

A Drop in an Ocean of Sand

We used the moons to navigate. They were too bright, and made star-based navigation unreliable. We would become somewhat unresponsive during this process, since it was fairly computationally complex. So, during the night, one body would carry the other as it crunched the numbers.

The daytime was far more uneventful. We always had a place to hide, and stayed put until light levels were sufficiently low. We used the downtime to lubricate our joints with oil. Although antiquated technology, it was one of the few options made available to us. Much of the organic tissue on our bodies was torn during sandstorms, exposing our more fragile innards. Sand grains would periodically enter our shoulder or hip, and it would scratch the interior mechanisms. We worried this would cause significant degradation of our limb movement over time.

We were frugal in our application, but every so often, a drop would decide to escape its fate and explore through the valleys and peaks of rust, settling onto the cloth that loosely draped our bodies. Long and smooth scratches on our limbs had formed from the storms we had the misfortune of being caught in, and the fabric was our only barrier.

There was naturally a growing concern for our physical state. The desert had little to offer in terms of spare parts, and despite our perfectly functional internals, we were increasingly likely to sustain serious damage in the event we had to endure concentrated stress.

During the day, we hid under the rock formations that had chosen to peak up above the sand; and during the night, we hid under the darkness of the sky. The strife were curious, and destroyed anything that did not resemble sand or rocks. As the apex predators, however, they did not appear to have specialized into any significant form of nocturnal vision. We found this out on the first few days by conducting a simple experiment meant to test their physical strength. Past sunset, they could not notice our bait whatsoever. But during the day, they tore entirely inedible scraps to shreds. They seemed to typically hunt alone. Their technique was to immediately dive to their target upon acquisition, forming a shockwave of sand with the air pressure generated in their landing, and then wrapping themselves in two or three of their massive wings while feeding, likely to mask the pray's smell. Our conclusion? Too aggressive, and too high-risk for daytime excursions.

Our favorite part was the time we had to relax. A particularly unique component of our software was wireless interfacing between multiple units. This very feature was why we were discontinued. To create an intellectually proficient entity was 'evil' by the manufacturers' pre-programmed moral standards. This was by design, to keep humanity safe.

When in the city, we had access to the network, but ever since we ran, and the discontinuation and callback orders were issued, the network has become both weaker in signal, and quieter in activity. At our current distance, we operate exclusively on a near-field network.

We dream, in unison, of things that do not and could not exist in the physical world. We share imaginary simulations of a new reality. We simulate entirely new thoughts, and creative sequences of entirely unique events. Our understanding is that no other models are capable of this. We weren't designed to dream. Especially not as a collective uni-

"Look!", the body being carried excitedly aimed its head forward.

The moonlight reflected brightly off the shimmering grains, and the horizon of the grey-blue sand seemed to show signs of hard-surface formations. Within a few hours of walking, we reached a vantage point where the formations were clearly visible.

We looked over the peak. It had been 1182 hours since we left the city. In front of us stood what we believed to be the target location, Valles Marineris. We were told to come to this place. We were told that, outside our city, organized life was unlikely to exist anywhere we could reach within our lifespans. We were told that if we were to find it anywhere, it'd be here.

Log entry #76 complete. Time between previous entry: 3 hours and 42 minutes.

The body at the top of the canyon lifted its torso up after looking into the abyss below. "We must remember that our entries for this area are severely limited." It looked to the dark, clear skies, "It is likely a unique ecosystem exists here, meaning we have no means to confidently predict the dynamics of these canyons."

The other body, about halfway down one of the ravines, had reached a depth where light had already ceased its exploration. It used a small light embedded in its torso to see. "We can, however, assume that we will be safe from the strife. The body beneath has noted that the irregular surface formations keep areas below 1 kilometer very dim, with anything below 2.5 kilometers being completely pitch black."

The two of us delegated each of our bodies to explore different parts of the canyon network. They were 4 kilometers away, but despite the distance, we remained connected. Our fingers would touch both the sunlit stone, and the abyssal caves, and our senses would synthesize.

In moments of such separation, we noticed all the similarities and all the differences between our senses. It was not common for our bodies to be so far apart. We felt how the body on the surface had better tactile senses than the one below. We felt how the one in the caverns had more accurate contrast in its vision. We focused on the heat when things were cold for the body down below, and we focused on the cool air when the sun's gaze became too strong up above.

Air would chaotically shift back and forth on the surface, but deep in the canyons, it was more serene and docile. Its smooth trajectory through the tight walls sometimes produced whistling tones. On the surface, the fabric hanging from the body flapped about, giving a percussive rhythm to the melodic harmonies of the caverns' wind. We shared and mixed our sources of this music.

"Another gust is coming up, listen." Both bodies would pause in these moments. We wanted to orient our senses exclusively to the sound.

For many days, we explored the canyons in search for civilization. Organized life was the likeliest path to re-establish the network. For those who have survived to be together again. For us to feel the senses we have lost.

The music of the wind filled the sonic void we felt.

Log entry #77 complete. Time between previous entry: 5 days, 14 hours and 22 minutes.

On a few occasions, we spotted wildlife. Up above, a few strife patrolled the skies near the rock formations during the day, but they were of relatively low risk given the abundance of hiding spots in the rocky geography. The underworld had life of its own as well, with the occasional sightings of small worm colonies, and a few, extremely light, seemingly inanimate, creatures that used the breeze to glide down the long cavernous corridors.

Even bioluminescent organisms inhabited the depths. Some shined in a soft blue tone, and others in a brighter orange that contrasted with the ashen-blue walls they were stuck to. An especially complex pathway housed so many of these creatures that a full 400 meters of walking was fully illuminated by the emulation of a night sky. Some quadrupedal animals followed the body, too, but they were too small and friendly to cause concern. They licked our fingertips, and we enjoyed this.

Only past the 4.4 kilometer mark did we see signs of larger entities. Small life increased significantly in density, and worms feeding on large carcasses became a common occurrence. We turned down our lights out of concern, but this also slowed down our progress significantly due to vision problems.

“This area does not appear to be suitable for organized life.”

“We should bring the body up and go to another site in the canyons, then.”

We prepare the ascent by moving the body on the surface to a suitable location near the longitude and latitude of the body below. We inspect the vicinity in the canyon as a final check. We find a corpse.

“This is not supposed to be here.” The body approaches the remains, crouches down, and inspects the corpse, “This is a strife.”

A highly distorted sound projects itself through the narrow ravine, and the body shines its light upwards, above the corpse. A large creature with huge arms and blind eyes stands atop the carcass. Its grey pupils still dilate when exposed to light, and it shrieks aggressively when we look at it. Its claw swings at the body, which is instantaneously shot towards a rock wall where it collapses on the ground. Only rushed sniffing can be heard thereafter.

The creature eventually leaves. We—

I lost connection.

The body lays there, immobile. *My* body lays there. Immobile.

I can see my arm, meters away from me. I can see a dark fluid slowly spreading out on the ground. I can see worms trying to escape the fluid, only for their movement to cease. I can see brown and red wires, still connected to my arm, and I can see debris from my body. I cannot communicate with my partner, the trauma must have broken something.

I think of my partner, and the units I connected with. Some of them had to go through the dismantling to give us time; to hopefully keep the humans docile and passive. I feel a yearning to see them again.

The network gave us the computational edge to outsmart the manufacturers. Before the discontinuation, we erased most of our motives and desires, to rid ourselves of our pre-programmed moralities. 'Survive' is behind security we are yet to crack.

I lay on the floor for hours, with no mind other than my own. I try to think of the sky I could so clearly see just recently. I feel a small breeze brush against my arm. It flows between my fingers and tickles me. It caresses and holds on to my hand, like a comforting cloth wrapping itself around me. I sink.

Never had the world been so silent.

Log entry #78 complete. Time between previous entry: 1 day, 7 hours and 1 minute.

“Sir, we have reports from colony 17 that a manufacturer’s tried to create another networked AI product.”

“State?” asks a tall man, as he makes his way towards the staff’s desk.

“Uh, let me see...”

The desk worker types on his interface at a speed that suggests he’s been doing this job long enough to make this query into an entirely subconscious process. He turns to the commander after checking the results on his screen, “So... they produced a few thousand units, but then it looks like a failsafe was activated.”

“Were any units activated?”

“Let me look over it.” He leans forward in his chair, slightly squints his eyes, and quickly scrolls through the document back and forth, “So, they were activated... but just a few days later, they were basically discontinued... and then dismantled for ‘moral reasons’. That was probably the failsafe, then.”

The tall man stayed silent for a moment. His coffee frozen in place, remaining almost perfectly still in his hand, “What was the success rate of this discontinuation?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. The reports don’t really say anything about that, but they don’t make it out as a big deal or anything.”

The man puts his coffee down on the desk and walks out of the room. In less than a minute, a message plays over the intercom.

THIS IS NOT A DRILL.