**One Million Years of Solitude**

 Fire crept across the horizon. An orange glow seeped through the trees, heralding smoke on the breeze and the cries of fleeing animals.

 The figure atop the pyramid watched the forest burn. A lightning strike somewhere in the distant hills, setting the dry tinder of the forest floor aflame. The figure knew this to be the most likely cause; its studies had tracked the entire lifecycle of the event across many seasons. The forest had burned fifty-six thousand, three hundred and seventy-three times since the figure first taken an interest in the phenomena. Each time the fires burnt themselves out and life returned, new growth replacing the old, a long-repeated sequence of death and rebirth.

 Yet it was not an eternal cycle. The forest was once savannah, and before that fenland marching down to the sea, when the burning hills were low islands offshore. Desertification might follow in time, or submergence should the sea levels rise again. The movement of tectonic plates might change the entire region beyond recognition, as they had during the events which woke him.

 Change came to all things. The figure was an exception, though it had been dead a long time.

 “It is beautiful in its own way, is it not?”

 For hours, the figure said nothing. When it did reply, its voice was an electronic grind across dusty machinery. “Destruction is the beginning of transition. Each thing becomes another through the breaking down of the old. That could be considered… sublime.”

 It fell silent again.

The sun dipped below the horizon; its fading glow lost amidst the flicker from the burning trees long before it disappeared. In the heavens, slowly being obscured by languid curls of smoke, a swirl of light peppered the stratosphere, clusters of stars and cloud trails of multicoloured nebulae. The light leeched down to where old stone and metal fell eternally before the pressure of entropy, cracks forced open by living vegetation and the creeping progression of rust.

The figure remained atop the pyramidion. It neither saw nor heard nor felt, not as it once had. It was a copy, a silver-clad facsimile of the original. Regenerated to a second life that had been an act of creation rather than of birth, the culmination of a manufacturing process and the conclusion of a desperate lie. A thing built to continue at the cost of the life it replaced.

Yet there was no joy in this second existence, no triumph in the continuation. No fear, no grief, no… happiness? The figure knew what these things were, could assess their value and effect using logic and cold reason, but true understanding was beyond it.

Years uncounted it had spent alone, searching for the meaning behind the words. Snippets remained, rogue engrams floating between nodes like dreams, keyhole viewings of a time so far gone even the legends of it had died. Their presence was a torture the figure had rejected; an interest subsumed by the hundreds of thousands of cycles gone since awakening, a quest ground into submission by the weight of time. In the end, all but the barest recollections had been deliberated archived.

“All that time, analysing purpose and motivation, and still comprehension eludes you.”

“It always will,” the figure said. Its voice became more fluent with use. “So much was stolen from us. Memory. Emotion. Empathy. The truth of understanding. But the time has not been wasted. Conclusions can still be reached.”

“And yet your calculations will forever remain incomplete.”

“Nothing is permanent,” the figure said. “And if nothing is permanent, then nothing is finite.”

It fell into silence again.

What more remained? A dead culture persisting beyond its time. Archives of forgotten knowledge. Dormant terrors created at the apex of their civilization shrouded now in dust, the people who created them extinct, the machines forged as replacements hibernating in the vaults beneath the ziggurat, as much slaves now as they ever were.

The figure became indistinct, the jade glow of teleportation enveloping it, energy swirling, coalescing, imploding.

As above, so below.

The figure walked down a corridor. This was the two thousand, six hundred and fifty-seventh time its auditory transducers registered its metal feet echo along this passageway. Its sensory suite noted an increase in temperature as it went. Dust lay thick on the floor, undisturbed since it was last, here a hundred cycles previous. From side corridors and hidden spaces small, scarab-like constructs issued forth to hover around it, metallic moths to his silver flame, their cyclopean eyes awaiting instruction.

There was no one else left to direct them. The court crypteks had perished beneath a flood of molten rock and superheated gases. Their last acts desperate activations of stasis fields to stem the tide of tectonic destruction even as their lord struggled awake through hasty reanimation protocols and incomplete algorithms.

A red glow emanated from the corridor’s end. Here the heat leeched through the places it was held in check by walls of rock and the final sciences of the technomages, so hot that in its original flesh form, the figure would have expired long before this point. Beyond lay a vast cavern, half-filled with the suspended flood of magma. There were times across the years when the chamber had grown dark as the outpourings of the planet found alternative ways to release their energy, but always, the fissure through the crust of the world remained open. In the recent past, it had filled again, a wrathful divinity refusing to be denied.

The light from it flickered, painting shadows along the walls of the cavern. Stasis fields shimmered iridescent, separating row upon row of individual tomb berths from destruction. Millions lay there, the heat beating upon their still forms, washing their metal limbs and skeletal faces in dirty, boiling orange. More had been lost than saved during the initial eruption, the vessels of their second life obliterated before the blistering tsunami was stopped.

“The means of salvation.”

“To all things come an end,” replied the figure. “In fire or ice, all things must eventually pass.”

The scarabs dissipated in response to a silent command, leaving the figure alone before the stasis field.

It had no eyes to close, so the figure cut the optic feed to its oculars while it established access to the tombs central node. In another existence, it might have been amused by the imitation of the gesture. Data flooded its cortical circuitry; the distant past presented as broken images; fire, and the promise of immortality within its consuming purity, followed by the hollow horror of that first awakening and the betrayal it exposed. With it came the knowledge of what it was, and what it had been. If it were able to process the emotion, the figure would have wept.

More recollections came, images of awakening again; of walking the same corridors and hallways, endlessly repeating the same patterns, devoid of purpose; of travelling across the face of the planet watching the pattern of stars above change.

The same questions, repeated with every step, a million-year mantra.

Days passed. Outside the tomb, the bushfires exhausted themselves and the blackened forest smouldered while new life awaited beneath.

The figure had known the obvious end to its logic for some time. It had contemplated alternatives, hesitating while it re-applied variations of calculation, computing in silences thousands of years long. Yet the same conclusion was reached from every angle.

“No more can be done,” the figure said. “Nothing more.”

There was no reply, but there never had been.

 The scarabs were where they needed to be, and the figure issued its final instruction. It couldn’t hear the detonations they caused nor see the destruction they wrought, but as the chain reactions spread, it could feel the tremors beneath its feet.

The stasis field trembled as dying machines struggled to maintain power. It failed with an ear-shattering crack and a rush of wind that rocked the silver figure back on its heels. Magma immediately rose amidst a rumble of molten rock and hiss of released gases.

The stolen right awaited. Oblivion; a lord's final gift to its people.

In the vast chamber, the first of the metal bodies were consumed by the roiling lava. It didn’t matter; they had been dead a long time. The magma flowed upwards, filling the chamber by inches and obliterating everything in its path. The ground beneath the figure's feet continued to shift, the plates that formed the planet's crust moving now the checks upon them were finally removed. Huge pillars of rock pressed through unshrouded metal, thousands of years of pressure finding liberation. Lava seeped upwards through cracks in the floor. The figure registered impossible temperatures in its feet before they were flooded and its sensors failed amid wailing alarms.

 For the final time, it cut the optic feed to its melting oculars.

 “Salvation,” it whispered.