

## A WHIFF OF FREEDOM

Larry barked a laugh and stopped to take a rest. Ahead, the phosphorescence of the fence made its hatchwork clear against the blackness that lay outside. But a few bright stars twinkled between the mesh, beckoning. *Escape!* The word and everything it stood for coursed through the man's mind, spilling over to energize his scrawny and exhausted body. The pain he felt was partly from his own gut and partly from outside. Intoxicated with the concept of escape, he lunged forward, elbows digging into the icicle-covered surface of Pluto, his lacerated forearms leaving a thin trail of blood over the ice.

Bob, sitting on a boulder nearby, watched his buddy with admiration and despair. The latter was of his own making: a woman on Charon, who had taken his immature love, wrapped it around his neck, and thrown him aside to suffocate in his own idealism. Of course, his brain told him that it was all childish and stupid – but that did not stop the pain, which in its own way was as intense as that of his male partner. Maybe there was something better on the other side of the fence. Or maybe they would both be shot by one of the guards who were reported to patrol it regularly. He did not really care...

“Bob!” The voice, irritated, penetrated the thin atmosphere of Pluto and bounced off the towering mounds of ice which crowded around. “Wake up!”

The large man seated on the boulder looked up, as if suddenly discovering his whereabouts. At his feet lay two backpacks, their angular shapes attesting to their burdens of tools. In another existence, he could have used those tools to build a house, creating a home and perhaps...

“Damnation!” Larry yelled. “Gimme the cutter!”

Bob started to rummage absentmindedly through one of the backpacks. Half of his mind replayed the time he had first met Her, while the other half directed his big fingers through the paraphernalia of the present effort. He relied on touch, because the only good source of light was the enormous but dim circle of Charon, which hung over the scene like a disapproving angel. The Pluto-Charon pair had been known since ancient times as a double planet. But only Pluto had been terraformed. It supported a meagre population of unique people pushed out of the more civilized inner regions of the solar system to form a mongrel colony of misfits.

Bob's fingers located the laser cutter. The feeble light from the satellite Charon glinted off the metal casing, where a winking green light showed that the energy cell was fully charged. Judging the distance accurately, he tossed the tool through the thin air, in a parabola of reflected light. "Here!"

Larry, who had not taken his eyes off the shining form of the fence, felt behind him and picked up the cutter in cold-numbered fingers. A pretty green star, matching the display of the laser cell, shone through one of the squares of the barrier. Larry liked green stars: they predicted new life. In fact, he liked stars of all colours, except the bland yellow of Sol, with its attached retinue of tamed planets and their hordes of moronic inhabitants. Spurred on by a racial memory of being different and wanting freedom, he crawled forward, the cutter clenched between chattering teeth.

Bob, watching impassively, thought that the whole thing resembled one of those B-movies from remote history. *Escape from Stalag Sol*, maybe. However, not everything changed with time. People still fell in love, and fell *out* of love; or got caught in the trap formed by the difference. In his case, the trap had proven as effective as one of those old tooth-lined steel contraptions people had once used to capture animals. A kind of leg-hold trap, where the mind writhed in agony, unable to get free...

"Yoh!" Larry exclaimed. He had misjudged the distance in the poor light, bringing his prominent nose into unexpected contact with the fence. A shower of violet photons fell to the ice, which promptly melted, causing a pop-popping, fireworky kind of noise. Rings of phosphorescence spread out from the point of contact, burying themselves in the frozen ground below and diverging rapidly above. Looking up, the man could see no indication of a top to the fence. As expected, they would have to cut an opening.

Bob, startled by the noise, rose from his boulder and looked around apprehensively. The encircling mountains of ice were silent, however. No rush of guards that he could see. But then, would he recognize the guardians of the fence anyway? Only a few of the billions of people who inhabited the solar system had even seen the aliens who patrolled its periphery. Their physiology and psychology were a mystery. So also was their motive.

Why had the human race been hemmed in? And by *whom*? The plans of the race – for interstellar exploration and glory – had been rudely cut off. Now, its billions swarmed around, confined to their own few planets, like so many rats. Rats in a trap.

Larry, unencumbered by philosophy, was cutting his way through the fence. He did not understand the physics of this skein of energy, but it sure was tough. Fortunately, the information he had gleamed from the techie at the bar was proving accurate: the laser tool sawed its way slowly but definitely through the mesh of the fence. The backpacks contained other tools should they be needed; plus a couple of bottles of hooch, planned for the celebration that would follow their escape...

There was only one bar of any significance on Pluto, which was naturally located by the side of the spaceport. Leaning on its scarred counter, Larry had learnt a lot over time from visitors and would have liked to learn more, were it not that most of the crews seemed intent on returning to Earth at the soonest opportunity. For Pluto was still a frontier world, in all senses of the phrase. Terraforming, while relatively straightforward for Mars, Venus and most of the other bodies in the inner solar system, had proven difficult on this icy outpost. Heat had been obtained from the tidal forces between the main planet and its large companion, Charon. This was sufficient to melt a lot of the eons-old, chemically-varied ice mantle. But Pluto itself was a small world, so its atmosphere had been artificially “weighted” with big molecules, which helped to keep the oxygen in place, with the bulk of what people breathed being the old standby of nitrogen, though in this case imported from Triton, the big moon of Neptune. But even with a passable climate and a breathable atmosphere, there was still the big psychological problem: darkness. The Sun as seen from Pluto was just a brighter-than-usual star; and the light from Charon was a feeble thing, compared to the illumination on the home planet due to the Moon. Living on Pluto was like being way up north on the Earth. Those who survived had the mind-set of the mythological Vikings; and like that vanished race, made their existence tolerable by a liberal use of alcohol.

The bar on Pluto was known simply as that: The Bar. It was the single most important place on the planet; and anybody of any significance had at some time or another sampled its wares. It was there that Bob – newly arrived from Earth with an irreparably broken heart – had washed up. Unfortunately, large men with placid characters have a habit of attracting the attention of small men with oversized egos. Thus had Bob found himself the innocent target of four thugs who were nasty, drunk and armed with blasters. The newcomer would undoubtedly have been charred, were it not for the intervention of a medium-sized individual who with an open hand had knocked the main member of the gang onto his rear end. Public amazement

followed this act of foolhardy friendship. And it was with an air of bafflement that the bullies had withdrawn from The Bar, covering their retreat with muttered threats.

Even Fred – the longtime barman with the bald head, who through experience had developed a callous disregard for his clientele – looked impressed. The hero of the event, Larry, seemed strangely oblivious of danger. And over a long series of succeeding drinks, Bob had eventually discovered the reason: Larry was blessed or cursed (depending on viewpoint) by inoperable cancer of the pancreas. He was, as he himself put it, “A walking dead man.”

Feeling guilty, Bob stopped his introspection, and picked his way through the gloom towards his companion.

“Keep down, you lunk”, Larry hissed. The two men had the easily familiarity where insults were a staple of speech.

Bob, trying to reduce the size of his large frame, crouched down among the chaos of ice that surrounded them. Arriving by the side of his companion, the big man saw that his smaller friend had managed to cut open a section of the fence. It was, however, of meagre size. “I can’t fit through *that*.”

“Stop whining,” admonished Larry.

The man’s voice was slightly shaky. His face, in the dim light of Charon, showed grey and drawn.

“Have you taken your pills?” Bob asked perceptively. His tone was that of a solicitous mother.

“Er...,” was the response.

“Go and take them,” ordered Bob, pulling the cutting tool from the other’s grasp.

Bob started to cut through the glowing network of the fence, enlarging the hole made by Larry. The latter, feeling abruptly tired, began crawling back towards the place where the backpacks lay in the snow. He hunched along for a bit, with awkward movements like a wounded snake, and then stopped. Suddenly, his body jackknifed, and he vomited.

The yellow stuff which came out of Larry’s mouth formed a pool on the ice. A small cloud of steam rose from it, and began spreading. Reaching Bob, the acidic smell made him gag.

Suppressing his own stomach, Bob ran – crouched over – to his partner. Larry’s teeth were clattering violently; and on being picked up, his body felt unnaturally light. Bob dumped

the figure by the side of the packs, and ripped open one of them. In a neat package were several tubes of pills, plus a syringe and several differently-coloured ampoules.

“This one?” Bob queried, holding up one of the ampoules in front of Larry’s eyes. These stared, trying to focus, but without much success. Taking a chance, Bob loaded the syringe. “You idiot,” he chided, and plunged the needle through the fabric into the other man’s thigh.

The effect of the drug was miraculous. After only a few panting breaths, Larry’s features relaxed, and a silly unintentional grin appeared on his face.

Bob watched his friend carefully for a while. It was a wonder that Larry could be so consistently good humoured, when his guts were being literally eaten away from the inside. What gave him the strong bulwark he obviously had against depression? (Or, to turn things around, why was Bob so prone to it?) Larry had a strange kind of whimsical resignation to his fate. Something that was hard to categorise, but might be called defiant despair. Bob had watched his buddy deal with the horrible pain of the disease on several occasions, and would have given everything he owned to be able to effect a cure. But that was beyond their combined resources, and in any case only available in the more advanced worlds nearer the Sun. On Pluto, the only thing available was the temporary relief of a shot, to buy time against the inevitable. To buy time to be used in doing something foolhardy but important...

Bob picked up the laser cutter again. He made sure that Larry was comfortable: his body leaned against a mound of ice, his head encircled by the hood of his fur-fringed parka, the pain-free eyes staring up at the image of Charon as it moved across the star-speckled sky.

At the fence, its tough strands gradually gave way to the sizzle of radiation and the wrench of big muscles. Bob grunted as he worked. He cut around a portion of the barrier big enough to squeeze through, and prepared to wrench it free. On one knee, he grasped the loose piece ready to pull, steadying himself by placing his other hand on the portion above.

He froze. There was a distinct vibration in the fence. Somebody – or *something* – was coming!

Bob turned back to where Larry lay, still staring at the sky, his eyeballs reflecting the faint light of Charon.

Suddenly a shadow fell across his friend’s face. Bob turned, opening his mouth to yell something. What seemed to be a massive black hand reached out and grabbed him...

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*Report on minor breach, Sector P. Two individuals, with primitive energy source. Repair immediate. Both subjects were found to be organically injured by prior events. Attention given, as per protocol, and subjects replaced.*

*Note: these two subjects show an unusual level of altruism (almost love) towards each other. If this were to develop into a race-wide quality, it might be feasible to lift the cosmic-zoo status. However, at present most members of the race are too quaint to be let out.*

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Larry and Bob were drinking beer in The Bar. Fred, the barman with the bald head, regarded them from eyes stony with suspicion. The two men appeared to be *happy*.

Larry's previously pasty face was now pink with good health, and his erstwhile gallows humour had been replaced by a more sensitive type.

Bob's large body seemed to fit the man more comfortably now; he even smiled occasionally, and showed no sign of his former lovelorn grief.

"What was that woman's name, anyhow?" Larry asked, careful of his friend's feelings.

"Funny, I can't recall," Bob replied. "Here, let me get you another drink."

Much later, the two buddies staggered to the door, their arms around each other's shoulders, and vanished into the cold night of Pluto.

Fred, who was paid a fixed wage, glanced at the clock and noted with satisfaction that there was only one customer left in the bar. That individual was clearly inebriated, and the waiter briefly considered calling him a cab, but decided not to bother. Spitting into a glass, Fred gave it a perfunctory pass of his dirty cloth and replaced it on the pile at the end of the counter. Then he expertly short-changed the last drunken customer and pointed him towards the exit.

The lock on the door clicked, and Fred turned back into his own world. Nothing could get in. Or out.