

A New Frontier

“We’re clear!”

The voice came echoing up through the chamber like the very soul of the mountain speaking out across the millennia—that is, thought Reid, if the voice of the mountain had a long, careening Appalachian draw. There was a scurrying response to the announcement as the small group of railway workers shuffled back towards the tunnel’s entrance. They were soon joined by owner of the voice, Astor, as he emerged from the dark of the tunnel at a light jog, lighter in hand. “Ignition in 3, 2...1!”

Boom!

The nitroglycerine went off in a blast that shook Reid to his bones. Smoke rose up from the tunnel and poured out over the barren slope of Mt. Pavonis, spilling down her sides like a slow-motion waterfall. They had been at it up at the summit for the better part of the month, though it seemed like some days they made no discernable progress through the orange-grey rock. That had changed with the shipment of blasting supplies that had come in from Omaha earlier in the week.

“Wait for it to clear before we set the next line!”

Reid stopped to take a drink from his canteen and remove himself from the path of evacuating smoke. His throat was parched, as the air was thin up here, and far dryer than he was used to. He strode carefully out towards the light gaping at the maw of the tunnel, raising his hand up to shield his eyes. The sun was alien, seeming simultaneously overbright and far too distant. It shone with a cold yellow glow, but it was of course still the same sun he had known

from before, the same sun that he had grown up under back home. It did little to make the view from the summit any more welcome.

The red earth surrounded them far below the grey of the mountain peaks, specked by only the most resilient and hardy of vegetation. It was a far cry from the lush, green foliage of his home. Reid spun to look back into the tunnel, admiring the progress they had made in just a few months. They were *his* few months – after all, he had only joined the rail crew earlier that summer. With any luck, they would get through the rock, over the summit, and back down towards the valley before the return of the harsh, desolate winter. He hoped.

“Alright,” called Astor, “group up and get in there to clear the rubble!” The man himself emerged from behind the cloud of white smoke, his face covered in a light dusting of the red earth.

Reid took one last glance at the cold sky before heading back into the tunnel. He and the others on the blasting team strode into the cool shadows, grabbing their axes and tools as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. They took their spots at the dead end of the tunnel, where freshly fallen boulders lay strewn about the blast site. Dust and smoke still hung in the air, obscuring Reid’s view of the newly formed indent, but it soon trickled out the mouth of the cavern and was washed away quickly by the summit wind.

The crew’s cart sat back near the entrance, ready to be filled with fresh pile of refuse and stone. Axes in hand, they set to work carving a small passage through the summit of that great mountain.

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There was little in the way of shade up at the summit, and no foliage to speak of. The noon time sun was relentless, and so the blasting crew had gathered tight within the shadow of a rocky outcrop for lunch. Down the summit line, other groups of workers took refuge in a similar manner.

Reid settled in against the red-grey stone and pulled his lunch out of the rucksack he had brought with him for the day. The tin held his usual: cured ham and not-quite-swiss on tough sourdough bread, spiced jerky, and whatever local produce – usually a tough and nearly inedible root vegetable – they had managed to scrounge up at the camp site.

The other men had settled in with their nearly identical lunches and canteens. A muscular fellow with hair so dark it was almost black had taken the spot next to Reid. Notably, his lunch seemed to show a variety that was almost unheard of at the camp. Reid felt himself staring despite himself at the rice, watercress, and fresh vegetables that were piled within the man's lunch tin.

“Where did you get that?” asked a voice, pointedly. It was Astor, leaning in to look at the man's lunch.

“Xin, thanks for asking,” the man said sarcastically, raising a sparse eyebrow as he extended one hand towards Astor. The other man blushed and shook Xin's hand sheepishly.

“I just came in from the city,” Xin continued. “And this,” he poked around at the vegetables in his tin with his calloused hand, “came out with me.”

“Forgive my friend,” one of the route planners said, elbowing Astor in the side. “He was just hoping they'd send his wife out in the next shipment.” This joke instigated a round of snickering from the group. “I'm Yuanchao,” he said, shaking Xin's outstretched hand.

“Great to meet you.”

“Name’s Astor.” The crew leader said, still blushing from the group’s teasing. He cleared his throat, and nodded his head toward Xin’s bounty of vegetables. “More of where that came from back at camp?”

“Absolutely,” Xin said, grinning. “No wife though, as far as I could see. Just a few more miserable saps looking to grab a bit of land.” He pointed to himself in jest, and then looked over to his side, towards where Reid was eating in silent observation. “And who are you?”

“Reid.”

“What brings you out here, Reid? You also got a wife back at Omaha? Family hoping to settle down?”

“Nope,” Reid said pleasantly. “Just me.”

“Must have a story,” Xin pressed on.

He gave a noncommittal shrug. “Not really any different than anyone else here.” Comfortable with both himself and the extended silence, Reid took another bite from his sandwich and chewed it slowly.

“He don’t talk much,” Astor added, by way of explanation.

“How about yourself?” Yuanchao asked, his words a stark formality against Astor’s drawling lilt.

Xin chewed a watercress thoughtfully. “Me? I’m gonna start a venture out here. Just had to take this job to pay my way until I got settled.”

“What kind of business venture?”

Reid leaned in now, intrigued to hear Xin’s answer. The newcomer had a sort of mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I’m a botanist, by study,” Xin explained. “I wanted to get a closer look at the soil here so I could figure out how to turn a profit with the right crop. I may

have taken this gig for money, but it's a great way to get up and personal with the soil." He flashed a wry smile.

"Plenty of dirt back home," said Astor. "Didn't have to come out here for that."

"Not all dirt's the same. Particularly when it's been through millennia of human abuse."

Astor snorted. "That's what we do best, I guess. The human race, royally screwing every land we touch." His words were said good-naturedly, in jest, though it brought on a round of nodding from the other men in the group. Astor went back to picking at his lunch.

Reid thought about this a moment. "Not all of us. Just the ones who see it as a business venture." Realizing the phrasing of his statement, Reid blushed – he hadn't meant for the words to sound confrontational, and his expression must have shown that, as Xin gave a hearty laugh.

"Oh, this isn't business," he grabbed a handful of the red dirt and let it fall back down to breeze. "this is potential. Human habit is where the business lies."

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"Hell on Wheels," they were calling it – Reid wasn't sure exactly why, but it seemed fitting, nonetheless. He assumed there was some sort of historical significance. A distant part of his brain recalled a line from the Divine Comedy: *Abandon hope, all ye who enter here*. That sounded about right.

The tents rose in crooked alleys across the landscape like a military encampment, albeit with far less structure. The structures were both elaborate and hastily built; the canvas showed wear from many long months of exposure to the harsh wind and the rust-colored soil, as did the people. They were scattered throughout the tents – some were buskers and actors, performing

improv comedy on a makeshift stage, while others hoped to scratch out a living selling rare goods and contraband to the railway workers. Further down there were a few more established buildings, some of which had seized the chance to fashion themselves into gambling dens or brothels under the vague, undefined laws of this land. They intrigued Reid not for their purpose, but for what story they told; somehow, time after time, society sprang up around these very pillars, around buildings built for sin, for pleasure, for humanity laid bare. It was, as Reid thought of it, the natural progression of civilization. And so it was only natural that it would begin again here in the barren wastelands of a dry desert nowhere, fueled by the dream of one day becoming a real somewhere.

Reid strode through the shabby blocks, admiring the strings of lanterns and distant music that echoed out from one of the bars. Intrigued, he stepped up over the building's threshold and in through the saloon doors. The bar was moderately crowded, though most patrons were from other rail-laying groups that Reid didn't usually interact with.

The bar was staffed by two women who were roaming back and forth across its length, restacking glasses and polishing others with rags that might once have been clean. Reid approached the bar slowly and took a seat at the corner near the back of the establishment. He missed civilization, *real* civilization, but this wasn't a half-bad attempt.

The bartender closest to him was tall, and dressed in a long clay-colored slip skirt and partially undone blouse that highlighted her prominent collarbones. Her black hair fell straight down to her mid back, and was pinned half-up with a tortoiseshell clip. As Reid sat, she didn't spare him a second glance, though she did quickly wipe down the nearby counter space. "What can I fix you for?"

"I'll just have some bourbon, neat."

“Alrighty.” Her voice had a forced flippancy to it, Reid thought. It was as though she was determined to sound like the kind of woman who would work at a place this, but her real voice was always there, peaking through the cracks.

The woman looked at him sideways as she reached for a bottle. “What’s your name?”

“Lieutenant Dobson, ma’am.”

A smile played at the corner of her lips. “I asked for your name, not your title.”

Reid mentally kicked himself. “Sorry ma’am, old habits. You can call me Reid.” He stuck out his arm awkwardly.

“Nice to meet you, Reid. Name’s Gemma Lee. What brings you out here?”

Reid wasn’t sure if Gemma was referring to the encampment on that particular night or the railroad job out here in the middle of no-man’s country. He decided that she probably meant the former. “Just looking for quiet company right now, is all.” It wasn’t a lie.

Gemma placed his drink down on the counter and stood back. “No, I knew that – that’s why anyone ever comes by here. If you wanted something different out of your night, you would have gone down to other end of camp. I was wondering why an ex-soldier like yourself would end up all the way out here.” There was a pause, and she added, “You could’ve had an easy life back home.”

Reid wasn’t sure that was quite true. Wasn’t a lot easy about life after war. He picked up his drink and swirled the liquid around, watching the light turn amber in its depths.

“Well, I guess I’m an opportunist,” Reid began slowly. “That’s what my ‘pa always said. Not much of it back home. Not trying to start a business, though,” he said quickly when he saw Gemma’s face. She blinked, apparently taking his word for it. “I’m just here, trying different lives. First I came out to Omaha, and then when I saw the posting, thought I’d give it a shot.

Didn't know anything about track laying, but I knew a bit about cartography, from my service days. Figured land is land, even out here."

Gemma's dark eyes were difficult to read. She placed her elbows on the bar table and leaned over, holding her chin in one of her hands. "What made you choose Omaha in the first place? Not much there, if I'm being honest."

Reid took a sip from his drink and made a face. It never tasted right out here; always a tad too watery, as though it had been rehydrated and cut with too much liquid to make it last. "That's exactly it, ainit? When there's nothing, there's potential for everything. 'cept when we bring our baggage with us." He thought about Xin's earlier words as they echoed through his own voice. He had never described it that way before, but he had found the man's talk of potential to be infectious.

The woman raised a slim eyebrow. "You trying to homestead out here?" a wry smile played at her lips, though the sarcasm in her voice was apparent, teasing. "Star a family instead of a business? Find a nice wife and settle down?"

"No, ma'am. 'Fraid I don't swing that way. After the war, I came back home, and it seemed like those promises of a new home were starting to amount to something. Didn't have a lot tying me down there, so that's all it took to make me leave. Potential. Sayin' yes, when given the opportunity."

Gemma snorted. "Those bastards started making promises long before you and I were born, and I'm not sure they ever meant well."

"But ain't that why you're here?" Reid cocked his head. He was truly curious. "Their promise of that new life? Gotta start somewhere, even if it's a place like this."

The bartender adjusted her weight as she leaned over the counter. “I ain’t *here* because of their promises, that’s for sure.” She gestured to the dirty bar. “Comparing *this* establishment to what those men dreamed up, here among the stars, a better life for all – now that’s a bold claim. Downright laughable, if you ask me.”

Reid gave a shrug. “We all gotta start somewhere.”

Gemma was quiet for a few moments. She bought herself time by scrubbing lightly at a mark on the wooden bar top. “Well, that ain’t it for me, chief. Besides, I don’t believe those men ever stopped to think who they wanted in their ‘better life’—and if they did, it sure as hell wasn’t me or mine.”

Reid nodded. He’d heard similar sentiment before, and he probably agreed, the more he thought about it. It wasn’t the promise of men that had brought him out there, anyway – just the idea of opportunity. “So,” Reid started in a rare show of social initiative. “if you weren’t chasing a specific frontier dream, or carried here on the wind like myself, then why’d you make the journey out?”

Gemma was silent for a few moments more. “I’m from Taiwan originally,” before Reid could stop her, she continued with a calloused voice, “Turns out, when your country is one of the dozens now made uninhabitable...well, the geopolitics get *messy*. Kinda like war does. And while you, Lieutenant Dobson, had the luxury of choice, I got sent out here. The republic replaced my citizen passport with a one-way ticket.”

Reid swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, ma’am, didn’t mean to be insensitive – ”

But Gemma shrugged, and strode over to the corner of the bar, grabbing another stack of cups to wipe dry. “You didn’t know.” It was a simple statement, said like that.

Reid nodded and took another sip of his drink. The taste was bitter, but not unpleasant. He felt like he was suddenly sitting on pins and needles, but was unsure of how to restart the conversation.

“S not all bad,” Gemma said quietly. “The pay isn’t terrible out here, even in contract. And if I save up some, get a nice piece of land at the end of all this...well, if nothing else, it’s nice to breathe fresh air again. But I do miss the ocean.”

Reid furrowed his eyebrows. He had never really thought about the lack of water on the continent. “Hm. Why haven’t they started on that? Seems like it would help speed up the climate stabilization.”

Gemma shrugged. “Terraforming ain’t the cheapest endeavor. Can’t really make a business venture out of it. Doesn’t go far without the government dollar – that was the whole reasoning behind the ’62 charter, as far as I understood.”

“You can when no one has any other options.” Reid said quietly, taking another small sip from his drink. It seemed like that was Xin’s plan, after all.

“Fair enough,” Gemma raised a glass and poured her own drink. “I guess easier to start over than to fix the old mess. Turns out it’s not all created equal, after all.” Reid looked at her, but Gemma was smiling. “Cheers to the next frontier.”

Reid raised his glass to that.

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The next day, Reid’s team returned to the summit tunnel to continue their dig. With the addition of the new explosives alongside a few new team members, the group had made good

work; at the current rate, they would be through to the other side within the summer. They had soared past their previous pace of mere inches per day and were now making progress on the scale of full yards.

The first round of nitro was set to go off before the sun had fully cleared the mountain peaks. Reid and Astor worked together deep within the cave, making sure to place each hole they drilled equidistantly across the site. Small clouds of dust flew up as they worked, but they didn't need to drill for long – shorter insets would suffice for the nitroglycerine's blasts.

Soon it came time to place the rods. The crew – really just Astor and Reid, on duty for drilling that day – carried the supplies down towards their freshly made pockets and set it down at the center of the wall with care.

“I wish we didn't have to handle this stuff,” Reid found himself muttering. He stared with hesitation at the explosives, making a mental count of how many he would need.

“Yeah, well, it's the only thing they can make in-situ,” Astor replied. He spoke sleepily, in that easy-going way of his. The man was never fussed about things out of his control, though Reid knew better than to mistake his manner of speaking for his attitude about the work. “I think twelve on each side should be plenty.”

Reid nodded. Astor finished his work and stepped back from the wall, clapping his hands together as he did so. Turning to Reid, he asked, “shall we?”

Reid nodded again, but swallowed hard. He never liked this part. With abundant caution, he stooped down with his lighter and ignited the fuse that connected their string of nitroglycerine rods. There was a click, and ignition –

Stumbling backward, Reid suddenly felt Astor's hand on his back, steadying him. He turned on his heels, and the two men ran back together towards the mouth of the cavern. Reid felt

his heart pounding in his ears in time with his footsteps, left, right, left, right. But he kept his expression straight, intentionally trying to appear calm so that the rest of the crew wouldn't tease him for his nerves.

The two men emerged into the harsh sunlight. Stepping to the side of the entrance, Reid took a large breath, feeling his heart slow and relax into the daylight mountaintop. The other workers looked curiously into the depths of the cavern, waiting for –

Boom!

The blast went off, shaking them all to their bones and rattling their teeth. The familiar cloud of dust flowed slowly out of the tunnel, trickling up and away into the grey sky.

Astor removed his hands from his ears and turned to face the crew. “You know the drill,” he called, “Everyone start hauling rocks into the cart. If anything's too big we'll tie it up and grab the horses to haul it out. Use your picks to get the loose rock out of the wall in case –”

There was a sudden rumbling as a huge stone dislodged from high above the mouth of the cavern. There was a moment, then, that existed only in hindsight: a catch, a fear, a breathless static in the mind preventing any and all action. Reid felt as though his heart had dropped out of his chest, as if all of the air had suddenly evacuated itself from the summit. Xin gave a shout, and the whole crew stumbled backward as the red boulder came plummeting through the air like a comet. It hit the ground with a tremendous impact, exploding outward into a dozen fragments, throwing dust into the air in a small cloud. The resounding crash echoed through the mountains and rang painfully through Reid's ears.

It was replaced by a screaming, hollow silence.

When the dust settled, it revealed Astor's body, lying strangely relaxed, prone against the rocky floor, as though he were about to awaken from a pleasant afternoon nap. Blood slowly ran

from lacerations across his skin and fell from a wound on his head, unspurred by any heartbeat. His expression was one of mild concern and fear.

The silence filled the space where the man used to be, and it was deafening.

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Reid wasn't sure why he was drawn back to the hellish blockade of bars, saloons, and gambling dens. He supposed he had wanted to walk, had hoped to leave the oppressive silence of the barracks for a more welcoming atmosphere. But really, he just wanted a drink.

The afternoon had passed in an icy blur of action and logistics. First, remove the body. Take it back down the mountain in the rail cart to the med tent. Reid and his crew had waited outside the tent in a solemn silence until it was confirmed, to the surprise of no one. There was nothing to be done. It was a quick death. Painless, even. The crew had nodded along together in sync, as one mind unsure of direction or independent action. No one dared say anything, for fear of breaking the seal of emotions that hung through the thin air. Some people whispered to themselves, saying quiet prayers or their own secular cries of shock. Yuanchao paced feverishly through the encampment, his hands on the back of his head, his eyes glistening as he focused on the sky above.

The director of the site had come by to say a few words, once she had been told what happened. Reid barely registered the words even as the woman was speaking. Someone else spoke about arrangements, about a service, about notifying next-of-kin. Reid floated through these formalities as they swirled and occurred around him.

But in his mind, he couldn't escape Astor's smile, the ease of his walk. The gentle way their crew leader had directed all of the men on that mountain top. His mind was filled with Astor's voice at mealtimes, at late night conversations by firelight at the barracks. They hadn't been close friends, but once you live and work alongside another fellow for months, it was impossible not to share a bond.

And the dynamics of the crew were already changing, as though some celestial body had been knocked from orbit. There was a hole in their ranks when they stood, waiting for plans and direction, for resolution. There was an emptiness among them as they walked back to their barracks, in a scattered formation, silent and solemn. And then there was the void of Astor's bed. Tidy, made up. His belongings organized neatly to the side of the bed. The photograph of his wife seemed to be held under a spotlight on its shelf above his bed. Reid forced himself to look away. But it was there, a steady pressure at the edge of his awareness. The growing tension in the silence of the room. The screaming, gnawing emptiness, the marked lack of words.

And so, Reid left.

He found Gemma once again in the bar by the corner. She was dressed differently than before, wearing trousers and a loose-fitting men's shirt. She waved noncommittally as Reid entered the room, but her expression darkened when she saw his face. The other bartender shot her a meaningful glance.

She didn't say anything right away. Reid sat slowly down in the same seat as his previous visit and swallowed hard. The dim lights of the bar pressed in on him from all around. He barely felt the wood beneath his arms, which he crossed over the bar. "I'll have the same as last time," Reid's words were nearly a whisper, his voice unused for so many hours.

Gemma gently poured his whiskey straight. “I heard about the accident at the summit today,” she said matter-of-factly. “Want to talk about it?”

Reid took his glass and cradled it in his grip but did not drink. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He didn’t dare glance up, for fear of having to meet Gemma’s gaze. But she didn’t try to catch his eye. She simply folded her arms and leaned up against the bar.

“First time?”

“Yes.” Reid took a long breath. “Well, no. I lost friends before, and family. Lost people in the war. But not out here.”

“It’s different,” Gemma stated, with the slightest nod of her head. “It always feels different. But people die on this new world just the same as on the old,” Gemma said. “Same type of people, too.”

Reid felt something rising in him, an anxious swirl of emotion that wanted to lash out. “But why? Why not change it? I thought...” The words left him, as they so often did. “I thought by joining in, that I’d witness some version of progress realized out here. I thought Xin was right. That maybe it would make a difference. But we just go ‘round and ‘round, we reinvent ourselves to be the same at every opportunity. He...Astor was only out *here* for his wife. The fractional gravity. It really helps some people. That and the clear air, however thin it is. He wanted to make his own way, get some land, have enough to live on. Take care of her. You’d think that by now...” he took a breath. “We made it all the way out here. And there’s still people who don’t have the choice.”

Reid let the silence fall, thick and dense with the uncertain question of disconnected grief. “What kind of new world is it that ain’t any different than the old? What does it say about us, that we can’t be better each time, we can’t learn to take care of *us*?”

Gemma was silent. She didn't move, didn't reach for a glass to clean. Her lips curved in the faintest expression of thoughtful agreement. "There are some things you can't leave."

Reid sat back and let the new reality wash over him. The strange sort of tilt that the world took, following the death of someone you knew, before you had accepted that they were gone. The cosmetic information, the simple and pure facts about Astor's life fluttered through his mind as Reid grasped for them, trying to piece them together into some sort of narrative, something that matched the type of loss he had known before, during the war. Back when there was someone to blame. But there wasn't one now, not really. And Reid didn't even know what the man's wife had looked like. He had never met her, and wouldn't dare look at that photograph. Not now. He didn't know her address. He wouldn't write to her, because he couldn't.

He sat back in his chair, blinking away mist that begun to crowd his eyes. "All for a few feet of progress each day. For someone else." The words were so quiet they were nearly a whisper. Reid leaned forward and stared into his untouched drink.

And Gemma Lee let him sit there in the silence. Not drinking, not crying. Just sitting in the silence and the sorrow.

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He went back to the barracks that night, under the floodlights of the camp and the thousand twinkling stars. Reid was sore, and tired, and ready for a night's rest – so he could be ready to do it all again the next day. And the next. And the next, until they met the other railway line at the through point and linked those great cities. Before, Reid had rather liked the idea of being part of that kind of history. But part of him now wondered, distantly, if this would be

worth it. If these lives, these individual lights going out, deaths wrought from the ambition of men they hadn't met – if all of that would be truly worth it in the end.

Before turning in, Reid stopped under the door to the barracks and peered back out at the darkness, marveling its depth. In the distance, the few organisms that had become native to that tough land chirped and croaked amidst plants toughened by a bleak and cold sun. He stared at the mountains, at the stark ridges of the canyons winding around ancient craters and riverbeds. Shrubs dotted the landscape, but there were still no trees here. It was alien and beautiful in its severity. Reid felt a pang of longing and sadness echo through his chest, thinking of those he had lost, and the versions of worlds they had all lost.

“You just don't get this kind of view back home.”

Reid turned to find the speaker. It was Xin. The other man emerged from the barracks, one hand held up to block the floodlight glare as he peered out over the rolling mountains beyond the railway encampment.

“Sure don't,” Reid replied, his voice hollow. “Not anymore, anyway.”

“Do you want to get out of the lights?” Xin asked, coming over to stand near Reid. “It hasn't been this clear for a long while. The dust has probably settled enough to *really* see some stars.”

Reid hesitated. He was tired, and not sure he could stand too much company. But there was something about the way that Xin asked the question that was gentle; it was an offering of camaraderie, the promise of vigil in the silence of the night. Reid nodded, and the two men set off towards the nearby hill.

It wasn't a long walk. They reached the rocky slope as the encampment fell away to a deep silhouette behind them. Reid strode over to the edge, and sat, dangling his legs over the

rocky crest. Xin joined him quietly, and the two men gazed up at the night. Here, beyond the lights of that small piece of civilization, the stars above revealed themselves: a vast web of lights, twinkling and dancing, their glow reverberating through the thin atmosphere as they blazed a billion lightyears away. And there, beyond the larger glows of Deimos and Phobos, Reid saw what he was looking for.

Earth.

There, in the distance. That fragile globe sat suspended in the endless darkness. Reid thought it looked small. Comprehensible, in a way that it shouldn't have been. He looked towards the stars that dotted that great black expanse around his home, and he let himself feel sorrow. Xin sat beside him in the silence.

And suddenly, Reid knew what he wanted to say. "When I first got here," he began, slowly, "I had terrible vertigo. Felt like I was spinning, constantly."

Xin laughed. It was an alien sound, but it broke something in the air. It was good. "You're tellin' me. I was puking my guts out for nearly two days before I got sent out here. I thought LEO made me wobbly, but that six-month transfer..." the man gave a long whistle. "And we were on the fast route."

Reid returned the man's smile. "It was more than just the gravity sickness. Though can't say I enjoyed that, either. It was more like...how do you say it? Existential? I had spent my whole life on that dying rock. You can never really see it all at once, never appreciate just how precarious it is. And I fought for it – or at least, helped fight for some parts of it, for some government that might have had their reasons, even if they were never clear to me. But I think we lose a little bit of ourselves out here, away from home."

Xin nodded. "I guess that's the thing about a frontier. It sounds great in theory."

Reid snorted. “They thought so, at least – those assholes who pushed for this – for colonizing this barren land, instead of trying to fix the mess we were making.”

“Do you really think that?” Xin asked suddenly. He looked troubled; his usual jovial expression was turned down, marked by worry and sorrow from the day’s events. “I always thought they had the right idea. I thought they were optimists, dreamers. I really do think we can build something better here. Something right. I think so, and I think Astor did, too.”

Xin’s final words hung in the air between them. Reid sighed. He supposed Gemma’s sentiment was rubbing off on him, much the same as Xin’s optimism had, at first. Now Reid wasn’t so sure of what drove him – or any of the men around him – here at all. At a certain point, the optimism that Reid believed in had blended into the personal desperation that he now saw among everyone in the encampment. “*They* never made it out here,” he said to Xin, somewhat bitterly. “Those men. But they didn’t have to, to feel it – that unconnection, the untethering. It isn’t about the frontier, Xin. It’s about dreaming. This,” he gestured off to the encampment, “is a dream of a past that didn’t exist, created so we could manifest a future that might not exist, either. And *that*,” he looked back at the small, distant planet, “*that* was real.”

Xin nodded slowly, but his gaze dropped down to take in the lights of the distant Omaha Base: the silver-white dome could just be made out in the plains of the Tharsis Rise, connected to its smaller branches by covered highway tunnels. Reid found himself staring at the city as well. It had been his first home here on the red planet. They were far enough away that he couldn’t make out the massive conservation forests and greenhouses housed underneath their respective transparent bubbles, or the hundreds of rovers he knew would be shuttling settlers to and from their outputs on the ring of the covered city. But he could see the newly laid high-speed rail

tracks as they curved their way gently out to the Thasis Montes where the two men now sat, and where the tracks continued on to their end in the tunnel high above at the summit of Mt. Pavonis.

Reid took a breath. It was a lungful of alien air, but it felt more akin to the air he had remembered from Earth's past. It was clean, crisp. He exhaled.

A silence fell over the night. The two men sat on the hilltop, silhouetted against the stars.