

Other Side of the Door

by

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“What’s it like?” she asked. She was looking up at me like they all do. I don’t know what it is, or what happened while I was gone, or which time it happened, but I went from average height somewhere around my third trip through the Reef, to tall. It wasn’t me that changed, of course, it was the rest of the world. But they’d never seemed to grasp the oversight, so since then, every one of my handlers has been a full foot shorter than me, regardless of their pretend age or gender.

“Which part?” I said. My usual rejoinder. For her this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, literally. For me it was just trip 37.

“All of it, I guess, but the transition is the most mysterious isn’t it?”

She was attractive in a way. Big eyes, maybe a little bigger than anyone had when I grew up, but beautiful, and a deep, deep crimson. I’m never sure where they get their ideas, but I suspect it’s often cartoons.

“Sure, the transition is mysterious. In the sense that it can’t be described effectively. When my ship passes into the reef, normal physics breaks down, and I run on normal physics.”

“So you don’t experience anything?”

“Well, that’s not exactly right. I experience things, but those things don’t make it out of the Reef. The scientists tell me that I’m experiencing all of it, but to me it’s the briefest of blanks. Like I fell asleep in my chair for a second, and then I’m in another galaxy.”

She adjusted something on a slim silver column that rose from the “medical dias” which is what was in my return room this time, and where I was standing. Last time it was an enormous tubular machine that seemed to be made of half skin and half plastic. It pulsed as I lay inside it, and they did whatever it is they do each time I return. Check my vitals, maybe, or inoculate me for where I’m going somehow. I stopped asking questions after the third trip. The answers never made sense, and it seemed to upset everyone that they couldn’t explain.

“So there’s no sensation at all?”

““Nothing. I know it’s a disappointment to you.”

She laughed, except it was closer to something between a bark and a chirp. “I guess you have had these conversations a few times before.” She stared into the distance for just a second and said “Thirty seven trips! That is a lot.”

“Is it?” I said carefully.

“Well, you’re almo --” she blinked hard, cutting off the word. “I’m sorry, you know we can’t talk about the world outside. It’s not good for you.”

I smiled. On my eighth trip I’d demanded information, really forced the issue. There was a fight, and I hurt someone, or something, I’ve never been really clear on that. It didn’t matter. The next ten trips there was security in the room, pointing things that looked like the guns I remember, but were certainly much more deadly. It made everything miserable. I almost quit then, but I’m not sure what happens when I quit.

“Are you okay?” she said. She was doing a good job of pretending an empathy she couldn’t possess. The only other people who could understand me were the others just like me, Reef travellers. And we would never meet each other, and might be horrified if we did.

“I’m fine. It’s just...difficult sometimes. You understand, right?”

She frowned slightly and said kindly, “You know it’s for your health, right? Everyone out there would love to see you and know you, but...you wouldn’t understand. You know the story, right? Do I need to tell you the story?”

“No, I’ve heard it before.” The story is the center of a Reefers world, in a way. They tell it during training, and every time you ask about walking through the door and seeing what’s out there. The short version is in the early days of the program, one of the first few Reefers came back. They took him out of the room. They tried to show him the world. He killed fifteen people, then himself.

See, when we pass through the Reef in our ships, we pass through a space where physics does not work the way it’s supposed to. And because of this, it allows us to travel incredible distances. And when we get there, we seed gates in the suns of other galaxies, and open them to human travel. We are the ultimate rock star, which is why they treat us like strange gods when we return.

But the universe is a big fan of keeping track of the details.

There’s no free ride when it comes to getting there. It’s true I experience nothing when I pass into the Reef, but it takes as long as light would have taken to get there. The nearest galaxy, which they hit the first decade of the program, long before I joined, is four years away. I don’t keep track of my distance anymore. I stopped on my fourth trip, when I lost twenty thousand years.

So the rest of the story about the Reefer who left the room, is that he didn’t recognize what he saw as humanity, on a visceral, genetic level. Because it wasn’t anymore. It was what they had become after a hundred thousand years. Or maybe a million. Who knows.

So I knew that the people I talked to were illusions. Robots? Shape changed? Some other thing I could barely imagine? Every return and every time in the room, you knew that just outside that door, was something so exotic you couldn’t comprehend it, and trying would destroy you.

So no matter how much she looked like a twenty year old woman, carefully checking my vital signs, I knew that she was something else. Even if they’d gotten everything right, I’d have known. But instead of panic, i just felt slightly off put by them. Some sort of pheromone uncanny valley maybe.

I watched her finish up, and then we chatted a little more. One thing that seems consistent is that they cherish me. They try and remind me, every time, how much I’m doing for humanity. It makes me wonder how big we’ve become, if even after all this time, and all the places we’ve opened, they still need us.

But I’ll never know. Because when she was done, and my ship was refueled, I would fly back out into the Reef, and seed another sun and come back home via the gate that blooms forth from it, and meet some other person, maybe a descendent over millennia of this person. Or maybe one day I would return and there would be no one here to greet me in the room, and then, whether it killed me or not, I’d find out what was on the other side of the door.