



**SONGS  
OF THE  
SO'A**

## SONGS OF THE SO'A

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"Uncle Terry, would you tell us the story of the singing trees?"

"Yeah, Uncle Terry! The one with the big explosion in it!"

Upon being addressed, light bands cornering Uncle Terry's panels transitioned from a slumbering orange to an alert green and he hummed to life like an iPod, only instantly and with a full battery. A single round eye swiveled down to the twin carbon-based life forms that were standing before him on their tippy toes. He regarded them silently for a moment, noting how their little hands were fused together pleadingly and that 40% of their faces had been eclipsed by adoring grins. Deep within his cerebral matrix, electro-motions and spectro-synapses crisscrossed at the speed of infinity, generating a neuro-technological reaction of warm sentimentally — a reaction he was very careful to conceal, which wasn't difficult because Uncle Terry was a construct and didn't have a face.

"It is late," Uncle Terry said languidly, settling deeper into his corner like a cat who has long since mastered the art of playing hard to get. "And you have both heard this story on many occasions."

"Yes, but you tell it so *well*, Uncle Terry!" said Rimple, the girl and the elder of the two seven-year-olds by mere minutes. She had rosy cheeks, bright pink hair tied off in pigtails, and the sort of supernatural adorability that could stop a line of Communist tanks by melting them like butter. "It's my favouritest story in the whole universe and I haven't heard it in literally forever!"

"Besides, mom says if we get a bedtime story we can stay up a whole hour later!" added Beans, the boy, who was plumper and even rosier than his twin sister. His hair was spiked in an effort to distract from his own ruddy cheeks and his hands were covered in

something sticky, as usual. He looked like the sort of child who would one day harken back to this year as the time his attention span hit its developmental limit. "You can't make us go to bed early! You just can't!"

"Please, Uncle Terry?" Rimple fell to her knees and clawed desperately at the avuncular construct's base panel. "PA-LEAZE?!"

Uncle Terry scanned the twins again, who had fallen silent to more effectively inflate their lower lips. Deep in his cerebral matrix, all traces of his resistance fell.

He was a colossal cybernetic construct, Uncle Terry — a perfectly symmetrical, octagonal pillar with a slight volcano shape to his limbless body. He was subdivided into three equal sections — one for his head, another for his midsection, and the last for his base. He loomed almost eleven feet above the twins — a black, reflectionless, ancient automaton whose only features were his single probing eye, an octet of light bands, a fading identity etching, and a great dent on the side of his head. He was nestled in the corner of the stately living room like a regal grandfather clock enjoying its antique status, or perhaps an elderly black Monolith who has been spending its retirement observing a *Murder, She Wrote* marathon.

"Very well," Uncle Terry said at length. "I will tell you the story of the So'a."

The twins flung themselves onto their bellies and began kicking their legs behind them in tandem like Olympic swimmers. Their pupils contracted like those of kittens being presented with a bit of tinsel and their cheeks became ever rosier. Despite his best efforts, Uncle Terry's carefully calibrated sentimentality levels swelled.

"But be cautioned that this is not a tale for the faint of heart!" Uncle Terry said in recitation of his customary disclaimer that the twins both mouthed in unison. "For it is a story of both beauty and horror, love and anguish, ice and fire—"

"We *know*," Beans said with exaggerated impatience. "Get the hell on with it!"

"Language, child," Uncle Terry said, firmly but not unkindly.

The construct hummed as he cycled back through his memory banks. The air before him rippled faintly like a pond — a rare cosmic phenomenon that has only ever been documented occurring in living rooms just as someone begins to recount their life story.

"Our story begins many millennia ago," Uncle Terry began. "On a planet called Edyn..."

The construct's eye opened for the first time. It was a bleary, laggard opening that instantly took issue with the brightness of the sun, like the early-morning awakening of a college freshman who started Frosh week with a single sip of beer and ended it in a potter's field with amnesia, a facial tattoo, and no pants. Once the eye filtered through the ultraviolet rays it scanned the alien landscape.

The first thought that coursed through the construct's cerebral matrix was that this planet was pleasant to behold, with its rolling blue hills and scenic cliff walls and marmalade sky and placid lake and picturesque clouds and fuzzy rodents in the throes of lovemaking. His second thought was that he had no idea what he was doing on this strange but pleasant world. This segued into his third thought, which was that he had no clue who he even was.

Now fully alert, his octagonal head rotated three hundred and sixty degrees and his eye processed an influx of data. He was partially embedded in a small crater at the heart of a wide valley. This wasn't the sort of crater that implied the cataclysmic annihilation of civilization in a Roland Emmerich movie, mind, but more the kind of crater that suggested that the base of a candle had been planted in Roland Emmerich's birthday cake too forcefully.

He tried to move, but his base section was lodged too deeply in the crater. He peered up into the orange atmosphere, where a microscopic glint pulsed for a few seconds and then vanished. Had he an eyelid he might have blinked. His eye darted from the sky down to the crater that held him prisoner and back. A flurry of

questions flashed through his cerebral matrix. Who was he? What was he doing here? Had he been deposited into this valley by whatever had been glinting in the sky just then? If so, was it ever coming back? He scrolled through his memory banks for any clues only to discover that all his data logs prior to his awakening were inaccessible. Perturbed, he tried to draw upon everything that he seemed to know by instinct — such as how to use his eye and turn his head — and found that significant portions of his knowledge base were unavailable as well. If his cerebral matrix was a house, then most of the doors and outlying wings were blocked off and all the furniture was sheeted.

His eye roved the landscape again, which was silent save for a slight breeze and the satisfied exhale of several unseen rodents.

Somewhere behind him a bird cawed.

After a while some clouds passed overhead, the sky turned a deep shade of purple, and it began to drizzle.

He uttered his first word: "Hell."

"There I sat, stuck in that infernal pock mark," Uncle Terry said with all the dignity of an old man who endured multiple world wars without so much as getting the sniffles. "Unable to move, a permanent fixture of the land. Doomed to sit immobile day after day, night after night, as time slipped past me into eternity."

"Did it get lonely on that planet, Uncle Terry?" Rimple asked, mes-merized.

"Oh yes, child, and maddeningly so," Uncle Terry said. "Even when I did not lack for company I was alone. You see, over time the primitive inhabitants of Edyn acclimatized to my presence..."

The bone flew past his eye, spun in the air a few times, and came back down.

He did not react when another bone came up a moment later, nor did he acknowledge the mob of primitive, green-skinned amphibianoids who were massing against him like sorority girls over a Maserati at a car wash fundraiser. It had been six months

since they had emerged from the distant lake, freshly evolved and ready to drink in the oxygen world, and started lobbing the bones of some mammalian creature in front of him for reasons heretofore unknown. As far as he could tell, they were either worshipping him or playing him for goodies like Neanderthals would a vending machine. At any rate, it had been one day shy of six months since he'd completely lost interest in them.

He had initially tried communicating with them, of course, but the language barrier proved insurmountable; though he seldom had occasion to use it, his was a well-rounded vocabulary that did not involve grunts, croaks, or flatulent noises of any kind.

He looked over the valley impassively as the sun and moon did a few power laps across the sky. With each rotation the amphibianoids gradually stopped tossing the bones up and down and instead started using them for simple tasks like scratching their lower backs and bashing smaller amphibianoids on the head for making too much noise while scratching their lower backs.

When one of the creatures used woven together grass strands to tie a bone and a rock together into a makeshift hammer, it suddenly occurred to the construct that he was witnessing a monumental transition in their evolutionary journey. As the sun and moon continued to spin overhead, he found himself taking a keen interest in the tools and instruments they crafted from the bones and sticks and rocks that littered the valley floor. Everything they made served a purpose in their developing community, he noted, whether it was bashing disobedient heads or scratching something out of reach.

As the generations passed, he tracked the ownership of that first hammer as it transferred from father to son, son to friend, friend to lover, lover to rival, rival to fermented berry dealer, and finally fermented berry dealer to a lowly mud puddle in front of his crater, where it lay forgotten for the remainder of its days.

He watched entranced as the bone handle slowly grew brittle and the grass strands frayed and unraveled and the stone fell away until the entire hammer withered away into dust.

Somewhere deep in his cerebral matrix, something sparked.

"Having observed those primitive creatures fashion tools and instruments for both survival and leisure, I became certain that I too had been created for a specific purpose," Uncle Terry said. "This led me to an existential crisis, for having deduced that I was the product of intelligent design and therefore created for *something*, I grappled with the terrible question of why I had been left on that world. Had I been sent there to fulfill the purpose for which I had been created? Or had I somehow outlived my usefulness and been discarded as that hammer had been?"

Rimple gleefully kicked herself away from Uncle Terry just so she could scoot up to him excitedly again.

"Seasons passed around me," Uncle Terry continued. "The balmy heat of Edyn's long summer eventually gave way to the frigid cold of her winter, and still the mystery of my purpose eluded me. It was during that season that despair gripped me powerfully and I wished for an opportunity to die."

"What happened to the amphibian people?" Beans asked after a yawn.

"They spontaneously devolved back into fish and returned to the lake," Uncle Terry said sharply. "Now *do* pay attention, young one..."

The stars shone luminously from on high, making the snow drifts radiate around him like a field of diamonds. Green, violet, and pink lights oscillated above the cliff walls like iridescent ribbons while exotic constellations mingled like neighbors at a garden party. The wintry valley was beautiful — and bitterly cold. His systems ran more sluggishly with each passing night and his eye was beginning to frost over. If the temperature dipped any lower he might seize up completely.

He peered into the twinkling lights and tried to imagine one of them descending to the valley to retrieve him. It had been one thousand years to the day since he'd first awoken in his crater — one thousand years of loneliness and unanswered questions. He looked from star to star, hoping — pleading — for a liberation that

never came. When he could bear it no longer he cranked his eye down to the snow drifts. Deep in his positronic heart he knew that the glint was never coming back.

As the wind rose to shrieking levels and the ice at last blinded him, he decelerated his cerebral matrix and surrendered to the cold. The last thought that crossed his mind before he fell into a dreamless void was of the amphibianoids' hammer, long since consumed by the elements — just like him.

The warmth of spring brought his systems back online and drew him out of his catatonia. According to his internal clock, the winter had lasted nearly seven hundred years. Slightly disappointed he wasn't dead, he ambivalently surveyed the valley.

The sky was its rich marmalade hue once again and the hills were beginning to bloom with sweet blue grass. Every thing was wet but warming. He rotated his head to see what had become of the lake and stopped halfway. Something new lined the southern end of the valley; it looked like a forest.

"That was the first time I laid eye on the So'a," Uncle Terry said, exuding wonder with every syllable. If he had hair, it might have started blowing majestically behind him on its own impetus. "The magnificent trees of Edyn. Tangerine in bark and limb and olive in leaf and stem, the So'a stood taller and mightier than any other tree, sentient or dumb. Compared to them I was but a bump on the valley floor, but to me they were royalty. The despair that had beset me before that terrible blizzard melted with the last patches of snow while the prospect of companionship brought revival to my very soul."

Rimple's mouth was agape with wonder, while Beans' mouth was slack from having just wrapped up another yawn.

"At first they maintained their distance to observe me, strange outcropping in the terrain that I was," Uncle Terry continued. "For many months we monitored each other silently, both attempting to ascertain the other's intentions. I later learned that they feared I was



a boulder. Trees and boulders are natural foes everywhere in the universe, you see, and on Edyn it was no exception."

"I've heard that!" Rimple said with more conviction than even the fiercest Southern Baptist preacher could muster.

"Eventually their curiosity overcame their trepidation and they began to migrate across the valley floor." Uncle Terry's eye was aimed at the wall, unfocused, as if he was reliving it all over again. "The saplings came first, propelled by their insatiable curiosity. Then came the leading council of elderso'a, who were guarded by a defending party of heso'a — those are the tribal warriors. The chiefest among the elderso'a was Woodroot, a wise and ancient patriarch, descendant of the venerated So'a philosopher and rhetorician Soundless-Fall. He questioned me for many, many months on things I did not know, such as what I was and where I hailed from. I answered to the best of my ability and assured him that I meant no harm, which did nothing to put the fierce heso'a at ease. The brashest and most arrogant of those defenders was Thrower -of-Shade, descendant of the legendary So'a warrior-poet Bark-is-Just-as-Bad-as-Bite. Thrower took me for a boulder assassin and urged Woodroot to try me before the council as an enemy. Even the tribal mage, Out-on-his-Own-Limbs, took my presence in the valley as an omen of impending doom. I feared that I would be torn asunder by the heso'a, or worse, left alone in the valley to rust." Uncle Terry paused for pure dramatic effect. "Woodroot, however, saw something in me, and after much deliberation the council decreed that they would coinhabit the valley with me. After a century the entire tribe had indeed settled around my crater, stretching from the lake to the cliff walls—"

"A century!" Rimple cried. "How could they possibly take that long to come to you?!"

"Because they *didn't* come to him," Beans interrupted, incurring a wrathful look from his sister. "Forests spread naturally on healthy planets. It's how nature works. They just *grew* across the valley!"

Uncle Terry shook his octagonal head, pitying the child's limited understanding. "Oh, child, that you could only have *seen* them.

These were not the dumb firs of Earth-of-Old nor the genetically engineered pet shrubberies available in your corner markets, but the living So'a of Edyn, the proudest and most sovereign of all the living beings in the universe—"

"Trees aren't alive!" Beans said forcefully. "I mean, they *are* alive, but they aren't, you know, *alive*."

"Shh!" Rimple hissed in Beans' face. "I'm going to break your face in half!"

"These trees *were* alive," Uncle Terry said to Beans gently. "For the So'a of Edyn were no ordinary trees."

"What kind of trees were they, then?" Beans asked.

Uncle's Terry turned his head coyly. "*Living* trees."

Rimple gasped as if hearing this for the first time, but Beans only groaned.

"While Thrower-of-Shade and the heso'a treated me with suspicion and hostility, the other So'a welcomed me into their midst with open limbs," Uncle Terry continued, his voice mounting in fond reminiscence. "In that season I was able to set aside the haunting questions surrounding my mysterious existence and enjoy the company of newfound friends. There was Six-Second-Vine, who was always good for a comic witticism or two, as well as a retired heso'a defender who had lost most of his limbs in a skirmish with the boulders. Everyone just called him Stumpy. Also, the maso'a — those are the nurturers — entrusted me to watch over their saplings as a show of good faith. One particularly precocious little one, Wee-Cones, adopted himself as my personal protector. I had no say in the matter at all." Uncle Terry added that last bit with a warm chuckle. "Finally, Woodroot took me under his branches, educating me in the customs and culture of the So'a. It was in the company of those noble trees that my loneliness was expelled, but it was in the presence of another So'a that my heart was awakened with desire..."

Something suddenly stirred in Uncle Terry. His light bands thrummed longingly and his eye glistened with passion. "Sapagewillow. Ah! Sapagewillow! She was the most beautiful

creature I'd ever laid eye on. Tall, slender, curvaceous... her bark was rich and pristine and her leaves could have draped kings and queens. Whenever she spoke, my positronic heart pined with desire, so melodious was her voice—"

"Trees can't talk!" Beans cut in again, enduring a sharp, sisterly belly poke for it.

"The So'a not only spoke, young one," Uncle Terry said patiently. "They *sang*."

The construct turned his head in a methodical three-sixty. The valley that had for centuries been bare was now filled with trees. They stretched skyward above him, refracting the sun through their fine leaves and swaying tranquilly with the wind. In their presence he felt a warmth that was not from the sun and a connectedness that did not come from the soil. He could not put it into words, but it felt like being home.

The voices of the So'a were currently raised together in song, which seemed to come as naturally to them as flight does to birds or waves to the seas. He listened, captivated, until the moon was well into its journey across the night sky. He never took his eye off Sapagewillow. When the dawn broke, he resolved to sing with them as a member of the tribe.

"Unfortunately, while I was an esteemed guest of the So'a, I was not one of them," Uncle Terry said in bitter lament. "The songs of the So'a are sacred, you see, and only fully initiated tribal members are permitted to partake in them. This presented another problem, for though Sapagewillow reciprocated the love I bore for her, without membership we would never be able to exchange the ceremonial song vows necessary to bind our union before the elders'o'a. Tradition dictated that both a feat of strength and the unanimous acceptance of the entire tribe was required for me to become a So'a, but the battle hardened heso'a were unwavering in their animosity toward me. Furthermore, Thrower -of-Shade was vocal in his intention to steal Sapagewillow away from me, saying

that I would never, *ever* be one of them."

"What a dick!" Rimple exclaimed.

"Indeed he was," Uncle Terry said approvingly. "But what could I do? I was still imprisoned in my crater and quite unable to prove myself through any physical feat of bravado. I certainly could not participate in the tribe's skirmishes with the boulders, who in that season had been launching numerous assaults upon us from the cliff walls. Thrower was convinced that they had sent me to infiltrate the tribe and weaken them for an impending invasion. Unless I could somehow win them over, I feared he would convince the entire tribe to move on from the valley, dooming me to isolation and loneliness once more. The loss of the So'a would have certainly been terrible, but the loss of Sapagewillow, my love, would have been too much to bear."

"Did you ever win Sapagewillow's heart?" Rimple asked, wringing one of her pigtails nervously despite knowing the entire story by heart. "Wait, do So'a have hearts?"

Uncle Terry paused. Even for a faceless cybernetic construct he looked unusually blank. "Yes. Yes, they do," he said finally. "And I won that heart, dear child, when I saved the entire tribe from a terrible calamity—"

Beans immediately perked up. "Is it time for the *explosion* part of the story?!"

Uncle Terry's head swiveled uncertainly. "What an *odd* child you are."

He looked across the So'a — at their pale, brittle bark and their withering leaves. He could feel their suffering, their gruesome decay. It was agonizing.

It had been a month since the valley had been swarmed by bark beetles from the east — foul, disgusting vermin with black shells, horrible pincers, and noxious saliva. He had heard some of the elders' sing songs of the death and rot they carried with them, but he had never imagined he'd ever see it with his own eye. They had ignored him, inorganic automaton that he was, but the So'a

they had attacked with barbarity.

Woodroot was white and frail, with sap flowing freely from open crevices in his bark. Sapagewillow's vibrancy had been drained away and she looked like a gnarled, decrepit thing. Even Thrower-of-Shade looked lifeless and emaciated. The suffering of the saplings, however, broke his heart the most. Wee-Cones was suffocating under them. The brave little one had attempted to defy them with songs of his own, but his little voice had quickly been smothered.

He turned his eye to the sky, which was as clear as it had been since the pestilence first fell upon them. Oh, that the rain would come and wash them away, or a sudden frost would sweep in and obliterate them!

But no aid came from the sky. No rain, no frost, and no glinting light bringing salvation. He looked again over his So'a, who were now completely overwhelmed by the bark beetles.

Bark beetles — no living thing was more devoid of mercy. Hatred for them surged through his systems, overheating his cerebral matrix. He wanted to destroy them, smash them into nothing, but the only weapon he had was his voice.

It would have to do.

He amplified his vocoder volume to the maximum limit and unleashed his fury.

"On that day I sang," Uncle Terry said. "Though I was not a So'a, I raised my voice to the heavens, unleashing upon the vermin the fury of my song. Driven mad by it, the beetles fled the valley, never to return! With their torture ended, the So'a stood in unified amazement of the power of my voice. The elders'o'a proclaimed me to be the savior of their people, and the awestruck heso'a even begged me to teach them how to raise their own voices in so potent a defense. Regrettably, my secret could not be taught, for I did not understand it myself. What was it *really* that had infused my voice with such offensive power? Some innate talent or hidden strength? Or something else entirely? Something, dare I say, not of this

material realm?"

"Like magic?" Rimple asked gleefully.

Beans scoffed. "More like an ultrasonic pulse. You're a construct, Uncle Terry! You probably just pitched your voice to the beetles' audio frequency and drove them off, like a dog whistle."

"You're right," Uncle Terry affirmed. "It *was* magic. It took many moons, but the So'a eventually returned to their former splendor. Wee-Cones and the others saplings continued to grow healthy and strong and Woodroot made a full recovery. Thrower-of-Shade finally accepted me into the tribe with open branches, telling me that I was the most formidable defender he had ever known. Suffice to say, Sapagewillow was mine from that day forward. Whenever we spoke she declared my song to have been the most elegant she had ever heard."

"Can I hear it?" Rimple asked.

Uncle Terry's head turned away in mock refusal. "The songs of the So'a are not for young human ears! They are composed in a sacred and notoriously tricky tongue, full of silent vowels and even more silent consonants!"

"Oh, please Uncle Terry!" Rimple stretched out her hands like a peasant pleading before her vassal lord for a crust of bread and some clean rags. "You've never sang us their songs before! I'm dying to hear them, simply *dying!*"

Uncle Terry chuckled like a jovial mall Santa who has just been entreated for a pony. "Oh, very well..."

Uncle Terry calibrated his vocoder settings and broadcast several bars of his song. Rimple held her hands over her heart and nearly swooned, but Beans made a face that suggested he was still waiting for the song to start. Just as the melody concluded, he looked at Rimple in astonishment, like a flat-Earther who has just discovered satellite photos on Google.

"That's not a song!" Beans cried. "That's just an audio recording of wind rustling through leaves!" He seized Rimple's cheeks and looked madly into her eyes. "Those trees weren't singing! It was just the wind passing through them!"

"Ah," Uncle Terry said patiently. "But what is wind but the songs of trees?"

"He's right!" Rimple nodded rigorously, shoving Beans away. "He's absolutely right!"

"What you just heard was a snippet of the song I composed for Sapagewillow at our union ceremony," Uncle Terry said. "Out-on-his-Own-Limbs officiated and Thrower-of-Shade stood beside me as my sworn heso'a defender. On that same evening Woodroot declared me to be a full member of the tribe and bestowed upon me the name Tin-Wood-Man. It was the greatest day of my life. When our songs concluded with the break of day, Sapagewillow and I were united as one So'a."

"How can a construct marry a tree?" Beans asked.

Uncle Terry chuckled. "I will tell you when you're older..."

Tin-Wood-Man watched the sun dip behind the cliff wall, watched its golden rays dapple radiantly across his people, watched as the valley came under the comforting vigil of the moon. Fifty thousand years had passed since his awakening, which was now but a distant memory. The So'a had grown taller — far taller than he could ever hope to be — and more populace, stretching from horizon to horizon like the waves of the sea. Wee-Cones had grown into a mighty So'a defender and adopted the name Broken-Limb, and dear old Woodroot had eased into a well earned slumber, leaving the future of the tribe in the limbs of a new generation of elders'o'a.

As for Tin-Wood-Man, he'd been amalgamated by the flora of the valley. Soft green moss and snaking vines had crept up around him, connecting him to his people through the very earth. He was one with this paradise — a central fixture of the land.

Their songs had been soft today — they were always softer in the golden season before the snow fell. This summer had been exceptionally long and prosperous, old Broken-Limb had noted — nearly three thousand years in length. The omens predicted that the winter would consequently be equally long and exponentially

hard. He did not concern himself now with thoughts of winter, for he'd endured many winters now, though none as hard or lonely as his first. These were the last evenings of summer — a time for reflecting on one's blessings, as Thrower was so apt to remind him — and he intended to enjoy them.

He gazed up at the stars long after the other So'a had drifted off to sleep, as was his custom. They were magnificent tonight — his own private light show. As he scanned the constellations in turn — the Flying Bone, the Vanquished Beetle, and the appropriately named Three-Stars-in-a-Straight-Line — he noticed that several of the lights were shining much brighter than the rest. He watched them with mounting interest, which swiftly turned to alarm when he realized they were becoming steadily larger. Before he could cry out, the lights were upon him. They loomed over the forest, bombarding it with piercing rays.

The noise was deafening.

"Uncle Terry?" Rimple prodded.

Uncle Terry had fallen as still and silent as a tombstone.

Beans shifted uncomfortably and hugged his knees.

Rimple scooted forward and tapped one of the construct's base panels. "Uncle Terry?"

"Hm?" Uncle Terry's head swiveled. "Ah, forgive me, young ones. An old construct sometimes gets lost in his thoughts."

"Is this the sad part of the story?" Rimple asked, barely above a whisper.

Uncle Terry was silent a long time, and then said "Yes. That was the night that the ships came to Edyn, and with them their terrible saws..."

Tin-Wood-Man's eye flickered, fought through a smattering of static, and then swiveled wildly. He was ratchet strapped to a hover platform that was speeding across a field of blue grass. Two bipedal life forms were guiding the platform from a rear control booth. Whoever they were, they seemed more interested in their colloquy



than in monitoring him. Past their cramped control booth he saw a dark, moonlit mass he recognized as the So'a forest getting smaller and the trailing shadow of the platform getting longer. The bipeds were steering into an otherworldly inferno, which was lighting up his peripheral vision and getting brighter by the second.

The realization that he had been uprooted from his crustal crater after fifty thousand years hit him at the same time as the wall of light. By the time both the shock and the light subsided, the bipeds had brought the platform to a sharp halt and disembarked.

His eye panned covertly around the gargantuan cargo bay. It was heavily modified, teeming with unsavoury looking bipeds, and outfitted with platform saws and laser blades.

It suddenly occurred to him how odd it was that he knew exactly where he was and how to identify everything he was seeing. How did he know what a *platform saw* was? For that matter, how did he know what ratchet straps, hover platforms, controls booths, bipeds, and cargo bays were? He'd never seen any of them before — *had he?*

He scrolled back through his memory banks and was surprised to learn that he *had* seen a cargo bay before — he'd been loaded onto one before his deployment to the surface of Edyn.

He let slip an audible gasp that went unnoticed by the bipeds, who were now removing the ratchet straps that constrained him to the platform. Every part of his cerebral matrix was now fully accessible — his memories, his function sets, and his data logs. The doors of his mind were wide open and the furnishings were on display. Whatever malfunction had been restricting him must have been cleared when he'd been hit by that EMP.

He withheld from questioning how he knew what an EMP was and quickly cycled through his memory banks. Like a child watching documented footage of a life he had supposedly lived before infancy he faced his memories — from his initial activation on a GaliCor assembly line, to the installation of his programming index, to his deployment from a research cruiser down to the surface of Edyn, right up until the split second a comet

struck his head in low orbit.

With his memories thoroughly reviewed, he followed a string of cyber neural links like Tarzan surfing across a winding vine until he arrived at his programming index. He processed it in a nanosecond. Then he processed it again. And again. And again.

"Should we start stripping him for parts?" rasped one of the bipeds, the tallest and gangliest of the two. "A GaliCor TerraHadron Unit has to be worth a bloody fortune to a scrap yard!"

"That's why we brought him here, numb nuts," shot back the other, who was shorter and stockier. "We'll chop the trees first and then strip him once we're starside. He ain't going anywhere and we've got to get this rock harvested before daybreak. We're in Corporate Space, and if we're caught, it'll be life in the omnidium mines, if we're lucky..."

The slimmer one nodded as the shorter one clasped him on the shoulder and led him away. "How much are looking to make from this job?"

"Even without the oversized turd back there, a forest this size will clear a billion omnibucks," the shorter one said with all the sage wisdom of an elder drug dealer to a novice user. "This So'a wood is bloody rare and goes for a fortune on the black market. You ever see a kitchen finished by one of these trees? Bloody luxurious..."

Tin-Wood-Man watched them go and then reviewed his programming index one final time. He felt as if somebody had tethered a weight to his positronic heart and kicked it off a bridge.

He looked over the platform saws and laser blades until his eye came to rest upon a great conveyor belt. Several felled So'a were already being loaded into the cargo bay. Sap was surging from their split trunks and their leaves were trailing behind them like falling tears.

He raised his voice in horror, but it was drowned out by the priming of the saws...

"At long last I knew the terrible purpose for which I had been

created," Uncle Terry said solemnly. "I was constructed by GaliCor for deployment on newly acquired worlds, which I would then terraform to be suitable for human colonization and corporate development. I was an instrument of destruction, sent to Edyn to level its natural beauty to make it hospitable for a lesser species. I even knew my proper name: TerraHadron Unit 771."

"Um, it's written on the side of your paneling," Beans said, pointing at the faded etching that stretched down Uncle Terry's body. "Why didn't you just read it there?"

Uncle Terry turned his head and strained to read the lettering on his midsection and base panels before catching himself. "For the exact same reason you can't see the tip of your nose, child."

Beans coughed. "I can see the tip of my—" His eyes suddenly crossed and he pressed his finger against the tip of his nose in alarm.

"What happened then, Uncle Terry?" Rimple asked, her eyes already moistening.

"I knew I had to save my people," Uncle Terry said resolutely. "But first I had to get off that death ship. Do not ask me how I escaped it, for it is too terrible a thing to recount to young children!"

Beans hiccuped. "Did you wait until nobody was looking and then sneak down the cargo bay ramp into the night?"

If Uncle Terry had eyebrows he might have arched one. "Child, sometimes you do surprise me..."

Tin-Wood-Man rolled through the forest back to his crater, hurdling roots and ruts like a mobile pillbox charging an enemy line. As he navigated the uprooted terrain, he oriented himself with his newly accessible functions — his twelve speed treads, his sample collecting arms that were housed in his midsection, the storage cavity in his base, and the environmental converters that lined his plating. The clamour of laser saws drowned out the defiant songs of the So'a, many of whom had already been felled. Silhouetted under the glaring lights of the hovering ships were hundreds of

bipeds, who roved from So'a to So'a with their blades. It was a massacre. He raised his voice just as he had once done against the bark beetles, but the bipeds seemed to be immune to his defensive songs.

He looked wildly around for Broken-Limb and Sapagewillow. High above him he saw the bisected body of Woodroot being lifted through a gravitational beam into a cavernous bay. Far away he beheld a dozen bipeds fell Thrower-of-Shade, whose voice was resilient until the bitter end. He rolled faster, swerving this way and that to avoid skulking bipeds. He had to find Sapagewillow before it was too late, he had to—

Suddenly he stopped.

At the center of a clearing lay the freshly chopped body of Broken-Limb, and beside it was Sapagewillow, uprooted and caked in her own sap.

He looked on in horror as a group of bipeds ran their saws through her bark, silencing her song. He heard the sound of his own voice pierce through the forest like a banshee's wail, drawing half a dozen spotlights to his location. Alerted to his presence, the bipeds replaced their saws with EMP emitters and advanced on him.

He backed away from the wall of oncoming bipeds, nearly crushing two saplings who were just sprouting through the soft earth. He looked from their quivering buds up to the marauding ships high above him. Rage surged through his cerebral matrix, overriding every one of his cognitive functions — save for his programming index.

Maneuvering gingerly over the two saplings, he initiated his firing sequence. Light bands cornering his panels ignited red. Vents opened around him and a light like a supernova erupted from his body.

He did not hear the screams of the bipeds nor the whine of the ships as they were swept away, only the roar of the wind and the rush of fire.

"The blast consumed So'a, biped, and ship alike," Uncle Terry said. "Within a week my storm cloud had spread around the planet, leveling everything in its path and reorienting the climate. Every creature, plant, ecosystem, and natural development was obliterated, except for me — the author of Edyn's destruction."

Rimple stifled a sob and buried her face in her knees.

"You told it better last time," Beans mumbled, crestfallen. "With the ships crashing and the fire shooting into the sky all awesome like. You made it sound exciting."

"I'm afraid I do not enjoy telling it that way, young one," Uncle Terry said wistfully. "It was thirty years before the terraforming process was complete — thirty years of brooding over my purpose as a destroyer of the world I loved so dearly. Once the atmosphere had cooled, another glinting star appeared in the sky..."

He was in another cargo bay being examined by a team of bipedal engineers in white lab coats. They were downloading data readings from his cerebral matrix and examining some of his internal systems. Before him stood a young human male in a nice suit with a cape pinned to his shoulder pauldrons. He had a tablet in one hand and a golden cane in the other.

"You are TerraHadron Unit 771, are you not?" the man asked, not unkindly.

"Affirmative," he said evenly.

"I am Mort Forbious III, the new magistrate of this world, which is..." He reviewed his tablet quickly. "Trade World 05072, corporate distribution hub for the Fringe Region. It's odd, you know, this planet was actually scheduled to be colonized back in the fourth megennium." He gave the construct an inquisitive glance. "The terraforming process is only supposed to take ten to fifty years, maximum. Your alert beacon is programmed to activate when the process is complete and you're ready for recollection. That was a flaw with your model, actually — one that resulted in more than a few units and planets getting lost in the shuffle. It got fixed in the version 2.0's about, oh..." Forbious checked his tablet again. "Forty

nine thousand years ago."

"I see," he responded.

"You're older than everyone on this colony ship combined," Forbius said, slightly impressed. "Imagine the stories you could tell us, eh? Shame I'm supposed to ship you back to Hyperion to be decommissioned. Did you know that?"

The construct did not reply. Magistrate Forbius looked from the construct over to a long viewport on the cargo bay wall, beyond which Edyn — or, Trade World 05072 — was visible against a starry backdrop. "Settlement begins tomorrow morning. I'm to oversee it along with all corporate development to ensure that GaliCor sees a return on its precious investment." He eyed the construct, as if sensing the turmoil raging beyond his faceless plating. "You were down there a long time, 771. Anything you care to impart to me? Regarding the planet, I mean?"

The construct examined the magistrate from head to toe. He didn't look like a bad man. Actually, he looked like he drank tea with his pinky finger extended.

"It is not a short story," the construct said at last.

The magistrate snapped his fingers at a nearby ensign. "Wembley, prepare my ready room, would you?"

Once the two were settled in the magistrate's private quarters, the construct began his tale.

"I told the magistrate my story, very similar to how I just told it to you two now," Uncle Terry said. "He was your grandfather, as you know, and he was so moved by my tale that he invited me to serve as caretaker of his estate. I had, after all, been misplaced for fifty-thousand years, so being misplaced again on my way to be decommissioned raised no alarms at Supreme Head Office Command. I advised him in his role as magistrate over a developing world, just as I occasionally advise your father now. I watched over him as he grew up, just as I watch over you two now and may even watch over your own children should that day ever come. That is my new purpose, which brings our tale to an end."

Beans was curled up at Uncle Terry's base, fast asleep, while Rimple was wiping her tears on the sleeves of her pink jammies. "It's so horrible, Uncle Terry," she sniffled. "The So'a shouldn't have died like that..."

Uncle Terry looked upon her with as much tenderness as a faceless construct could muster. "Ah, young one, but the So'a are not dead! They live on through their songs. So long as there are those like you and I who remember them, the So'a will never be forgotten."

This brought a smile to Rimple's face, which was drooping despite her most valiant efforts to stay alert. "I'll sing their songs every day, Uncle Terry!" She yawned and her little eyes at last sagged shut. "I'll sing them for everyone to hear..."

As the twins were at last collected for bed by the lady of the house — who only gave Uncle Terry a curt nod — the old construct stirred from his resting place and left the living room. He rolled across the populuxe manor, increased his speed briefly through the bloody luxurious kitchen, and emerged onto a spacious patio. He gazed up at the teeming metropolis that had sprung up on Trade World 05072 — formerly known to him as Edyn. The night sky was polluted by piercing lights from the profane, boulder-like towers that jutted up from the featureless landscape. It had been sixty years since he'd last seen a star. He rolled down the patio ramp and through the lavish hydroponic gardens, which had been Magistrate Forbius III's gift to him, until he came to his private greenhouse, which was shaped like a dome.

Passing through the curtain barrier, he rolled past one exotic botanical display after another until he arrived at a shrine-like table at the very center of the rotunda. Upon this table sat two potted saplings, both tangerine in bark and limb and olive in leaf and stem.

He regarded them thoughtfully as a father might his twin newborns through a maternity ward window. When he played his recording of the song he sang to Sapagewillow on their union day, the two saplings stirred and returned with songs of their own,

rustling their leaves as if a breeze had suddenly passed through the greenhouse.

He then turned from them to one of the sun windows, beyond which lay the cluttered lands they would one day inherit. He mentally recited the firing sequence on his still active programming index — stopping, as usual, at the thought of Rimple and Beans' adoring faces. He would wait until they were of age and able to leave this ravaged world. If they had children of their own by then, perhaps he would wait for them as well, just as he'd waited for the first magistrate's son. If there was one thing he'd learned in fifty thousand years, it was patience.

"One day, my children," he said softly as the saplings continued to sing. "One day..."