

HIEROFANI

By dejavroom

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Hierofani", Malcolm Akhtonem said, when the noise finally died down and we could hear ourselves again. The past five minutes were a complete pandemonium, as the shuttle's machinery hissed and clanked, complained and moaned under the unimaginable pressure of the wormhole that we had crossed. The shuttle had resisted well to the trip, but the signs of metal stress were everywhere. Amazed as I was with the purpose of that ship and its appearance (it looked like a bathyscaphe out of the 19th century - it had wooden parts, for God's sake...), I took little time to consider its resistance at such adverse conditions. From time to time some of the pipes running along the walls would hiss and expel gas, and a crackling noise of electrical discharges was our background sound all the time. Were we safe, or was the "Munnim" about to blow up, leaving us stranded in a distant...

Where were we, anyway? Akhtonem was staring at the window, eyes wide open and a smile in his face, and his swarthy, alien/egyptian skin glowed with excitement. "Hierofani", he repeated. "I recognise the system. There's Autor 3 and his twin star Denea". And when I looked in the direction he was staring at, I could not hold the tears.

I never felt such fear in all my two hundred and thirty-two years, nor such awe, such humbleness.

First of all, we were in space. Leaving alone that, we could see, above our heads... the gigantic spiral arms of a galaxy. Of Hierofani. Slowly it moved, with a grace until that day unknown to me. With a texture that seemed misty, velvet-like. With a majestic and delicate glow. Above our heads, like a god's eye. Taking its time.

It was the most beautiful and frightening thing I've ever seen, even though "beautiful" and "frightening" are only poor attempts to capture what I felt. In a moment I knew exactly my place in the Universe. I stared at my hands, trembling. Carbon, hydrogen, quarks, gluons... energy. I knew we were going to die. We had little food and water, but... I would talk to Malcolm. In the end, I wanted to be released out there. I would join my sisters, the stars.

And then he said: "I'm gonna make some coffee. This is gonna take a while..." There was a smirk in his face, the same I saw as we escaped, through bribery, the Maximum Security Prison Koth Annun in his planet. "What?" I said, still shattered by all the things that had happened in the last day. Being condemned to death in a distant planet, escaping prison and stealing the dimensional shuttle, seeing the inner workings of a worm-hole and being stranded in space. And we weren't done with the surprises:

One of the screens in the control panel showed the platform from where we had fled. Guards, scientists and bureaucrats walked to and fro, talked, then left - but all too fast. As if in a hyper-accelerated film, they were only blurs in the screen. And the platform was... aging. Rust was rapidly forming in the metal parts everywhere. The lights died out. The camera stopped filming. "What?" I repeated, like in a dream.

"Funny, innit?", he said, as the coffee heated in the plastic bags. "We were sentenced to death, and now to the people who condemned us we are like immortals." Then I understood what he was talking about. We were near light-speed, and probably trapped in the gravity field of one of the outer arms of the galaxy above. Near light speed meant also that time would pass much faster to... well, to all the other living creatures in the Universe than to us. Director Raksari was probably dead by now, and so his sons, in a few minutes his grandsons...

"What do we do now, Malcolm?" I asked. He returned to the window and made himself comfortable. "To them you're like a god now, man. Behave as one.", he said, as he passed my coffee, eyes already fixed in the unbelievable view we had before us.

"Contemplate".

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