

. . . On his way out of BuAsCom, Hogan ran into a couple of sailors he hadn't seen in Myears, and with them he made a bee-line for one of the pleasures he had missed most about Mars—the Leaf and Pig Pub in Valles Centris, uptown, thirty-fourth level. It was 5 pm, Mars time, and he decided to take his leave as mariners have in ages past—sitting on a stool, drinking leisurely, looking out the sky tubes at the comings and goings.

Because a cull was coming, he knew the bar would be crowded.

Seventeen

The Leaf & Pig

A cull was something no humaranic, on Mars, at least, had undergone in over 15 Myears, and which no humaranic should ever have to see: the trashing of unneeded entities by statute, without previous personal notice. Ironically this was something everyone had become used to over centuries, realizing the elimination of inefficient entities was needed for the survival and betterment of society.

The problem was, there was no way to know *who* or *when*, ahead of time, unless, of course, you knew someone.

Newscreens would advise a cull was scheduled, major or minor, quoting official numbers but without disseminating any information about the specific areas where it would occur, or giving anything but a general time frame, and offer network and legal services to handle final arrangements. Egress was throttled at the time of announcement, except for people with security or diplomatic clearances, and active duty military. This way everyone had reasonable time to prepare. And when the time *did* come, a planned percentage of organisms, human or not, modified or not, robotic or cyborg or mixed or not, somewhere, would just stop functioning; killed outright, if old, worn out, or Ura, by the closest transponder micro ray. It was marketed as “DPSS, Drop in Place, a Sacrifice for Society.” This happened disproportionately, of course, to hutrans and other sub-entities. However, theoretically it applied to all, and, every once in awhile, took the occasional oligarch, too, just so everyone would know it was “fair” and more important, who was still boss.

This was a weird form of digital Darwinism in which TechStat looked at your graphs and productivity and unit cost per metric and decided if you should be eliminated. Political components and exercises were not supposed to be part of the algorithm. The idea was survival of the fittest. However, TechStat had twisted the idea, like most dictatorships, so that this fate descended on lower classes more than most: people without jobs, homeless and less-educated entities; the poor.

As usual.

More important was an unexpected and unexplained result: Over time, culls seemed to eliminate creativity in society; the people who were more passionate, got angriest, and were often least integrated and less “improved.”

The first cull was first attempted (but never finished) in 2763, administered by the TSHCB, TechStat Humaranic Competency Board, an agency responsible for population harvesting as well as providing statistics to EntityCensus by statute. And although this statistical approach was definitely up his alley, and Hogan had more knowledge than most people about what to expect, he was still completely in the dark about the schedule or whom it applied to, and as such was surprised like everyone else, when humaranics, while walking along in conversation, fell to the floor and were picked up quietly and quickly, taken away by reclamation bots. People partied way more pre-cull, but mostly didn't modify their schedules a lot because of one upcoming. However, there was always a remarkable increase in productivity, in the weeks leading up to one.

The good news to Hogan was, with satisfactory fitness reports, he was exempt.

Culls recycle entities when their reproductive and social liabilities exceeded the carrying capacity of the system. And Hogan hadn't gone through one in years, with his father, long ago.

But having steeled himself losing friends in combat, and also because of his last Military-Grade Stoic 17fa371-3392 personality update, he was more relaxed than most with the upcoming tragedy that would affect others way more than it would him.

Therefore, Hogan was feeling warm and nostalgic, hearing the sounds and appreciating the smells of his birth planet, breathing past the fine sand that drifted through the microscopic cracks in the tubeways into his nose and hair, and would occasionally cause him to cough when he didn't wear a mask. He walked a mile or so from BuAsCom, lollygagging in the shops, to an elevator, then rode it down to the bistro, getting a Mars Dog on the way.

He had hoped he'd be able to spend a couple of hours at his family apartment, about fifty clicks on, but realized he wouldn't be able to accomplish that when he saw how hectic everything was: people were queued everywhere. Part of the reason he walked was because he couldn't find an unused cab, and there were no personal flying areas allowed this close in to most spaceports, even for the military. He was also surprised to see so many new fortifications and armaments, and there was a security presence on his birth planet that he'd never seen before. He seemed to be scoped or challenged every time he turned around in the tubes.

He gawked at the steel reinforcements, filled with water to mitigate the sun's radiation on the surface, which in many spots had been so built-out that they refracted the season's low-level sunlight

into reflected rainbows. Hogan saw the structural amendments in the tunnels and below, and couldn't miss the sally ports and field-of-fire areas outside the bubbles. So, he was distracted and engaged as he walked along, although with a smile on his face, thinking about hoisting a tankard of Mars Special Bock where it was made, once again.

He walked past roving signs informing everyone about the cull.

Quicker than anticipated, he turned a corner into a wide, red, level twenty-two hallway and saw that old plastic sign, "The Leaf & Pig," with "Leaf" lit up in Gaelic Green, and "Pig" blinking pink intermittently.

He wasn't surprised to find someone he knew bar-tending. It was Kevin and his brother Dennis, non-identical twin cybots who had been orphaned many years before. Their prime had died in a flivver accident twenty years or so ago, and they were reasonably ensconced with a small inheritance and the fact that they were easily among the most popular non-human bartenders in the City, mostly because, like all successful barkeeps before them, they were good listeners.

"Green Pig, and a Mars Bock back!" Hogan growled as he sat down on the worn green leather stool, with a split in the middle patched up with pink tape.

Before he looked up from washing glasses, Kevin paused a moment and said automatically, "All our pigs are served green," then raised his head. "Hey! When did you get in?" Kevin grinned and put out his hand, and Hogan grasped it in a tricky grasp that only locals knew.

"You, however, can have your pigs any color you want!"

Kevin was blond and husky, while his brother was dark-haired, a little more studious and serious, and the ladies liked them both. Besides their friendship, and the always interesting new crowd, and the steady supply of young, beautiful students from nearby Maremaris University, one of the reasons Hogan liked the place was because Dennis and Kevin always seemed to know what was going on, without having to watch the screens or vid anyone, either.

"On leave?" Dennis asked as he reached in front of his older brother and grabbed the bottle of Mars Rum to mix another double moonlight.

"Naw, just a quick drink, passing through."

Dennis grunted "right" in reply. He continued: "OK, don't tell me. I'm glad you stopped by, anyway. Wouldn't wanna miss talking to a man who used to be one of the best." Dennis smirked, finished poring his drink and looked him in the eye.

"You see it?" Hogan asked, reluctantly.

“Yeah, everyone was watching here. It was Saturday.” Kevin looked at him now too, and Hogan looked down at his drink.

“Hey, you’ll be back—you’ll whack the next guy, huh?” Kevin said.

Hogan looked at him and said, “Never said I could win ‘em all.”

“To a great run, and the beginning of the next one!” Dennis lifted a small glass with something orange in it, clinked glasses with Hogan and downed the shot. They stared at each other for a couple of moments before Hogan finished looking up a name he was reaching for: “So, how’s Marlene?” he said, referring to an old girl friend. “Still working for Nettie, just like us, but acting like she’s the boss,” he replied while filling a glass on the back bar near Hogan with synthetic peanuts, while Kevin refilled drinks. Dennis filled the drinks again, dropped a couple small corona pods into them and they did another toast: “Nuts for Palmer!” and they downed their shots, again.

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