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A World Called Solitude

Stephen Goldin

**Parsina
PRESS**



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First Parsina Press edition, September 2011.

ISBN: 1466341254.

EAN-13: 978-1466341258.

to Kathleen, the first to rescue me from solitude

ACT I

Chapter 1

“Arthur, how many times this month have I wished I were a poet?”

The robot barely hesitated. “Seventeen, sir.”

Birk Aaland nodded absently. “Make that eighteen now. This world inspires poetry—or it would if I were any good at it. And I remember so damned little of the poetry I learned in school. It only goes to show that a good technical education can still have drawbacks.”

The man and the robot were standing atop a rounded hillock overlooking a broad plain. The purple-shading-into-green flatlands stretched before them until the horizon stole it from view—a horizon that was clear and sharp, free of the haze and pollution of a human-occupied world. Low scrub dominated the scene, with some prickly pseudocactus and misshapen purple trees giving counterpoint.

The hot yellow sun rose behind Birk, warming the back of his neck. It cast long shadows of the two figures on the hill, the tall, robust man and the cylindrical robot beside him. Overhead, the gray of the dawn sky was bleached to the pastel shade of day.

It was not a still life Birk observed. The creatures he thought of as birds—even though they bore their young alive and had no feathers—filled the sky. Dawn and dusk were their prime hunting hours in this part of the world, though already most of the night-flying insects they preyed on had found their havens for the day—much to Birk’s relief. Smaller creatures scampered about, little blurs at the edge of his peripheral vision. The air was clean, smelling refreshingly of herbs and damp leaves.

Two kilometers away was a herd of the animals Birk had named “lopers,” already awake and grazing on the vegetation. The lopers were lumbering four-legged beasts nearly as tall as a man, two and a half meters long and weighing upward of two hundred kilos. They had tawny yellow fur clumped in odd patches over their skins, and long, flat tails dragging awkwardly in the dirt behind them. Their faces were piggish, their eyes dark and stupid. But despite their ungainly appearance, Birk knew they could move swiftly when alarmed.

“I tried writing poetry when I was in college,” Birk continued, his gaze never wavering from the vista before him. “I suppose everyone does. I tried to fill it with passion and imagery, expressing the innermost secrets of my soul. Only my soul didn’t have any secrets; not then, anyway. So my passion came out as pretension and the imagery came out as

clichés. I had a problem, too, with lapsing into doggerel at the most inopportune places.”

“Doggerel, sir?” From Arthur’s inflection, it was clear Birk had used a word beyond the robot’s vocabulary.

Birk turned from the landscape to look at his partner. Arthur was a tall, silvery cylinder of metal and plastic with a variety of arms and sensors scattered over the upper half of his body. He was supported by four legs that could extend at will from a dozen centimeters to more than two meters. The legs could also be flexible or rigid, whichever was more useful at the moment.

“Yes,” Birk said. “Doggerel is considered a bad sort of poetry, when your lines take on a singsong quality and content is sacrificed for meter; I can’t define it any more precisely than that, I’m afraid. It’s too bad I didn’t save my old poems—you could have seen it in a minute.”

He shook his head. “It’s a shame I can’t do more justice to this place. Sometimes the urge is overwhelming, it’s all so beautiful. Look at the yellow and blue of those birds flying over that green patch of ground. Well, I can’t do it any justice by just talking about it; let’s move in closer and see if we can bag a looper for dinner.” He gave a friendly pat to the spot where Arthur’s shoulder would be if Arthur had shoulders.

They started down the hill at an easy pace. Birk couldn’t have taken the delta any closer to the herd without spooking them, but a walk of two kilometers would be good exercise. Beside him, Arthur matched the pace, equally unhurried. Arthur had a patience

no mere human could attain; after all, hadn't he waited here two thousand years with nothing to do until Birk's arrival?

They reached the bottom of the hill and had started toward the herd when Birk suddenly began to laugh. "What's funny?" Arthur asked him.

"My own egotism," Birk said. "You write poetry to express your feelings to someone else—and there is no one else except you and the other robots. I already know what my feelings are, and you could never understand feelings or emotion. It would be a colossal conceit and a waste of time—an intellectual form of masturbation."

"You masturbate quite frequently," the machine commented.

"You have neither tact nor delicacy, do you know that?" Birk didn't even break stride, but smiled anyway. "I shall attribute it to jealousy, because you were created less than a eunuch and cannot enjoy the Supreme Pleasure. Yes, of course I masturbate; otherwise the pressure would build up until even *you* looked good to me. And I like you too much to rape you.

"There *is* another alternative... in the Black City."

Birk stopped and turned abruptly to face the robot. His teeth were suddenly clenched, his voice harsh, his hands balled into fists. "I know there is. And I've told you not to bring that subject up again."

Undaunted, Arthur stopped as well. "Yes, you're right. I apologize."

"And don't apologize so quickly. How can I get a good argument started if you apologize at the first

little outburst?”

“I’m sor—”

“There you go again! Damn it, stop being so perfect.”

“I am what I am. I can’t help that.” The robot extended one flexible arm and laid it gently on Birk’s shoulder.

Birk shrugged away the touch with a sharp gesture and stalked forward angrily. “Forget it. We’ve got lopers to hunt. Let’s go.”

He strode across the plain at a pace nearly double his former easy gait, swerving every so often to avoid the larger rocks or bushes. Arthur would have had no trouble keeping up, but decided it would be more prudent to stay a few steps behind the human. He had seen Birk fly into these sudden rages before, and knew that the wisest course was to let the anger burn itself out and maintain a low profile in the meantime.

The trek across the open ground took twenty minutes, all of it in stony silence as Birk refused to acknowledge the robot’s presence. The herd moved little from its initial spot; none of the lopers’ natural enemies were in the area, and they did not recognize the two approaching figures as a threat. The strong, musky odor of the animals filled Birk’s nostrils as the hunters closed to within thirty meters of the grazing herd. Birk stopped and unslung the gun from his shoulder.

The weapon was left over from the reign of the Makers—Birk’s name for this planet’s original inhabitants. It looked like a slightly squashed, yellow plastic volleyball with a vacuum-cleaner nozzle at-

tached at the front. It weighed only a few grams, yet because of the awkward size and shape Birk had found it necessary to use both hands when firing. It had not been designed for a human's easy grip.

He stood there for a moment, eyeing the herd and choosing his victim carefully. His needs were modest, so he disdained the larger males, and he did not want to upset the breeding pattern by taking a nursing mother. He finally selected an immature female as his prey. Having made his selection, he aimed his weapon carefully and fired.

The gun emitted a series of high-pitched beeps and a thin blue line of energy flew from the nozzle. The energy projection streaked through the air to its target. There was a crackling that reminded Birk of static electricity, and the loper cow collapsed onto the ground. The rest of the herd, on hearing the beeping sounds, looked around in confusion and, at the instigation of one large male who seemed to be the leader, moved at a fast walk to a spot a few dozen meters away, leaving their fallen comrade behind.

Satisfied with his kill, Birk turned to Arthur and finally spoke. "All right, call the delta over and let's get our catch home."

Arthur obediently beamed out a radio signal and, from the other side of the hill on which they'd originally landed, their hovercraft lifted into sight and zoomed toward them. It had the triangular shape of an arrowhead without a shaft, ten meters from tip to base and nearly two meters high. It flew soundlessly, but its large bulk and quick motion startled the grazing herd. As a unit they bolted northward at a sur-

prising speed.

Within seconds the delta was hovering overhead and, at another silent radioed command from Arthur, it floated gently to the ground three meters away. The cargo door in the back slid open, as did the plastic bubbles over the passenger seats on either side of the forward vertex. The ship turned off once more, awaiting further instructions.

Birk grunted as he bent down to drag, with Arthur's help, the heavy loper carcass over to the craft. They lifted the animal into the cargo section, and Arthur tucked it neatly away while Birk brushed the dirt he'd picked up from the body off his rough-skinned leather jacket. The two hunters climbed into their own seats and closed the plastic bubbles again. Though Birk had learned to pilot the delta, he preferred to let Arthur do the actual work today. He gave the robot a curt nod, and their craft lifted gracefully into the air to begin the long flight home.

The delta flew at the leisurely—for it—speed of 2,000 kilometers an hour. The character of the land beneath them changed as they passed over, progressing from purple scrub plains to brown wooded hills to tangled and overgrown green patches of level land. Birk stared stonily ahead, at first, but his anger faded gradually as the ground passed beneath him,

On Earth, he mused, all that would have been parceled out and divided into farm sections, all under cultivation to make maximum use of the resources. There'd be squares and rectangles of different colors, all neatly plowed and carefully tended.

Here—nothing but wild, uncontrolled growth.

He grinned, taking a perverse satisfaction in the untamed quality of this planet. It was as though living on a savage world made him something of a savage himself.

Occasionally they passed over some of the smaller towns and villages the Makers had left. Years ago, Birk's curiosity might have compelled him to interrupt his journey and investigate these hamlets on the outskirts of the "civilized" world. But he'd seen enough of them in his eleven years here; with few exceptions, the smaller towns in this region followed a similar pattern. He would never have time to explore them all, but his early investigations told him that he didn't really want to.

After an hour's silent flight, the nature of the land below them softened, became more regular. Soon the outer fringes of the city he called Beta-Nu were passing beneath their craft. The delta began to slow its flight and drop lower. The sun was now well above the horizon, and Birk gazed out over the city where, in recent weeks, he'd been residing.

The Makers had chosen to lay their city plans out in diamond patterns rather than rectangular grids as was customary on Earth. They loved to build tall and slender, so that many of their cities resembled pincushions: flat-topped buildings, needle slim, pierced the sky, thousands of them clustered together in impressive array. The Makers had loved colors, too, and each city was a rainbow of towers. Some of the buildings were even made of materials that changed their hue depending on the angle of the sun.

The delta homed in on the tallest building in Be-

ta-Nu. Birk always chose to live in the tallest building of any city he was exploring; he could then look down from his tower and plot the course of his inspections. Plus, he'd be able to find his way around in a strange city by using his home as a reference point.

This tower of stone, steel, and plastic was eighty-seven stories tall, small for a skyscraper on this world—but then, Beta-Nu was a small city. Arthur had said that Beta-Nu's population was only four hundred thousand at the peak period in its history.

The robot now settled the delta gently down atop the tower's flat roof and sent out another radio signal. Within seconds, a swarm of small gray helper robots appeared at the back end of the craft, unloading the dead loper and carrying it to the service lift. They would take it to the kitchen, Birk knew, where the carcass would then be skinned, cleaned, dressed, and prepared for half a dozen different meals. The kitchen robots were very efficient.

Birk emerged from his side of the delta, paying no attention to the mechanical dwarves. He walked to the edge of the low wall that enclosed the roof and leaned on it, staring down at the city below him. Beta-Nu, though small, was one of the more interesting sites he'd explored during his sojourn on this world. It was once known, Arthur had informed him, as an artists' haven; museums and galleries abounded, and even some of the individual homes and apartments showed artistic pretensions: entire walls of stained glass, unusual architectural designs, murals that covered whole rooms. So far, Birk had barely explored one quadrant's worth of richness; the rest of

the city was his for the taking.

After some moments he was aware of Arthur standing slightly behind him, trying to attract his attention. He ignored the subliminal signals, forcing the robot to speak aloud.

“Sir, were you considering an exploration this afternoon?”

“Yes, I was.”

“An excellent idea. Perhaps I could show you some of the—”

“I’ll go alone if you don’t mind, Arthur.”

The robot hesitated just a fraction of a second. “If that’s what you want, sir.” And, after another pause, “May I ask you a question?”

“Sure. But I won’t guarantee to answer it.”

“Are you feeling all right?”

Birk’s first impulse was to snap back a quick “Of course,” but then realized Arthur wasn’t inquiring about his physical health. An honest answer would be far more difficult. He tried to evade instead. “You’re a robot. You don’t even know what feelings are.”

“Not from firsthand experience. But I can make inferences from the outward appearance and behavior you project, comparing them to your previous behavior. The difference is entirely too obvious, sir. If you want to hide your feelings from me, you’ll have to be far more subtle than this.”

Birk grinned in spite of himself. “Arthur, there are times when you’ve been the only thing keeping me sane in this place and there are other times I’d gladly take you apart piece by piece. I don’t know which feeling is uppermost at the moment, but I

hope I never do reach the point where I dismantle you. That would be—”

“Sir?”

“What?”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Damn you!” Birk turned away, then turned back again almost immediately. The petulance was gone from his face. “There’s a doomsday feeling that’s been building up in me over the last week or so. Have you ever known that the world was going to end very shortly, and there was nothing you could do about it? Don’t bother answering, that was just rhetorical. But that’s how I feel right now.”

“The world did end for me once, sir,” Arthur said quietly.

Birk stared at him, nodding slowly. “Yes, you’re right. I keep forgetting, even though the evidence is all around me. I think that’s why I feel so close to you; we’ve each of us had our world end once. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize, sir. I have no feelings, remember?”

“You’re either being cynical or naive. If I can ever figure out which, I probably *will* dismantle you.” Birk shrugged. “Nevertheless, I’ll be going out into the city today. Alone.”

“As you wish, sir,” Arthur said—the model of the perfect servant.

The streets were patterned mosaics in waves of colors. They echoed the soft clicks of his boots as he walked, while the silence welled up inside him until it was a roar. The thoroughfares of Beta-Nu were

narrow, made to accommodate only pedestrians; mechanized traffic was reserved to the underground tubeways. It was not that way in all the cities on this world, but Beta-Nu had been one of the newer, more progressive communities. Perhaps that was why Birk liked it so much.

Around him towered the city. Stone giants of blue and gold and red and green peered down at him, barely tolerant of this alien interloper and indignant that he should command the situation. The sturdy structures showed the wear of time and the wind, and the city was scented with the perfume of gentle decay.

The ubiquitous gray maintenance robots bustled all about him. Most were only waist-high, but they gave the city its only pretense at life. It was these mechanized legions who'd kept the cities so well preserved centuries after their builders had perished. Birk had, by now, become accustomed to seeing them sweeping, dusting, removing foreign matter, or repairing cracks with their welding lasers; he paid them as little attention as they paid him.

And, as always, the streets were lined with ghosts. Birk had seen enough pictures of the Makers to visualize them quite vividly. Averaging more than two meters tall, with two arms and two legs apiece, they had heads that were squashed ovoids with narrow, pinpoint eyes, no noses, and a gash that only by generosity could be called a mouth. Skin colors varied from blue to green, but there was one minority race that seemed to have a pleasant golden cast.

The most blatant features of the Makers, though, were their enormous hands and feet. The hands each

had seven digits, including two thumbs, and had twice the span of a human's. The feet were similarly oversized, and yet the arms and legs were proportioned normally for slender bodies.

Eleven years ago, these creatures had seemed bizarre; now, Birk was more used to seeing representations of them than he was to seeing humans. Even his own reflected image seemed strange to him. In some ways, too, he felt more of a kinship with the Makers. They existed in a place that was now out of time and reality—and so did he, cut off from all that was normal for his race.

A gentle breeze blew from his back, ruffling his unkempt dark hair still further. There were times when the wind could become strong enough to make the buildings vibrate. On some of those occasions, Birk could feel as though the city were serenading him with a soulful siren song; yet at other times it was merely cacophonous vibrations, and he would stand in the middle of a room, holding his hands over his ears and screaming.

He ignored the taller buildings on this jaunt. He'd learned early on that they were usually either offices or apartment houses; and while there were always serendipitous discoveries to be made there, his soul today craved more momentous accomplishments.

He likewise walked right past the parks with their immense statues and monuments to war; they held no meaning for him today. Picking up a small pebble, he threw it at some birds to watch their hasty flight with grim amusement. He was looking for something special, and was angry with himself for not knowing what it was.

There were smaller buildings interspersed among the larger ones. Cubical and rectilinear architecture prevailed, though occasionally he would come across a whimsy that was a dome or pyramid or even some irregular conglomeration of straight lines and curves. These were the ones that attracted his attention now; only eccentricities would soothe his strange mood of the moment.

The first few he came to were shops of some sort, but whatever merchandise they'd sold had long ago turned to dust and been swept away by the efficient maintenance robots. Sometimes murals were painted on the walls, faded over the millennia; invariably they were scenes of great battles, dedicated to the glory of war. The best one he saw was of two opposing robot armies, clashing in a furious metallic assault. The din of that silent struggle was overwhelming, but Birk turned away, unmoved.

After three hours of random walking, he found what he'd been seeking—an art museum. In contrast to the war murals that graced public walls and the heroic statues that filled the parks, the art in the museums tended to be of a softer, more sensitive nature. The Makers put their spirit on display, but they held their soul in secret.

This building was an inverted truncated cone, held upright by three outside pillars. Inside, the gallery was arranged along a helical walkway that spiraled up the sides. The vast open space in the center—which grew larger the higher one climbed—was filled with mobile sculptures suspended from the translucent ceiling, and with phantom images of animals and flowers that floated through the air cour-

tesy of hidden holographic projectors. Standing at the foot of the walkway and looking upward, the effect was one of having the museum stretching out infinitely into space overhead, even though Birk knew the building was only ten to fifteen stories tall. He was suitably impressed, as the designer of this gallery had intended him to be.

He started casually up the ramp with the wall on his left, noting as he walked the artistic legacy that was now his alone. Some of the works had been done on a fabric-based material similar to canvas; these had been partially eaten away by this world's equivalent of mildew and bacteria, though not to the extent one might have supposed. They were, after all, indoors and protected from the elements and animals. The maintenance robots had done what they could to preserve these treasures, with more success in some cases than in others.

Later paintings were made on an artificial material that could be as thin as parchment while retaining color and lasting indefinitely. The paints themselves were mineral-based and faded almost not at all, despite the millennia that had passed since their original application.

There were other forms of art besides the paintings. Sculptures both of stone and of metal were set at intervals in niches along the wall as he ascended; the metals tended to be corroded, but the stone works were as fresh as the day they were cut.

In addition, there were some of the unique art forms that, for want of a better word, Birk had called "windows." A plate of what looked to be glass was framed flat against a wall, and yet looking through it

gave the viewer a panoramic scene as though he were looking through the wall. The representation was perfectly three dimensional, yet the glass that held it was flat. Birk had once taken down one of these pieces to make sure there was nothing behind it but solid wall. He had never figured out the process that created these windows—it was certainly no holographic procedure he was familiar with—but he had to admire the technique and craftsmanship that went into them. Often they were the most striking works in any given display.

The works at the lowest level of this gallery had a martial flavor to them, but they were subtly different from the more public art forms. These paintings concentrated on the individual aspects of battle—bravery and loyalty, cowardice and betrayal. A few were even so bold as to depict the tragedy of warfare as well as its glory: widows mourning their loved ones, limbless veterans returning to shattered homes, terrified children dying for reasons they could not understand. Birk passed them by, observing but uncaring.

Next came a series of more surrealistic works: pieces where perspective shifted in and out of focus with startling abruptness; where there were several different references of gravity in one painting; where familiar objects were of unusual proportions or in bizarre juxtaposition; where colors clashed in outrageous combinations. There were times when Birk enjoyed standing before such works, wondering about the symbolism they carried to the audience they'd been intended to reach. But today he was in no mood for puzzles, and he pushed relentlessly on.

There were some strictly representational pieces, though not very many in this gallery—simple landscapes, or seascapes, or portraits, or scenes of ordinary events: merchants in a marketplace, craftsmen at their labors, children playing by a seashore. Birk spent a long time studying these last, hoping they would speak to him, tell him something that could relate to life as he was living it, But they were just pictures, as lifeless now as their creators, and try as he would he could not bring animation to their subjects.

The higher he went, the harder it was to go on. His legs began to ache from the climb. His breaths were deep puffs. *One more time around the spiral*, he thought, *and then I'll quit*. He grew thirsty, and wished the Makers had believed in putting water fountains in public places. He climbed some more and rested, drawing deep breaths. *One more time around*.

He climbed.

He found what he didn't know he'd been seeking near the very top of the building. It was one of the windows, oval in shape, with the long axis nearly two meters tall and the short axis a meter across. The frame was glittery silver, sparkling with a life of its own. Birk took one look into the window and was transfixed by its awesome emotional impact.

The background of the scene was dark blue, verging to black as it faded into the distance; although there were no lines of perspective, the impression was of staring down a long, dark tunnel with no opening at the other end. Two figures inhabited the scene—both androgynous (if such a term could be

used in reference to the Makers), both featureless.

One figure seemed smaller, though that might only indicate it was farther away from the viewer. It was pale blue and lay on its right side, propped up on one elbow. Its neck was craned forward and its left arm stretched agonizingly toward the other figure in a gesture that could only be a call for help. Its cry of pain was implicit in the strain of its musculature, the angle of its head, the trembling fingers of its hand.

The larger—nearer?—figure was golden-skinned and had its back turned to the other. While it, too, had no facial features, it faced the viewer in a pose of disdain. Hands resting casually on hips, left foot forward and slightly bent, the figure had its head cocked, listening. There could be no doubt that it heard the piteous pleas of its fellow on the ground behind it—and there could be even less doubt about its total lack of concern.

There in the window, the scene was staged in eternal simplicity: the blue victim, its silent screams echoing through the blue-black corridor, reaching out for help; and the golden ignorer, locked into its own world and refusing to emerge even to help a soul in agony.

Birk didn't know how long he'd been standing in front of the window before he realized he was sobbing. The devastating emotionalism of this single piece had lanced through him, touching scars he'd thought were long healed and making them bleed afresh. Birk sank slowly to his knees but did not—could not—take his eyes from the window.

Though the picture remained unchanged, he

could see faces forming on those alien bodies. His face and—Reva's. He was on the ground, reaching up to her, reaching for his golden Reva. *Reva, I'm hurt. Reva, I need you. Reva, don't deny me! Reva! Reva....*

There came a point at which he could no longer keep himself upright, even on his knees. He fell forward, then, to the walkway, and his eyes finally left the scene in the window. He lay there prone in an undignified heap with his arms outstretched and clawing at the floor, coughing as his tears flowed unchecked. The walls of the empty building echoed his cries of anguish.

After some time, the sobbing stopped. Birk rose unsteadily to his feet and staggered back down the ramp and out of the gallery. Not once did he look back at the window hanging silently on the wall.

The nightmares started up again that night.

They began with the peaceful fuzzy nothingness of his normal sleeping pattern—but the fuzziness was suddenly shattered by sharp, painful images of bright lights shining in his eyes, of harsh stabbing at his limbs, of a relentless droning in his ears that grew louder and louder no matter how hard he tried to shut it out, until finally his eardrums threatened to burst. There was Reva, standing before him, naked in the golden glow of her beauty, smiling her warm, understanding, I-can-make-everything-better-with-a-touch smile. But as he stepped toward her she changed, snarling with fangs that would shame a guard dog, raking him with claws of burning iron.

He backed away and stepped into a Pit. Cold, heavy chains bound him as he fell. As he hit the

floor, he discovered that there were others around him, also in chains—faceless souls screaming against their bondage. The floor tilted and he was thrown together with them, jammed so tightly that the stench of their sweating bodies burned his nostrils. Then explosions, bright lights, shock....

He awoke to find himself crying in Arthur's arms. The robot was holding Birk tightly against his smooth body, swaying ever so slightly with a comforting rocking motion and stroking the man's hair tenderly. Birk could recall his mother holding him like that when, as a child, he'd awakened in the night with fear. As rational thought returned to him, he remembered teaching Arthur exactly the way it should be done.

"I... I think I'm all right now," he managed to say.

The robot loosened his grip, but did not entirely let go yet. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Yes, quite."

With the increasing confidence in Birk's voice, the robot took his hands away and backed off. He continued to watch Birk closely, however.

"Thanks for coming to me," Birk went on after a moment. "It's been a while since I've had an attack that bad, hasn't it?"

"Over three years, sir."

Birk shook his head "It's all part of this feeling I was trying to describe to you earlier. I don't know what's come over me."

On impulse, he threw back the blankets and slid off the high bed to stand naked on the icy floor. The soles of his feet tingled and the air was biting cold all around him, but he forced himself not to notice.

Instead, he crossed to the stairway and climbed up one flight to the roof.

A chill wind whipped him as he stood unprotected in the darkness, looking out over the black abyss that was the city below. Looking upward brought no relief from darkness, either; the night gripped him like a cold black fist and the sky was as barren as a witch's womb.

Behind him, Arthur emerged from the stairwell carrying a sleeping robe. Birk turned slowly and allowed his companion to dress him. "I do miss the stars, Arthur," he sighed. "They're the one thing I really do miss. These empty nights of yours give me a touch of claustrophobia."

"You said yourself, though, that being in the middle of a dust cloud kept other humans from finding you."

"True, true. But shooting my own arguments back at me won't cure me of nostalgia. The stars were always my friends, even when people turned against me. I may recognize the necessity for their absence, but I still miss them. Damn it, I do!"

As he spoke, a streak of light flashed across the otherwise black backdrop of night. "A meteor," Birk said, his lips curling into a tight smile. "All right, then, I'll settle for that, if it's all this stingy sky will give me."

Alarm bells started ringing downstairs, and Arthur stiffened. After a moment, the robot relaxed again and addressed his master. "That was no meteor, sir. It was an artificial object, quite possibly a spaceship like the one you came in. It just crashed in the mountains five hundred kilometers north of

here.”

It was Birk’s turn to stiffen. The night’s chill had suddenly doubled its intensity. There could be only one reason why a ship would come here: they had found out about him. They were coming to take him back.

Perhaps it was, indeed, the end of the world.