

Akeldama

Keyon lay down on the couch and closed his eyes. There was a slight tingle somewhere near the base of his spine and then his eyes opened again and he found himself stood on the platform of a train station.

The sound of whistles and the shouts of men assaulted his senses. He was struck by a series of strong smells. People bustled all around him carrying luggage or keeping children in tow. At the platform edge tendrils of steam inched their way up from the locomotive that stood just in front of him. A long plume of smoke rose from its stack. As he glanced around, Keyon noticed the style of people's clothing: ornate wide flowing dresses on the woman made them appear to float across the platforms dark paved surface. The men were dressed in equally formal attire with stiff looking hats and canes in their hands.

The high pitched wail of the steam engine's whistle jolted him into movement. He glanced down at himself and found he was wearing a black suit and waistcoat. Under the waistcoat was a shirt of light brown linen buttoned up to his neck, while on his head was a hat; black to match his suit. Certainly period costume, but which period he had no idea.

A small man with a striking moustache dressed in what was obviously a uniform, approached him.

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

Keyon thought for a moment and then delved in the pockets in his jacket. In one he found a large slip of paper. CIWL Orient Express, Paris to Istanbul, were the most prominent parts of the printed text. He smiled to himself, recognising the name of the two cities. At least he now had a vague idea where he was and where the train was going.

He passed the slip to the man, a ticket collector or porter Keyon presumed, and waited while it was checked.

"Sir, if you will follow me," the man said and headed down the platform, weaving in and out of the other passengers. As they walked Keyon glanced at various people wondering if any of them were part of the group.

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

Removing his hat Keyon stepped up and into the train. Rather than the separate compartments Keyon opened a door to one large seating area. Plush chairs filled the space, wooden tables dotted in between. At the far end of the long room, was 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, Keyon recognised three of them from previous events. He greeted them as he passed and took a seat next to one of the men he knew.

"Good to see you again, Michael," he said. "I didn't notice you at the last meeting"

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

“Yes,” Keyon replied. “Maya had put together a great narrative. You’ll 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?”

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

“Oh, I’m sure you will,” Michael told him. “We all remember your last telling.”

Keyon was about to reply when he noticed Sander had stood up. There were now twelve people in the carriage, most sat in small groups, all were dressed in the same style clothing.

Sander 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 Group’s fifty seventh story telling. As you’ll have noticed I’ve chosen Earth’s late Victorian time period as a setting. More specifically the famous Orient Express in 1892.

“The train will be leaving Paris in a few moments, and I will ask this month’s storyteller, Keyon, to take the stage. As usual, once Keyon has finished reciting his tale there will be food and drink for those who want to stay.”

There was noise from the platform, a couple of shouts and a whistle was blown, then the carriage lurched slightly. Keyon glanced out of the window and saw that the train was beginning to move.

“There,” Sander said, “we are underway, so, Keyon, if you would like to begin.”

Keyon picked up the tall cup of mint tea the barman had brought him, and walked down to the end of the carriage near where he had come in. Those that weren’t facing him adjusted their chairs, and Sander sat back down.

“Thanks, Sander,” Keyon said, giving his throat a quick clear. He placed his cup on the table to his right. “It has been well 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 and a couple of supportive voices. “For my telling I would like to take you away from this classic setting and back to nearer our own era. This is a tale made disturbing by its oddity, for I am sure you will agree once you have heard it, such things almost never occur in our day and age. So unusual was the incident that no report of it ever found its way to the media. Wide spread knowledge of such a happening would shock our society.”

He paused to let his words sink in, taking a sip of his tea, and then he began.

Joseph Makson had been a policeman on Rubicon for over forty years. The planet was both wealthy and peaceful and Joseph had enjoyed his time in the force. There were 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 centre in the city of Beltraus to deal with a dead body, he was intrigued.

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

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

“Thank you,” Joseph replied. He went to stand by the windows, looking 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 Comms Data 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 Makson,” 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, 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 any questions you might have.”

Joseph was led down a corridor and the pair took a turning that headed towards the west side of the clinic. Meeks showed him through a set of large double doors and a screening field slid across his skin as he entered an operating room. On the table was the outline of a body underneath a white sheet.

“This is the man,” 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 counter top. The body Joseph could now see lying on the table was that of a man of uncertain age: definitely someone in their middle years. He had blonde hair, cut short to just above the ears, some facial hair, but more like stubble rather than an intended style. The man had a large prominent nose, thin lips and earlobes that tapered into the sides 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 the evidence indicated a human male meeting the current norms. 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.

“Can I see his belongings and whatever he was wearing?” he asked.

“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 and glanced at the trays. They were all empty apart from one that contained a white cloth. He slipped his hands through the decontamination field and felt the fabric. Something natural he thought. His CD accessed the clinic’s data and confirmed it was cotton, basic, untreated, cotton. The field expanding as he lifted the garment up so he could see its full drop. It appeared to be a dress or robe of some sort. There were no pockets, no ID tags, much like the body it was completely unadorned.

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

“That’s correct,” Meeks said, “there’s no external trauma, no sign of foreign bodies or chemicals, manmade or otherwise. While I was waiting for you to arrive I finished some deeper scans on his blood and organs and there isn’t the slightest evidence of any outside interference.” The doctor gave a sigh, “I even looked at some of the reports in the archive from murders and assassinations in other systems and there’s 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 shook 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.” He gave an apologetic smile.

“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 I’ll get over to the ship. If you think of anything else let me know. Thank you for being so thorough, Doctor.” He turned and headed out of the operating theatre without further pleasantries, wondering if the doctor, for all his years of medical work, could have missed something.

While walking over to his car, he called up the records of the autopsy and ran them through the police system. By the time he had sat down in the front seat Central had come back to him with confirmation that there was nothing out of the ordinary. Meeks had checked and double checked

everything, and he was not 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 a few hundred kilometres south of the clinic. While the car flew there Joseph started to re-order what information he had so far, hoping that something at the site of the ship would make it all fall into place.

The ship sat at the base of a shallow sloping hill. Further down the incline lay the cool blue water of a large lake, small waves glinting in the sunlight. At the top of the hill and disappearing into the distance was a forest, its heavy green leaves offering a thick canopy of shade against the midday sun.

Joseph chose not to land immediately keeping his car hovering over the scene. He brought up an overlay of the forensic scans and studied it.

Imprints showed that the craft had touched down in exactly the position it now sat. It had landed parallel with the line of the shore, the front of the ship pointing west. The man had stepped 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 even and measured. There was also no evidence that he had moved after that.

The precision with which the man had settled down on the grass bothered Joseph. There was no sign that he had moved at all once he had laid down. It was as if he had known exactly where he wanted to go as soon as he had walked out of the ship. Joseph began to wonder if the doctor was right and they were dealing with an android that was far more sophisticated than any technology they had encountered before.

There was also the possibility that the body had been placed on the grass when it was already prostrate; the footsteps could easily have been replicated. 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 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 Central an intercept had been dispatched. This had gone suborbital and reached the scene one minute and thirty seven seconds after the ship had touched down. The scene it found was exactly as 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 leaving anything behind.

Joseph gave a slight shiver as the thought of alien life came to mind. He dismissed it quickly hoping for some other explanation.

Upon landing he traced the path from where the body had been found back down to the ship. It gave him a feel for the site. He paused as he came to the doorway of the craft. From where he stood he could hear the sound of birds in the woods and from the other direction the gentle lapping of the water in the lake. This was a perfectly peaceful place to die.

The ship was a standard 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 existed at all. 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 Central had a glitch. Trace elements on the outside of the hull showed that it had been used both in and out of atmosphere. The man had used the manual controls to land; this tied in with the fact that he didn't have any com attachments. He certainly could not have flown the thing any way other than on manual without some form of CD.

After a look around the craft, which proved nothing other than the fact that forensics had been thorough, Joseph went over to the flight chair where the man had sat. The note that had found was still lying there. He picked it up, turning it over in his hand. Other than the single line of text there was nothing. Joseph even held it up to the daylight coming in through the open door in a vain hope something would be revealed.

He left the ship and walked back up the slope to where the body had been found. Upon reaching the spot he lay down on the grass. He tried to mimic the pose of the dead man and succeeded without adjusting his body. Maybe the guy was not so robotic just careful. Sitting up again Joseph scanned the water and the grass covered slopes that led down to the lakes opposite shore. He overlaid more images from various reports and still came up with nothing new.

After a few minutes of contemplation he got up and walked back down to the abandoned ship, putting in a request to Central to speak to the System Commander. He was not at all surprised when Luke got back to him within a few seconds.

"Joe, how's it going?" the chief had his usual cheerful note in his voice, "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 happened. I want to say that there are others involved, but there's nothing that points to that. Other than the fact that I can't think of any 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 thing 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 leave 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. 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 I can do something with,” Joseph replied. “Catch up with you before the next Heads meeting.”

Luke dropped the connection and Joseph was left with the silence of the ship. He turned to walk out, glancing at the small rectangle of paper on the chair one more time. His eyes showed him an image of the translation next to the scrawl 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 walked out into the bright sunlight.