

Seedlings

In the back of his mind Cantar knew something was not quite right, but at the moment he was too busy slaying the dragon of Baltinaar to pay much attention. He knew that the instant his focus diverted from the task at hand one of those three heads was sure to rip him to shreds. That is, unless one of the other heads fried him to a crisp first.

“Temperature 28, pulse 32, pressure 90 over 35,” the dispassionate voice droned.

Again he parried the attack from the left head, but the right one made a severe gash in his shield in the brief instant that he looked away. This was going to be the toughest battle of his life. The chill on Mount Eltam was doing nothing to help his coordination. He was freezing and briefly wished for a little fire from the middle head just to warm him up, but all he seemed to be getting was a little smoke stinging his eyes. His legs were feeling like lead.

“Temperature 29, pulse 38, pressure 95 over 39, all systems functioning normally,” the dispassionate voice again made an announcement to no one in particular.

Great, just when he was beginning to get the hang of dealing with this three-headed dragon he could see a Qualar avian approaching. They were such obnoxious beasts and always looking for prey of opportunity. In this case Cantar knew that the avian sensed he was in trouble and might make an excellent meal. He could feel his heart pounding harder and harder trying to bring extra energy to his arms and legs to turn the tide of battle.

“Temperature 30, pulse 40, pressure 98 over 41, stage two injections beginning,” the androgynous voice dutifully reported.

The avian dove between Cantar and the dragon only to be met with a shield in the beak for the attempt. The avian was stunned briefly but recovered before crashing into the rock outcropping that gave Cantar’s flank a little protection. Cantar’s arm went numb from the impact forcing him to lower his shield and allowing the dragon to take a swipe that grazed his cheek drawing some blood.

“Temperature 31, pulse 43, pressure 100 over 45, stage two injection complete, all systems functioning normally.”

As the avian began circling back for its next attack the dragon let loose with a torrent of fire from its middle head. Cantar thanked the gods for the Stalik shield that insulated him from the blast, but the acrid smell was overwhelming. Still the warmth helped him stop shaking so much from the freezing cold of the north wind. As the center head withdrew Cantar had his chance to strike briefly at the left head that appeared to be temporarily blinded from the light of the fire splaying on the shield. He drew blood, but knew that it was not a mortal wound. The dragon shrieked, but all the while he could hear his heart pounding in his ears and could feel the burning in his legs.

“Temperature 32, pulse 48, pressure 103 over 50, stage three injections beginning.”

Cantar could see the avian beginning its approach and wondered how long he was going to be able to keep this up. Fighting the dragon was bad enough, but two of these monsters was asking more than he felt his body could handle. What were they both doing on Systar anyway? They don’t live on Systar. Then he heard the hiss from behind him at almost the same time he saw the reflection of the Cerillian snake in his shield. Cantar backed against the rock outcropping to keep the snake from being able to reach him from behind. Cantar kept wondering why he was in this battle alone.

“Temperature 33, pulse 51, pressure 105 over 55, stage three injections completed, all systems functioning normally.”

The snake was temporarily stymied by Cantar's move to the outcropping, but it still demanded some of his attention, attention that was in short supply. The avian was in a dive headed directly for Cantar just as the dragon pulled back for an instant. A coordinated inter-species attack? Cantar had never heard of such a thing, but that's what seemed to be happening. Why was he the focus of all their attention, and why was the sky suddenly bright red?

"Temperature 34, pulse 53, pressure 108 over 58, all systems functioning normally."

Cantar could see his ship far above him. What was it doing there? Where was his crew? Why weren't they helping him? So many questions and so little time. Wham, came the impact of the avian on the shield knocking him back several feet and leaving his ears ringing from the intense noise. He felt the ground literally begin shaking under his feet.

"Temperature 35, pulse 55, pressure 110 over 60, minor convulsion being sensed, anti-convulsant injection beginning."

The ground shaking subsided and Cantar regained his footing just in time to fend off a strike from the snake. Again Cantar had drawn blood and the snake hastily retreated even though it was not seriously injured but seemed even more intent on its prey. As Cantar was focused on the snake the dragon seared his left shoulder that wasn't completely shielded at the time. The pain was intense, but Cantar knew as long as it hurt he was alive.

"Temperature 36, pulse 58, pressure 112 over 65, anti-convulsant injection completed, all systems functioning normally."

Cantar wondered what it was that was functioning normally and who said it just as the dragon took a big bite out of his shield. Sensing his peril the avian dove again in an attempt to defeat the shield completely, but there was enough left to fend it off yet again. Cantar's arm taking the full impact became nearly useless and he could feel the strength draining from his legs as well. Still the hiss of the snake reminded him that he couldn't let down even for an instant, but he sure wished someone would stop that damn ringing.

Ring. "Temperature 37, pulse 62, pressure 115 over 70, recovery completed, all systems functioning normally." Hisssssss. The repository began to open.

The snake is making another attack Cantar thought, but the sound seemed to be coming from the wrong direction. Could there be two snakes? No, that doesn't make sense. Cerillian snakes never work in pairs. But why is the dragon pulling back? Cantar could also see that the avian's circling was taking it higher and higher. Cantar could hear someone shouting his name from a distance. Could it be that his crew was finally coming to his rescue?

"Cantar? Cantar? Temperature 37, pulse 63, pressure 117 over 72, recovery completed, repository now opened. Cantar? Cantar?....."

Where was the avian? Did it just get so high that it was now out of sight? No, that doesn't make sense. It couldn't have gotten that high this fast. Cantar spun to his left realizing that he hadn't been watching the snake. Where was the snake? In a panic Cantar spun completely around but failed to spot the Cerillian anywhere. Then he realized the dragon was gone as well, but he could hear the shouting coming closer.

"Cantar? Cantar? Temperature 37, pulse 63, pressure 117 over 72, recovery completed, repository now opened. Cantar? Cantar?....."

"I'm over here," Cantar tried to yell, but he was having trouble making his mouth form the words. It felt like his mouth was taped shut. He strained still harder. The words wouldn't come out but noise certainly did. His eyes flew open.

"Cantar? Cantar? Temperature 37, pulse 63, pressure 117 over 72, recovery completed, repository now opened. Cantar? Cantar?....."

“Heeeerrrrreeee! What?” Cantar’s head was pounding and he felt so weak he could hardly move. “Pain! My head!”

“Administering analgesic, Temperature 37, pulse 70, pressure 120 over 75, recovery completed, repository now open. Hello, Cantar.”

“Recovery completed according to who?”

“According to me of course,” the mechanical voice replied.

“Yeah, well you are not much of a judge. I’m the one living in this head that is pounding like a Pilf bomb had gone off in it. Why can’t you start the analgesics earlier in the process?”

“Cantar, we have had this conversation before. You know the analgesic would interfere with the recovery process. I am sorry it does have to hurt,” the mechanical voice feigned compassion where none was actually felt.

“Yeah, I know, but don’t you at least have something stronger?”

“Cantar, you know better than that. If I administered anything stronger I would have to wake you sooner so that the drug effects would be worn off in time for you to do your job. We just cannot be wasting precious time because you have a headache. There are many more places to stop before we are finished.”

“OK, I give up. I suppose even if you let me think I convinced you that you still would do exactly the same thing to me next time wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

Cantar thought it must be nice being a machine with no need to lie.

“OK, let’s get on with it then. You suppose you could help me out a little here? My legs aren’t being too cooperative.”

“Certainly, Cantar.” The repository tilted into the near-upright position so that Cantar could step out feeling a little more dignified than if he had had to climb out. Well, dignified was relative. He was still stark naked, but then again no one was there to see him.

As he stepped onto the deck from the repository the gel slid from his body. This was the ooze that helped keep him nourished and regulated his temperature while he was in stasis between jobs.

“Sorry about the mess,” Cantar apologized.

“That is perfectly alright, Cantar. I will clean the area while you are showering.”

“OK. I’ll be right back.”

“Please hurry. We don’t have too much time before the first seeding operation.”

“I know, I know. Just be patient.”

Of course the ship was ultimately patient while not even knowing what it would feel like to be patient. After all, the ship had been awake for all seventeen million years of this job while Cantar had only been awake for about a year now in total.

If the ship had idle thoughts during all this time it might have wondered why Cantar never asked about the home world any more. The simple fact that Cantar had always been an outsider would be something the ship might never comprehend anyway. The death of his crew on the Galena run had pretty much finished off the few relationships he had ever had with anyone other than his parents who had died years earlier. So, Cantar just didn’t care much about the home world or anyone he had left behind. Instead, the whole idea of this job had appealed to him in regard to seeing things long after civilization was no more than dust in the wind. In truth, the ship had lost contact with the home world after little more than the first 500 years, and it never found it necessary to mentioned this to Cantar.

“Back already?” the ship asked.

“Very funny.”

“Well I was going to say, ‘Halt, who goes there?’ but I thought that stopped being funny after the first ten or fifteen times.”

“You’re such a wit.”

“Why thank you, Cantar.”

“Well at least half of one anyway.”

“I understood that, Cantar.”

“Sorry.”

“No offense taken. Besides we have work to do.”

“OK, what have we got?”

“This system seems promising. Here are the sensor readings for the major planets.” Information flashed on the screen in front of Cantar. “These two planets appear to be good candidates for the seeding process.”

“Can you give me a close-up of each?”

“Certainly. Here is the first candidate. All parameters are in the acceptable range except the temperature is a little high.”

“OK, give me the second one.”

“Certainly. Here is the second candidate. Again, all parameters are in the acceptable range except the temperature is a little low.”

“Too bad we don’t have something in the middle.” Cantar observed.

“Well, this was the best system we could detect after our last stop. I think we have done pretty good to find two acceptable seeding sites.”

“Yeah, it sure beats going through this whole wake-up process just to find a dry hole,” Cantar observed.

“So, are we in agreement that both should be seeded?” the ship asked.

“Agreed.” Cantar responded rather automatically, then he added, “Hey!”

“Yes, Cantar?”

“Do you suppose we will ever run into a place that is just right, but that we won’t have to seed?”

“I am afraid I don’t know, Cantar. Why do you ask?”

“Just a little lonely I guess.”

“Maybe next time.”

“Yeah, maybe next time.” Cantar said even though he didn’t believe it. He knew the odds. “All right then, standard orbit for the first planet and begin seeding operations. After that is completed you can execute a transfer orbit and set up for seeding of the second planet.”

“Acknowledged, Cantar.”

“You got this one covered then?”

“Yes, I can handle it.”

“OK, then, I’m going to read a little. Just let me know when it’s time for me to go back into stasis.”

“Yes, Cantar.”

“Oh, and thanks for showing me these places. I just wish I knew what they would be like in a few billion years.”

“Acknowledged, Cantar.” The ship tended to take things literally and made plans to bring them back around to this system in a few billion years. If the ship had been prone to

wishing, it might have actually wished that doing this might someday help Cantar's feelings of loneliness.

Cantar went off to read while waiting to go back into stasis, and the ship began the seeding operation of launching organic compounds and DNA into the atmosphere of the planet using several thousand re-entry probes.

Rain was falling and cooling the slopes of the mighty volcano while steam rose into the air. These days some of the rain actually managed to stay liquid and ran into small pools. The organic compounds and DNA strands were being concentrated and a few of them managed to link together without being driven apart by the tremendous heat and the blasts of lightening striking all around them.

It was a good day on earth.