

Ashes

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Zachariah looked around the pub as he set his glass, empty but for a bit of foam, on the table next to Sam in his urn. The Wanton Woman was quiet. It was still early in the evening and the regulars hadn't yet begun to drift in. The heavy rain was keeping the casual drinkers home, and Easter had lit the coal fires to keep out the chill. There were a few people scattered among the tables and at the bar, and no one seemed to be particularly interested in their neighbor's business.

Except for Zachariah, of course. But he was an experienced professional in other people's business. He didn't see anyone who was out of place or unaccountably familiar. The Agency would soon discover what he'd done, regardless of how well he'd covered his tracks, and would come after him. But evidently not yet.

He'd taken his dad's usual corner table. *Always have clear lines of sight to entrances and exits.* The voice of his training had grown softer over the years, to the point of being almost subliminal. *Always scout the location of a meet. Make sure there are no surprises.* It had become a prayer that autorecited over and over again, that had kept him alive through situations that should have killed him, and so he listened. He'd done his homework. The Woman hadn't changed since he was a kid, and this had always been the best seat in the house. Dad had preferred this table for much the same reason, particularly after he'd lost his job in the mines. He'd enjoyed watching people, observing the tides of conversation and emotion that would run through the pub over the

course of an evening.

Easter started the Guinness as soon as Zachariah stood up to make his way to the bar. Zachariah gave a wry smile. Easter poured a proper pint, giving it ample time to settle. Guinness had always been his drink, another habit he'd picked up from dad, just as Sam had acquired a taste for Best from his. Normally, he'd have stopped at one pint, or perhaps even before the first had been drained. He knew from bitter experience that drinking made him sloppy. He could feel the alcohol eroding the edges of the wall that kept his emotions in check. He could sense the bulking mass of his fear, pacing, looking for a way out. Still. For the moment he had control. And he knew he should worry about drinking too much tonight, particularly given the nature of his— guest. But tonight was different, and the terms of his pact with Sam were clear. The worry had to be set aside. There was a wake to be held. The clock behind the bar read 19:55. It still read bar time rather than real time; ten minutes before his guest arrived at 20:00.

Zachariah got back to the table, set his Guinness and the Best next to Sam's other two (as yet undrunk) pints, and sat down. He took the last envelope off the stack. It had *Taj Mahal* written on it in black ink. He put a spoonful of Sam's ashes in the envelope and sealed it shut. Sam's list was longer than Zachariah remembered it, but there'd be enough ashes to go around. Zachariah was going to have a busy last few months. Some of the places would be interesting: Angkor Watt was in the heart of the war zone and the Army of the Black Star was known for not taking prisoners; a unknown plague was burning wild through the Yucatan; and Mauna Loa had become restless recently. Fortunately Zachariah had been the resourceful one of the pair; he'd be able to make his way to most of the places without undue difficulty. It would give him something to do instead of just waiting for the cancer to finish its work.

The only really troublesome destination was the first on the list, and the most important. Mars. To get Sam to Mars meant getting around the Quarantine, and that would take some work.

Hence tonight's meeting.

Zachariah remembered the beginnings of the Quarantine, long

before it had had a name. He and Sam had still been kids when the Mars probes started going wrong. For every failure there'd been a reasonable explanation or a plausible cause, though engineers in the US and Europe forgot to coordinate their choice of units just a little too often to believe. Pioneer stopped broadcasting a few years after that, but it had already lasted far longer than anyone had expected. The Voyagers fell silent—again no surprise.

But then, the pace had picked up. Shuttle accidents became almost routine, satellite launch vehicles blew up on the pad—and over the decades, every outward looking satellite in Earth orbit, every probe sent out into space beyond, failed. Always, a plausible explanation for each failure; but not everyone was willing to buy the twin mantras of *coincidence* and *the dangerous frontier*.

Not that it mattered. Most people didn't care as long as their phones worked, and their satellite TVs, and their fancy automobile GPS. But Zachariah didn't believe in coincidence. Sam had gone off to become a teacher by this time, and he and Zachariah were only in sporadic contact. But it was Sam who'd sent Zachariah the article—from some fringe conspiracy-theory science fiction magazine—that had first bestowed the label. *The Quarantine*. Sam had written *Guess I'm not getting to Mars anytime soon* across the top.

That was the last time he'd heard from his friend. Over time, people began to forget about space. There were enough problems on Earth to keep everyone occupied and distracted, after all—and the feeling began to grow, as if deliberately nurtured, that there wasn't anything worth seeing on the Moon that we hadn't already seen, nothing worth finding on Mars. Why spend precious resources visiting dead rocks when there was poverty and global warming to deal with here on earth?

It was almost time. Zachariah raised a silent toast to Sam and finished his Guinness, and went up to the bar to get his last round of the evening. He glanced around en route. In the hours he'd been here, he hadn't been able to find a single thing that had changed significantly since his last visit. Everything was a bit older, but then it'd been sixteen years since Mom's funeral. Time had bleached out the colors; the curtains were a bit more frayed than he

remembered. But there were the same dull pewter tankards hanging from the exposed beams in the ceiling, the same scythes and pitchforks hanging on the walls. The air was murky from the combusted ghosts of cigarettes and cheap cigars smoked over decades, and the spores from the mold feeding on the beer that, once spilled, never quite dried out of the carpet.

And Easter was still pulling pints behind the bar, still with the same taste in loud flannel shirts. He never forgot a customer, and he'd starting to pour the Guinness as soon as Zachariah walked through the door. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't recognized Sam. Zachariah had had to ask for the first pint of Best.

Waiting for his Guinness to settle, Zachariah ran his hand along the bar. Dad had claimed that it had been carved from a single piece of wood, from an old tree that had come down during the big storm of 1968. A lot of dad's stories seemed to come from that night, when the wind howled like a wild tortured beast, tore the roofs off houses, broke the trees and drove the waves against the shore. The bar had suffered over the years: from spilled drinks, cigarette burns, and the occasional impatient and incompetent whittling while someone was waiting for a drink and Easter wasn't looking.

Standing at the bar reminded him of Sam. They'd spent a lot of time here, waiting for pints, theirs and their dads'.

Zachariah remembered the night he and Sam had started worrying the details of their pact on the walk over. Sam kept tripping, as he did every clear night, unable to keep his eyes on the road.

He'd grown up wanting to travel, to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. The stars had captivated him, as had television, movies, any picture or story of somewhere exotic that drifted across his field of vision. He was only ten when he'd started drafting his list. Mars was at the top. He'd spent entire summer afternoons in the library, skipping football games in the sun to pore over maps of the canalli, trying to decide just where he'd go, planning his itinerary for a trip to a land that had disappeared decades before. He'd kept the list in his wallet, on a piece of paper that had been folded too many times. He'd take it out occasionally,

adding a place, removing a place, taping it back together when it threatened to come apart, recopying it when it did— but Mars never moved from the top of the list. Zachariah shook his head and smiled at the memory of Sam and the fire in his eyes whenever he'd talked about Mars, about improbable trips to far distant stars.

Hence the pact. “When I die,” Sam had said that night, “if I haven't made it to Mars, make sure I get there.” Zachariah had agreed, at first just to shut Sam up on the topic; he hadn't talked about anything else for weeks at that point. Hell, they'd only been fifteen years old, and Zachariah hadn't made the promise with any intention of keeping it. But Sam had been persistent, and he'd worn Zachariah down. It took another three years before Zachariah opened up and tasked Sam with his half of the pact. Sam left the next day for university. He made his escape. It took Zachariah another eighteen months to get out, into the army.

From there into the Agency.

The thump of a full pint being set none-too-gently on the bar brought Zachariah back to the present. He paid Easter and took the drinks back to the table, set Sam's pint next to the others, sat. Sam's urn was plain but heavy, a white stone cylinder about six inches high and four across. Sam had no family left— like Zachariah— and no other known friends. It was his lawyer who'd eventually tracked Zachariah down. Sam hadn't left any money; he'd spent it all traveling. All there was to Sam's entire estate, besides the slowly rotting ancestral home with its books and furniture, were the ashes and the list. And the pact.

20:05. Zachariah looked up to see his guest walk into the pub, dripping wet from the storm outside. The sight triggered a rush of adrenalin. He hadn't known whether the alien would even show up; the magnitude of what he was doing finally hit him. As well as he'd planned this meeting, scouting the location and planning his way out, doubt crept in. One side or the other would catch him, sooner or later. That would be the end of him. Yet there'd been no other way, no better strategy. The Agency kept far too close an eye on things; if he'd tried taking the meeting to the aliens it would have been the last thing he ever did. Here, in full public view, his chances were marginally better.

Besides, he thought, it's a wake. Where else could it be?

His guest walked up to the bar and spoke to Easter. Easter pulled him a pint (lager by the looks of it), then pointed to Zachariah's table. The stranger was average height, average build, bald but otherwise non-descript. No glasses. No facial hair; in the dim light of the pub, his skin looked remarkably smooth. No scars. No tattoos. No physical characteristic to capture attention. Zachariah watched closely as the newcomer approached. He had a slight limp, but just enough to break his symmetry; not enough to draw attention to himself. The only unusual thing was the absolute stillness with which he held his pint. No sloshing, no spilling. The lager in the glass was absolutely level. Zachariah smiled to himself, careful not to let it leak onto his face. Those were the sorts of details that had given them away in the end.

"My name is Bob. Are you Zachariah?" the stranger asked, standing next to his table. Zachariah nodded. "Take a seat." He motioned towards the empty chair across the table.

Bob nodded and sat. Zachariah reached over the table and shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Bob." As with everything else about him, his grip was generic. Not too firm, not clammy or flabby. Unremarkable, and all the more remarkable for that. "I'm glad you could make it." He'd spent the past month trying to figure out a way to get one of the aliens to meet with him, without giving too much away. In the end, he'd decided to be direct. He read through the profiles the Agency had put together over the years, chose one, and sent him an invitation: please join me for a wake, and try not to be followed.

Over the decades, Zachariah had spent weeks at a time watching the aliens, getting to know the individuals, speculating on their social structure, command structure, motives, favorite foods. His assignments had been close surveillance, but he'd always followed the basic rule: run when you think your cover's blown. He'd never been this close to one who'd been aware of his presence (*As far as you know*, he admitted to himself), and he could hear the voice of his training, yelling, pushing, trying to drag him to his feet and out of there. Ignoring it was a lot harder than he'd expected. But there was the pact to honor. There was a promise to keep.

Zachariah closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to speak. "It will take me a few minutes to fully explain the point of this meeting. Are you willing to listen?" He opened his eyes to see Bob nod his assent, and he continued. "Growing up, Sam was my best— make that my *only* friend. We came here when we were younger, with our dads. Later on our own. We'd sit at this table, and drink our pints, and talk about dreams.

"That's why we're here today, to honor his memory. So, before going any further, we raise a toast to the memory of Samuel David Sampson." Zachariah raised his glass, and Bob followed. They drank.

Zachariah motioned to the urn, opened his mouth. He paused. He wouldn't cry, that he knew. He'd learned too well over the years to bottle up unwanted emotions. It was all part of being a good soldier. But he could feel those emotions roiling inside, and just this once he savored them for a moment.

He hadn't felt anything for years, not even pain. It was a nice change.

"This is all that remains of Sam," he continued at last. "He died several months ago, and was cremated as is our custom. It is the duty of the family of the deceased to dispose of the ashes according to his wishes. As Sam has no family, that duty falls to me."

He paused and looked over at Bob. Another small detail that the aliens had never quite made to work was to cultivate a lack of regularity. Their eye blinks were always exactly three seconds apart. Watching Bob, Zachariah began to feel slightly uneasy.

"When Sam and I were young, we made a pact. We each had a dream, that the one left alive agreed to realize when the other died. Sam died first. Do you understand?"

Even over the noise of the pub, Zachariah could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

Finally, Bob nodded. Zachariah let himself breathe again. "Sam's dream was to go to Mars. Even without your Quarantine, it would have been difficult. We weren't on track to become a space-faring people. But after your interference, it became impossible.

"I promised to get Sam to Mars."

Zachariah glanced up to the ceiling, looked back down into

Bob's unreadable eyes, and gave the speech he'd been working on for the last month. "We know about you. We've been watching you for years. We know who many of you are. We know where you live. We don't know where you came from, or when you arrived. We know how you communicate but we don't know what you say to each other, whether it's some sort of code or just your native language. We know where each of you works, we know how you set up the Quarantine from inside. We don't know why. We've been patient for a long time, just— observing. Trying to piece together some picture of your capabilities. We may not always be so patient.

"I've made a lot of promises to a lot of people over the years. Haven't kept any of them. But my days are almost at an end, and I need — I'm not sure I could tell you why, exactly. I'm not sure you'd understand if I could. Something about redemption, maybe. But I promised Sam that he'd get to Mars."

Zachariah looked at Bob. Bob stared back at him, not moving, not speaking. Zachariah took the envelope from the bottom of the stack. The word *Mars* was written on it in large block letters. From his jacket pocket, he took out a hard plastic disc case.

"On this disc is everything we know about you. I'm here to sell out my whole damn species in exchange for..."

"Courier services," Bob finished softly, when Zachariah couldn't. Zachariah nodded.

The alien stared into his eyes for a few moments. Then he reached across the table, and pocketed the envelope and the payment. He raised his pint. "To the memory of Samuel David Sampson, then."

The alien left the pub, leaving most of his pint behind. Zachariah sat for a moment before drinking down the rest of his. There was no way to be sure that Bob would keep his half of the bargain, but this was the best he could do. Godspeed, Sam, he thought. He thought he felt something else, then--relief, perhaps--but there was no time to savor it. They would be coming after him soon. Both sides, probably: his own, for his betrayal, and the other, on the chance he knew more than he'd told them. Perhaps they were already waiting outside, just beyond the feeble protection

of human witness. Too late to worry about that now. He had an escape route set-- but not just yet. He had some of Sam left, and Sam had loved this place. Easter wouldn't mind.

Zachariah sprinkled the last spoonful of ashes on the floor, finished his pint, and picking up the stack of envelopes, walked out into the night.

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