Daniel Wilby  
Palshaw

English IV

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The Final Frontier

Sunbeams reflected off a metallic black plate atop the masthead of a spaceship. The masthead was massive and alone, a giant cone. Its uncovered bottom was supported by thin silvery legs that pressed deep into the red dirt; there was enough room for a child to run freely, but no one much bigger. Wires of different colors and thicknesses hung loosely below the shuttle, snaking in and out of downward protruding holes--all except for a large protrusion with a glass pane covering it. Standing two stories high, and covering the area of a swimming pool, the metal construct sat in the middle of a lifeless, rocky plateau. What seemingly splattered its white sides, colorful markings--blues, purples, and yellows--were the sole attention grabbing items that could be seen in the entire environment. Painted halfway up the ship were four flags--a European Union, a Russian, a British, and an American--and just below, two logos--Virgin Galactic and SpaceX.

As the sun stood directly over it central axis, a whirring started to sound from the capsules white sides. Large metal plates moved across and onto the adjacent panels to reveal large crisscrosses of solar panels. The black sky juxtaposed the lit up red soil that surrounded the structure.

Through the thick metal shell of the capsule, three cylindrical rooms stacked on top of one another, gradually getting smaller, encompassed all the space inside the ship that existed. In the bottom cell, it was cramped with scientific instruments that had loose wires hanging out and oil stains on them. Every few feet there was a monitor with a keyboard that touched the ceiling. A person would not be able to stand up straight or extend their arms fully anywhere on the ship as it was neither wide enough nor tall enough to accommodate a normal person’s height or arm span. At the center of each room, a vertical scaffolding jutted through man sized openings and near the center of the room.

All sides of the two rooms were painted a fluorescent white and had looked artificially clean except from the marks of the non-indigenous machines.

“Look at it! It’s there! Look at it!”

“I’ve seen it already.”

“No you haven’t, Cecilia!” a young man wearing a black Pink Floyd shirt and course orange snow pants shouted to a womandressed in a plain white shirt and similar pants.

The woman’s face held baggy eyes below bushy brown eyebrows much like the man’s; however, they differed in that Cecilia’s gaunt face had light blue eyes, whereas John’s rounded face held brown ones.

Speaking into a microphone attached by wire a wall covered by electrical instruments, the woman’s face loosened and her voice became condescending. “Sit. Rep. 2023, December: it is approximately 3.65 hours since touchdown, and all we have found is a new characteristic of childishness in one of the crew members.”

“You might as well use my name. It’s only me and you here. And this anomaly.”

“Note: John is hated by the other crew member--and tell me, for the record, what color is it?”

“Look through the window--it’s going to move!” The young man lay prone over the glass hatch which led out of the ship, his nose pressed against the glass like a small child’s at an aquarium--his inset eyes focused and blaring.

Cecilia turned around and looked directly at John. “The color, john--*what is the color*? It’s just your reflection.”

Jerking his head in an upward motion, but keeping his eyes locked on the hatched, he blinked rapidly. “That’s a possibility. But I think it has just moved. A shame, you missed your chance.” The man softened his facial features, relaxing his typically tense eyebrows and resting his wide mouth, and shrugged. “It *is* a shame, really. It could have been a Martian, and we could have been accredited with such a success as finding foreign life. It would be the *grandest* scientific honor, but I guess you don’t care.”

The woman turned back to her monitor; covered in a light glow from the monitor, her brow furrowed and smile dissolved. Fingers quickly moved back and forth on the keyboard, a loud clicking following each move. “Oh, and once you’ve finished inspecting your reflection, could you record the barometer?”

The man slowly lifted himself from the floor, leaving smudge marks against the pearly white matte plastic from his hands on the floor. His arms showed marks from the position he had been sitting in as he stretched them to grab the central ladder’s rungs. As he climbed, he started to sing: “*Is there life on Maaarrrsss?*”

The woman was glued to the screen: she rested her body on surrounding exercise equipment and scientific machinery, snapping the main dial off the photospectrometer. Yet she did not flinch, only until a beeping came from her monitor. The alarm went up four semitones from an already ear-piercingly high note and then started back over, until Cecilia pressed a square, green button to the left side of the monitor.

John popped his head out from the upper floors. “Is that your sweetheart Richard Branson calling?”

The woman kept typing as the noise subsided. “No, it’s a message from your ‘Musky’ boy saying that we have to prepare to go outside.”

“That’s not his name.”

“Okay, Elon then.”

Cecilia took the three steps to the central ladder, dodging unmarked boxes and plastic coverings for the machines which had already been in use. The boxes were stacked three high until they neared the ceiling, and were the only objects in the craft that were made to be a color other than white.

On the second level, there were no instruments or tools, but instead two beds which, instead of being straight rectangles, clung to the curved wall. Connected to the foot of the beds, pearly-white, metal cabinets stretched to the ceiling lay dormant with a panel which was drawn over its front side.

“Can you unlock them, now?”

“Patience, I need to record a health statement from us both.”

Pressing a button on the ceiling, one that could resemble one on an aeroplane, the panels on the cabinets drew in like a garage door and each revealed a space suit and rations, a small beeping noise sounded continuously from the cabinet.

“Why do they have to be white? I won’t be able to find anything on this ship if things keep being white.”

“I would recommend using your blood for coloring but--on the record--it is unsanitary and, again, childish. Just deal with it.”

Giving a grunt, both people strained, legs creaking and arms shaking, trying to put on the suits. The suits’ thickness was a finger’s width, however the material was loud and dense, a white color which was different than the rest of the ship, more grey with a hue of orange. The suit had a three-layer sealment system with a zipper on the top layer, Velcro on the second layer, and on the third, a metal clip. The feet of the suit were hard aluminium and were sewn directly into the mesh type skin of the suit. The helm was a large glass bowl construction which had no electronics except for the sealment mechanism on the edge clip.

“John, is yours on?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll release the air then.”

When the air pressurized to the atmospheric pressure, they slid down the ladder and opened the glass pane hatch on the bottom of the ship. The boots of the suits pressed gently into the rough looking surface of the ground, leaving boot marks reminiscent of those from the first Apollo mission and sending streams of red dust upward. Lumbering forward, the two figures crouched to not get caught in the low hanging wires.

“So you obviously have some measurements to do?”

“Yes, but let’s just make it to the edge of this plateau first.”

The ground below them gradually started to darken, but the sun was still able to make the paint on their suits deteriorate and chip off as they were exposed. The chips stayed in place, only moving when suddenly jostled, falling straight downwards as if there were no wind. Walking through the dirt would press aside the small particles and create a perfect footprint.

“I feel at home, here. It’s like Earth.”

“Yes, Earth, except with two-thousand times the radiation and the lack of a breathable atmosphere.”

Approaching the ridge, the suits took further wear as the radiation took its toll further onto the protective viewing glass. Massive rocks protruded from the landscape and added a rigidity to the landscape, offering difference from the soft ground.

“Don’t scuff your feet like a child, we won’t be able to see then.”

“*Don’t scuff your feet like a child*, *mwu*.” John scrunched his face. “We’re almost there anyway.”

The plateau had a steep edge leading to a deep valley. The edges were steeper than normal stairs, but they were still walkable and could have been scaled with a careful footing. The dirt was blended into the rocky formation of the cliff.

“Once you’ve finished taking your measurements, you might want to look down in that valley. Do you see that?”

“Just describe it to me.”

“Look at it! It’s there.” John jutted his head forward, bending his neck to an uncomfortably angled position as to see clearer.

“Are you sure it’s not your shadow?”

“No it’s different than that was.”

Cecilia glanced briefly at the bottom of the valley. “I don’t see anything.”

John’s face tensed, his veins began to bulge, and his muscles flexed. “I think the thing in that valley is more important than whatever you’re doing now.” John’s eyes widened and contracted, looking at the entity in the valley.

“Later.” She was examining a rectangular instrument that had clasps like an ants mouth around a piece of rock. “Record this: rock texture is metallic--chemical makeup is predominately iron oxide. No, sorry, give the tacheometer a second.”

As he began gasping for air, his curiosity bested his fear. “Then I will go down to get a better view.” He quickly motioned towards the edge and tilted his head down into it.

John put his legs down on the slope as a toddler would stand taking his first steps. Small rubble rolled from around his feet and into the valley below, making a light tapping noise on each subsequent hit. His legs shook as gravity took hold and dragged him downwards. The meanwhile Cecilia still stood straight up, looking downwards at a small device held in both hands and took no notice of her partner’s motions.

What went from a fast shimmying down into the valley snowballed into a tumble. Guiding himself by use of his arms, he managed to miss hitting two boulders half way down. Falling finally on his posterior in the dirt of the valley floor. His eyes widened, mouth dropped, and forehead sweated all at the same time. He turned and frantically waved his arms like a flailing tube man towards Cecilia.

“Look! Look! Look!” He waved his arms helplessly, and then, in a bout of desperation, his hands scoured the surface of his suit.

Cecilia turned from her screen and looked at the trail of prints that John had left. Her face took on a tired countenance and she tilted her head backwards and rolled her eyes. Setting on the same path that had just been taken by John, Cecilia moved more gently, stepping lighter than her male counterpart and keeping herself from falling. Head angled forward, she looked at the entity standing before her.

“I told you I saw something! I told you that we’d make scientific history! I told you! I told you! I told you!”

Cecilia took no notice of the remarks and gaped at the object ahead of her. “I don’t know.” The gears within Cecilia’s head froze--all thoughts and all worries dissolved into an emollient humming as she wistfully stared. “What are we?” Her eyes opened wider than they had ever opened before, as if she were gazing into an endless abyss that started and ended right in front of her. With robotic movements, she pulled out the rectangular box with forceps.

John’s eyes locked forward and his face seconded Cecilia’s. Memorized, he put his arms around his helmet, as if to cover his ears from a deafening silence which blared. “It’s like a fire, you shouldn’t stare at it.” His cool stance stiffened as he progressed through the sentence. “But we must see if the fire is hot.”

“We can’t compromise the data.” The words barely tipped out.

The man inched to the apparition. He crouched down and let his helmet stray just inches from the amorphous object. His neck and eyes strained forward, like he was trying to go further without moving his position--as if he were staring at the event horizon of a black hole. Sweat dripped from his brow and steamed up the inside of his helmet, his breathing the only noise emanating space. His arms angled around like he was about to hug the object, shaking furiously all the meanwhile.

John’s arms pressed forward, creeping increasing slowly as they neared. “I am no one.”

His hand reaching the event horizon, and his face began to beam a malicious smile. He started to rise from his crouched position, but slipped forward. The smile grew on his face; it was wide and open like a child who has been given all he has wished for. As he fell in seemingly slow-motion, a word came: “Bliss.”

Then, no sound. Everything above his waist was engulfed.

His legs lay straight and lifeless on the ground, covered in a thin layer of red dirt. A small, rounded pebble, red and speckled with black spots, lay in a crease on the suit just above the back of his kneecap. There was no end to his legs--they fused forward. Cecilia stood unmoved since she last conversed with John, muscles locked. The sun moved from overhead to behind a far-off mountain in the space of what felt like a moment, and a thin veneer of sweat and saliva covered the glass of her helmet in front of her face.

In a conciliatory tone, Cecilia spoke softly, “John?”

Only a thin buzzing of the tacheometer and the void of space could be heard. The gears started once again, and she ripped her eyes away and turned around to her way back to the ship.