water shutoff will commence in 1.5 minutes.”

Clenching his jaw, Tyler added an ironical, “Thanks.”

True to its word, precise to the nanosecond, the water shut off. A microfiber towel was dispensed to him, which he utilized and placed in the clothing renewal receptacle. On Earth he would’ve brushed his teeth, but on Irizan the food already contained necessary molecules to keep his teeth a perpetual ivory shade. Not unlike treats he had given his black lab, Geist.

He tried not to think much about her anymore. Not after he realized that even accounting for Irizan’s shorter solar years he’d been in this world for a decade now. Geist, about six when he was transported here, was likely dead. With the pandemic and general instability of Earth, maybe the whole planet was gone at this point and he was the last human left. Just very, very far from where he belonged.

“Thirty-eight minutes, remaining. Increase your pace to meet your timeliness obligation.”

Tyler slipped on a polymer outfit that was deep black with teal highlights. It wasn't form fitting but also wasn't good T-shirt and pair of jeans comfortable. Addressing the AI in an airy tone he said, "Timeliness modulates discord."

"Parodying Kayli-Zan's accurate recitation of this crucial maxim is inappropriate," Irizan informed him. "Disdain for your life mate does not inculcate harmony nor improve biological longevity."

Slipping on his final article of clothing, a teal jumpsuit of sorts that marked him as a member of the miner's class, Tyler slipped in a dig. "You know you always side with her."

"She is Zan. Her rhythms and comprehension of optimized civilization are more expansive than your own." There was a note of reproof in the AI's familiar recitation of why Tyler was wrong in literally every disagreement he'd ever had with one of the planet's people.

Tyler took a moment to look into the reflective panel on the wall. His hair was already drying, kept short and darker here than it had been on Earth. His face was clean shaven though he had formerly gone to lengths to maintain a steady level of intentional dishevelment and scruffiness in his appearance. He lost the fight on growing a beard early on. Only elites among the Zan were permitted facial hair. Or any control over their appearance. The AI had optimized every facet of life, including ensuring that pre-selected couples would match their partner's preferences in appearance. Kayli-Zan liked him to look what he thought would have been termed "preppy" on Earth.

"Might as well get this over with," he told himself.

"Thirty-five minutes to complete tasks."

All that time dreaming of what it would be like to have a smart home on Earth seemed silly right this moment. "You're a peach," he informed Irizan.

"Peach?" the AI repeated, analyzing the Earth word that

he'd let slip into his now fluent Kaizan, the predominant language of Irizan. Every so often he would use English words that the AI would note and try to perform a philological analysis on.

"No direct matches to this idiomatic phrasing exist. There is the pejorative, 'You're a *ponzo*.' Or the superlative, 'You're a *sheniri*.' Which best represents the meaning of this idiom?"

Having been on the receiving end of the former numerous times and the latter at least once, Tyler smirked. Maybe this day would be better than he expected. "Neither."

"Explain the meaning of peach."

"It's a stone fruit from my home world," Tyler explained, relishing the chance to have one over on the AI. "It means something akin to, 'You're swell.'" He made sure to toss in the English word swell, knowing it would further fluster Irizan.

"The meaning of this word, 'swell,' is also unknown. Analysis of facial expression and tone implies it connotes a superlative. Lexical entries for 'swell' and 'peach' added. Additional analysis determines the use of sarcasm. Critical or congenial?"

Nope not a great day.

"Congenial," Tyler said, amusement fading from his voice. Irizan tolerated a little roasting, but as the arbiter of law and order for the entire planet, flagrant disrespect landed one in reformatory therapy. Something Tyler had twice endured and only just come away with his sanity each time.

"Assessment: Congenial. Proceed with your preparations. You have twenty-seven minutes remaining. Alerting supervisors to probable delay."

Ugh. Definitely not a good day.

"Thank you," he said and hurried to the kitchen. As soon as he crossed the threshold into room, he saw her.