

TRIAL

by Brett Melnick

Nolan Birk sits at the far end of his father's fishing boat, a bucket of bait by his side as the sticky summer heat grabs hold of his body. He casts his line onto the shallow Potomac River waters as his father, Nelson Birk, watches his son's release from the middle of the hull. His father's presence excites Nolan. It sparks his curiosity. He wants to know more. Unravel the mystery. Be included in the secret of his father's work. Deep in thought, Nolan's mind slips, missing his chance to reel in a nibble. Nelson motions for Nolan's fishing rod. "If you want to catch a fish, you can't waste time thinking. Let your instincts take control." Showing his son for himself, Nelson grabs the fishing rod and baits the line. As Nelson casts over the shallow Potomac waters, a chill grabs both their attention. Nolan takes in a whiff of the air— it smells of smoke.

Alleviating all other senses of their duties, Nelson keeps his eyes closed as he focuses on the fishing rod, waiting... waiting... waiting... Then, with a slight pull on the hook, he opens his eyes and reels in, lifting the line to reveal a large Catfish. Nelson grabs the fish and turns to Nolan. "See. Allow your instincts to control you." Nolan, envious, stares at his father's catch. "Let me try again."

Nolan grabs the rod and feeds his line. *Focus, Nolan, focus.* Eyes closed; he throws his line into the water. Then, on the slightest shake, Nolan opens his eyes, quickly reeling in as he pulls in a fish. As he hurries to bring it in, the sky around the river gets darker-- a dense cloud crosses over the sun.

As Nolan eagerly reels in his line, he spots something peculiar out the corner of his eye.

A slew of fish, all in formation, cross Eastbound past the boat, scurrying toward the open waters. Nolan loses focus, turning toward the water to witness the droves of fish swim away. The Bluegill attached to the end of his line quickly breaks loose, joining the other fish toward the ocean as Nolan looks up toward the sky. Immediately, he locks eyes with a sight he's never seen before. A large, gaseous object blocks his view of the sun. The dim skylight reeks of a dense, pungent heat.

As the object above continues to slowly engulf the sun, the engine to the boat starts. Nolan turns to his father. Nelson, whose face now appears all but relaxed, guides the boat with urgency, pulling down on the throttle as he steers to shore. The waves pick up, rocking back and forth as the outer reaches of the solar system alter the planet's pull. The forest goes dark, the seagrass no longer visible around the water. All Nolan can piece together are the edges of trees in the distance, and the various elements within their fishing boat. All his senses failing him, Nolan stares in awe as he looks up at the sky, spotting the impending threat above him—the monstrous Ring of Fire.

Nolan jumps up, waking abruptly from his fainting dream. Frantically panting for breath, he sits up in his bed-- a malleable metal sheet holstered up from the ground bends to his shape. A circular dock, located toward his feet, rotates upward and projects a series of blue augmented screens before him. A blinking red screen to the left of his dock notifies Nolan of his irregularly beating heart: 117/60, 118/60, 121/60. A computerized voice fades in over the room. "Rise in heart rate detected. Initiating chamber cool down." This is Erebus.

On Erebus' command, a cool thin layer of water vapor releases from the sides of the dock, spraying Nolan across his face. Nolan sits in place, slowly catching his breath as he cools down. *The dream. It felt real.*

As the heart monitor on Nolan's dock drops to a normal resting heartbeat, the screen turns back to blue, and the dock rotates, retreating to the end of the bed as Nolan slides out. Touching down on the metal flooring of his room, he slowly stretches and turns to his right arm. A large metal console wired into his flesh shines back at him. An augmented screen on the arm console delivers the date: July 4th, 2077.

In his three years studying Francium 12, the planet has maintained an average daily temperature of -75 degrees Celsius. It's forever frozen. Nolan mentally notes the idiosyncrasies of the planet from the reality room, a high-tech chamber within his space Orbiter, designed to allow him to see life on the ground floor of the uninhabitable planet. In its primary role, the reality room allows Nolan to control the ship's robotic Scavengers, stored on the ship and sent down into the planet's atmosphere to search for signs of organic life.

Nolan walks on an omnidirectional treadmill. Every step relays to a Scavenger, roving on the ground floor as it endures the harsh Francium climate. His VR goggles project the scene onto his HUD. Today, the Scavengers face a windstorm. The range of vision can't be any more than four feet. It's not worth it to risk damage to the rover when eyeshot is no more than an arm's length.

Nolan presses a button on the console sewn into his right hand. On his touch, the Scavenger folds inward, concealing its technology inside a hard outer shell to keep it safe. With another touch of a button, a long drill extends from the center of the Scavenger. As Nolan swipes his finger on his console, the Scavenger drill starts up and begins to bore a hole into the sheet of Francium ice.

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"Erebus, begin recording." Nolan proclaims as he now sits on a large circular table within

his sleeping quarters. The table projects an augmented hologram in the air as it records Nolan's face. Nolan records himself for the hologram. "Crosswinds continue to increase between the poles, weather has worsened, and a constant veil of sleet continues to obstruct the Scavenger's view through the day."

A pause. The thought striking him that this may never be seen by anyone.

"Hopefully, through exploration and drilling, we will soon discover the elements needed to promote growth and will uncover the planet's water source in due time." *What if this planet's a dead end? What if I'm doomed?*

"Until then, I will continue to work, and hope that the weather will cooperate."

Will I ever touch the ground again? What if none of this is real?

"In summary, today's Trial of FR-12 was capped at eight hours, two-point-four miles."

What if this is how I die?

"This is Nolan Birk, signing off." With a swipe of his console, the hologram vanishes. A screen on the table appears, slowly counting the upload progress of Nolan's log as he waits. Today, time couldn't seem slower. Other days, it feels like it's going by too fast. His first memory of entering the ship, lost and replaced with knowledge of math, science, ice and the indescribable feeling of total emptiness. His reports, which serve as beacons back to Earth, are his only hope left to communicate with humankind. If humanity even exists anymore. His radio silence says everything. *Francium is billions of miles away, communication from such a distance has never been attempted before. Maybe they just take longer to reach me.*

Through the cracks of the ship radiate the voice of Erebus. "Trail entry four-zero-one-seven upload, complete."

"Erebus, please input today's data in the log," replies Nolan.

“Yes, Sir. Inputting now.” Erebus’ omnipresent voice retorts back. The upload screen on the table vanishes as the augmented hologram starts back up. This time however, instead of a mirror image of himself, a large blue planetary map of Francium-12 appears. Various holes in the log represent data missing from Nolan’s study; like a 3-D puzzle without a third of its pieces, the map is incomplete. Erebus inputs in the day’s data, and a new piece of the map begins to materialize on the hologram. As the information fills the screen, a large circular area of the planet’s map remains blank. “Erebus. What is this location?”

Erebus responds. "That is an unmarked location of Francium, Sir. It appears that heavy winds and ice have prevented you from researching here.”

“Send me the closest coordinates. Tomorrow we’re filling it.”

A long pause from Erebus. Nolan awaits the questioning. “I’m sorry to argue, Sir. But Scavenger Seven should first complete its charge.”

The thought disgusts Nolan, having to fight with a billion-dollar supercomputer for what he wants. He responds back, “It is in the best interest of the mission to complete the probe of the Northwest Quadrant, Erebus. The risk of not performing this Trial outweighs the risk involved with the Trial itself.”

The CPU makes noises as Erebus computes the sentiment. Then, a compartment on the side of the table pops open, revealing a small microchip. Nolan takes the chip, inspecting it thoroughly. A mechanical engraving on its outer flesh reads: 24.812448N, 48.2294368W. Nolan inputs the chip into a card reader on his arm. His arm console lights up as it reads the chip’s data, locating the coordinates on the planet’s map. “Scavenger Seven has received your data. We will commence a probe of the unmarked Northwest region tomorrow.” Nolan nods back as the hologram on the table powers down. *Time for a shower.*

Nolan is only one foot out of the shower when Erebus calls out to him. “Master Nolan.”

“Yes, what is it Erebus?” Nolan responds. A long pause from the system as the table begins to load up a new projection, then Erebus speaks. “According to my records, tomorrow marks eleven years in space.”

“You sure are on top of dates, Erebus.”

“It’s my job to remember dates, Sir,” responds Erebus. Nolan steps over to his closet and puts on his sleep suit, as he turns and spots a holographic birthday cake that Erebus has projected atop the table. He lets out a loud belly laugh. “One moment you fight. The next you’re making cakes. Is this what married life feels like?”

“I’m really not programmed to understand that construct,” Erebus replies.

“Me neither.”

“Is there anything special I can do to celebrate for us?” Erebus asks. Nolan shakes his head as he tucks himself into bed. “There’s nothing to celebrate.” Nolan presses a button on his arm console and shuts off the hologram. “Engage night mode, Erebus.”

As Erebus dims the lights, the dock at Nolan’s feet folds inward, pushing itself up the bed and tucking Nolan in. As he watches the room go dark, his mind becomes encumbered with thoughts. *Eleven years. Where has the time gone?* Nolan shuts his eyes, clearing his mind as the silence of space lullabies him to sleep.

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Sweat drips down Nolan’s face as he sprints within the reality room. Scavenger Seven speeds forward through the Francium terrain. A thick layer of ice covers the viewfinder; all Nolan can see from his HUD is the obscure translucent reflections of light as it hits off the vehicle’s compromised view. He slides an augmented lever on his arm console, and a

holographic map of the planet appears on the corner of his HUD. A red dot blinks back to represent Scavenger Seven's position, now meters from the yet ventured black dot on the map.

Sliding the map away from his HUD, Nolan braces himself as the Scavenger charges through the snowfall ahead. He closes his eyes, sprinting forward as the Scavenger accelerates past the breaking winds and falling sleet that block its view, revealing a large, snow-covered mountain directly before him. Unable to avoid collision, the Scavenger collides with the mountain's stocky snow coating, generating a loud thud that reverberates around the walls of the reality room.

Nolan grunts as he steps backward, reeling the Scavenger out of the snow. Dislodging Scavenger Seven from the mountain, he looks to his console, watching as it flashes back a concerning shade of red. Snow atop the Scavenger has made the unit top-heavy. Nolan looks around, assessing the damages on his console, but through his HUD, all he can see is darkness. Nolan yells, "Erebus. Permission to reposition the thrusters toward the orbital cortex." Erebus chimes in his response, "Processing now."

Nolan waits patiently as a pair of large thrusters on the sides of the Scavenger slowly wind up and rotate forward, directing themselves at the head of the Scavenger. The thrusters fire a strong ray of heat toward the top of the Scavenger. Nolan quickly reaches to his console, dialing the intensity of the thrusters back as Scavenger Seven bronzes up from the heat. As Scavenger Seven's body begins to lose its coloration, the thrusters power down. Nolan looks out through his HUD, finally getting a clear picture as to what the Scavenger hit, as he stares forward at a steep hill right ahead of him. It's a massive slope that ascends into the clouds.

Nolan opens a sidebar window on his augmented HUD. A small 3D model of the Scavenger projects onto the screen. Gauges on the 3D model display the various percentages of

functionality left on the machine. The orbital cortex and the thrusters both appear to have less than 50% functionality remaining.

Nolan swipes away the analysis of the Scavenger's functionality and looks back at the hill ahead. "How high up do you reckon it goes?" he asks. Erebus performs a scan, expelling a blue-hued shroud over the area. The results project onto Nolan's HUD. More than six-hundred feet long. An unusually steep unnatural slope for this planet.

"Could we scale it?" questions Nolan.

"To its peak?" Erebus replies.

"No. Just halfway up?" A long pause as Erebus analyzes. Then Nolan corrects himself. "Of course, to its peak." *I guess computers don't compute sarcasm.*

Erebus chimes in. "I would advise against it. The Scavenger has three thousand watts of battery remaining. Any miscalculation, and it will die on its ascension. A drop of that magnitude would be fatal." Nolan contemplates. The sight is quite unusual. What lies on top could be the groundbreaking discovery he's been looking for. *Who knows what the conditions will look like here a day from now? This is our shot.*

Nolan ignores Erebus' orders as he turns to his console and slides an augmented lever forward. The thrusters rotate back into position, leveling with the Scavenger body as they let off a fiery hum and propel the Scavenger forward. The conveyor-like feet of the Scavenger indent in the soft snowy ground above the planet's surface as Scavenger Seven hurls itself up the steep crater. As it scales the crater, the Scavenger braces itself for contact from incoming hail. The storm gets heavier and heavier as it nears the clouds that cover the crater's peak.

"Scavenger Seven is at 40% maximum functionality," chants Erebus from within the reality room. But Nolan keeps silent, eyes on the prize, as Scavenger Seven leaps into the clouds

that look down onto Francium. As the Scavenger levels with the clouds, the screen goes dark. *No please no. We couldn't have lost visual again, could we?*

Then, the Scavenger shoots up, breaking out from the formation of clouds as it blasts off the ground and ascends into the air. Now, above the clouds, there's no snow in sight. Nolan looks down at the crater below him— Its innards are dark and black. It's nearly impossible to make out the texture from his position.

Nearly fifty feet above the ground, gravity begins to make its mark on the Scavenger, and turns the rover southbound. Nolan braces for contact.

“Scavenger Seven is at 20% maximum functionality.” Reports Erebus.

“Kinda busy right now,” Nolan yells back, as he opens a terminal window that displays the Scavenger's corner thrusters. He taps the screen, using the thrusters to slowly throttle the Scavenger back toward the planet. With each tap, a small breath of pressurized air shoots out from the bottom of the Scavenger. Nolan sweats bullets as he meticulously taps back and forth, depleting the Scavenger of its fuel reserves as he repositions in the air and prepares for landing.

Now ten feet away from the crater below, Nolan softens the Scavenger's fall by expelling out the remnants of the throttle fuel. Beyond a yard's throw from the surface, the thrusters burn out completely, spitting out gas as the Scavenger lands safely on the dark, chalky soil.

Caught by the pure adrenaline of the moment, Nolan lifts his arms up in the air. “How was that for a landing?”

“Personally, a little more excitement for my liking,” responds Erebus. Nolan laughs at the comment as he reads the augmented diagnosis of the Scavenger, which now holds five percent battery. The thruster fuel has been depleted entirely. That means no more wild feats of crater scaling for the rest of the journey.

Nolan looks around the crater through the Scavenger's HUD. A large, cavernous boulder rests at the end of the crater, roughly 200 feet away. He turns to the ground, inspecting the soil as he clicks a button on his console and a small drill appears from the base of the Scavenger. It begins to dig into the soil. A percentage bar on Nolan's screen tallies up the soil sample size. As the drill barrels into the ground, it stops. Nolan retracts the drill from the soil, revealing the hollow insides of the crater. *It's hollow?*

Erebus' blue atmospheric scan fills the Scavenger's drilled hole, identifying the soil-less hollow space within the crater. "Sir. It appears to be a small pocket of liquid." *Liquid? This planet has shown nothing but ice and snow for three years. Now suddenly there's something warm enough to exist as liquid?*

Nolan yells out to Erebus. "Let's release a Mantis." Erebus processes the request, and the drill to the Scavenger opens, revealing the small scouting device known as a Mantis. Nolan drops the Mantis into the hollow pocket, watching as it explores the unfamiliar space. As it searches, a long report appears on Nolan's HUD, displaying various chemical symbols, sanctioned out into square boxes and followed by much longer fractions. The symbols "C" "Ca" "Cu" and "Mg" appear as large squares on the report. Smaller boxes appear underneath as the report continues: "O", "Ar", "N", "P", "K" ... the list continues as the square boxes get smaller and smaller.

Erebus chimes in. "Soil from the spot of the crater contains large traces of carbon, calcium, copper and magnesium. However, the majority of this sample is carbon. Assessing the soil in relation to the mineral abundances, this land appears to be, by shape, pigment and composition, a form of graphite."

Nolan shakes his head. *Graphite? That doesn't make sense.* He breaks away from the hole, looking up and assessing the formation of the crater. "This doesn't add up to me, Erebus.

Am I missing something?” Erebus takes a moment to think internally, then replies. “No. It’s a bit peculiar. Most graphite would naturally appear much closer to the planet’s core.”

“Could it be alien, Erebus?”

“I’m unable to come to a definite conclusion with the information I have, Sir.” Nolan looks back at the Scavenger’s remaining battery supply. Three percent. It would be a gamble to try to trek the remains of the crater today.

Nolan looks around, rotating the Scavenger’s head for a lay of the land. On its turn, he spots a sudden movement near the cave in the distance. Nolan stops and stares at the cave that rests within the crater. *Did something just move?* Nolan holds Scavenger Seven’s head in place, waiting quietly for another sudden motion from the distant cave. *Patience... Patience... Patience... THERE!* A shadowy figure slowly emerges from the cave. Too far away to make out, Nolan stares at the figure’s dark silhouette as it begins to take shape. Nolan yells out from the reality room, “Erebus, do you see this?” Erebus responds in confusion, “Do I see what?”

“That figure! There’s something moving from inside the cave.”

“I find that hard to believe, Master Nolan,” replies Erebus.

His eyes glued to the cave, Nolan begins to operate the Scavenger, using the remains of its power supply to get closer. *Just another hundred feet.* The silhouette of the creature ahead continues to stand still. Still too far away to make out, Nolan slowly directs the Scavenger forward as the console turns bright red; a warning that the Scavenger battery has reached one percent. This is life or death.

“Master Nolan, if the Scavenger battery reaches zero, you’ll lose it.” Nolan continues to walk, stepping forward on the reality room floor. Now, forty yards from the cave, the figure begins to reveal itself through the viewfinder. Tall. Lanky. Standing upright. *It looks human.*

Positioned in the center of the crater, Nolan looks around, inspecting the figure closely as it continues to stand and stare. Nolan stares back. *Is my mind playing tricks on me?* Without the presence of another human to speak to for the last eleven years, it wouldn't be crazy that his imagination got the best of him, if just for a brief second. But he can't help himself. Like a magnetic force attracting him in, Nolan carries the Scavenger forward with little regard for its remaining battery. Then, out the corner of his eye, he spots something: an object, flying forward as it strikes the Scavenger dead-on in its orbital cortex. Nolan's feed goes black. A static hiss bleeds out into the reality room. Nolan takes his headset off; the same question rattling around in his head a million different ways: *What did I just witness?*

"Logging trial entry four-zero-one-eight." Nolan sits at the projection table within his quarters. The screen captures him as he speaks. "In today's Trial, the Scavenger explored a hilltop location within the Northwestern plain of FR-12. A further inspection of the land led to the discovery of several life-sustaining elements within the location's soil. This is the first glimpse toward sustainable life on Francium since arriving in orbit."

Nolan takes his time as he carefully surrenders each word from his mouth. He stares at the augmented screen capturing his every move. *Who's watching me? What do they want from me? What are they going to do once they get this information?*

He clicks a button on the table console, turning the hologram off. The table's display retreats inward and the upload stops. Erebus calls out from afar. "Upload cancelled. Are you okay, Sir?" Nolan takes a moment to himself. "Yeah. I'm fine, Erebus. I'll upload tomorrow instead." As he sits, Nolan's mind continues to provoke him. The image of the shadowy figure cemented in his head. *What could it have been?*

Nolan shakes his head, forcing himself out of his imagination and back to the moment.

He looks out onto the hologram, watching as the navigational data from the Trial begins to present itself on the large augmented blue map of Francium. The newly trekked planetary crater reveals itself. Nolan points at the crater's rim, and several geometric measuring tools appear on-screen, projecting a right angle onto the crater's shadow and measuring its depth. Erebus displays a mathematical equation to the side of the geometric toolset:

$$\tan \beta = d/l$$

$$D = L * \tan \beta$$

The crater's measurements materialize onto the hologram. 200 meters high, 50 meters deep, and a diameter two kilometers wide. Nearly 700 feet of scaling the Scavenger took to just get atop of it. However, looking down at it from above, it doesn't look like a crater at all. It's more like a monolith.

Nolan swipes the arithmetic away from the hologram and pulls up the coordinates: 25.327338, 48.223722. As he stares at the navigational code, a microchip pops out from the side of the table. Nolan collects the chip and puts it up to his eyes.

The Transport Hanger is hot and cramped. However, to its benefit, it's the best place on the Orbiter to view Space. It's the only place, in fact, to view space from the otherwise windowless ship. The heat from the Hanger comes from the ship's energy source, a strongly insulated nuclear reactor. Wired throughout the Orbiter, the reactor pressurizes steam flowing through the ship and converts it into energy. The process is perpetual, so long as the reactor doesn't wear out.

Wearing an insulated space suit, Nolan sits on the hanger floor and opens the last transport pod on the ship— a large, cocoon-like tube roughly six feet tall by six feet wide. The hatch to the pod opens, revealing Scavenger Eight. Nolan unscrews a compartment on the side of

the Scavenger, revealing a microchip receiver concealed within the rover's exterior shell. He places the microchip from the Trial into the receiver and screws the Scavenger back together.

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The bed console folds outward on Nolan's approach. Erebus is quick to note Nolan's presence. "I see that pod eight is now set for launch." Nolan strips down into his sleep suit as he replies. "I've equipped it with the ship's last Scavenger. It's set to land on Francium at 0400 hours." Erebus takes a short beat to himself. "You're sending down our last transport pod?"

The comment hits Nolan like the tip of a dart. *The last pod to Francium.* Nolan lays down and looks up, "Yes. That's correct." As the dock reclines back, Nolan looks, taking inventory of his room. He closes his eyes, breathing slowly as he falls to sleep. *As much as I try to accept it, this will never be home.*

Nolan's eyes open abruptly, as he stares out at the white Francium snow. Hail falls around him. His view hazy, Nolan struggles to latch onto a frame of reference. He looks toward the cave, making out the faint outer lining of the spot he noted hours ago, and walks forward. The temperate snow pushes back, getting worse as he moves, and brings Nolan to the ground. With his remaining breath he opens his eyes, looking back to the cave. Like he witnessed through the eyes of his Scavenger, the amorphous shadowed figure presents itself within the cave's sheltered confines. As Nolan attempts to get a good look, a blanket of snow covers his body.

Nolan jumps up from his bed. In a sweaty panic, the console around him releases a thick aura of water vapor. Nolan breathes out heavily as he slowly comes back to his senses. *It was just a dream.* He looks to his console, checking the time: it's 0200; two hours before Scavenger Eight's descent to Francium. Jumping to his feet, Nolan rushes over to his closet. Erebus chimes

in, noticing. “Master Nolan. It is not yet time to wake up.”

Nolan ignores Erebus as he relinquishes his arm from the closet cabinet and pulling out a large burlap sack. He stuffs a handful of clothes into the sack and exits down the hall. Quick in his stride, Nolan walks to the hanger. Erebus’ blue ominous light follows him through the sterile walls. “Master Nolan. I don’t want to have to report this.”

“Just checking on Scavenger Eight, Erebus. Then I’ll be back to sleep.” He puts on the space suit hanging against the chromium hanger door, then pulls intensely against the pressurized door handle, leaving Erebus behind in the contained inner boundaries of the Orbiter as he enters the hanger.

Secured to the oxygen system within his suit, Nolan looks out from the large hanger bay, spotting Francium-12 in the distance. The snowy planet glistens back. Nolan walks over to the transport pod. The control board, programmed with Nolan’s preset planetary coordinates, waits patiently for instruction. Nolan walks over, twisting off the pod’s air-locked seal, and revealing the resting Scavenger inside it. *If this is our last pod, I’m making sure it has me on it.*

Nolan pulls Scavenger Eight out from the pod and throws it to the side as he leans over to the computerized screen on the side of the pod. He plugs in a series of numbers, altering the launch time on the pod from T-120 to T-2, as he pounds down on the enter button and squeezes himself inside.

As the launch time reaches zero, the jets on the transport pod fire up and the pod slowly pushes itself out from the hanger bay and into space. Nolan grips a handlebar on the side of the pod as it rotates 90 degrees and exits the hanger. With no force of gravity to control it, the pod sits in the stillness of space.

Nolan looks out the window, catching eyes with the Orbiter. He’s never seen it from the

outside before. His whole life had been confined within those walls. The sheer reality of the situation strikes him with force; more than a decade alone, billions of miles away from the place he once called home. Inching further and further from the place that became his home for so much of his life, it dawns on him that there's no surefire guarantee he'll ever return to the Orbiter, his only way back to Earth. As honest as it is that there's likely nothing left of *home* anyway, he can't let the dream of one day returning leave his mind. A tear dribbles off his face as the transport pod separates itself a safe distance away from the Orbiter and begins to fly off towards Francium. As with all things in this immeasurable and incomprehensible galaxy, what's done is done.

The Pod picks up speed as it enters Francium's Atmosphere. The calm and quiet ride now begins to get loud and bumpy as Nolan looks out the window. A sheet of sleet covers the transport pod. Over the interior sound of the pod's bells and whistles, Nolan hears the cries of freezing metal. *This is how I'll die.* The crackling sounds of freezing metal grow louder. No longer can Nolan burrow into his head for some means of escape. This is his reality.

Exiting the cloudy outer shell of Francium's atmosphere, the view clears from Nolan's window. Looking out, he locks eyes with the dazzling Francium snow. He's mesmerized by its gaze. Nearing the Francium surface, Nolan closes his eyes and braces for contact.

The transport pod slams into Francium's surface. Making contact, the pod ricochets off the ground, taking yards of ice along with it as it endures the impact. Nolan holds on tight as the pod reaches a momentous halt.

The hatch to the transport pod twists open, exposing Nolan to the planet. Shaking off his landing, he grabs his burlap sack and slides off the pod, stepping onto the ground of Francium

12. His suit keeping him safe from the sub-zero temperatures, he reaches down and grabs a

chunk of snow. Inspecting the unyielding, firm frozen sample below him, Nolan smiles. He has now touched down on land.

Strapping the burlap sack to his suit, Nolan looks around. It's everything Scavenger Seven projected through his augmented headset, just now all his senses help to bring in a more pronounced understanding of the sight. Dislodging his feet from the snow, Nolan treks along the graphite soil as he arrives at the mouth of the cave. Looking inside, he notices that the path ahead slopes downward. Nolan walks down the cavernous footpath as the path evens out and the natural labyrinth folds inward. Various tunnels stretch outward from this circular omphalos. This is where the roads diverge.

Nolan stares toward the center of the circular room, spotting a tall metal structure resting before him, concealed within a synthetic metal envelope. A bright blue aura of heat radiates out from cracks within the structure's iron sealing. Nolan stops and takes a moment to inspect the metal figure; the blue light from inside reminds him of the very reactor that keeps his Orbiter powered. Nolan walks forward, feeling the immense heat from the device get stronger and stronger with each step.

Nolan reaches his arm out toward the structure, placing his arms in a small crevice as he begins to pull the structure's metal plating apart. As the heat from the structure consumes him, Nolan pulls the metal apart, revealing the very device responsible for the blue light of heat. *It's the ship's reactor.* Just as the realization sets in, a dart flies out from the distance, jamming itself into the arm of Nolan's spacesuit. His eyes light up as Nolan recoils and reaches for his arm, feeling the dart, and pulling it out only to discover that it has punctured his suit. Oxygen slowly begins to exit, hissing violently as he feels an added resistance to his breathing. Nolan quickly covers the puncture with his arm, looking around nervously for the inflictor of the blow. Turning

to the cavernous stalagmites above, Nolan spots a camera in the corner of the room. He makes out the model of the camera. It's a Scavenger viewfinder. *Scavenger Seven?*

Nolan falls into an anxious frenzy and anxiously turns around toward the cave's entrance. Losing oxygen, he wheezes as he accelerates into a sprint, running away with all the energy left in him as he heads to the mouth of the cave. Steps from the cave's entrance, a large metal pole enters and whacks him on the back of his head. Falling to the ground, Nolan pants heavily as he goes in and out of consciousness. Turning onto his back, he looks up, catching a glimpse of a figure walking toward him. The room begins to spin as Nolan gasps for air, asphyxiating as he focuses his eyes on his apparent killer. As the creature leans in, Nolan is finally able to get a strong glimpse of it: Dark hair, brown eyes. A tall, lean figure. *A human...* Nolan faints to the ground.

Nolan's eyes open. He looks forward, spotting four large steel bars ahead, protruding out from the ground and confining him within walls of sulfate. It's a makeshift prison. A man rests a small metal object on a desk beside him as he watches closely from the other side of the bars. Nolan focuses in, trying to get a read on the object itself, then realizes... it's his arm console. Entering a state of shock, Nolan turns to his arm. A set of bandages poorly cover the space of an incision. *He ripped off my arm console.* Off his thought, reality hits him: He isn't wearing his suit. Nolan reaches for his head, feeling his face as he lets out a series of quick, short breaths. The man leans forward toward the cell. "You won't need your suit down here. This space is safe for us to breath."

"Safe for Us? Last time I checked, you weren't trapped in a jail cell."

"Illusions can fool you." The man replies. He stands up from his chair and looks down on Nolan. Nolan can barely look back up at him; he hasn't yet adjusted to the much heavier

Francium surface gravity. Without his suit, the force of the planet must be fought with his body's nimble strength alone. The man kneels down to Nolan's level, finally giving him a good glimpse of his face. Mustering up the strength to look up, Nolan yells out. "Who are you?" The man smirks as he stares at Nolan's weak body, pinned to the ground. "My name is Abe."

Abe walks to a high-tech, augmented computer on his desk and reads an analysis report on the screen. "And you, *Nolan Birk*, are experiencing an extreme level of G-force that you've never experienced before. An hour of this force, and your bones will snap. I can help you, though, if you're willing to cooperate."

Nolan looks back in surprise. "How do you know my name?" Nodding back, Abe reveals to Nolan a small, engraved microchip. "Your vehicle had a chip in it that gave me some information from your journey." Abe turns to the arm console that sits on the desk, continuing. "I would imagine this console contains the rest of what I need. Now, how did you find this planet?"

Nolan begins to feel his muscles rattle. He begins to sputter back a response. "I was sent here to find a new home." Abe leans forward, intrigued. "A new home? And who exactly sent you, Nolan?" The gravitational force pushes down on Nolan's neck, bringing his body to the floor. On his last breath, Nolan exhales out, "I... I am... from Earth." The planet's gravitational force getting the best of him, Nolan falls onto the ground. Abe looks back, nodding in fascination. "Thank you, Nolan."

Reunited with his space suit, Nolan follows Abe through the central passageway of the cave as the two lock onto the large, shimmering reactor glowing back at them. "This reactor heats up the pockets of ice stored in this cave and converts the water vapor into oxygen. So long as the reactor works, this cave is habitable." As Abe continues to showcase the device, they watch as the reactor flickers out a blue light. "It doesn't have much life left in it though."

“Are you going to use it to terraform?” Nolan asks. Abe looks back in confusion. “What exactly do you mean?” *He doesn't know?* Nolan had been sent here for one objective: to use the reactor to terraform Francium-12. With the reactor planted and latched onto the largest body of water on the planet, he could use the device to intensify the cooling process on Francium. *If Abe isn't here to terraform Francium, then what is he doing here with this?* Nolan conceals his tell and shifts his question. “Do you think Francium could be a home for us? Where I come from, people believe Francium would become our new Earth...”

Abe looks back in confusion. “Why would it need to be our new Earth?”

“You don't know?” Nolan replies in surprise.

“Don't know what?”

“Earth is gone, Abe. The Atlas Twilight destroyed it years ago,” Nolan replies. Abe quietly absorbs the sentiment, then begins to laugh. “No. No it hasn't.” *What? What's so funny?* Recognizing the concerned look on Nolan's face, Abe stops laughing. “I don't know what you're speaking of, but Earth isn't gone. I can prove it.” Turning away from Nolan, Abe walks down a strange corridor within the central passageway. Taken aback, Nolan hesitantly follows along.

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“I landed on Francium ten years ago,” exclaims Abe, as he leads Nolan into a large circular chamber of the cave. A series of high-tech transmitters rest on chrome tables within the room, latched to a computer resting on the center of the table. The assortment of mechanical wires feed up through the columns of the cave and lead outside through a fracture in its ceiling. Nolan inspects the equipment around him. The manufacturing barcodes on all the materials in the room are etched over in Mandarin lettering.

Abe turns on the various transmission machines scattered around. “Our government has

been tracking a strange asteroid that appeared on our satellites nearly three decades ago.” The machinery powers up and emits out a high-frequency hiss as Abe boots up the computer and continues. “An asteroid with an elemental chemistry that contained all the basic building blocks of life... Carbon, Hydrogen, Nitrogen, Oxygen, Phosphorus and Sulfur. We examined it as it moved freely through the galaxy. Landing on certain planets and spreading from star to star the various elements necessary for life, only for it to leave and arrive again at a new planet to repeat the cycle over again.”

Abe hits the power button on an old RCA microphone as he continues. “My home government believes that this asteroid we’re standing on has been supplying the seed of life to planets all across the galaxy for millions of years.” *So, that anomalous slope wasn’t a slope at all, but an otherworldly being, propelling itself from planet to planet and pollenating any star it passes with the chemical blueprint to life?*

Quizzical, Nolan turns to Abe “You’re saying you believe this asteroid is God?” Abe turns and nods back to Nolan. “Yes. That’s correct.” Abe turns the volume meter up on the transmission device. Voices immediately flood into the room from the other end, speaking back in various languages all across the globe. Nolan listens as Abe alternates frequencies, flipping between channels to the CNSA, BACC, The Ministry of State Security and NASA. Abe leans in toward the transmitter, addressing a voice on the other end. The two sides go back and forth in Mandarin. It’s all incomprehensible to Nolan, who stares nervously at Abe as he speaks into the microphone. *What could he possibly be telling them? Can I trust him?* Finishing his transmission, Abe flicks off the device and turns back to Nolan. “Earth has never been in danger, Nolan. Whomever told you such a thing has been trying to deceive you.”

The questions begin to parade around Nolan’s mind. The sincerity of his trip. The

mission he'd been sent to complete. The clear visions in his mind of the Atlas Twilight entering the solar system. *How could a memory be a lie? How can any of this be real?*

Following Abe's lead, Nolan carries his burlap sack by his side as they approach a large graphite epoxy door. The door slowly dilates open, and Nolan and Abe enter, walking into a silvery carbon composite spaceship workstation. Nolan looks around, taking in the space. The room is filled with complicated gadgets. Resting on Abe's workstation sit several vials and flasks with various liquids. Water, Mercury, Sulfur. The body of Scavenger Seven lies on a workbench in the distance— Its wires laid out for examining. "What is this?" Nolan asks curiously.

"This is my lab." Abe takes Nolan's arm console and sets it down on a large, magnetized table. On its touch, the table emits out an electromagnetic aura, lifting the arm console up, and shielding it within a light graphene aerogel casing. A computer resting on the table begins to analyze the console's molecular composition.

"After the crash, I thought I'd never be able to get off this planet. Then you arrived." Abe turns back to the arm console and reads the computer's projected analysis. "My computer indicates that your console has over three hundred petabytes of encrypted information within it." He nods to the Scavenger. "You've been within orbit, sending these machines out onto Francium in search of something. So, what have you found?"

Nolan wearily stares back. "Other than this? Nothing." Abe looks at him in disbelief as Nolan continues. "My mission has been to find organic life. Some sort of water that could perhaps exist under the sheets of ice that scale this planet. Until today, I've found nothing but ice." Abe shakes his head. "You've been probing for years, and I'm the first creature you've discovered?" Nolan looks back in confusion. "Why is that surprising?"

"The intentions of your trip. Can't you see? You've been lied to, Nolan. The reason

you're here is bigger than you. It's because back home, we discovered the asteroid we're standing on right now is creating new alien life across the galaxy. Species that could become threats to the existence of the human race if we allowed them to evolve." As Abe raises his voice, Nolan takes a step back, nervously looking around the room. He begins to backtrack toward the dilapidating door. However, on his presence, the door doesn't open— As if he's not human enough to trigger it.

"I know this is a lot for you to consume right now, Nolan. But, now that you're here, we're safer than we've ever been. Now we have a way to complete this mission we were sent here to complete, and still survive. We can take pieces from my lab and refurbish your transport pod. Then, we can use the reactor to blow this asteroid up safely from your Orbiter. We can accomplish our mission together."

As Nolan frantically thinks the concept up in his head. His eyes can't help but wonder— spotting all the deadly materials around him. Knives. Drills. The thin copper wires protruding out from the remains of Scavenger Seven. Like an animal, wounded in a corner and ready to pounce; the reality of the situation hits him all at once. Nolan stutters out a response. "I can't leave here. I can't destroy this planet. I'm supposed to find our new Earth and save humanity. It's what I agreed to do!"

As Abe continues to motion for Nolan to relax, he works up the confidence to tell the boy the reality of his journey. "Nolan, you weren't chosen to terraform this planet. You were chosen to destroy it." Taking a long pause, Abe continues.

"Nolan. You're here to eradicate God."

END