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They say that trying to have Ask and Embla, Adam and Eve or another ultimate creator couple is just not possible. All the diversity that constitutes a race would have to come from two people. Almost every human has a few dormant genetic disorders that inbreeding would quickly make to rise to the surface. One look at the collection of Habsburg jaws, the deformed skull of Akhenaten or the harebrained antics of George III says enough.

But Anders and Ellen did not want to be parents of a new population. They just wanted to get away. Away from the filth, the crowds, the prejudices, the social prison that was Earth. The planet was thronged with people, wasting their energy endlessly competing with each other and wrecking the environment in the process. There were too many rules, rule breakers and rule breaker hunters to cope with.

So they sold everything they had, which was a decent amount, and bought a M3r class exploration vessel. Various unscrupulous traders supplied extra modules that made it suitable to transport a small human crew. A cyborg was paid well and disabled the transponder without asking questions. When all was ready, they disappeared without goodbyes and snuck out of the solar system. Then they hugged each other one last time and crawled into the cryopods for a long sleep. It lasted 74,000 years, driving an unbridgeable gap between them and Earth. They did not mind. After all, keeping in touch with home was what they were trying to avoid in the first place.

The robot pilot was designed to last longer than that. It sandwiched short periods of work with long intervals of idleness, without ever getting bored. It kept the two alive, handled the acceleration, deceleration and final orbital maneuvers and everything else that needed to be taken care of. After more than 13 human civilization lifetimes it freed them from their cold sleep.

Ellen woke first, breaking creation myth tradition right away. Anders was conscious again seconds later. For the couple, waking from cryosleep was like no time had passed at all, like they had just left each other's embrace a minute ago. But outside, the scene had changed. Instead of the iconic rings of Saturn, lighted up by a faint sun a hundred times fainter than on Earth, another blue marble slowly rotated below the spacecraft. Because of the orange light from its K-type star, it was slightly less blue and white than its faraway counterpart, though hardly perceptible to the human eye. Of course their eyes did not gaze on the planet directly yet, as the craft was not equipped with windows. Telescopes, radar and infrared scanners provided better images and much more data on the side. Eagerly the two emigrants jumped at them.

"It is slightly bigger than Earth," Ellen said. "Gravity at 1.16 gees, sidereal rotation 44.2 hours, temperature snapshots between -12 and +55 degrees Celsius ... it's a nudist paradise!"

"Those are temperatures from the Cretaceous," Anders remarked. "Let's hope that the bioscanners do not find any carnivorous dinosaurs running around. But the atmosphere is what really matters. Let me see. Mostly nitrogen, a lot of water vapor, the carbon dioxide level high though not toxic and 28% free oxygen. We can breathe that with minimal filters. I am going to kiss you so well when we set foot on the surface!"

Ellen moved towards him with a naughty look on her face. She brushed her golden blonde hair to one side to attract his attention to it, half opened her mouth and then bypassed him at the last moment to reach for some instrument. Ensnared as a thousand times before he grabbed her and took an advance on his promise.

When they disentangled, breathless, they turned their attention to the control panel again. Scanners were busy exploring the visible half of the planet and data was pouring in.

"It is a jungle planet," Ellen remarked. "No ice except at extreme heights, a handful of deserts and wastelands. The rest is all forest."

"This is somewhat how Earth looked like before we started to chop down the trees," Anders replied. "This is the virgin Eden that we were hoping for. Clearly nobody has claimed the place,

so we will. I'm launching the probes to take closer look at the life on the surface."

The ship shuddered slightly when the probes detached, as a mother animal laying its eggs. The two fresh planet owners busied themselves with the data for hours on end, as if they had really rested for too long in the cryopods. They had prepared for an ecology that would be incompatible with their Earth metabolisms, surrounding them with indigestible or poisonous food and forcing them to set up an isolated ecodome. But surprisingly that was not so. Almost all amino acids, sugars, lipids and proteins, nucleic acids and enzymes were familiar Earth types. Better still, the amino acids were left-handed and the sugars right-handed too.

Anders was flabbergasted. "If Earth has a brother, it has to be this planet."

"Then lets name it 'Bror'," Ellen said.

He chuckled. "That is so dull."

"It's better than a fancy name that sounds exotic but nobody understands. Its our world; it should have a monosyllabic name that has a proper meaning and slight exotic tinge. Bror."

"All right. Now that we have family, I think we should not wait, but meet him." He loved the way that she could smile like a child, even with decades of maturity behind her eyes. "We'll board the Grasshopper tomorrow - Bror time - when we have done a few full orbits and chosen a good spot for touching down."

The landing craft detached from the orbiter and expended a tremendous amount of energy in repelling molecules to shield itself from air friction. Inside, the two fragile humans endured the stress of deceleration, knowing that a paradise was waiting for them. Anders threw up, but his groombot quickly sucked up the vomit and wiped his chin before the next breaking interval set in. After a few more grueling hours the lander screeched through the thicker lower parts of the atmosphere and then gently lowered itself on the 'Bord', a rocky outcrop on a horseshoe shaped island that had been chosen as the first base. Metal popped and clicked while the craft cooled down. Sniffers and samplers took stock of the surroundings and the exhausted pilots clambered out of their seats.

Soon the two two bent over the instruments, analyzing flora, insect fauna and pollen, looking for pathogens. Hapless plants and animals were kidnapped by robots, ensnared or killed and then dissected. There were only a few poisonous ones. One species, mostly limbs and fangs, hunted among the trees like some kind of Tarzan, but most posed little threat to humans.

Anders spent two days programming their sentinels for proper responses to all different kinds of animals. Ellen grew increasingly frustrated with the cramped safety of the Grasshopper. "Anders, they're fine! You can spend months tinkering with them and they still would not be perfect. Good is good enough."

"But the probes are still exploring the swamps, the micro cultures have not yet matured ..."

She stamped her foot. "Every test is positive, every check light is green. I want to see some *real* green, feel it, taste it!"

"Listen dear, it is too soon. "You have waited for 74,000 years, surely you can wait a few days longer?" He turned back to his instruments.

Had he looked the other way, he would have seen that his little joke backfired. Under cover of the noise of the DNA centrifuge that droned out all outer sounds, Ellen opened both outer doors simultaneously. Before Anders could react, she jumped out without even single strip of firbrarmor, uttering a shrill laugh when her bare feet touched the moss.

With a grunt, he leaped out after her, trying to catch her, but she ran towards a clump of bud-trees and nimbly climbed into one. She had forgotten the robot report that said that they reacted to the touch of herbivores by folding themselves up. The tree jerked her off the ground, three meters up towards its bloom center, where she was forced to let go. Screaming she fell down, on top of Anders, who was just too late to catch her in his arms.

No bones were broken. Relieved yet enthralled they lay on the ground, feeling the soft touch of alien moss, inhaling alien scents, listening to the noises of alien animals.

"We are king and queen of this world," Ellen said. "Those titles are hollow when we stay locked up in a tiny castle."

He remained silent. She feared that she had pushed too hard, too far; that they were off to a bad start. But then he hauled himself up with a flex of his strong legs that quickened her pulse and walked towards another tree. He plucked something that resembled a violet apple and presented it

to her.

"So take a bite, my queen. The robots say that it is safe, but who knows how it tastes?"

She hesitated the shortest moment and then took a mouthful. It was sweet, with a hinge of what resembled cinnamon. She presented him with a piece, using her tongue instead of her hands and went on to explore more familiar tastes. For the first time two aliens were making love on Bror. The native fauna did not take notice.

They spent the whole day exploring the neighborhood. Ellen had been right; the planet was safe enough. The few carnivorous animals that attacked were dealt with by the sentinels. They could walk around with fear of harm. They encountered new plants and animals at every turn, engaging in a competition to see who could name them the best and the fastest.

At a cliff edge they peered out over the swamp in the lowlands, filled with a mix of broadleaf trees, bud-trees and lower bushes, green and blue in a multitude of hues. Sharp eyes could discern a few shapes moving through the shrubs; small rotorwing birds descending from the treetops; flasheye frogs dazzling insects with brief rays of gold.

"We have succeeded," Anders said with a deep smile. "Others may come, no *will* come, but that will be long after you and I will have lived, joyed, grown old and died. We are king and queen, alone in our private kingdom."

Ellen did not reply but snuggled against his side.

The next day they started to build a house, the first of several. Actually it was the robots that did the work: mining, smelting, sawing, weaving and putting it all together. The royal couple only gave directions, combining long cherished ideas with improvisations. They erected a house on poles like stilts, with overhanging verandas and many turrets and minarets, mostly made of a hard wood with a deep red black hue. This was their home for a week. Then they moved to the western shore to carve out a rock dwelling in a cliff, devising an ingenious ventilation system that made the best of the fresh salty sea air. More dwellings followed, like the desert dome that was cooled by a water well, the tree bridge maze and the underwater observation lounge. All were located on the island which had now been named simply 'Først'. Meanwhile the landing craft was soaking up solar energy, preparing for journeys to the nearby continent and other unexplored landmasses.

Besides enjoying themselves as architects, they took up other jobs. Anders occupied himself with the taxonomy of the vibrant flora and fauna, even though he knew he could never complete it in his lifetime. "You know, despite the double photosyntheses, the roller taxa and other novelties, life here is not so different from Earth," he said to his wife. "The DNA and RNA have the same structure and we even share a large number of genes."

"Convergent evolution?" Ellen proposed. She also studied the creatures around them, but in a different way. She tried to domesticate some species and see if some could be cultivated or tamed as pets, guardians or even steeds. "Damn it, I have lost track of the wallflower again. Probably camouflaged nearby. It will only come back if I lure it in with food, but it has eaten all my trianglyseeds."

Meanwhile they started another competition, a cooking contest, to see who could make the best meal of the available food.

That evening Anders started to prepare for their meal, hairroots with bluepears and fried deerrette. Ellen went out to gather some firewood. No fear of overburdening the ecology with just two people on the planet! She trod softly over the mossy ground, picking up dead branches here and there like it was the most natural thing to do for a modern city dweller. She could not help thinking about the ancient Zen saying: 'How wondrously supernatural, how miraculous this is! I draw water, I carry fuel.' The water would have to wait for a while, because her arms were full of firewood.

In the distance Anders switched on another supernatural phenomenon: music. Guitar chords heralded one of their favorite songs, 'Strange World', by the apparently androgynous Ké. Though she had heard it hundreds of times, the alien environment made his eerie falsetto voice grip her like never before, covering her skin with goosebumps. At the camp Anders was touched too; she could hear him clapping to the rhythm and dancing. Abruptly she decided that she had enough wood and made her way back, stalking forward even more silently to surprise her husband. Then she froze solid and nearly let the wood fall out of her hands.

A man was standing near the camp, half hidden in the dark. He was naked like them and held a crude, slightly twisted and bent spear. Both of them stood completely still, while Anders could be seen miming K e's voice, preparing the food. The stranger seemed mesmerized by the scene. Only a slight quivering of his hands betrayed some emotion running through him. When Anders turned aside and light fell on the spectator's face, Ellen could see tears rolling down his cheeks.

Startled, she dropped the wood. The man whirled around to face her. Then she saw that he was not quite human. He was short, stocky and muscled, had a large broad nose and his forehead sloped back at too steep an angle. Despite the facial differences, she recognized a look of surprise. Then it changed into one of fascination. She screamed and ran towards the camp. The man uttered a loud squeal and ran the other way.

Anders had quite some trouble calming his wife down. "No, I'm not crazy, I saw what I saw! It was not an animal, but a man, I mean, nearly a man, a manlike monster, no ..."

He gripped her shoulders hard and gave her his deep grave stare that had worked in the past. In the background K e sang "Strange world! Believe and everything will be alright ..." Her heartbeat slowed a bit. "It was, he was ... a neanderthal. A live one."

Anders smiled sadly. "There are no humans on this planet, let alone cavemen. You -"

She slapped him in the face, then dragged him to the place where the man had been standing. "I'll show you the footprints!"

But the ground was hard. Their amateur wilderness skills could not discern any tracks.

"If there was a human or a neanderthal there, he would have triggered your sentinel," Anders said. "Maybe some plants puff out hallucinatory gases. I will program some sniffers to check for that."

Ellen said nothing but withdrew and locked herself into a private bubble with a sensory cap. Anders knew better than to disturb her in such a condition. He ate his meal alone, munching both food and somber thoughts.

The next day he noticed that someone had muddled with the sentinel programming. The logs showed that only one parameter had been changed: the threat factor for male humans had been increased. Though that subroutine for humans, the most complex of all, had been deemed unnecessary on Bror, it was still in the programming because the original had been designed on Earth.

Anders took the hint. He logged a message: 'I am out hunting.' and left the house without saying goodbye. And hunting he went indeed, using several advanced sniffers as dogs and his sentinel as a weapon. The sniffers were instructed to find traces of humans or something that resembled them. Of course they found the numerous tracks that Ellen and Anders had made, twisting and circling around the house. At last they spotted the footprints of the neanderthal. With a grim smile on his face Anders started to follow them, his sentinel by his side like a hunting dog. The tracks went into and through the swamp, where the human hunter struggled with the soggy ground and fallen tree trunks. After a few hours the ground became drier and the landscape more open, gradually turning into a woodland.

The sentinel was the first to be alerted. Anders heard it adjusting its position and powering up. Then it exploded! Some shrapnel barely missed him. He dropped to the ground. The sound of a heavy gunshot caught up with the bullet a second later, thundering over him and startling all animals nearby. He looked up and saw another sentinel approaching from the opposite side of the meadow in front of him. He did not recognize its design.

His heart was racing. Without the sentinel, he was defenseless. His instincts screamed: Run! Hide! but he was rooted to the spot like a rabbit transfixed in bright light. The other sentinel approached quickly, flying low over the grass. It reached him and stopped to survey the scene.

I am dead, he thought. But the thing made no move to kill him. Could it be waiting for its owner? No person showed up. The sentinel completed its inspection and then set off, backtracking Anders' route.

Back? Ellen! He sprinted in pursuit. Only after a hundred meters of running, jumping and steadily falling behind the machine did he realize he still had his communicator with him.

"Ellen, it's me! Put the house on alert. There is an ... alien sentinel coming your way, it may try to kill you!"

He could hear the panic in her voice. "An alien? By the Sun, what ... Anders, are you all right? How big is it? We only have a few small guards here."

Anders heard a deep hum behind him. He turned around and saw a medium sized aircraft flying by. It was following the same route as the smaller sentinel.

"They're coming! Get away!"

He was racing like a madman, still half way when a big explosion erupted in the distance. His mind was in tatters but his instincts kept him running. When he arrived at the house he saw only a smoldering heap of debris. This was not the work of bullets, but something heavier. Parts and pieces were spread dozen of meters away.

"Ellen!" He kept shouting her name, hopping around and turning over larger pieces of junk, fearing to spot a loose limb like in some cruel vid.

"Anders!" She came crawling out from under a bush, not bloody but the opposite: pale as a ghost. They hugged fiercely. "It came charging in only seconds after I had left the house! It gutted it into a ruin and shot all the sentinels, the builders, the sensors. Everything is torn apart, burnt or flattened to sheets." Her eyes burned into his. "When it was done, it looked around for more. It must have seen me, it must have! But it left me unharmed and simply whisked away. What was it?"

"I don't know. It handled me and my sentinel the same way. What is it after?"

As an answer, another explosion in the distance rocked the skies a few minutes later. There were more of them, spread across Først and the next hour. After a total of eight the silence held. Eight, as many as the houses they had built.

That night they held together under a makeshift shelter constructed from 'fern' leaves, which were not actual ferns but resembled them. There was no atmosphere modulation, no brain wave smoothing and no guards except their own skittish selves. In the morning they found that not only had their stuff been destroyed, but also secretly taken away during the night. Imprints and holes in the ground were all that was left of their house.

"Maybe your neanderthal was smarter than he looked," Anders hazarded.

"I have not seen any neanderthal yesterday," Ellen grumbled. "I think that those sentinels simply acted according to their protocols."

"Then who programmed them?" Anders asked, but of course there was no answer.

Their stores had been erased together with their house. They were hungry and wanted to find some breakfast. Now the jungle planet was not so friendly anymore. Ellen had no shoes on and would get bloody feet within a few kilometers, so they pulled and tore at some vines and leaves with their bare hands and worked it as best as they could. The result were a pair of big clumsy sandals that would not last long but solved the immediate problem.

They had no trouble finding food because the forest was lush and they already knew what was edible and what not. So breakfast was a meal of fruit, hairroots and brickleaves. Anders tried to make a spear out of branch of wood, but could not produce anything better than a long stick. "Meat will be more problematic. We will have to become hunters."

"The first priority is not to become prey," Ellen said. "Remember those sentinels?"

"They ignored us, so I think that were are safe as long as we are not a threat. We must find them and more importantly, their masters."

Sentinels fly and don't leave tracks, so they went back to the place where Anders' guardian had been blasted to pieces. It too had been taken away, leaving only a few broken leaves and patches of scarred grass. They pushed on, scanning for anything different than the multitude of simple green growing, slithering, hopping and buzzing life around them.

Of course the others found them first. Anders and Ellen became aware of them when they tried to get over a steep hill, failed to find a slope that they could climb, and turned back on their trail for a different route. There were footprints of Anders' boots and Ellen's large sandals, plus tracks of several barefooted people. The couple drew back in fear, looking around in all directions, while Anders clutched his stick with whitened knuckles.

A shadow from above notified them that there was one direction that they had not checked. He was squatting on a rock, apparently completely at ease. He had the same half-human, half-other head like the first one that Ellen had seen, a wider chest like a beer barrel and a mangled, shriveled left arm. Two other men appeared behind Anders and Ellen, completing an encirclement.

Both parties eyed each other for a minute. Then the rock-squatter jumped down and approached the two homines sapientes. Anders made a thrusting move with his stick, which provoked a strange high pitched shriek. Again the neanderthal approached and again he was threatened. This time he

simple grabbed the stick, wrested it out of Anders' hands with great strength and cast it aside like a toy.

Ellen bolted. She darted past the other two and ran down the hill. Anders followed immediately. The neanderthals gave chase, yelling. They kept up without difficulty. The hunters seemed to amuse themselves by teasing their prey. Several times one of them dashed past the couple with an ease that betrayed far better sprinting talent. Then the outpacer made faces, waved his arms and steered the panicked man and woman in another direction. It was like a party of devils was making ready to roast them over the fires of hell.

But after a short while they tired, while Anders and Ellen kept on running, high on adrenaline. The chase became a dogged pursuit, though the hunters did not run like dogs and started to fall behind. The two humans blushed from exertion and hope. Then they ran into an ambush. Six, seven, no eight more neanderthals of both sexes and all ages jumped from the bushes and tackled them like professional rugby players. They were captured.

The neanderthals thronged around their catch, looking them over, sniffing, touching clothes and hair and everything else that was strange and interesting. Then the original hunters came up, panting from the run. The one with the atrophied arm brushed the others aside and appropriated Ellen, probing and testing her. He fumbled with her clothing and his phallus was rising; it was clear what his intentions were. Anders tried to intervene, but strong arms held him back without trouble. Desperate, Ellen cried and wailed like a wounded animal.

This triggered a response from the man she had seen two nights earlier. He shouldered forward and cast a puzzled glance at her. Frowning, he produced a high squeal. "Sayne! Sayane!"

What? It was Anders who grasped what he was trying to say. He drew breath and sang as best as he could: "Strange world! People talk and tell only lies. Strange world! People kill an eye for an eye. Strange world! Dream one-day we'll see the light. Strange world! Believe and everything will be alright."

The man visibly brightened and tried to sing along, though he lacked the proper vocal control and sense of pitch. A few of the children joined in too, creating cacophony of shrieks, grunts and whistles. Ellen saw what was happening and sang with the rest. The sexual advances of the leader were drowned out and instantly forgotten. A woman with flabby breasts and jolly wrinkles in her face took care of Ellen and the tribe marched off.

It was just a short walk to the neanderthal camp, a small clearing next to an overhanging rock that sheltered a smoldering fireplace. There the two aliens were seated and offered food. The whole gang gathered around them. They tried to communicate but lacked both knowledge of Earth languages and their own. "Sayne ollo! Peedle tallolly lis!" was all they could say.

But of course the question was clear. There and then Ellen taught them their first word: 'music'. She sang for them, Strangle World and other songs. Some did not appreciate and got bored, but most, especially the first mimic, were fascinated. Ellen was a fairly good singer and her emotions gave her voice a strength that even non-musical people could feel. When she tore into the classic Shores of Karawala, there were once more tears in the man's eyes.

Again Anders proved ingenious. Before the stunned faces of the neanderthals he tore off several strips of skin from the stem of a bender plant, with the help of a youngster rolled them into a string and bound one end to a tree branch. He pulled it taut and plucked it, producing a single wobbly note. He also used his feet to stamp on the ground. Suddenly the music had a rhythm section, humble as it was.

Ellen jumped up and started to augment the tunes with dance. This all neanderthals could appreciate. They jumped up and down, turned and wiggled, as much out of tune as toddlers, but equally enthusiastic. Ellen even managed to teach some the basics of the Bikutsi.

The feast went on for hours, until the night descended. Everybody was exhausted and laid themselves down to sleep. Anders and Ellen huddled together, uncertain if they were now safe or not.

"Should we wait and slip away?" Ellen asked, whispering.

"No, they would track us down without trouble," Anders said. "Better stick to this road for now." Deeper into the night the male with the one and a half arm approached again, but the 'old' woman, who was in between them, alerted as if she had not been sleeping at all and buffeted him on the head. He slunk away and did not come back that night.

Whether they liked it or not, the pair of homines sapientes were adopted by the tribe. It was a mottled group, consisting of two adult males and one adolescent, three adult women and thirteen children of various ages. The men were hunters. There was no large game on Bror, but plenty of small animals to catch. The women and children gathered roots, berries, leaves and insects. The horny hunter was the chief, though his power seemed limited. 'Mother Sunshine', as Ellen had named their protector, was at least as important and the other man, the music lover, seemed ambivalent towards any leader.

The main activity of the tribe was gathering food. As the planet was one big larder, this took little time, leaving their hands free for leisure, play and grooming. There were quarrels but they were small and brief; there were moments of inspiration, few and fleeting. Life was slow and complacent.

Anders observed the gentle rhythm of the lazy group and remarked: "This is Eden."

"For them, maybe," Ellen said. "Not for us."

So they they started to turn the small dull society upside down. Though they were used to robots doing all the work for them, they were not ignorant of technology. Ellen weaved reed mats that served as roof or floor mat; Anders produced a rickety musical bow. The neanderthals were more experienced flint knappers, but had never learned how to make glue and use it to fasten their knives to their spears. The new wonder workers made soap to clean both wounds and healthy individuals, atl-atls to fling javelins further and sewn bags to carry things.

Their status rose like a rocket blasting into space. Mother Sunshine smiled all the time at them; the music man became their student in the vocal arts; the children loved them; even Half-arm grudgingly paid them respect. If they were ever king and queen of the world, it was then. Maybe the neanderthals were filthy, but they sure did not make a crowd and took their adopted kin without prejudice.

Yet kingdoms do not last. After several weeks there was a noise in the night, a rumbling like distant thunder. The tribe turned over and resumed snoring, but Anders and Ellen sat up wide awake. "An aircraft!"

Two hours later a soft buzzing sound came from the trees. That the neanderthals did not bother to wake up proved how harmless Bror was. A small probe, not larger than a bird, hovered close. "Huish ǀ\* na af \* kaleal," it said in a low voice.

"We do not understand what you are saying," Anders replied, protectively standing in front of Ellen, though rationally he knew that that was futile. "West-Saks? Fusilatino?"

The probe seemed to have some difficulty with that. "Penderay. Ummstadt. Understand," it finally said in West-Saks. "Intent threat. Biopeople, action path follow me. Sibling branches damaging, authored four."

They followed the machine into the forest. The trees were gray and silent, as if not wanting to be part of the show. They could hear other probes flying nearby and felt like cattle being herded towards the slaughterhouse. The escort led them to a riverbank half a mile away. A small craft was waiting there. When the party emerged from the forest, it opened a door. Somehow the light shining from the opening did not feel welcoming. They climbed inside and once more found themselves surrounded by metal, plastic, derfib and an artificial atmosphere. Small critterbots examined them while the doors closed and the craft took off. The noise and acceleration were mild at first, but once they had gained some altitude, the vessel blasted off in earnest, pushing them deep into speed cushions. Some hours later it slowed down, maneuvered for a while and then gently docked with another ship. The door opened again.

They stepped out into a hall dazzling with decorations, artworks, infosigns and advertisements; a cacophony of several musical melodies peppered with newsreels and commentaries; insect-robots fluttering by, spraying scent marks and giving micro-massages. It was like an LSD-trip on steroids; their senses were overwhelmed.

The suddenly the storm subsided somewhat. Some kind of demon three meters tall with the legs of a goat, a skeletal body with a tail and two cat-like heads approached them. "Apologies four!" it said, not speaking from any of its two mouths but from somewhere below. "You are pre-Blossom, no? Too much stimuli, yes? I am Yakshal Ter IV pela Hunghi, acceptance yes host. Honor parley

interview respect, now of course. Primary: How when why start planet?"

Anders blinked for a moment, then riposted. "Who, why are you?"

Some kind of horned snake rose from the ground and started to communicate with the 'host' with rapid speech in an alien tongue, accompanied by pictures that flashed up between them. Several other monstrosities, all different, joined in, all chatting away feverishly in their sign-sound language. Then the horned snake displayed some glyphs that seemed to startle the others and drove them back a little. It turned towards the two humans and spoke with a deep baritone that did not match its small snake mouth at all. "Talk now. I have few moments account. You not pre-Blossom, you lab-grown, no? Identify yous."

"We are not lab-grown," Ellen said. "We are from a planet called Earth."

For a moment the serpent watched them through its eye slits. Then it exclaimed "Truth!", turned towards the other aliens and started to jibber and jabber again.

"An answer for an answer," Anders yelled. "What races are you?"

A creature like a rabbit with six insect-like legs spoke to them. "Ha! Race moot! All fluxhaphe. You be earth monkey, great money-monkey! Ha! Score joke, points!" The snake yapped at it. It jumped away nimbly and hid behind a pillar.

"What do you on D-ghut-15?" the snake asked. "Planet."

"It is Bror, our home," Anders said boldly. "We colonized it."

This provoked a consternation that seemed to mean either laughter or anger.

"D-ghut-15 is lab," the serpent said. It winked its eyes and a moving holographic movie appeared out of nowhere. In just seconds it showed how DNA was re-factored, cells grown into neanderthals and their brains filled with information via electrodes. Then they were brought down to the planet and released, monitored by a multitude of spy bots. The movie ended with the sudden appearance of the two humans, who were displayed with virus symbols over their heads, spreading technology among the neanderthals like disease.

"When we arrived, there were no machines on the planet," Ellen said.

"You ape ship no khidrezan, not see lifers!" the insect-rabbit yelled from behind its cover. Abruptly everybody turned, not towards it but to the cat-skeleton-goat creature. There was talk, interspersed with holograms that showed possible scenario's. They converged on a picture of a multitude of spaceships traveling on some kind of three-dimensional grid, bending, stretching and splitting it. Meanwhile a single tiny speck moved in on a parabolic trajectory, completely out of alignment with the grid. Over it hovered the same virus symbol that had accompanied the pictures of Anders and Ellen. It stole right through the grid, slowing and settling down into an orbit around a planet that looked like Bror. Voices were raised, and then it appeared that some kind of vote took place. All lights focused on the greeter-demon. It made a final statement in the alien language and then was vaporized.

Over time Anders and Ellen figured out why. They found themselves on a spaceship nearby their planet, filled with thousands of humanoid, demoniac and unhumanoid forms. It was part of a mega-civilization that spread over almost a million planets, moons and space stations. Tens of thousands of years ago it had spread out from a small source to grow into a jungle of 56 trillion inhabitants. Humans had started it, but only a tiny minority was still recognizable as such. Most chose another form, or a series of them, not to get bored. Everybody was intelligent and competed with everybody else in a high-energy, high-conflict world where money, prestige and pleasure were everything. There were no states or nations, but endlessly shifting alliances and confederations. The successful ones rose to the top; the losers, like the two-headed officer in charge of securing Bror, were eliminated.

Anders and Ellen found that they were but pawns in the great play where another piece had just been toppled. Some 'people' were pissed that they had fouled the neanderthal-experiment, but more were interested in the two primitive humans themselves, who had missed out on the great galactic emigration and were now lost in the modern society. It was not just scientific curiosity. For the creatures of the mega-civilization there was little distinction between science, business, politics or entertainment. Everybody wanted to advance in the grand game. Two old fashioned homines sapientes were just one more means towards those ends. Some wanted to examine them; some to display them in museums; some tried to have them sign a contract to waive their rights to their limbic systems.



They were about to be tricked into signing one wrong contract to avoid another, when they were rescued. A lawyer pointed out that technically, they were members of society too and so should be treated as citizens, not animals. There were objections but these were repulsed with a flourish. The lawyer, a six-legged cyborg named Ror-mAm ‡ d'hal, gained substantial fame and prestige. Anders and Ellen gained some respite in an artificial home that was made to resemble an old style Earth house. The bricks were not porous, the tub had no auto-cleaner and the plants grew a hand span per day, but it was close enough. Dazed from the glitter and jitter of the mega-society they sat down to gain some rest.

"At least these space stations are clean," Ellen said.

"But we cannot keep up with them," Anders replied. "They think faster, speak faster, live faster, so much that it drives me crazy. And to what end? They compete so fiercely that all the energy is lost in strife and nothing is left for progress. They should have been masters of the universe by now, but they are just a very large shed of cackling chickens. Maybe we should apply for a transformation and become like them, so we would fit in."

Ellen clutched his face. "I don't want to be like them. I want to be me. I want to be away from these masses, the ubiquitous rivalry, this prison without walls."

So they sold some interview rights, which were valuable while their hype lasted, and bought a N3cr class scouting vessel. Some liberal cyborgs beefed up the radiation shielding and repair capacity that made it suitable for a very long voyage. An official was paid well to look the other way when the craft was up for registration. When all was ready, they disappeared without byes and set a course perpendicular to the galactic disc. Then they smiled to each other one last time and crawled into the cocoons to go into a stasis of epochs. Who knows how long it lasted?