

1st – Filippo Rubulotta (Original in Italian)

In the darkness a regular rumble, close and with a slight echo. This sound... But it is my heart! Where am I? I try to open my eyes but I cannot. A female voice makes me jump. "Goodmorning Jack Well, the awakening phase is progressing smoothly. I'm Janet, the pod's artificial intelligence in charge of your support. I'm at your service." I gasp, unable to speak. "Don't strain yourself, you will regain function shortly." I sigh, focus, and lift my eyelids, now successfully. A palm away from my nose a frozen transparent panel. My breath is thawing it. A couple of metres ahead I glimpse more cryogenic capsules. The glass fogs up. I hold my breath, letting it fog up. Humanoid figures are approaching the other capsules. Their skin reflects the light irregularly, like liquid mercury. Who or what are they? They do something near the other capsules, which open, releasing a jet of steam. I start breathing again and the glass fogs up. What is happening? My heartbeat echoes louder and louder. "Opening procedure initiated." A hiss and the capsule opens. It must have been one of those things. I try to move but nothing happens. Damn it, body, move! A shadow approaches my face and everything goes dark again. *** I wake up and stretch. The ceiling is light green. "Goodmorning." The voice comes from the right, a man on top of a bed is watching me. At least he is human. I rise, the room is completely bare except for our beds. "Good morning, sorry but... who are you?" "From what the AI told me, I'm Conrad Crow, but I'm having trouble with my memory. Does that name mean anything to you?" "Nothing but I don't remember anything either, did you see those things that woke us up?" "No, just a shadow before we got here. What about you?" "I don't know, but it's better..." I try to get up, putting my foot on the floor but I get dizzy, stagger and fall on the bed. "Take your time, you just woke up. Besides, we can't go anywhere, there are no exits." "Nothing? Are we prisoners?" From bad to worse. "We have company." He points behind me. I turn around. A brown-haired man in a large tunic is standing over an opening in the room that wasn't there before. He steps forward and the opening closes behind him. I fall back on the bed. "Who are you? Did you see those things?" The man moves his lips, emitting a melody. I open my eyes wide. He's not human, he's one of them! He shakes his head and touches his neck. "Sorry, I forgot the translator. Anyway, those things are us. Only in organic suits." He lifts his shoulders. "You should feel the uncomfortableness, better the robes." "But you're..." "Humans? Yes, just like you." "What about that tune from just now?" He steps between us. "That's been our language for a long time now. You must have been in cryosleep." "What do you want from us?" He walks towards Conrad. "We got the report from your ship and here you are. I don't know how much longer the systems would have been able to resist." "Then thank you. But where are we?" "A colleague will tell you that. I'm here to greet you while the technicians analyse the data, sorry but cryosleep is a process we're not used to anymore." "In what sense?" "That we have better methods. On the subject, how are you feeling?" Conrad gets out of bed and stretches. "Never so much better, I used to have some back pain but I don't feel it now." "Good, we've intervened on some minor issues." He smiles. "And with the memories? How come you were on that ship?" Conrad sits back on the bed and shakes his head. "Nothing." "Me neither." I stroke my chin. "But what about the rest of the crew?" "In other rooms, we preferred to divide you into pairs so that your awakening would be more peaceful." He touches his neck and nods. "It's time for a walk, come along." He walks towards the wall and the opening appears again. I watch as Conrad shrugs, stands up and follows. I get off the bed calmly, one foot at a

time. Let's hope for the best, let's go. We end up in a corridor as bare as the room, only this time white. In front of our guest's footsteps a green light trail lights up and disappears behind me. We reach another wall that opens into a small room. Our host stops outside it. "Come on in, one of my colleagues will show you the rest." Conrad continues quietly. Hopefully he knows what he's doing. I follow him. In the empty room is another man, also wearing a large tunic but with blond hair. The opening closes behind us. The man nods his head. "Welcome." "You're the one who's going to tell us everything?" He smiles. "I'll try." "So..." He lifts his hand. "Soon." The walls of the room open up and around us an immense meadow and a blue sky welcome us. Outdoors? I plug my nose with my hands and look at the man. He smiles. "Don't worry, there's no danger." He takes a breath of air. "See?" I remove my hand and breathe. It's no different from inside the building, except that there are more... smells? To the left is a meadow full of flowers, red and blue. "Were you able to terraform Mars?" He nods. "And many other planets." "And which one are we on?" "You know it very well." I arch my eyebrow and look around. From a forest just beyond, I glimpse deer, watching us and moving away. Conrad's face streaks with tears. He falls to his knees on the grass and begins to sob. But what... The guide smiles. "He understood." It can't be... "This is there..." He nods. "The Earth." "But that's impossible, we left it unrecoverable!" "It wasn't easy. With time, a lot of it, we succeeded." He turns and points to the landscape around us. "Hundreds of years and now the cradle of our civilisation has been restored to its former glory." "And why are we here?" "A hunch, if you agree. You have known the pain of losing all this, now, would you like to stay and be its caretakers?"