

Neil

Stepping out into the Ark corridor Neil looked back at Voss who had the same expression everyone does the first time they step foot in the Ark's storage centre. He had a gaze of sheer wonderment at the truly epic amount of storage components and how many there were in one section of the centre. Neil had lost that feeling after a couple of weeks. Not long after he decided he should stop wondering at the limitless 'what ifs' in the storage components and what they held inside them as it had begun to affect his focus and the time it took him to complete simple tasks in the Ark storage centre. He found himself wanting to look at each of them individually. *What has the company deemed worthy enough to ship with us?* Breaking himself out of his daydream he thought about his curious companion. *I've got to keep Voss focused in here, get to the mainframe, find the scrubbers, re-program and then get him the hell out of here,* Neil thought, as went back to worrying if he looked suspicious. The problem was that every time he worried about looking guilty he started to sweat and go red.

"Voss, follow me and don't touch anything. I mean it Voss. Don't touch anything, ok?" Neil said waiting for a response from Voss who took his time to make eye contact with Neil, as he was still amazed at the sheer height and depth of this section of the Ark's storage centre.

"How many compartments like this are there?" Voss said when he finally looked at Neil, trying not to focus on the gap between his teeth.

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is that you follow close, don't touch anything and do what I tell you when I tell you," Neil waited for a response and could see that Voss had that unimpressed look in his face that he got whenever someone asked him to do something that's not in his remit. "Just follow me," Neil led the way down the self-illuminating corridor that threw back every step they took bouncing off the metal plated walls. It was as if the lights and the echoing foot falls took it in turns to race their way down the corridor just in front of them, leading the way to the stand alone terminal.

Arriving at the computer terminal Voss continued to be memorised and gazed around at an eternity of storage compartments, wondering at the possibilities of the material stored in each as Neil had done so many times. Voss knew the rumours about the Ark and that they said it contained the genetic material of every possible species available on earth, to help repopulate and maintain pollination and migrating habits that have minor, but not insignificant ecological changes on the environment that they inhabit. As Voss kept himself distracted Neil accessed the terminal in front of him, typing pass codes and navigating his way through streams of information as the blue

holo-projection full of text and images illuminated his face, highlighting the void of light in the gap between his teeth and the flickering red-streaked eyes dashing through locator logs and Co2 scrubber index codes. Finding the three scrubbers he needed to have re-programmed before the 'ecologist' poked his nose in gave Neil the time he needed, as he typed in a serial number whilst glancing quickly over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't been watched. ARK-34/21. One word came up on the holo-projection in front Neil's face 'Incubation.'

"OK Voss, scrubbers located," Neil said as he swiped the holo-projection in the familiar 'shut down protocol' that worked for all interactive panels on the ship. *Get him to the scrubbers, one step at a time* Neil thought, as he felt the all too familiar trickle down the back of his neck. A sign of sheer panic and frustration twisted into each other, showing that Neil's secrets were skin deep, waiting to rear their heads and expose him for the type of man he is, or at least, that was what Neil feared. "We get this done and I'll buy you a beer," he joked nervously to Voss.

"I'll settle for an extra shot in my hydration pouch," Voss said through tired eyes and heavy bags that pulled at the lids.

It wasn't long before the babysitter and the caretaker were where they needed to be and were doing the job they needed to do. Voss was just following the directions he was getting from Neil, whereas Neil was checking and double-checking everything he was doing. The last thing either of them needed was a fresh crew member finding obvious mistakes; maintaining stress levels and relationships were a part of the training and mistakes always put a strain on relationships, especially when the company was always watching. Mistakes in the long routine and semi-isolation of the rotations, sometimes they could cost you an extra days work, sometimes your life and the lives of everyone on board the ship.

As Voss was holding the end of a Co2 scrubber that was protruding from a hidden grate in the curved ceiling, Neil was adjusting the distribution rate on a small flip-up panel halfway down the scrubber. Neil quickly discovered that the reason they were playing up was that they had reached the end of their cycle and they had not reverted back to their initial Co2 intake. It was a simple fault that they could easily put right, but it was a fault that shouldn't have happened. The reason it did happen was because someone had programmed them to not begin their cycle from an outside terminal. That someone was Neil, he had made sure that he had three specific Co2 scrubbers showing as a malfunction in the Ark storage centre so he could access the area with his login and not be questioned about his time spent around materials he had no business being around. He did, in fact, have business in the Ark storage centre, just not company business.

“Right Voss, you store that scrubber away and I’m gonna make my way down to the last one. Head over when you’re done,” Neil said, already beginning to move down the corridor lighting itself with the progression of Neil’s pace.

“Where will you be?” Asked Voss, eyes squinting into the growing lights, who doesn’t know the Ark layout as clearly as Neil does.

“I’ll be in compartment thirty-four, row twenty-one,” came Neil’s voice, echoing down the metal tunnel he had just hurried down.

Out of visual and audio range of Voss, Neil began to jog down the corridor, sweat pouring down his back and chest. He could feel his temperature rising fast and his breathing becoming laboured, forcing sharp pains in his chest with each intake of breath like his lungs were burning from the inside out. He didn’t have much further to go, compartment thirty-two was on his left as he carried on through his pain, wincing with every breath he took. Compartment thirty-three went past in a blur and Neil realised that he was getting worse.

Only managing short sharp breaths he decided, as soon as this was all over, he was going to get a med-scan and see what was actually going on with his body. *This isn’t just hyper-sleep adjustment; it would have been getting better by now, wouldn’t it?* He didn’t have time to finish his own thought as he came upon compartment thirty-four, slowing down he moved through the compartment’s rows, counting in his head and occasionally spluttering as he tried to catch his breath back. Twenty-one, right in front of him. The little square panel looked exactly the same as all of the others; he didn’t know why but he thought it might be special in some way, or at least he had built it up to be special in his own mind over time, the object of his desire, his holy grail.

He pressed the release sequence into the holo-screen at the side of the metal frame 310184 and with the familiar cold storage hiss of trapped oxygen a slim metallic sheet slowly propelled itself out in front of him revealing a tray with circular plastic sample cylinders almost floating on a bed of smoke. The smoke was produced from the hydrogen storage that kept all of the samples in the Ark at a zero level of progression, stopping cellular division and any development frozen in time. Neil gazed into the thin cylinders without blinking as he wiped his brow of beaded sweat. He reached up to the neck of his engineering rig and pulled out a chain that hung beneath. It held his company dog tags to identify his person and a small trinket. The trinket was of a metallic nature, but shone like black marble in its double oval ring, turning inside of each other so you couldn’t tell where it started and where it ended. Neil repeated two words over in his mind: *eternal return eternal return eternal return*. This was the only thought going through his consciousness as his other hand reached up to the trinket on his chain, one on the top oval and

one on the bottom. His hands twisted and the trinket clicked open. Neil froze immediately, staring into the tip of the separated trinket he still held up in his hand.

“Neil?” came Voss’ voice from down the hall leading to the rest of the compartments. He was shouting for him and had clearly gotten turned around in the maze of compartments. Neil panicked for a moment and realised that Voss was on his way and he was running out of time. *Ok, lets get this done. Three out of five samples . . .* He didn’t move, he was still frozen, knowing that his actions in the next few moments of his small and insignificant life could change everything humanity had been fighting for. “Where are you?” Voss shouted again from the compartment corridor, closer than before. Neil tipped the half of the trinket in his hand over the first cylinder and a dark green droplet tipped out into the clear fluid already in the cylinder; within a second it had already begun to dilute, creating a hint of green translucent fluid. As carefully as he had been the first time, he repeated introducing the droplets to two other cylinders with clear fluids in.

Just as he finished he heard Voss stomping down the corridor, his boots thumping on the grated floor. In a flash of urgency Neil clicked the two halves of his trinket together and manually pushed the tray back into its cold storage, feeling the cold burn on the tips of his engineering rig gloves. As the tray slotted into place the holo-screen asked if it should re-commence its storage program and after pressing the ‘yes’ marker on the holo-screen, Voss immediately appeared around the corner preceded only by the automatic lighting system flickering into life around him. *He’s always covering his eyes with painful gasps, I can’t think of a crueller torture for someone who finds himself surrounded by oppressive lighting, haunting his every step.* Neil quickly slipped the trinket back into the neck lining of his engineering rig. Voss looked at Neil in anger for a brief moment and within a matter of seconds his facial expressions changed to a softer appearance. Neil knew this was because he looked as bad as he felt, with sweat visually running down the side of his head soaking his thin hair, his breathing more laboured than Voss’ who had been jogging through the Ark compartments to find him.

“Everything okay Neil?” Voss asked, holding back his annoyance as far as Neil could tell.

“All good,” replied Neil caging his extremely heightened nerves at the thought of been caught and questioned. “I’ve managed to . . . take care of the last Co2 scrubber,” he rushed his words noticeably. “So we’re all done and dusted!” Neil coughed into his gloved hand, then struggled to draw in half a breath before he could speak again. “Lets call it a day Voss, thanks for your help. I owe you that extra shot,” he tried to force a laugh out before he ran out of breath. Voss gave a hint of a smile seeing that Neil was trying to thank

him for once rather than verbally battle against him. Together they walked back through the corridor, followed by the lights stalking them through each passing moment of their lives.

Hours later Neil closed himself in his quarters, as small and oppressive as they were. He sat on the end of his bunk and stared at the wall forcing himself to calm his mind. *Have I checked everything? If Elliot finds anything then I'm done! Game over, there'll be nothing to start over with . . . no, not like this. Elliot will know something is wrong. Or Voss, he's been checking up on me and asking if 'everything is ok?' but I know what he really wants, I can read between the lines. Trying to see if he can break me and get me to crack, I can see it in his eyes.* Still staring at the wall, Neil had subconsciously increased the tension in his whole body until he suddenly realised that he was shaking. *Calm down, calm down, calm down.* He got off the end of the bunk and took two steps over to the sink in his cramped quarters, where he proceeded to fill up the bowl with a little water. Splashing his face and running some cold water through his closely trimmed hair he could feel his heart rate slowing down, no longer threatening to burst inside of his own chest.

Looking deep into his reddened eyes, as if he were trying to find something, he stared, waiting, watching. *We are the beginning and we are the end. Without the end there can be no beginning. We are the eternal return.* Neil reached behind the neck of his engineering rig, which he never takes off and pulled out his metallic trinket turning it inside of itself with an inscription of Neil's mantra along the outside. He pulled the double looped ring to his lips and kissed the metal oval repeating his thoughts out loud. "We are the beginning and we are the end. Without the end there can be no beginning." In a ritualistic manner he opened his eyes looking back at himself and added his final word of prayer in a whisper. "Ouroboros."

Making Neil jump in his own skin the three loud blips echoed around the room, sounding when an incoming live feed is requesting an answer. He turned to his glowing blue holo-vid monitor with a yellow alert pulsing that reads 'Adrian Voss calling.' He pressed the 'accept' marker on his holo-screen. Voss appears on the screen looking as tired and drawn as he always does. "I've started Elliot's integration process. Should be a couple of hours and I'll have to kick in to baby sitter duties," Neil just nodded without responding, so Voss continued the conversation on his own. "Shall I give you a call when Elliot's up and about?"

"I guess so. He'll probably want the tour," Neil forced interest in the matter so as not to seem too inconsiderate.

"She. Elliot is a she. I've been going through her med files and it states her name as Andrea Elliot ecologist and genetic engineer," Voss sounded almost impressed as he read the highlights of her file to Neil.

“She? Genetic engineer? . . . yeah, of course. Let me know when she’s functional,” Neil leant forward and ended the holo-vid communication before Voss could even attempt to ask another pointless question. Sitting back on his bed, Neil pulled his legs slowly up to his chest and hugged them as tight as his weary arms would let him. The same thought drifted through his weakening consciousness, making more sense with every iteration. *I just need to get some rest. I just need to get some rest. I just need to get some rest.*