

Crashed

Twin suns began their slow progress behind the vast, smooth obelisks that appeared to be our eventual destination. The mules began to bleat in their strange alien tongue and one of the tribesmen, the one carrying the whip, also began to cry out. Almost in unison every single mule paused, shook their hind legs and sat down, regardless of whether they were bearing a rider or goods. Most of those present were familiar with the procedure and managed to dismount with grace, even my fellow slaves, shackled as they were about the ankles and wrists. As the only off-worlder present, and even after five arduous days of travel, I sadly found my face pushed in the dry, gritty sand as my steed collapsed beneath me.

I was dragged to my feet roughly by one of the tribe, a huge burly fellow who had apparently had it in for me from day one. For the past five days of our long trek east-wards I was certain he had been making sure to whip me a little more than any of the others. Fortunately, since no one could understand a word I said I was able to curse him at my leisure. For all I knew, in their weird language of clicks and barks, they could have been saying the same things about me.

He spun me around and pushed me towards the now-massed herd of slaves that were my compatriots. Though they bore the same weathered complexion and tanned skin as our captors, by comparison they were a weedy bunch, undernourished and underfed. Thinking back to what had passed for rations ever since I had been taken prisoner, this was no surprise. While a few of the slaves had been captured at the same time as myself, the others could have been captive for who-knows how long?

There seemed to be about fifty slaves, compared to only twenty tribesmen, but taking into account size and strength, I'd say that was more than enough. I had been surprised that our captors had been so kind as to provide us with transport, however unwieldy, smelly and unpredictable these native creatures were. Upon seeing the sheer distance we were to travel it soon made sense. Without rides of some kind there was no way any of these pathetic specimens would survive the journey and the tribesmen obviously had need of them, for whatever reason.

The suns had finally set and the chill-night breeze once again began to whistle through my aching joints. In the opposite direction the lone moon of this planet hung pale and high in the sky. Far from a smooth, round circle this moon was lumpen and malformed and its close proximity to the planet allowed me to literally count the many vast craters. Turning once more east I stared at the obelisks, which had begun to glow that now-familiar bright-orange that had so captivated me as I flew over them not five days previously. So captivated, in fact, that I had ignored all my computer's warning signs of a sudden gravitational wave in the space immediately above me.

My ship was largely undamaged but the wave played merry havoc with the dark-energy converter that was the heart of the engine. As fuel began to leak I was left with no option but to set down. Before all power died my computer managed to find a convenient spot behind an enormous mesa where we landed comparatively comfortably. Immediately the auto-repair circuits kicked in, using a meagre back-up generator to begin knitting the damaged systems back together. The computer managed to inform me of the basics of its situation before shutting down completely as the repair-cycle began to do its magic.

I had armed myself, stocked up with tobacco and marijuana, and stepped outside; someone or *something* had caused that gravitational wave; something that clearly meant me harm, and I was taking no chances. The repair-cycle was going to be at least a day; I planned to just circle the mesa, make sure nothing was nearby. Despite it being night the light of the moon was more than enough to see without a torch and I had set off confidently. Sadly, I had barely made it out from behind the mesa when an arrow whistling past my ear told me things were going to be a little more complicated.

“H'urggha! Tk! Tk!”

The lead tribesman was once more barking at us. The slaves around me began unwrapping the panniers from their mounts, some pitching primitive animal-skin tents, others beginning the process of building fires. The tribesmen themselves had begun drinking some sort of alcoholic drink that they seemed to have no tolerance to. In the past few nights I'd seen more than a few slaves badly beaten and roughed up by drunken tribesmen. Luckily for me I'd kept my head down.

In many ways I had been quite lucky. Admittedly, being shot down over a desert on a strange planet and then being taken captive by primitive, skin-wearing, unintelligible idiots was not particularly lucky, at least I had escaped the beatings that were meted out regularly to the other slaves. I had no idea how to pitch a tent and no idea how to build a fire, yet none of the tribesmen seemed to mind if I just stood there smoking. I had caught a few cracks of the whip from the big bastard but all the others left me alone. I noticed a few of them looking at me sometimes, and muttering in their language, but otherwise I was okay. They apparently never even bothered to search me, as I still had my weapon, as well as my skunk and smokes. I even got to keep my clothes.

As my fellow slaves continued with their labours I reached into my pocket and extracted my pouch of tobacco. Rolling a small cigarette I watched my supposed compatriots toil away. As I lit my rollie and breathed a deep sigh of relief I noticed that the first tent to go up, as per usual, was the big chief's tent. I presumed this chap was the chief because he was extremely old and weathered, even more so than any of the others, and he bore an elaborate headdress that looked an awful lot like an astronaut's helmet, albeit carved from wood and decorated with feathers. Where the feathers had come from I had no idea, since I had seen no birds, indeed no life at all, apart from the mules.

“T'iggr'da! T'iggr'da! Faslovni! Tk! Tk!”

As the tribesmen around me all began to chant and bark I turned my attention once again to the glorious obelisks in the distance. Their glow left me entranced; I fancied I could see a faint corona of energy surrounding them and within that corona yet more dancing shapes of colour. There were five of them and at a guess I'd say each one was about two miles high. When I had been taken captive, at the mesa, they had not been visible but as I had been shackled and placed upon a mule with all the other slaves and we began our ascent on to the plains they had drawn into view. I had nearly forgotten the circumstances of my predicament, so taken was I with their exotic, powerful glow. Even during the day, when the twin suns painted the landscape a sickly ochre, the obelisks still seemed to bear some of their nocturnal glimmer. In the day, though, one could see the hard-lines of their edges, too smooth to be natural. And yet what purpose would it serve to build such a structure on such a nowhere, nothing planet, populated only by savages?

Perhaps it was this mystery that had driven me on; armed as I was I could surely have fought my way back to my ship several days ago. She would be repaired by now, sitting there waiting for me, humming patiently. How would I return? How would I get off this planet? As I continued to stare at the swimming shapes in the distance I found myself finding it harder and harder to care.

My reverie was broken by violent nudge to my shoulder. I snapped around to see my rival, the big bastard, fire in his eyes, gibbering nonsense at me.

“Tk! Tk! Y'laroth! Y'laroth! Feggn'r!”

“Look, I've told you before, I don't have a clue what you're talking about. Bugger off.”

“Tk! Feggn'r!”

He raised an arm and pointed towards the big chief's tent. The big chief himself was stood outside it, his headdress under his arm. In his other hand he bore a large staff that seemed to be made of gnarled bone. He lifted the staff from the ground and beckoned me with it, then turned and entered his tent.

I looked from the tent to the big chap, then back to the tent, then back to the big

chap again. He once more pointed towards the tent, then began striding towards it. I flicked away my cigarette and began to follow him, noticing the looks from the other slaves. I pondered my situation; this could either be very good, or very bad; my salvation, or my execution. I felt the reassuring weight of my gun against my breast and muttered a prayer for my soul.

We arrived at the tent; several attendants pulled back the beaded entrance curtain and let us in. Immediately I was hit by a waft of incredibly sweet smelling smoke, unlike anything I had smelt before. I could also taste roasting meat in the air and noticed a spit in the corner upon which sat roasting some four-legged creature. My mouth began watering.

“Y'laroth! Tk!”

The big chap pointed to the centre of the room where, behind a low table, sat the chief. He was cross-legged and on the table before him was an enormous water pipe that seemed to be the source of the unknown smell. The chief looked up at me, his eyes barely visible behind the multitude of lines that criss-crossed his features. It was hard to tell which was a scar and which was a wrinkle, so seamlessly did they all blend in. I had to admit it was quite fascinating. Like the obelisks, I could stare at that lined face for hours. He extended a hand and bade me sit down.

Nervously I stepped forwards. There was a cushion on the floor, but how on Earth I was going to sit down cross-legged while manacled was beyond me. The chief made a noise, barely even a grunt, and within seconds my chains had been unlocked and cast aside. The chief made another grunt; I looked around as the big fellow bowed slightly, then departed. The chief and I were now alone.

As I sat down on the cushion the chief took a slow, long drag from the water pipe, which must have been at least six feet tall, the bass rumble of the bubbles impacting my sternum. He removed the mouthpiece and the lines on his face creased out and up as a broad, cheesy smile appeared at his lips. Smoke seemed to pour from every part of him as he leaned forwards to offer me the pipe.

Never one to turn down a rare pleasure such as this, even in such dire and dangerous circumstances, I accepted, also smiling, and placed the pipe at my lips. Before I had even had a chance to truly inhale the power of the smoke hit me and my head began to float somewhere above my body. I took a longer drag, letting the smoke filter through me and remove all the aches and pains of our five-day ride. It was spectacular.

I took the pipe from my mouth and once more offered it across the table but it seemed like someone else was doing it; like I was watching myself perform the action. No, not watching exactly; more like recalling a memory. Yes, that was it. It was the memory of passing the pipe.

I recalled the chief taking the pipe from me and extending his free hand. He opened his mouth and spoke:

“Now you understand. Now you see.”

He was right. It seemed totally normal now. Of course I could understand. I looked over at the roasting spit in the corner; it was no four-legged beast but a human being, skewered through the skull and rectum, its skin blackened and dripping as the embers of the fire died below. I looked into the water bowl of the vast pipe; there, suspended in the water, its face contorted into a rictus of agony, was one of the slaves I had noticed disappear only yesterday. As the chief drew on the pipe the pressure forced the body to dance to some inaudible rhythm; I could now hear that rhythm. It was the beating of my own heart.

I watched myself take the pipe once more and draw hard, taking the smoke deep into my lungs and brain and body and spleen and guts and cock and balls and eyes and teeth and bones and muscle and sinew, tendons snapping as they are pulled taught with pliers, brains dashed against rocks and left to spill out into the light, bodies broken like matchsticks, punched, bruised, cut, bloodied, gouged, snapped, stabbed, torn apart utterly.

The big chief smiled.

“Now you understand. Good. We welcome you. We welcome you, Brompton Rhodes!”

A cry from outside, then another, then another. I understood. We were under attack!

Alexander Hayden James Smith, 29/11/2011