

The Seal of Kunduon

1/10/2022

One

The Kiss

“Whomp!” went the thud, and Hogan looked up to see the bridge splatter. He dodged pieces of the transit console that flew by him and nearly hit Morgan, ducking nearby in their suddenly vibrating flivver. Reaching for his e-suit, he swiveled to watch her already stuffing that perfect body into hers, glancing worriedly back. “The belt, the belt!” he shouted, but a bit ahead of him, as usual, she’d already covered up everything but her head, sat down, pulled the long-neglected strap over her shoulder and latched it in. Since she’d already bounced off the bulkhead a couple of times, she knew the gravity jets didn’t work anymore, or the rest of the nanotronics in the sloop.

Heck, she thought, grab a seat belt if it’s the only thing that works!

Hogan finished strapping in, too, just before a tiny puncture appeared in the view port, which still offered a stellar vista, except for the growing vortex out of a small black hole that was the loss of their environment, sucked out into space.

He wondered how any of this was going to get them to light speed, thought “What the hell!” and before she could seal up, gazing into the wide eyes of the very real woman he loved, kissed her, again.

Two

A Couple of Weeks before The Beginning

“In the beginning was The Word, and The Word was with God, and The Word *was* God,” Hogan whispered to himself, over and over, the first sentence of the second-most popular book of all time, at least since Ezra Palmer.

His face lit up.

God . . . is . . . *Communications!*

He realized the network wasn't just the *business*, or even Tech Stat—it was the most powerful thing that ever had been, or ever would be--the system state called, "*Now.*"

Now, what could *he* do with that? He felt sure the solution was in The Seal, always had been. He squeezed the titanium, copper and brass medallion, hanging from the sliver-light chain in his left hand, and glanced at Morgan, pouring over star maps. She caught a questioning gaze and stared back with a knowing smile, sensing his excitement.

"Looks like a slingshot, doesn't it?"

Hogan stared at The Seal for a couple moments. Then, closing with Transponder KB31642-29A7-P, he started writing a batch file in TTranspond++, a transponder-communications interface language he had helped develop; a file he hoped would send them on their way to another galaxy and a life of true freedom, at the speed of light, *or faster.*

If it wasn't for a lost asteroid, he mused . . .

Three

Several Years before the Beginning

It was a strikingly-blue Sunday on a lush, green Earth, the day 2002 Euler disappeared.

The asteroid, a seventeen-kilometer-diameter slice of silica, iron, and phosphorous group metals with synthesized atmosphere, booming greenbelt, tiny custom steel industry and excellent views, ceased to be; no warning, no by-your-leave kiss me on the lips or anywhere else action; just *vanished.*

The Grogai had called Euler home for eight centuries, and fast approaching the beginning of the Fourth Millennium, it was incumbent upon TechStat (prevailing authority for the system named "Sol") and the Clan Grogai lucky enough to remain, to find out where it went, and God willing, get it back.

Guiding TSLG's ("Technical Statistics Leadership Group's" or "TechStat's") search would be a young, mostly human being with history.

Cecil Hogan III--"Hoge" or "Hogan," to his friends, was almost to the altar when the muster ("Urgent Callup – TSLG Command") claimed him in red Ariel text on the back of his right eyeball. He stepped out of the communion line in the small, neo-traditional Catholic Church on the beach in

Shreveport, Louisiana, put a burly finger in his ear, gazed up into the dark bio-oak rafters of Reincarnation Parish and rasped softly into the air:

“Hogan, SA-FD 242011b3, Biomass.”

“You’re ordered to report to the nearest spaceport immediately, Lieutenant Hogan, with gear,” was the reply, in a computer-generated, quasi-female, authority voice that only he could hear.

Although being ready to ship out at a moment’s notice was part of his job, Hogan thought this was beginning to get a little old.

“Was’ sup?” he asked, his blood racing.

“Just get in.”

“Understood, out.”

He pulled his finger out of his ear and looked around self-consciously. Pushing a transceiver against his eardrum helped him to hear clearly, and had become regular behavior ever since the P-blast that almost took his head off on Europa a couple of years before, and made him feel uncomfortable around people he hardly knew. However, this was an academy town, and people were used to receiving quick deployment instructions, and, Lord Knows, seeing people with combat disabilities.

Regulations required him to report immediately to an assembly point, this time NNOS, although he would stretch those orders and take a minute first to kneel at the synth black-oak railing, open his mouth, lean back, and receive “The Host, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ,” from a ministering Priestbot named “Roy.”

Before he could do that, however, he swiveled toward a quite stunning young woman, with dark eyes and fine, black hair, whom he had bumped into while stepping out of line, and was now looking straight at him. She smiled a coy smile, with no small regard, but he knew that an urgent deployment was very unpredictable.

“Sorry,” he whispered, matter-of-factly.

“No problem,” she smiled back.

Hogan thought she might be in her 20’s, but of course, there was no way to tell. She blinked shyly back at the unabashedly-competent, young (she thought) officer in his pressed dress whites and turned to step back into line. Without (she thought) anyone noticing, though, she managed to touch a fingertip of her right hand to a fingertip on his left as they bumped back together, her in front, in line.

Hogan realized then he probably would see her again.

His fingers were transmitter/receptors, like everyone else, his were configured as “open,” and he now had her personal profile, including the NTIP system-wide-ID “Leila Miranda Ortiz—EP G1-421165-e32-504,” had been assigned at birth.

She wouldn't expect his, however, because he was in uniform. But she hoped he'd vid her, whether he was dating or had a lifemate; that is, if he was into women, or even humans.

Protocol begged a call, anyway; if she was that good, she deserved one.

He gazed at her appreciatively for a moment, then he knelt and received communion and walked out of church without turning around. He could feel her staring after him as he left, and, although he did his best to think about more important things, God especially, his thoughts excited him. However, with a discipline borne of military training and his particular history, the dark, stocky, square-headed and very quick Space Academy (SA) Biomass Tech turned his thoughts to the call-up.

He briefly considered flying to his nearby private quarters for his kit, but decided to use one of the Academy's that he knew would be stored in a locker at the spaceport. A cab was hovering a few yards from the church. Since he had a lot to think about, he thought he'd let something else do the flying while he tried his best to anticipate his immediate future. He also didn't need to get in an accident at this stage of his career.

"New, New Orleans Spaceport," he shouted, and the cab set down so he could climb into the passenger's seat.

"The fare to NNOS is \$ 1,950,035.65, please pay before departure," the cab said.

Hogan waved his hand over the dashboard and saw, "Fare paid in full for New, New Orleans Spaceport Departure Queue--Call-up Exemption Etime May 1, 2997, Hogan, SA-FD AA21(x-21b;300022)," scroll down the back of his eye, this time in default Times-Roman green. He settled in for the short ride as the cab climbed to altitude.

"Relax, put your feet up. Would you like a cocktail?" the cab asked.

"Sure, make me a frosty-moonlight, a double."

A chilled drink shortly appeared in the clean, clear cup holder next to him in the black-padded seat. He took a sip, tossed his head to get his fashionably medium-length bangs out of his eyes, glanced briefly at the fast-receding Earth as the small pod skipped into the billowy clouds, leaned back and closed his eyes.

But before he could relax, he heard Bob, his physician:

"Still having problems with that ear? Let's take a look here." "Bob" was a network service, and there was no way to turn him off.

Hogan was pissed-off over TSLG's frequent updates, like all category FD (fast deployment) fighters, because regulations required him to often install special builds not needed by, or allowed to, the general public. This was very stressful, especially taking into account the pressure from the statistics project he was on. However, the network had saved his life in the past, and he certainly didn't

want to appear unappreciative, realizing that might hurt his advancement possibilities; especially because there was nothing he could do about it.

“Yeah,” Hogan replied. “The volume on the left still drops out when there’s a lot of echo . . . “

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” he was interrupted--“We’re gonna give you a new rev while you relax in the cab—good thing you didn’t fly in yourself, this’ll save us both some time.”

“Shoot,” Hogan said. Then he took another pull on his drink, closed his eyes and tried a couple of Bob’s latest meditation techniques.

Bob had been Hogan’s family physician for 90+ Eyears, and Hogan felt a quite Ura-like, sentimental attachment to a service that’d never steered him wrong, even though he occasionally sought a second opinion. Hogan’s guest planet of Earth was one big bandwidth-intensive network node, however, and the download was quickly over.

“That’s it. You should be fine now. Vid me if you need me.”

“Thanks Bob, good work,” Hogan replied and tried to relax for a couple more becoming-rarer minutes. He opened his mouth and tried his best to yawn, his left and right ears popping alternately.

In a very few minutes he arrived at the New, New Orleans bubble, built on a platform over the azure waters of the New Gulf of Mexico, with barely enough time to order his second drink, which he chugged. He debarked the cab into a queue at NNOA, winking at a ravishing, fresh-faced single-woman adjunct in the Fast-Deployment (FD) tube, and was issued a kit, including weapons, from the troop locker.

This process took a few more minutes than it should have, because the system was down, an occasional happenstance historically that was becoming more common, that everyone attributed to the sophistication of the networks, and “chaos theory.”

He was helped by one of the hutrans lucky enough to have a job assisting in troop deployment, who seemed eager to assist Hogan. The hu’ worked extra hard on the fit, which Hogan appreciated, smiling down at a malformed human without a name and flipping him a fiver. Then Hogan crossed tunnels, bought a beer at a hover-bar talking with friends and awaited further orders, although they never came; at least to deploy.

Within sixty Eseconds of 2002 Euler’s disappearance, TSLG had issued a pre-idealized call-up for 82.6 % of the unassigned, able-bodied sailors in the middle sector. Hogan would have been directed to command a forward platoon, at the least. However, TechStat soon found themselves with an embarrassing problem: where do we send the troops? And although the gigantic wheels of the greatest technological civilization in humaranic history were ready to deploy an overwhelming force to respond

to an undeniably lethal threat, no foe appeared, and lacking any kind of fight anywhere, *for* anything, everyone had to stand down.

Adding to TechStat's consternation was the fact that at the time of Euler's disappearance, a TSLG cruiser was only a couple of hundred-thousand kilometers away. The Santino pulled into the space 2002 Euler occupied less than fifteen Mminutes later—would have been there sooner if they hadn't had to wait for an authentication and authorization relay from a Mars based transponder--and couldn't find a thing.

Hogan returned the kit to the very same hu', addressing him by the number tattooed on his neck: 648-3. Afterwards, still not up to flying anywhere by himself, he hailed another cab to take him back to the academy. He was hurrying because he still had time to show his completed project to Commander Meerav, and possibly even to talk with Dr. Doolin, too, about his project and a couple of other things screwing with his constantly-more-preoccupied mind.

Four

God Is Great

Even without the commotion surrounding the Euler disappearance, this would have been quite a day.

Hogan had finally finished a grueling data project that had run over schedule. He was done, and very close to his deadline, too, with the iron-plate application he was known for, although this didn't guarantee he wouldn't be challenged for his lateness and have to fight in an arena. However, SA fighters tended to keep out of the way of a Ura FD who hadn't lost in 25 bouts.

Still, Hogan was a little apprehensive, not just about the possible challenge, but also about the pressure to get another major personality upgrade, and the whole freaking lifemate thing, too. Living was about to become more complicated, and the possibilities made his life seem more stressful than usual. Something undiscovered lay ahead, and he could feel it pressing on him, like he was sporting a thick coat of black space paint but covered in antique bird feathers, getting ready to fly into the future.

He was maturing quickly and he could feel it, and he knew he would be leaving the bright green fields of Earth again, probably soon, and that he would miss them, almost as much as he missed his family's rock, Toutatis, or their ancestral home in the red sand caverns of Mars.

Space can be a lonely place, but that's where he chose to live, and work, and was happiest.

So, it was with mixed emotions that he stared up at “The Project” in the BioMass lab in dome at the Space Academy of New, New Orleans. Although it involved an active census of one of Terra’s lowest creatures, the implications for planetary control were astounding.

In a little over an Eyear, Hogan had built a program that accomplished the indexing, in real time, of an *exact count* of every presently-living and recently-to-long-dead earthworm, on Terra. He stepped back from the virtual representation of the Earth that hung in the air in front of them and glanced at Commander Meerav, his professor. It sparkled frenetically back at them: green for birth, yellow for living and red for death, as they gazed up at the hexadecimal digit hovering in the air next to it:

12BB F82H was in the terabillions, yet existed only for the briefest of moments. Almost instantaneously thereafter it became 12BB FC9H, and continued morphing so fast it became a blur, except that either of the men could squeeze the muscles around their eyes and slow the refresh rate down until it made sense, stop or release it merrily on its way again, documenting the birth, brief life, and death of a planet full of *URSULA CORPANIUS*; yet another quantum leap in agricultural production for a very over-populated solar system.

Meerav, a thin, dark-featured, wiry overachiever with a memory for figures, regarded the display for a few moments and then turned to Hogan, impressed. “That’s a lot of worms,” he said, and then, simply, “God is Great.”

“God *is*, Commander. Thanks for the support, sir.”

“20 hours a day for 6 weeks straight, to finish *almost* on time. You got a little hyper-drive somewhere we don’t know about?”

“Sir, I’m *not* a bot.”

“No, Lieutenant, that’s one thing you certainly aren’t,” Meerav laughed, differentially.

“Replacing every earthworm on Earth with a version that reports its condition and GPS, in less than a year, I really didn’t think it could be done,”

He stared at his underling.

“And if cryonics does their job, we can even get ‘em back!” Hogan laughed.

“Click, and find out how many reindeer there’ll be for Christmas; then (much slower and measured), “Yeah, let’s hope so.” Soon after that Meerav added, “Don’t think that’ll hurt you, huh? Two days late?”

Pause back.

“I’m ready.”

Meerav looked him in the eye and the men shook hands. Light Commander Meerav was head of the department, a not-so-small backwater of BioMass; NatureStat. And he saw Lieutenant Hogan had distinguished himself, with a commitment to the work and some top-notch late-hour coding.

He was a little bit worried someday Hogan could promote past him, so he contained himself, and didn't show *too* much appreciation, and he was also very aware of the dangers Hogan faced for his sometimes too-conspicuous creativity.

As for himself, Hogan dreamed of one day passing Meerav in the air, wearing a Captain's Badge, above his hard-won Blue Combat Cluster.

His thoughts strayed for a moment, and he thought of Christmas, the New Year and "Palmer Time," his imminent search for a lifemate, and where in hell he belonged in this still way too fast, too full, and always more dangerous universe.

So, he smiled at one of his mentors: "I've still got time to show Dr. Doolin."

Meerav said, "Congratulations," adding, "In the name of God, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful, Peace be upon you." Hogan put his left hand over his heart, his right had on the butt of his firearm, and bowed while looking into Meerav's eyes, "Palmer's peace be upon you." Then he walked a few feet away, sat down in the air and took off.

Gliding slowly out of a nearby window that displayed the muted, green glow of a soft shield, and picking up speed, he flew from the grass and wildflower rooftop of Terracort 459-1 A4776 to another one in the same complex a couple of clicks away. He circled in the air above it awaiting in the pattern, and noticed it was about to rain, although he couldn't remember being told. Slowing down quickly he hovered in, stood up and walked through another soft shield under a silver canopy that was an entryway to the mostly underground office complex of BioMass.

Five

She'll Keep Me Home

Entering Terracort 459-1 A4762, Hogan was immediately challenged by a robotic guard who demanded his network ID. After scanning, he was released to enter the main corridor, where he turned a translucent corner in a wide hallway and ran right into him.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing here . . ."

"Dr. Doolin, it's done. I flew over to tell you personally."

“Well, well, finally . . . and only a little late,” he enthused, “I don’t expect that will hurt you very much, eh? “

Dr. Hemet Doolin, a Captain in TSLG’s Space Force, was pure Marman, and at almost five feet tall when he stood up on his thick hind legs, which he did now, was almost two feet shorter than his precocious student. Dr. Doolin’s head rose in the air and he binked right next to him and put a hairy paw on his shoulder.

Dr. Doolin was Statisman 1st, and one of very few entities on planet with statutory responsibility for biological census and statistical body-mass planning. He was also a Palmerite, and not to be explicitly trusted in every regard, although with Hogan’s history they understood each other better than most.

“Well, I guess you think you’ve earned a well-deserved week or two off, maybe fly to a pleasure world, take in some air—“

“No, thank you, very much; actually, ah . . . no.”

Dr. Doolin waited patiently, but when Hogan looked uncomfortable and wouldn’t go on just said, “I see.”

Hogan looked even more uncomfortable after that; realizing he’d never find out if he didn’t ask, presently queried, shyly, “Actually, I’d like to start looking . . . I’d like clearance to seek a lifemate.”

Big pause from Dr. Doolin, then: “A lifemate? Well, well, well.” Doolin had thought for some time this might be coming, but still sounded surprised.

“Yes, I . . . thought maybe the time had come.”

“You don’t think a lifemate will interfere with . . .”

“No sir, it’ll . . . she’ll keep me home,” he interrupted, again.

Dr. Doolin was acutely aware of the continuing insubordination, but didn’t seem inclined to censure one of his most successful, decorated cadets, his reputation for creativity and individuality striking in a military setting, although many thought that was because of his family connections.

He also recalled that on the pleasure world, team-building exercises, Hogan had always seemed a little less enthusiastic, more shy and careful, also Ura, always Ura: too many unmodified genes; more than just a little, “too human.”

But in spite of all that, Dr. Doolin hadn’t accurately anticipated his young charge’s desire to “settle down,” although Martians did sex and family differently than other humaratics

“With the points you’ll accrue from finishing . . . “ Dr. Doolin continued,

“Yes sir, if you could certify me.”

“Certify! Think you’re ready for that?”

“Yes. I can finally afford it,” he laughed, “and I’m ready for the challenges and responsibilities. I’m also ready to work on something a little more complicated than just counting up worms, Sir.”

The Martian found the segway breathtaking, much more than simple insubordination. He sized up Hogan, who looked like he’d finally realized his much-too-human proclivity for conflict and rebelliousness.

After an even longer pause Doolin just asked, “Lieutenant, what’s come over you, a lifemate and certification, in the same cycle? “

Hogan looked him straight in the eyes. “Yes sir.”

An understanding expression presently appeared on the furball’s face.

“I’ll consider your requests at the appropriate time, Lieutenant. However, there’s a job that needs to be accomplished before anyone else gets any R&R *or* favors around here.” It took a couple of moments for Hogan to get his drift, and then he blinked, excited at a prospect he hadn’t anticipated.

Dr. Doolin continued, “There’s a rock not far from your place that we’re having a little trouble locating right now . . . ”

“But, I’m only in BioMass,!” Hogan interjected, confused. Then, he caught himself, straightened to attention and finally said, “Excuse me, Sir, for my excitement, and interruptions.”

Doolin, summoning a Marman’s natural patience, soon said, “There is no ‘only,’ Lieutenant. Maybe someday you’ll realize it was never about the worms.” He let this sink in for a few moments, and continued: “It’s time for you to dust off your cosmology chops. How’s tomorrow morning at ten?”

“I’m at your convenience, Captain,” Hogan replied, knowing that with his project finished he was ready to be re-deployed, although thinking in the back of his mind he might have enjoyed a couple weeks leave, first.

“However, before we meet, and it appears you haven’t heard,” Dr. Doolin continued, “You’ve been challenged.”

“By whom, Sir?”

Dr. Doolin slowly and carefully said, “Aoki.”

“Aoki?” Hogan repeated softly, caught off guard. Here was another unanticipated complication. He recovered quickly, and said, “I’m ready for anyone.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. Why don’t you finish him early, and we’ll meet right after that, either at my office or in the hospital?”

“No problem, Dr. Doolin. I’ll see you at your office, 10 am.”

“Fine.” They stood gawking at each other for a few seconds. Then Hogan saluted and Dr. Doolin binked away, leaving Hogan deep in thought.

Six

May the Best Being Win

Hogan hovered over the small arena built into the side of one of the mini-courts at 0745. The bowl was already crowded. His Second, and one of his best friends, Lieutenant JG “Trace” Bowman, was there when he arrived.

Because the challenge was for lateness and nothing more exciting, with no expectation they’d attract much of an audience, no one had thought to reserve anything bigger, and the space would be theirs for only an hour. That usually gave fighters plenty of time to spar, and more than enough time for the cleanup ‘bots to put everything back in order afterwards.

Trace concurred with Aoki’s assistant, Chuvalo; they’d fight in front of a small group of friends, and afterwards, go straight to breakfast and beer. That’s the path most challenges took. However, Hogan’s and Aoki’s reputations for hand-to-hand combat preceded them, and when Hogan hovered into the arena, still a little dopey from sleep, he was surprised to find it packed with a standing-room-only crowd. In fact, a couple of vendors had found out about the late-listed challenge and were there selling Ever-Clear and snacks. Hogan was a little surprised to pick out both Commander Meerav and Captain Mackinly, the head of the Academy, sitting together in the first row.

When Hogan landed, Meerav flashed him a thumbs-up sign and Hogan waved back. Trace was excited by the unexpected turnout.

“Whoa, looks like this’ll end up being featured. Want to change weapons?”

“No.”

Hogan had to force himself to concentrate, and put the bigger-than-expected crowd out of his mind. He wasn’t about to change his strategy or tactics. Aoki had challenged, so Hogan had his choice of weapons, and therefore had chosen the knife, because it was simple, he was experienced with it, and because with his physical abilities, it should be to his advantage.

Hogan had fought before with lasers, flash pistols and even a small pulse blaster. He’d battled once with a spear and net, like an ancient Roman Gladiator, and his challenger that time was a Human-Kodiak Bear-IC combo, lucky to escape with just one of his eyes still functioning, even though it was the one on the back of his head.

And although it was best *not* to communicate your fondness for a particular weapon, giving an opponent time to study the latest configurations for attack and defense, in the 25 challenges Hogan had

accommodated in the past ten years, in more than a quarter he'd chosen the Bowie knife. He had never lost.

Hogan was very careful not to let his feelings for his challenger intrude on the process at hand, either. He looked over at Aoki, greasing up on the opposite side of the ring. Hogan had always liked him, in spite of his by-the-book attitude and his seeming fondness for behind-the-scene intrigue. In fact, Hogan had taken him under his wing for a while, when they were deployed together on Europa.

He thought of their time together, chasing a cadre of insurgents led by the infamous Andretto himself. When the ice and slate dust cleared in their floods and they went about counting bodies, Andretto's wasn't among them, although they'd killed hundreds, mostly in close-order fighting in the ice caves. It was here that Hogan had distinguished himself by defending a position that was in danger of being overrun, and he'd been decorated.

Gazing over at Aoki's massive arms and legs, though, Hogan quickly overcame any past fondness. Lacking a war or campaign, this was one of the ways a junior officer advanced in Space Academy, and concern for Hogan's inferior's past loyalty and friendship would not be a factor.

Aoki was younger, stronger and part Himalayan Ape. He'd been designed with the latest technology, superior sensors and faster processors. He had the trumpeted E of A advantage, too. Although Aoki was sociable, sensitive, and well liked by his friends, peers and supervisors, Hogan expected a very cold opponent, unobstructed by anger and negative emotions, a pure killing machine.

The referee walked over to pluck a hair from Hogan's head. Hogan raised his hand to help but the ref said curtly, "I'll do that," located a strand of hair next to an ear, plucked it out, slid it into a little clear box that contained Hogan's DNA certificate, engineering schematics and NTIP ID, watched it turn green and holding it high, announced to the crowd, "Entity One, the challenged, Cecil Hogan III of Toutatis!"

The already somewhat inebriated crowd of spectators responded: "Looks like a Clone to me!" "He's not who you think he is!" and, "The right man with the right shit!"

The referee then flew over and performed the same ritual at the other side of the small oval, and after he yelled, "Entity One, the challenger, Aoki-san of Tanbir," Aoki turned to Hogan, put a clenched fist in an open hand, and bowed. Hogan bowed slowly back, not taking his eyes off of him.

The referee held up his hands to calm the crowd, and when they did, continued his announcement: "Ladies, gentlemen, furballs, hu's and ICs," welcome to the 7th Entity Challenge of the year! On this side is the challenger, Aoki-san, Entity One, mother of two from The City of Tanbir, weighing in at 615 Kilos, with a height of 2.15 meters!"

The crowd cheered lustily for the Tanbiran.

“On this side is Cecil Hogan III, Entity One, mother of none, from Toutatis by way of Valles Marineris, weighing in at 557 Kilos, with a height of 2.24 meters!”

The crowd cheered again, not as loud, and Hogan felt immediately they were partial to home-worlders, or maybe it was just challengers. He felt surprised to find out Aoki was multiple entity certified, mother of two clones already, although he could have gleaned this information from his profile if he'd thought to look. His family must be better off than Hogan thought. Also, wondering if he had been fighting next to Aoki in the past, or just one of his clones, was a little unsettling, too.

“Ready, Challenged?” the ref bellowed.

Hogan nodded, noticing the cold stare coming from Aoki.

“Are you ready, Challenger?”

Aoki nodded.

“May the best being win!”

A roar came from the crowd as the referee quickly took his position hovering in the air above the two fighters.

“Fight!” screamed the referee.

Seven

Dreams In Time

Al and Sylvia Hogan, Hoge's great, great, great grandparents, were geneticists, winners of the Mendel Prize, and direct descendants of a scientifically-prominent family that was persecuted on Earth in the mid-to-late 21st Century like many other scientifically educated people.

They arrived on Mars in 2093, part of a last group of scientists, educators and intellectuals fleeing social and political repression, environmental catastrophe, and a continuing World War IV on Terra. They'd been subjugated because they were smart. It was the age of brutes on Earth. The serious, continuing conflict between science and institutional religion, specifically the conversion of the United States Government to a Bible-based republic, “God's Domain,” in 2044, had ushered in a final, desperate attempt by the conservative and reactionary president and board of the short-lived “Planetary Council” to be able to contend with the always good for business dictum—location, location, location.

For the world was a Russian domain now—enabled by the vast cooler climes of Siberia, with smaller still-temperate regions in Alaska, the Norse Countries and Antarctica, and there were still

ongoing last-ditch climate projects on the Earth as well as Mars and the Moon, too, though humanics (Martian's hadn't been invented, yet) seemed to be fighting a rapidly losing battle.

Al's parents were graduate instructors at University of California in post-second earthquake San Francisco, and, realizing it was only a matter of time before their family would be arrested, helped their Son and Daughter-in-Law compete for, and win, two of the last postings to a genetic lab still operating on Mars beyond the control of the straw "Planetary Council" (formed by a coalition of the USA, Russia, Norse countries and Japan. This alliance, heralding the fast-disappearing UN&C Inc., gave Al and Sylvia a small window to leave Earth, journey to Mars, and continue their lives as research scientists.

They were both fresh out of U.C. Berkeley in Sacramento, with degrees in Cloning, Robotics and AI.

It was on a Martian night in 2201 that the accident occurred that resulted in the "birth" of the first Marman. According to legend, Al and Sylvia had already conceived a son, in spite of the prohibition against it, to be called Normal Hogan, and were hiding Sylvia's pregnancy from the UN&C. (This was correct, although they'd come close to deciding against that, not only because of the legal prohibition, but most importantly because they saw what lay ahead, especially the overt prejudice beginning to be directed toward the fewer and fewer naturally born, unimproved, sometimes called "Ura," or backward, human beings still allowed.) These "unimproved" entities, without benefit of the more competitive installed technologies, were slipping into the lower classes, the severely disadvantaged, and newest slaves of their age, called, "hutrans," waiting, forever, to be upgraded to "TSLG "Minimum level."

However, Al and Sylvia saw great advantages in unmodified human beings that proponents of modified entities didn't see, and made the decision to have their own, naturally-birtherd son.

Early on, some people, especially religious people, thought humans would always be superior to machines, no matter what advances technology brought, and Al and Sylvia were devout, transitioning from Christianity to Palmer.

It was Myear 2201 in the still relatively small community that would grow up some day to be billion-soul Mariners City, located 1,000 feet down the side of the biggest chasm in the solar system. Al was sitting at a desk in their small home laboratory, soldering a circuit board with his forefinger. He glanced over at his soul mate and fellow scientist.

She removed a small, puffy, silver wafer from a canister crammed into a messy corner at the end of a long chrome work bench, held it up to the light and a quizzical expression came to her wide,

teeth-filled mouth. Her silver hair drifted in lazy curls down her back, and her matching eyes gave her a cool, magnetic, angel-like look.

“350 degrees for an hour and a half?” big fore-headed Al intoned dryly. “Did you make gravy?”

“I want to test this.”

“Sweetheart, it’s gonna take some time to find out how well it works, if it even does,” Al added, before rubbing his chin slowly--“Although we’ve still got one license left from good ‘Ole Mars U . . . and remember, you’re a Hogan now.”

“And we *Hogans* seem to have a lot,” Sylvia beamed, “especially when we don’t get caught violating research protocols,” she smiled, not ironically.

“Let’s get started.”

Al rose from the bench grinning wickedly with a better idea. “Why don’t we start growing this improved human being in an hour or two,” he cooed, with something else on his mind, and walked over, standing very close to his very silver and very sexy (in a scientific way) bride, who, grinning back at him just asked, “An hour, really?”

He smiled suavely, looking in Sylvia’s eyes, as he pried the container from her hands and twisted them gently behind her back, slowly, softly, but firmly.

“Let’s test this, first . . . “

Al started kissing Sylvia all over her pretty face and neck. Neither of them noticed the canister holding the wafer, now forgotten, that Al laid down on the end of the work bench without replacing the cap. Falling out, the wafer landed softly on a ventilation duct, bent in half, and began oozing large drops of blue-green liquid into the level below them.

“Ummmm. Your room, or mine,” Sylvia whispered.

“We share a room, remember,” came Al’s breathy reply.

“Fine, mine then,” Sylvia started licking his lips with her tongue.

Suddenly she stopped. “We’re not going to get into any trouble for this, right?” She said. “We’re gonna use protection, this time, right? Why don’t I suck on a lozenge and give half to you?”

“To hell with them” Al hissed, “We applied for a freaking kid 5 years ago. I say let’s just do it ourselves, although we may need to try again, and again, and . . .”

“I’m not getting thrown out of here with you, darling. You can get red sand in your teeth when you eat if you want to.”

“Fine. I’ll suck on a lozenge.”

“Good.”

They stumbled away, laughing and pawing each other, as the wafer continued to ooze into the grate. Hogan, in his dream, could see a fuzzy face hovering in the air above him.

Eight

He Didn't Have to Kill Me

In a blur, Aoki covered the almost 20 meters between them, parrying Hogan's knife hand and lunging for Hogan's neck, holding his knife folded back against his wrist. It was a classic attack--an attempt to turn an opponent, and either cut his jugular on the way out or stick the back of the neck on the recovery stroke.

Hogan wasn't surprised. He parried the lunge perfectly and closed on Aoki, moving behind him in the direction of the spin he had induced with his parry. However, by the time he got behind him, Aoki had turned completely around again, this time sweeping Hogan with a low roundhouse.

Although Hogan quickly hiked his legs to let Aoki's kick pass, he was caught off guard by the bigger man's speed, and went down backwards just as Aoki managed to catch Hogan's feet with his ankle. Aoki followed him down, squatting and pushing his knife past Hogan's head, barely missing a killing blow and nicking his ear. Then he quickly pulled the knife back into a chambered position, and stepped over him, ready for another thrust.

Hogan knew if Aoki swiped again with the sharp, bright steel, the fight would be over. However, Aoki was so intent on his kill that he didn't see Hogan's leg come around, for when Hogan went down he had thrown all his weight into contracting his legs.

His right knee caught Aoki squarely in the butt and Aoki went sprawling across the ring. But in the accelerated spin Aoki managed to pilfer Hogan's knife, which he lost hold of and watched slide across the grass of the arena, before Aoki picked it up and both men rose slowly to their feet.

Damn! Hogan watched Aoki tuck his Bowie knife against his other wrist while slowly straightening, a wry smile coming to his lips.

Arena challenges were usually quick affairs, and for one of the few times in his short career, Hogan knew he was in a world of trouble. In a fraction of a second, his processors had mapped more than a thousand scenarios: attack, feint, roll, turn in the air, grab the wrist, kick and sweep with the other leg, etc., all with probabilities way less than 50%.

Hogan became aware of the roaring blood lust of the crowd. They were all on their feet, screaming, while in a hazy part of his consciousness he refused to believe he was about to be beaten,

and still wondered where the blinding speed had come from, to an entity that by all genetic rights should have been considerably slower than he was.

He gulped and faced his fate with the stoicism that was imbued in him by his training, and by the latest version 14.32 “Academy Edition” personality he’d recently downloaded. Then he felt something else, too; he was scared. And very soon after that, he felt something he wasn’t supposed to feel: he got mad.

In fact, he felt chemical and psychological reactions that had been outlawed for centuries begin to creep over him. When Aoki came for him, slowly and carefully this time, setting up in a modified fencers position, with the rear knife pointed up, Hogan was so ready.

Respecting his former commanding officer, even though unarmed, Aoki feinted once, twice, and struck. Feeling his second wind, Hogan let him in, quickly turning his body sideways so that the knife passed right in front of his stomach. Hogan then grabbed Aoki’s lead hand and the knife in it simultaneously, breathing out, relaxing like an old time Aikidoist.

He brought it to his middle, bent the wrist back onto itself, pointed his hara to Aoki and spun around, simultaneously raising the knife to Aoki’s chest. The adrenaline from his fear and anger was now coursing through Hogan’s system, and with practiced strength, he began to push the point of the knife into Aoki, who gave ground by backing up slowly, until he stepped against the grass berm that separated the fighting area from the buffer zone in front of the seating.

Meanwhile, Aoki had taken a fruitless swipe with his other hand at Hogan’s head, quickly dropping the other knife in excruciating pain, as he grabbed his bent wrist with his other hand, pushing back against Hogan painfully.

Hogan pushed the point of Aoki’s knife against his chest until it had entered about a half-inch, and was maybe another inch from Aoki’s heart. Aoki’s busy personal medical ‘bots were humming like bees, isolating tissues and staunching blood flow, although very soon they would not be able to compensate for the severing of heart or artery.

Aoki had backed up until they were at the very edge of the ring, where Hogan expected him to tap out at any moment, but it was here that Aoki’s strategy was revealed. As Aoki-san’s back foot touched the berm, his anti-grav’ boots spun him into the air and he twisted, slipped out of Hogan’s grasp while still holding his weapon, transferred his energy into his now free knife hand, and plunged the knife directly into Hogan’s heart.

Hogan barely had time to hope the arena’s medical ‘bots were fast and efficient, before he slumped over and dropped heavily, hitting the ground.

As he drifted into unconsciousness, Hogan was confronted by all of the important, unaccomplished tasks spread before him, everything from getting certified for multiple entities to finding a lifemate, and he felt a momentary sadness when he realized these things wouldn't happen. Then he saw for a moment the woman he had bumped into in church, and he started laughing at the irony of worrying about "things still to accomplish," when he was obviously dying. A beat or two after that, he was gone into the warmth, connected to everyone and everything.

His last thoughts were of his shock at his opponent's quickness, and as he faded, memories he didn't know took him back to his long-ago great-great-grandparent's time, a memory of someone else, a time he'd studied in school but didn't realize he knew, a time of ancestors, mistakes, a system falling apart, and the first Martian.

Nine

Doofus

They met in a dusty, cold corner of a level-three basement near a biology lab and community grow site that also offered a network hub, and therefore a powerful place to play virt. Normal was running down a corridor in his first-person shooter hologram, blasters blazing, in an Esuit, when suddenly an unarmed but unknown entity appeared six feet to his rear. Hogan turned in the hologram to see a fat, gray, ball of hair with an exoskeleton and a round face wearing what passed for a smile. It had crept up on Normal, but as soon as it was discovered, "binked" away quickly, like a flea, terrified, and pressed itself against a wall of the tunnel, abruptly disappearing into the wall.

Normal, startled, ran in the other direction for a couple of meters, then, realizing he wasn't being pursued, slowed down, stopped and turned around, looking over at Doofus, who didn't move. Normal gaped at the wall of the cave for a while then walked back, slowly and hesitantly, and when he'd finally got to where he'd last seen, "it," he whispered, conspiratorially, "Hi. I'm Normal. What's your name?"

Doofus didn't know what to say. But because he was sired from the genes of a tough Martian sand flea combined with Sylvia's experimental syrup intended to herald a race of super-intelligent, peaceful, honest to a fault, human-combination animals, the first "Martian" slowly emerged from the side of the cave, dusted sand off of his carapace and just said, "I dunno."

It'd been known from the early days of human satellite and robotic exploration there was water, and with that carbon-based life on Mars, and proved on the ground in the first permanent migration

colonies in the 2050's. This on a planet that averaged minus-sixty degrees Centigrade on the surface, with dust storms that lasted years and winds over four hundred miles an hour scouring everything with sand. However, now an intelligent interface between Martian and Earthian (and to become known as, "humaranic") life had begun.

"Do you want one?" Normal asked, solicitously.

"I Dunno."

"I'll call you Doofus," Normal said, "Because you don't know anything, OK?" Then he added, "And remember, my name is Normal."

"Doofus; Normal," Doofus said, pointing from his chest to Normal' with a sound that amounted to Martian singing, which is how they communicated. He became more round and furry, with a little fuzzy head that would rise out of his body when he felt secure. He also made a buzzing sound when he spoke. Normal moved closer, and touched him. After he did, Doofus flinched, disappeared, and reappeared almost instantaneously 10 feet away.

"Wow, how'd you do that?" Normal asked, delighted. He walked up to Doofus again, slowly pushing his finger into him. Doofus stood his ground this time.

"How'd I do that," Doofus agreed, warming up to his new friend.

In the distance, they could suddenly hear Normal's mother calling: "Normal, Normal! Time for dinner!"

Normal looked perplexed for a moment, then said, "You'd better hide here, I'll come and see you after I eat."

"Hide." Doofus buzzed. Normal pushed him under the metal stairs. "You stay here, I'll be back," he ordered, and left him there.

As Hogan slowly regained consciousness he realized it wasn't his Great, Great Grandmother calling, after all; it was another voice indeed, calling a different name entirely.

Ten

Would You Like Me to Fluff Your Pillow?

"Lieutenant. Lieutenant Hogan, can you hear me?" the nurse asked again. "Just blink your eyes, if you can't talk."

He awoke slowly in a private room in St. Jude Hospital, not far from Shreveport and the Academy; an angel-faced nurse named "Molly," calling his name.

He remembered who he was, and most of what had happened, although, naturally, he was a little fuzzy on the details.

The medical personnel in the stadium, (a fortuitous team, it turned out, drawn from staff and spectators, including a V-Corps trauma nurse), had quickly sealed him into a local-field filled with saline solution, blood anticlotter and oxygen. While his personal cloud worked on the lesion, he was being treated for shock, and monitored closely by experienced personnel over common devices provided by the arena. This response returned a high 90's percentile survival rate, success usually determined by the time it took to get the patient enclosed and stabilized.

When he awoke a couple of hours later in a private room, in a beautiful meadow "on top," the heart repair accomplished and his tissues healing, his first thought was joy and amazement at being alive, and an appreciation for his short but already eventful life. Shortly thereafter, his mind wandering, he experienced some shock at his defeat, and he swore to himself he would review the fight as soon as he could stomach it. (When he did watch it later, in slow 3-D, he saw how close Aoki had come to severing his pulmonary artery with that last, quick thrust, and realized how damned lucky he was to have a better-than-average medical crew in the arena that day.)

His third consideration, however, was a little surprising: he thought of the young woman, Leila, whom he had bumped into in church a few days before. He hadn't had the time yet to search for her, but he knew she might have viewed the challenge, as this was public entertainment. And he wondered, if he'd died, and she had been watching, what she'd have thought; would she have missed him? Would it have even mattered to her?

He also felt a queasy new feeling that something instrumental had changed in his life; because he had fought challenges for years without losing, and now he felt suddenly, wholly, vulnerable. He could feel his humanity in a raw, almost suffocating way, and the promise of a thousand years of incremental triumph over death, at least for the well-off, was fading quickly. Like all young men sometime in their youth, he now realized the likelihood he would die one day, and not live forever.

"Would you like me to fluff your pillow?" Molly asked as she watched him open his eyes and moved closer to adjust the thickness of his pillow and height of his head with a wave of her hand. She competed for space with two nursing-assistant hover-bots that were already ministering to him, and she wore a white midi-skirt and opaque orange blouse, which, of course, she could transform into another mid-length solid color at whim.

Hogan, not that long ago, would have been busy trying to get a date, however something funny was happening; changing him daily. He could feel this, and in spite of all of the laws against it, he was getting a little angry, too.

“No, I wouldn’t. As a matter of fact, instead of being held here, I’d like to get back to my unit,” he quietly demanded.

She started, as her patient was obviously Ura. She was also a Lieutenant.

“Soon enough, caveman. You know, if you stop losing challenges, you won’t have to go through this.”

Hogan tried his best to sit up and direct a retort, but a wave of nausea quickly overcame him. He managed only to elicit a quick moan, and fell back to lie on unseen bubbles of pressurized air that supported him as surely as if he was lying on a big red brick.

“You know what I’m going to do,” she confided, sounding something less than sincere, “I’m going to ask a doctor if you can go home as soon as you’re able to sit up without growling.” She waved his head a little lower and walked around him, all the while pointing her finger straight at him, taking readings, and ended up smiling sincerely just inches from his face.

“Rest now, Lieutenant, and get back to work as soon as you can,” she said, squeezing his arm gently. “I’ve given you a little sedative to help you sleep. Vid me if you need anything,” she said, and walked out, passing Dr. Doolin, as he walked in, sat down on a floating chair and watched Hogan fall asleep.

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