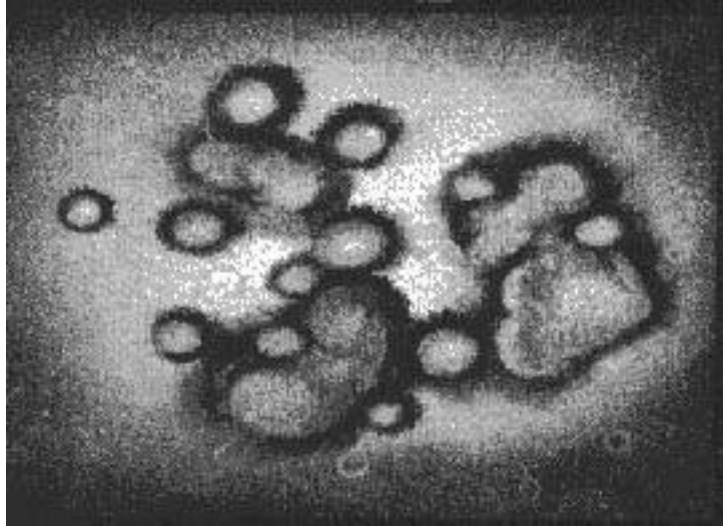


END OF SEASON

Andrés Vaccari



For some reason she preferred It as a man. She loved the obsidian eyes and the pensive dome of his skull. She loved the ripples of pale muscle stretched over his bones, his ribs, the hollows in his neck and cheeks. She loved the wholesome instrument of his sex nesting in his groin, with its intricate lace of purple veins and its unthinking eye of flesh.

But this *It*—It scared her sometimes.

As It clambered down from the ship, Calista felt the usual mixture of anticipation and fear. She was a junkie, she realized, addicted to the secretions of her own body, her excitement, her dreamy moods and bouts of anger.

The first thing she noticed was that It was older. Another season had passed. Already? She could see It was changing, becoming a *he* again. Probably a couple more days; a week at the most.

She stepped forth. "Welcome home, Duncan," she greeted, trying to inject some cheerfulness into her voice. "Any action out there?"

Duncan halted in surprise, picking up her presence. It let out a low hiss, a hiss she interpreted as a sigh of disillusion.

"Not much, eh?" she said.

Its multifaceted eye assessed her quickly, yet thoroughly. The gaze was like a beam of light searching a dark room. *Have you been naughty, Calista? Have you played in the labs while I've been away? Have you tampered with the machines?* But there were new corners in her soul now, secret places Duncan knew nothing of.

As Calista approached to kiss It, the gaze continued to search for something in her expression. What It was seeking was unclear. She only knew that one day the elusive sign would be found, and that her time would then run out.

They fucked. Duncan's skin was cold after the trips, and his eyes were empty. Every time It returned, It brought a whiff of the Void, the ticktocking of entropy home. Together, on the large low-g bed in the main bedroom, they rode the violent undercurrents and the vertigo of infinity. It was as if Duncan, after weeks of cruising through nothingness, was trying to make up for something, trying to soak up her human warmth in one gigantic intake, to reap it savagely out of her.

It cupped her breast in long purple-furred fingers. Its insides shivered under the vitreous skin. In Its hands, her breast became like a grail, a symbol of Duncan's longing to be a man again. But now there was something else, something she had never seen before. Duncan looked... *scared?*

She wrapped her legs around It and mounted It again. As they neared another climax, she pinned It to the bed and stilled Its movements until they both lay motionless. She liked to savor Its member inside of her, feel its pulsations, its rivers gorging with blood. Its sex became a part of her, an extension of her nervous system. Its pleasure was her pleasure, Its fear her fear.

In those moments of stillness, she reached into her own Void that was also Its Void that was also the Void outside enfolding them, immense and uncaring and slowly engineering their deaths and the death of everything behind curtains of icy space and inexorable temporality.

The climax was always a disappointment, the wave of ecstasy too closely followed by a spasm of physical disgust and satiety. Her insides churned as her cells began to assimilate Its jissom. But the queasiness quickly passed. And she was on again.

The welcoming fuck lasted almost two days. Duncan was almost a man by the time they finished. Its skin peeled back and the layers of Its exoeskeleton came off in fragments. They stopped only to drink the food from the machines and clean the mess from Duncan's transformation. The magnificent sky presided over their ritual--because the Void can be beautiful

sometimes. The arc of Annubis D loomed above, slowly climbing across the vault of the ceiling until taking over the whole view. In between orgasms, they became aware of the green surface of the empty planet staring down at them, gently streaked with streams of volcanic red and gas-clouds of cobalt blue. As the station went about its orbit, the sight of Annubis D drifted away and the sky blackened again. One by one, the stars appeared, their tiny flames puncturing the distance. Then Annubis D appeared again and the whole cycle repeated itself.

They lay back, exhausted. The ritual welcomes were getting shorter each time; she could still remember when they used to last for weeks. Duncan's energies seemed to be ebbing. It was a pity, for Calista felt the opposite: invigorated, younger, strong. It was as if his life was slowly being transferred to her.

"Will you take me with you next time?" she asked him.

He took a long time to answer. His gaze scanned the skies.

"You won't like it now. There are fewer things to see."

"But I am alone in here."

"You have the machines. And the library."

"They're not enough."

"Please, Cal. I am not in the mood for this."

Things had been different a few seasons before. She'd been allowed to travel with him, helping out with the charting of the trips and the gathering of the sensoria. They cruised across the galaxies, disseminating clouds of

exploring machines, tiny artificial eyes that hungrily hunted life and the sights of the universe. They made love and lay back afterwards looking at the grand spectacle of the Void, which had not seemed so threatening back then. Sometimes they asked the computer to reprocess and eroticize the colors of the nebulae and moons, to record the drifting songs of radiation and channel them into their spines. Their fucks acquired a different quality, and Duncan and Calista became like one writhing pyre. They screamed, they hurt, they levitated and crossed myriad forbidden dimensions.

Then the planets began to die down. There was still a lot of activity out there, but the reports were unequivocal: the gradual cooling off was noticeable everywhere, and it was increasing exponentially. She had seen some of the latest pictures, the sterile surfaces of rock, the gray twilights and burning oceans. She had felt the stings of ice through the recordings, the *hate* in the skies, the crying of the winds and the furious chemical battles on her skin. It was the first sign of the collapse, the vast inward movement of the Void that would culminate with the annihilation of time and identity. The thought seemed to distress Duncan a great deal, and he had asked her not to come with him any more.

One day Calista had decided to stop looking at the recordings. Instead, she visited the library and reworked the old sensoria, combining various tracks and making up her own planets, with large nomad cities of crystal and long-fingered birds sailing across the turbulent ether. Through the control of her electrical potentials, her memories and thoughts Calista could alter the

recordings and make new ones. The places gradually disintegrated and became abstract accumulations of sensoria running over her body. Soon there was only one planet, the Calista planet, one desert of blue sands and many small suns dancing across the heavens. In her own small way Calista could rewrite the universe, although she was powerless to avert its end.

“I am going to die one day, my honey. Soon,” Duncan said.

“What do you mean?”

“I will be no more. Not as I am now, anyway. My body will break up into fragments and join the lower strata of being.”

She understood, and the thought filled her with terror.

“Does that mean we won’t be able to fuck any more?”

He smiled and averted his gaze. It was good to see him smile. But when he looked at her again there was that expression on his face, the same one she had seen in It earlier that evening.

After they washed, she followed him into the labs. Or rather, *he* followed her. The deterioration of his body was becoming apparent. He walked slowly and she frequently had to stop to let him catch up. He stooped, and his eyes regarded her strangely. But she was glad to have Duncan, *him* again. Her father. Her lover.

They halted at the doors of the lab and she eyed him interrogatively. As a girl, the world of the station had seemed endless and full of wonder, and the labs had been one of her favorite places to play. But her world had

narrowed considerably since then, and she had come to regard her place of birth with a kind of superstitious terror.

“We are going to go in,” he said, looking at the metal door. “We will check how our babies are going.”

The door opened soundlessly. They moved through the corridors past sealed doors until they arrived at a spacious and dimly-lit room. At the center of the room there was a row of cylindrical glass containers. Inside the containers, floating in a clear blue liquid, were dozens of human embryos joined to machines by thick umbilical cables.

Duncan leaned over the terminals and scanned the screens of data. He frowned and began to type something on one of the keyboards. As he worked, some of his youthful vitality returned, and the lines of his face seemed to disappear.

“Shit,” he said finally. “This is no good.”

“Our success rate is optimal,” the computer responded. “Specially if we consider the circumstances.”

Duncan glanced at her, then back at the screen.

“They are deformed,” he said. “Dumb and sick children. Get rid of them all. Except maybe for number *nine*. He seems to be doing okay. Replace the cultures and start again.”

A wheezing sound issued from the equipment surrounding the containers. In unison, needles emerged from the top of the tanks and descended onto the soft shells of the babies’ skulls. The computer pumped in

the poison, a thick brown stream that flowed into the tiny bodies and dissolved them.

"Why did you make me?" she asked him as the remains were flushed from the containers.

Duncan kept staring at the monitors.

"You will know in due time," he said finally.

She didn't have to wait long. Although their routine continued as normal, she could tell Duncan was agitated, that things were not the same. He was absent for days, working at the lab. He had made some androids to entertain her, but soon she got bored with them. She ended up destroying the stupid things, one by one, cutting their heads off with a laser while they continued to fuck her, then ordering them to form a queue and march into the nearest garbage chute.

"I want to live to the end," he confessed to her one day, after an unusually tender succession of fucks. "You understand that, don't you?"

"No," she said.

"Please try. I am getting old, and it is necessary that you understand. It is your destiny."

"I can try."

"It is a waste, you know? All these millions of years of evolution for nothing. When the Big Crunch comes, I will have my revenge. In the name of

every sentient being that ever existed. I will go down that fucking hole laughing. You understand?"

"No. Things are born, they grow and die. No big deal. You taught me that. It's a hard thing to learn."

"It is your destiny," he said, as if not listening.

The end of season arrived one morning not long after that conversation. She disconnected from the library machines and felt it, heavy in her bones, as if the marrow in them had turned to lead. She sought her own image in the polished concave walls of the library room. A part of her understood. A part of her had always *known*. And when she couldn't find her reflection on the walls she rushed out through the corridors and searched for it on the windows of the ship and on the metallic surfaces of the machines.

She spotted it on one of the com terminals, a distended face lying on the surface of the inactive screen. She looked at her image for a long time. She looked different. *Older?* No, that wasn't it. She looked like...

Him.

She was suddenly very cold. Duncan was on a trip, and for the rest of the afternoon she sat without moving, waiting for him. She knew he had to come soon. She thought of killing herself, but knew the machines would not let her do it. She knew so many things that day. It was all so clear.

He climbed down from the ship. His movements were wooden and mechanical. In his eyes Calista saw boiling volcanoes, cumulus of dead gas.

But mostly she saw nothingness, one infinite flat field of no movement, no time and no thought. He was older, much older. His joints were tangled knots and his eyes were sunken in folds of yellow flesh. His legs were bent and carried him unsteadily. His hair was nearly all gone, only two wisps of white left floating on his temples.

Duncan assessed her. But he couldn't hold her stare for long. He knew.

"Come, Calista," he said.

Later, in the main bedroom, as she lay on the bed naked, Duncan wheeled in the machine. It was a machine she had never seen before, a floating contraption of thin needles and tiny eyes with an insectoid stomach of polished chrome. He fumbled with the controls, punching a code on a tiny keyboard, then cursed and punched it again. The machine shook and unfolded. Spheres of crystal gyrated in the air, held by tendons of aluminum. The machine came to life and looked at them, appraised them, studied them. She could feel its stare weighing her bones, measuring her internal liquids, listening to her breathing, her thoughts, the flow of her blood. Duncan extracted two thin tubes from the body of the machine and motioned her to stand up. She hesitated for a moment.

But then she obeyed, knowing that it was better than the alternative, better than resisting, better than being alone or--worse--uncreated. Better than growing old.

Duncan drove the tip of the tube into the base of her skull. Then he did the same thing to himself, probing his neck with infirm fingers until he found the exact spot.

They lay on the bed. His skin was brown and hung in folds. His flesh seemed to be detaching itself from his muscles. She held his penis in her hand and massaged it tenderly, looking for a twitch, the beginning of an erection. It was slow at first, but she orchestrated everything carefully, attacking his centers of pleasure, driving his old body onwards and onwards.

Then she could feel what he was feeling, and she could tell by his eyes that he could feel what *she* was feeling too. They were locked in a feedback loop. There were no secrets now. He felt his own rugged skin through the touch of her hands. She felt the wet apex of her own labia, magnified and distorted by his lust. She saw the terror, the naked terror of a caged beast glowering in his bloodshot eyes. She *felt* it and added her own. The juice of carnal electricity became a rapid, then a vicious and deafening waterfall. The intensity of the emotions threatened to overflow their bodies, to burst through their skins--to *kill* them.

Their confused and fragmented bodies soon approached the climax, the final little death. Duncan's member was breaking, growing, hurting. The muscles of her sphincter were contracting and expanding like the lips of a starved mouth. Throughout the experience, they could feel the presence of the machine distantly presiding the affair and computing their responses.

The world disappeared. *Goodbye, Duncan.* She wasn't sure if she said this or if she merely thought it. It was the same thing now.

He woke up and couldn't move. It took him a few moments to locate his body, a thing bereft of feeling or movement hanging from his neck. He knew something was amiss. There was pain, a pain he could not associate with any area of his body in particular. It came in waves, then it trickled, then it poured in again.

The view was familiar. It was the Void again, as seen through the dome of the master bedroom. The stars were staring at him. The dying stars.

For a while nothing happened. He tried to remember. But it hurt to do so; it was like touching a sore, bruised membrane. And he could only gather small flashes, a face, a series of landscapes--meaningless fragments.

There was another presence in the room. He was aware of it long before he saw the lean and long-haired figure walk into his field of vision. He couldn't recognize her at first. And when he did, there was a torrent of memories. It all came back to him. He remembered. And he understood.

"It worked, Calista," the woman said. It was not a question.

He tried to speak, but could not find his mouth. He felt sick, every cell in his body spinning and disoriented. The woman approached and inspected him closely, maybe wondering if he was alive at all. He saw the face he had seen earlier on the dead screen of the com unit. The woman was himself--
herself.

He saw a hand, his own hand, rising of its own accord. The hand was brown and decrepit. He felt the vertigo of the new (*old*) body weighing him down, writhing inside as if trying to dislodge its new host. The index finger twitched weakly once, and then the hand dropped out of sight.

Duncan was saying something to him, but the meaning of the words slipped through his mental fingers.

"... atoms and flowers... alarm... but... nigh is... like the cumulative... beautiful... strong body... I will... do you... thank you... die... vanity and pride... Adam and Eve... for nothing... future... Fuck them."

Then Duncan stopped speaking, as if realizing that her words were not getting through. She looked at Calista for what seemed an eternity.

It was good, Calista thought. While it lasted.

Duncan frowned for a moment, and then she smiled. Had she heard him? Calista hoped so.

"Do you want to go now?" she said. She had to repeat the question a few times.

In a little while.

Duncan nodded.

"I'll give you twenty minutes."

She turned to leave, then halted.

"Goodbye," she added.

See you.

He lied there, thinking of nothing in particular. He felt a warm liquid rush entering his spine and remembered he was still connected to the machine. Some of the pain retreated and the colors became sharper.

Thank you.

As the station continued on its orbit, the first glimpses of Annubis D entered the bottom corner of the dome. The atmosphere was like the halo on the head of a giant angel.

When his time was up, the machine issued a command and another rush of liquid, of a very different nature, flooded his spine.

Calista closed his eyes.



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