

Holo-esca surrounded him. Like luminescent plankton in moving water, stimulated by the liquidity of his ID, they glowed faintly, awaiting unintentional activation. But S7L0429H knew better than to let his gaze wander unprotected. He sat hunched forward, tired but satisfied, his eyes transfixed by his synthmead and the two well-endowed nymphs bathing within it.

A slight tremble passed through the hand with which he held the dirty glass. A blue sky, white fluffy clouds, illuminated by the rays of a warm sun. He was standing in a green meadow, surrounded by willows. Not far from him, a rippling stream meandered between rusty banks of clay. Marsh marigolds bloomed near the burbling water, and the meadow was covered in a sea of yellow buttercups. Thousands upon thousands of bees flew through the air harvesting the nectar of the yellow flowers. The loud swell and ebb of their humming permeated him, like a hypnotic call, like a song beckoning from far, far away. The wondrous humming slowly subsided, and finally the bee paradise disappeared into the smooth surface of his now stale drink. A blissful smile remained on his pale face. The effect of the holo-esca hiding within the code of the nymph-pornogram, had taken hold of him.

Ecstatically, the miner left the dreary watering hole. The thundering vibrations of ships entering and leaving port had become like music to him; the hard smell of laser-blasted rock clinging to the air-locks, like a sweet fragrance. Even the dismal twilight that the icy surface of Eris reflected down upon Dysnomia, did not cause him the anxiety and dread he had felt at his arrival. With manic light-headedness, he entered his mining ship, connected his entangled netnode, initiated the new coordinates, and activated the autopiloting system.

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Awakened from stasis, his consciousness emerged in a state of fragile disorientation. The control panel seemed like black glass behind which too much darkness had gathered. Emptiness. There were no nearby objects, no bodies of matter that could have served as a task and reassuring reference point. The Apogee to the next spaceport had been exceeded. The stasis had not, as usual, bridged the great emptiness of interspace; it had guided him into it. He had fallen victim to one of the infamous Null-Relics, holo-esca, the hidden criminal backend of which had long disappeared, leading into emptiness; they were, it was said, the voice of Darkness, luring spacefarers into its maw. The Darkness, he thought.

S7L0429H lay huddled in a narrow niche near the only window. He was looking at the stars, especially a star that was a little brighter than the others, the Sun. A cold shiver ran through him. At the periphery of his vision, a star had been extinguished. The Darkness was coming.

Eventually, even Sol had disappeared behind the object, an undefined polyhedron with smooth dark surfaces that broke the dim light of the stars. Only the outermost edge of the face behind which the Sun now lay hidden was illuminated by a semitransparent reddish glow. He felt a deep, almost painful yearning. Without paying attention to the instruments that did not register the object, S7L0429H hurriedly dressed in his spacesuit, which smelled strangely of phenol. Something had accessed his node. He was welcome. The space-miner was smiling again.

Never before had he seen a thing of such exquisite beauty. Fine cracks and inclusions iridized in the light of his lamp like globular star clusters, galaxies, in a sea of red crystal. Deeply moved by desire, he accepted their invitation and touched the smooth surface of the ancient object. He was filled with warmth and could feel the melodic vibrations of the swarm. The quantum entanglement of his netnode had begun, and his consciousness was slowly dissipating. They were beings that had existed for eons, thinking deep within the cold darkness, beyond the bright filament of transient matter. S7L0429H would now, forever, dream towards entropy with them.

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Several centuries later, the body of an unfortunate space-miner was recovered by programmer archaeologists. After falling victim to a Null-Relic, the miner had stranded in the void and suffocated in the vacuum of space not far from his ship.

*text \$narrator*