

TWISTED THREADS



Until their sun was extinguished, the dappled marmosets of Jenas were a shoo-in for eventual planetary dominance. They were unpickily omniverous. Their very few predators were voracious, but not overly bright. And the more intelligent marmosets were beginning to toy with the idea of using twigs to explore interesting holes in tree-trunks. From a dappled marmoset point of view, pre-history looked very promising.

But one fine clear afternoon, a red dot appeared in the blue sky above the primaeval jungle, glowing and swelling. The big-eyed marmosets, their long, graceful fingers wrapped around slender branches, watched in fascinated and curious silence, stroking each other's backs reassuringly. They blinked and tipped their heads to one side. They chewed leaves, hypnotised.

And then the sun went out, like a midnight candle pinched between licked thumb and forefinger. Within weeks, the temperate Eden of Jenas was no more than an ice-bound rock, haunted by the ghost of a civilisation still-born.

The demise of the blameless marmoset did not, however, go unremarked. Several hundred light-years away, on the planet Rescaline, the final dying gleam of Jenas' sun was the cue for a riotous end-of-project party.

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The door slid open with a gentle sigh, and Pelop Skeetly walked into the office of his Managing Director, Bez Marad.

“What news?” Marad asked, even before Pelop had taken a seat.

“I’ve found a star that no one in their right mind could object to,” said Pelop, subsiding into the chair. “It’s doesn’t even feature in any minor constellations.”

“About time,” his boss replied as he absent-mindedly excavated detritus from his middle nostril. “These conservationists are making it bloody impossible to turn an honest profit. Have you run this past Survey?”

The fortunes of the planet Rescaline were based on the dominant species’ specific expertise in the field of sun-sucking. The principle was simple. Identify a region of the universe dotted with rich industrial planets that were depleting their resources of on-world energy; pick a local yellow sun that no one cared about; suck out its power using patented Rescaline technology – known colloquially as the Vampire Engine – and sell on the energy at vastly inflated rates to manufacturers desperate to sustain the production of whatever quaint geegaws provided their livelihood in the galactic market.

“Yeah,” Pelop assured the MD. “We need a wildlife report, but it’s a formality. There’s nine planets, of which only one supports any life at all. And even that’s primitive.”

“Just one? Then we’re laughing.” He considered for a moment. “Are you absolutely sure that this planet is unremarkable? Nothing there to justify preserving it? Nothing at all?”

“Yep,” Pelop nodded. “Lifewise, it’s about as interesting as the plug-hole in my bath.”

Bez grinned. “There’s a PR opportunity here. See if you can get me a meeting with that idiot Ala Blek.”

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Ala Blek, it would be fair to say, was not popular with the vested interests that controlled Rescaline. She was the spokeswoman and figurehead of the Movement for the Preservation of Lesser Planets, and – in the words of the man from whom she had received an invitation to lunch – she was a royal ache in the sphincter.

As a child, Ala had kept rats. There was not a planet in the universe on which rats had not evolved, and on not a single planet were rats generally considered cute. That was exactly what Ala liked about them. Even at the age of five, she had been an instinctive champion of the outcast and the disregarded.

She graduated in biology, and went on to write a thesis concerning the proliferation of species in infant ecosystems. On the day her thesis was published, the Vampire Engine had extinguished the sun around which span a water-clad world that was home to the unique singing cod – a species that Ala had cited as an exemplar of the infinite diversity of evolution’s inventiveness. Appalled and indignant, she joined the conservationists and, as she was both extraordinarily beautiful and blindingly intelligent, she was soon identified by the media as the newsworthy face of the Purple Movement – that being the colour of chlorophyll on Rescaline.

“I cannot imagine what you want to talk to me about,” Ala said as she took a seat opposite Bez Marad at a restaurant on the expensive side of town. “I’ve only shown up because it’s not every day one is asked to lunch by a party who’s tried to have one assassinated.”

Marad shrugged and smiled. “It was nothing personal. What are you drinking?”

“Whatever you’re drinking. From the same bottle,” Ala said. “In fact, give me your glass.”

As the waiter served lunch, and as Ala insisted on her host trying a random forkful of her risotto, Marad put his proposition. He knew, he said, that she thought the corporation callous and uncaring. He understood, he assured her, the issues concerning primitive species on unexplored planets. And, if he was honest, he was worried about his company’s image, and the effect of purple concerns on the price of his shares.

“So – I want to offer you the chance to act as a consultant on our latest project. It’s an obscure sun with nine planets, only one of which – as far as we can tell – supports life. But – and I’m very sincere about this – we want to be sure that we’re doing the right thing here. The purple thing. And you are the expert in that field. You’re the best. I only work with the best.” He sat back and smiled, sipping his wine.

Ala tipped her head to one side and looked at him. “You want me to check out the life on this one planet?”

“Or however many, yes.”

“And you want me to give you the go-ahead to suck its sun?”

Marad shrugged. “Or not. Whatever.”

“And you’ll stand by my report? Even if it’s a no?”

“I’ll make it a condition of your contract.”

The waiter poured the last of the wine, and Ala picked up her glass. “Nuh-uh. No contract. I won’t go on the payroll. You don’t buy me.”

Marad lifted his glass in a toast. “Are you suggesting I might pay you? I wouldn’t insult your intelligence, dear girl.”

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Ala peered into the scope.

“Five continents. Ice caps at both poles. About three quarters ocean.”

“As an accurate percentage, it’s seventy-two point six recurring,” the computer said.

Pelop chuckled, looking out of the survey ship’s window at the third planet from the sun – the sun that he had identified as suckable.

“Dominant species is humanoid,” Ala continued. “Stage five agricultural, and perhaps stage two industrial. Apparently tribal and bellicose. Very little sign of an off-planet leap.”

“Very little sign?” Pelop said. “They’re dirt-grubbers! Look at them!” He leaned towards the monitors. “They squeak at each other!”

Although she didn’t so much as glance at Pelop, Ala had to admit his observation was correct. The dominant species did indeed communicate by making the air move - which was a setback. Telepathy was a major indicator of a Class 1 humanoid civilization. Without that, she’d be making an argument for organized apes.

“They appear to have abstract ideas,” she murmured.

“My oven has abstract ideas,” Pelop laughed. “It dreams of the perfect soufflé. What’s your point?”

Suppressing an expletive, Ala turned her attention to the less dominant life on the world below her. She was looking for something unique – a singing cod, some kind of bipedal mollusc, a viviparous bird – anything that would enable her to slap a preservation order on this one lively planet in nine. But there was nothing there. The entire world was crawling with banal, ten-a-penny species that wouldn’t attract a second glance from the most conscientious galactic biologist.

“Can we call it a day?” Pelop asked. “You know you’re flogging a dead horse -- if you’ll pardon the choice of phrase.”

Ala rubbed her eyes, and let out her breath in a long sigh of disappointment. “Yes, okay. I’ll call in my report and then you can pull the Engine in.” She switched to the screen and Bez Marad’s face appeared. “I’ll write it up later,” she said, dead-tone, “but the upshot is that you have the go-ahead.”

“Splendid,” Marad beamed. “And thank you for your input.” He shifted his gaze. “Pelop?”

“I’m instructing the Engine to be brought in now, sir,” Pelop said. “I’ll stay to see it begin sucking, and then we’ll be on our way.”

Out on the rim of the solar system, the rockets of the Vampire Engine spluttered and then roared with silent scarlet flame.

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It first appeared above the plains of Central Africa. As the planet turned, and night crept around the globe of Earth, it could be seen over the rainforests of Brazil and eventually the measureless fields of China. As the huge flaming ball approached beyond the moon, it was visible even in daylight, a burning shimmering spot of crimson against the blue of the sky. And it grew, day by day, pacing across the stars, paling the yellow sun, making shadows of the mountains and whisking the oceans into an angry froth.

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“Don’t take it so hard,” Pelop said. “You can’t win them all.”

“Drop dead,” Ala mumbled. She put her feet up on the console. “You wouldn’t understand this, but what really gets to me is that they look so much like us.”

“The monkeys?” Pelop asked, pouring two glasses of wine.

“The humanoids. They are humanoids. If it weren’t for a genetic mutation or two, we’d be them.”

“Speak for yourself,” Pelop grinned, handing her a glass.

Through the window to her left, Ala could see the Vampire Engine – still far away but heading towards them, past them, to the yellow sun that had fuelled the alchemy of life on the pretty, dull little aquamarine planet. She swung her feet to the floor and leaned forward again, wine in her hand, and gazed into the monitors. She frowned. She moved her fingertips to the controls and zoomed in. The apes were up to something. Something very odd.

Without looking around, Ala put her glass down on the sidetable, sloshing wine over the rim, and then her hand moved delicately across the panel of the console. She pulled the focus tight.

The apes were gathering in huge groups, all over the planet. In cities, across the plains, on mountain tops. They were looking up to the sky – and they were squeaking. They were squeaking in unison. All of them, squeaking, squeaking, squeaking in one voice.

Ala switched the translator in, feeding the output straight to her brain so that Pelop wouldn’t scan it. She listened for a few beats – and then she gasped. She adjusted the translator. She had to be sure. And she was. She shook her head, and chuckled.

“Pelop,” she said quietly, looking up. “Call off the Engine.”

She sent the output to him.

Pelop blinked as the translated stream hit him. His eyes flickered from side to side as he tried to understand. And then, slowly, a smile broke across his face like early light. The smile spread, cracked. And he began to laugh. He sat back in his seat and laughed and laughed, until the tears ran down his face. He clutched his stomach and doubled up, racked with breathless sobs of laughter. This planet was, after all, unique. It was priceless. The hell with the corporation – what Ala had discovered here was more important than any suckable sun. This was...this was the funniest damn thing in the universe.

“They’ve seen the Vampire Engine coming, you see,” Ala said. “And they somehow sense that it’s bad news for them. I mean, they are properly organised. They’ve built machines. They’ve split the atom. This is so incredible! You know what they’re doing, don’t you?”

Pelop screeched and rolled onto his side. “Don’t say it! Don’t say it! I’ll die!”

Ala focused the scope and looked again at the unparalleled, untouchable apes of Earth. She sighed, smiling – astonished at the unfathomable variety of life in the endless universe.

“Pelop, they’re praying. Those wonderful, adorable creatures believe in God.”