

Akeldama

Robert lay down on the couch and closed his eyes. He felt a slight tingle somewhere near the base of his spine and then his eyes opened again and he was stood on the platform of a station.

In front of him a classic steam engine waited. He could see smoke coming from the stack. Further down the platform a couple of passengers were stepping up through the door of a carriage. Both of the women were wearing very ornate period costumes. He glanced down at his own body and found he was wearing some kind of black suit with long tails. Under the suit was a shirt of some kind with frilly sections around the neck and cuffs. Up on his head he found a tall and perfectly straight hat, black to match his suit. Certainly period, he thought, but which period he had no idea.

A small man dressed in what was obviously a uniform, a different style to his own suit but also in black, approached him.

“Sir, may I check your ticket and direct you to your carriage?”

Robert thought for a moment and then checked his pockets. In one he found the large slip of paper. GNER Orient Express. London to Paris. He smiled to himself, recognising the name of the two cities. At least he now had some vague idea where he was and where the train was going.

He passed the ticket to the other man, a ticket collector, he presumed, and waited while it was checked.

“Sir, if you will follow me,” the porter said and moved towards the carriage door slightly down the platform. As he passed a window he caught sight of movement and turned to look in through the window. Inside a man and woman were stowing luggage in over head racks. Robert had no idea if they were part of the set up or two of the guests.

“This is your carriage, sir,” the porter indicated, holding open a door.

Robert removed his hat and stepped up on to the train and was immediately greeted by the smell of tobacco. Resisting the urge to cough, he opened the connecting door and walked in to the main part of the train. This carriage did not look like the others he had passed. In place of the separate compartments was a large seating area. Plush chairs filled the space, wooden tables dotting the spaces in between. At the far end of what could only be described as a room, Robert could see a small bar. It was placed slightly to the right of the door through to the next car.

Five people already sat in various chairs. Even with their ornate outfits on, Robert recognised three of them from previous events. He greeted them and took a chair next to one of the men he knew.

“Good to see you again, Michael,” he said. “I didn’t see you at the last meeting, or at least I didn’t recognise you.”

Michael gave a slight nod as he put down his drink. “No, I wasn’t there last month. What with work and family it is never easy to find the spare time. I heard I missed a good story though.”

“Yes,” Robert replied, “it was excellent. Susan had put together a great narrative. You will have to get the recording when you get chance. It was certainly one of the better ones.”

“And it’s your turn tonight, isn’t it?”

Robert gave a short laugh. “Yes. I’m hoping I can match up to the good standards we’ve had recently.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be great. We all remember your last telling.”

Robert was about to reply when he noticed Jackson was standing up. There were now twelve people in the carriage, most sat in small groups, all dressed in the same style clothing. The women with large dresses the men in black, high buttoned, suits.

Jackson cleared his throat and waited for the conversations to fade away.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I’m pleased to see so many of you could make it, for what is the Astrid Bonnington’s fiftieth story telling. As you will have noticed I have chosen Earth’s Victorian time period as a setting. More specifically the famous Orient Express in 1908.

“The train will be leaving Paris in a few moments, and I will ask this months storyteller, Robert, to take the stage, so to speak. As usual, once Robert has finished reciting his tale there will be food and drink and for those that want to stay for the full trip, we will be arriving in Constantinople in eight hours.”

There was some noise from the platform, a couple of shouts and the sound of a whistle, and then the carriage lurched slight. Robert glanced out of the window and saw that the train was now moving.

“There,” Jackson said, “we are now underway, so, Robert, if you would care to begin.”

Robert picked up the tall cup of mint tea the barman had brought him, and walked down the end of the carriage near the door he had entered through. Those that weren’t quite facing him adjusted their chairs, and Jackson sat back down again.

“Thank you, Jackson,” Robert said, giving his throat a quick clear and placing his cup on the table next to him. “It has been over a year since I last told a story here, so I can only hope you have forgotten how poor my last one was.” There were a few chuckles through the gathered audience and a couple of supportive voices. “For my telling I would like to take you all away from this classic setting and back to nearer our own time. This is a tale made disturbing by its oddity, for I am sure you will agree, such things almost never occur in our day and age. So unusual was the incident that no reports of it ever found their way to the news services, for wide spread knowledge of such an incident would send shock through our society.”

He let his words sink in, pausing while he took a sip of his tea, and then he began.

Joseph Robertson had been a policeman for over forty years on Rubicon. As some of you will know the planet is both wealthy and peaceful and Joseph had enjoyed his time in the force. There was very few serious crimes to deal with and while even on such worlds as Rubicon violence did happen, it was a once per decade occurrence. So, when he got a call to attend a health clinic in the city of Beltraus to deal with a dead body he was both alarmed and intrigued.

It was late afternoon, the sun standing high in the sky and warming the spring air, when his car reached the clinic. The building was a serene looking place set in the midst of a large park. There were a few other cars in the car park, but he saw no one else as he walked in through the main doors and announced himself at the reception desk.

“Doctor Meeks will be with you in a moment, Mr Robertson,” the buildings management system told him.

“Thank you,” Joseph replied, and went to stand by the windows to look out at the park while he waited.

After a couple of minutes a door at the back of the reception area slid open and a tall, dark haired man walked through. He was wearing a white doctor’s coat and carrying a large CD pad. The man walked straight over to Joseph, his long steps propelling him quickly across the room while still giving him an air of unhurried movement. Joseph’s internal CD identified him as Doctor Reginald Meeks, one hundred and forty years of age, living with his long term partner in a house on the outskirts of Beltraus. Meeks had one child who was now in his fifties and off planet. The only thing unusual about Meeks was that he had been a doctor all his life.

“Sergeant Robertson,” Meeks said, offering a hand to Joseph. “I’m glad you could come so quickly.”

“My pleasure, Doctor Meeks,” Joseph replied. “I was intrigued by your request for help. We get so few deaths and especially those where there are unknowns.”

“It is a rather odd situation.” Meeks turned and indicated towards the door he had entered through. “Let me show you the body and then I can answer your questions.”

Joseph was lead down a corridor and the pair took a branch that lead off to the West side of the clinic. Meeks showed him through a set of large double doors and then through a screening field in to an operating room. On the table was the outline of a body underneath a white sheet.

“This is the body,” Meeks said, indicating the table. “Are you okay if I remove the covering? As I mentioned in my RQA there are no signs of trauma – no damage at all in fact.”

Joseph nodded and Meeks lifted the sheet from the body, placing it on a nearby table. The body Joseph could now see lying on the table was that of a man of uncertain age - certainly someone who was in his middle years. He had blonde hair, cut short to just above the ears, some facial hair, but looking more like stubble rather than an intended style. As he looked closer, Joseph noticed there were hints of red in the stubble, showing the man’s more natural hair colour and making Joseph more certain that this was not a style choice.

The man had a small, slightly upturned nose, thin lips and ears with lobes that tapered in to the side of his face. His eyebrows were blonde, as was the hair on his arms, the smattering on his chest and that around his pubic region. The body was the usual well toned affair. All other evidence showed a human male of normal form. There were no tattoos, fades or other skin adornments.

Joseph let his CD capture all the information and start the searching and cross referencing. Then he turned to Meeks.

“May I see his belongings and what he was wearing?” he asked.

“There over there,” Meeks said, indicating to a table with a number of trays on it. “You’ll be disappointed though. His clothing was very basic and he wore no rings or devices.”

Joseph walked over to the other table glanced at the trays. They were all empty apart from one which contained some white cloth. He slipped his hands through the decom’ field and felt the fabric. Something natural he thought, and his CD pulled the data from the clinic and confirmed it was cotton, basic untreated cotton. He lifted the garment up so he could see the full drop of it, the decom’ field expanding as he did. It appeared to be a dress or robe of some sort. There were no pockets, no shop tags sewn, much like the body it was completely unadorned.

He turned slightly as he looked at the robe. “You mentioned that you have been unable to find any cause of death.”

“That’s correct,” Meeks replied, “there is no external trauma, no sign of foreign bodies chemical, nano or otherwise. While I was waiting for you to arrive I finished some deeper scans on his blood and organs and there is the slightest evidence of any outside interference.” The doctor gave a slight sign, “I even looked at some of the reports in the archive from murders and assassinations in other systems and there is nothing that even comes close to this. This is either something we’ve not seen before or the man’s body just stopped working – all his functions, all at the same time.” He gave a nervous laugh under his breath. “I even started checking to see if he had an off switch.”

Joseph replaced the white robe in the tray and turned back to the body.

“What about an internal CD?” he asked.

Meeks shock his head. “He doesn’t have one. No implants, no augmentations and no sign that anything external has ever been fitted.”

“Is there anything left for you to check on, Doctor?”

“Not unless you can turn anything else up from the ship. I’ve exhausted every line of enquiry.”

“Okay, thanks.” Joseph glanced at the body one more time. “I’ve picked up all your reports, so I’ll leave you to store him and get over to the ship. If you do think of anything else, let me know. Thank you for being so thorough, Doctor.” He turned and headed out of the operating theatre without and further pleasantries, wondering if the doctor, for or his years of medical work, could have missed something.

As he walked over to his car, he called up the records of the autopsy and ran them through the police system. By the time he was sitting down he had already got confirmation that there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. Meeks had checked and double checked everything, and he wasn't even joking about looking for an off switch – he had done a fine scan over the entire skin of the corpse.

The location of the ship the body had been found in was only a few hundred kilometres South of the clinic and it didn't take Joseph long to reach it. It was a grassy hillside that sloped away from a large wood down to a small lake. The abandoned ship sat at the base of the hill, some twenty metres from the lake. He chose not to land immediately, but brought up an overlay of what the forensic scans had found.

Imprints showed that the craft had touched down in exactly the position it was now in. The man had got out of the craft and walked up the hill. He had then laid down on the grass, arms by his side, feet pointing back down the slope towards the lake. There had been no further movement. The man's strides up the hill gave no indication that he was rushing or meandering - just a steady walk from the ship. There was also no evidence that he had moved once he had laid down.

Joseph found this most puzzling of all. When most people settled down, certainly lying down to wait for something to happen or do something, they very rarely got exactly the right spot. Most would at the least shift and arm or leg as they settled. This was more as if the man had been very precise about how he sat and then laid back and had been perfect with his placement. Joseph began to wonder if the Doctor was right and they were dealing with an android that was far more sophisticated than any tech' they had encountered before.

There was also the possibility that the body had been placed on the grass when it was already prostrate. The presence of others at the scene had also been checked, however, and there was nothing to show that either people or devices had been there. Central Control had not seen any other vehicles in the area at the time, there were no traces of omissions from anything and super scans had not even found any heat residue.

The ship had been detected entering the planet's atmosphere and tracked as it landed. As there had been no response to ID requests from CC an intercept had been dispatched. This had gone suborbital and reached the scene one minute thirty seven seconds after the ship had touched down. The scene it found exactly was s it had been when forensics showed up five minutes later. If there had been anyone else involved in this they had been and gone very quickly without registering on anything.

Joseph gave a slight shiver as the thought of alien life came to mind. He dismissed it as quickly, but was left with the thought that this might be the only explanation.

Up on landing he traced the path from where the body had been found back down to the ship. It was not that he was expecting to find anything that had been missed, but it did give him a feel for the site. He paused as he came to the door way of the ship. From where he stood he could hear the sound of birds in the trees of the wood and from the other direction the gentle lapping of the water in the lake. A perfectly peaceful place, he thought.

The ship was a normal one man design. It looked brand new, as if this had been its first flight. Indeed track and trace had been unable to find any evidence that it had existed. The internal systems were all blank, showing not a single sign of use. He could have been looking at a ship sat at the end of a production line, before even the diagnostics had been run. Scans had shown that the engine had been used so there was no need to worry that CC had a glitch and the craft had never even flown, and other parts of the ship showed that it had been used. The man had used the controls to land the thing, and this tied in with the fact that he didn't have any tech attachments. He certainly couldn't have flown the thing any way other than manual without some form of CD.

After a look around the craft which proved nothing other than the fact that forensics had not missed anything, Joseph went over to the flight chair where the man had obviously sat. The note they had found was still lying there and he picked it up, turning it over in his hand. Other than the single line of text nothing jumped out at him. He even held it up to the daylight coming in through the open door in some vain hope that something would be revealed.

Leaving the ship he walked back up the slope to where the body had been found. Laying down on the grass he tried to mimic the pose of the dead man and succeeded in doing so without having to adjust his body. Maybe the guy wasn't that robotic, he thought, just careful. Sitting up again he scanned the lake and the grass covered slopes that lead down to the lakes opposite side. He overlaid more images from various reports and still came up with nothing new.

As he walked back down to the abandoned ship he put a request through to the CC to speak to the System Commander. Luke got back to him within a few seconds.

"Joe," he said, the usual cheerful note in his voice, "how's it going? Found anything out that will put this one to bed?"

Joseph shook his head. "Not a thing. No one's missed anything and I've got no idea what's gone off. I want to say that there are others involved in this, but there's nothing that points to that other than the fact that I can't think of any other way for this to have been done."

"You didn't find anything out from the doctor?"

"No. Meeks did a very thorough job as did forensics on the ship. There's not a think I can add."

"What do you suggest we do with this?" Luke asked him.

"I'd say pack it up and keep it quiet. Something may crop up later. We can keep it as an open investigation for a few years." Joseph stood in the ship once more, looking at the control panels as the pilot would have seen them. "I'd pass the files out of the system as well, if I were you. There's no shame in not being able to come up with any answers on this one."

"Yeah, you're right," Luke agreed. "I'll give the instructions to put it all in storage. Are you planning on following it any further?"

"I'm not sure there is anything else to find, but I can promise that I won't stop thinking about it."

"Fair enough. Thanks for looking this one over. Let's hope nothing like this crops up again."

“I’d just like to get back to cases I know what I can do with,” Joseph replied. “Catch up with you before the next Heads meeting.”

Luke dropped the connection and Joseph was left by himself in the ship once more. He turned to walk out, glancing at the small rectangle of paper on the chair one more time. The translation was overlaid on top of the ancient language.

‘I returned to offer salvation, but how it leaves me cold to know that I am not needed.’

He shook his head and walk out in to the bright sunshine. Maybe it would mean something to someone out there.