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JESSE SHORT

## ATMAN'S OCVLUS

The truck crept up the highway. A man inside surveyed the wasted sprawl of slash-and-burn trees and drought-harrowed fields. The radio crackled.

The engine growled as Zane applied the brakes. It had been a long haul. Fifteen hours he'd been on the road, and his eyes were shot. Driving up the highway took longer now: the roads were more dust than tar, and littered with the shells of abandoned vehicles. Most were rusted, torched or stripped, but some were brand new, their doors left open, great metallic steeds, victims of the old days.

Zane levered the foot brake up and down, jimmied the handbrake and simultaneously flipped up his sighted specs as he roped in the wheel hard to the left. The semi trailer he commandeered pulled into the service station and shuddered to stillness. His hybrid engine coughed out a mushroom plume of smoke and the clattering shook fine ash from the chassis. He loosened the kerchief secured around his grizzled jaw and stared out of the metal frame that once held his windshield. He'd been meaning to get it fixed, but it was a question of finding someone who could cut the glass for a 30-year-old Freight Liner Columbia.

"Good girl," he said, patting the dashboard. "You owned the road."

He hopped down and his hands went to his belt. Keeping his back to his cab, he pulled dual CZ75 Czechmates and used the sights to pan the roadside. Nothing. The guns, Graftclone Automatics, allowed him to fire three shots rapidly and switch to single fire by compressing the hand on the memory handle. Twin cartridges in the stock and another under the barrel meant that anyone handling them would complicate the existence of anything within a 70-metre radius. They were guns he knew intimately. They were there when the road was empty and dark places full.

He hedged around the vehicle. The blue revolving capsule was only metres away, washed in white clinical lighting. He dodged past relic bowsers coated in grime and crouched before the revolving capsule. In the open, his back felt cold.

A whir at the intercom. "Read."

Zane stood. He threw furtive glances around him. "Zane. Hauling canned produce.

Buying. Water and rations.”

“Read: water and rations. Licence?”

“Check ZD1105.”

“... check Zane Dekker. Please step in the scanning berth.”

The curved door receded. A hum and the inner berth illuminated. Zane step-hurdled the raised threshold and the door sealed behind him.

“Please place your weapons in the yellow container,” said the intercom.

The space lit up with a contour of deep sun. Still holding his guns, Zane placed his fists into the holding pockets. His guns were scanned and tagged with a safety coil. He unzipped his waist-length sport jerkin as per protocol to reveal the hidden pockets. Underneath he wore black, reinforced, nanofibre-shell combat armour. A tablet-encrypted inner shell referenced his fingerprints and displayed them on the wall next to his licence, photo and GEM (Genetic Encoded Memory).

“Thank you. Welcome Zane.”

“Welcome?” Zane whispered hoarsely. “To a polished place in old hell.” Zane entered and re-holstered his pistols.

He didn’t see any store attendants. That job became obsolete for the sake of self-service depots and automatons. There were usually some security personnel, but since the government phased in the national security program through “Knowmedia”—some person’s sick idea of melding social media and augmented reality with a permanent online user interface—now every minute detail, every second lived, could be recorded by people themselves and relayed in real time to the security mainframe. Everyone was everyone’s spy, and privacy was dated terminology. Any decision made was ghosted with the lidless eye of scrutiny.

Zane moved to the refrigerator. He eyed several large bottles of water and used the blinking feature through his augmented specs to select the ones he wanted to buy. A voice in his ear asked, “Zane, confirm purchase: 10 water bottles at 12.59/L?”

“Water, water, everywhere,” Zane grumbled. That much water could power the truck’s regen-hydro cells for two days and serve as drinking water. Ten water bottles rolled out into the collecting tray. He quick-stepped, never halting for a breath to buy his rations: vacuum-

sealed meat packs, compressed vegetable cakes and mineral paste. He took these and placed them all in a disposable plexi-tray, closed the lid and shouldered the affixed strap.

Into the scanning berth and out with a Czechmate Automatic.

The air grew hot. With the coming shade of night, the very earth shimmered. It was a body alive beneath his feet, and seemed to writhe feverishly, as though it fought to contain all the possessed souls that had died where the desert and grasslands merged. A hot swell rushed him as he ventured outside. The dying light sketched a bold horizon. Silhouetted hills stretched for ks under a yawning sky.

Zane tossed the supplies in his sleeping cabin and climbed into the driver's seat. He gunned the engine and it roared to life. Feeling the engine again was like the resuscitation of a calming, thudding heartbeat.

A storm raced up all grey and menacing. Wild rain lashed at the doors and misted through the open window. The freighter ate up the highway, passing twisted hollow trees and yellowed swards of grass that swept across flat lands before edging onto sand-choked riverbeds.

A wail resounded overhead, followed by red and blue flashing lights. It was a Simian Drone: one of those hateful flying machines shaped like kite-hawks and nicknamed as such. The Kite-hawks forever policed the road, their judgment inescapable. The drone cast out its holographic resonance scan, before vanishing ahead at great speed.

A convoy of trucks advanced from the opposite direction. The trailers were plain as rice. Zane gritted his teeth. In this voided open, everyone seeks to escape from everyone, and the constant fight to stay alert left him ruined. As the trucks drew nearer, the road dipped down into a gully. The dry air reverberated as the drivers tried their compression brakes. The trucks lurched forward tentatively like frightened bulls, scrimmaging the littered road for traction as they made their way through.

Akenburcht: that's where Zane Dekker was headed. Akenburcht was essentially a fortified city-state with a demilitarised zone encircling it. It was created in Queensland's North many years ago through a development project with Dutch contractors. It had been designed as one of many defensive cities built within the state, including several more in the Northern Territory. After decades of peacekeeping and special forces operations in the Middle East and Asia—including deployments in Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Estonia and a 15-year occupation in Korea following the 2044 invasion of North Korea into the South—Australia suffered a cataclysmal joint attack from a number of countries. Combined bombing and long-range missile strikes targeted military bases in Darwin and Townsville, utterly devastating all life in the northernmost parts of the respective cities' borders.

Right now, Zane was passing into the outskirts of an abandoned town. Hundreds of people had relocated to this area after mega cyclones and storm surges made living on or anywhere near the north-eastern coast a questionable reality. The outskirts grew into a zona verde of ramshackle sheds and miserable caravans all arranged in a sheltered circle. The road ran through it, splitting it.

A vehicle blocked the road, a twin-cab utility. It had careened around a long-imagined obstacle and rested with its front passenger door open. The utility was a moment in time; it had been abandoned in a panic. The windshield was a frosted seal of cracks.

"Damn thing," Zane muttered. There wasn't enough room to push it off the road. He'd have to get out. He slid over a seat and opened the door. Zane dropped down and crouched on his knee. He drew the gun from his right holster.

Zane looked at a graveyard of old Fords that had tanked into a cluster of rusted skeletons. Across the road, an ancient Queenslander balanced precariously on its slanted grey stumps. A corner had been shorn off and the kitchen was laid bare. A table hung out of the gaping hole as if possessed with the hope that someone was coming to save it. No stairs. The glass window shutters were streaked with dirt. But the land beyond it lived. In the moonlight, Zane's eye was drawn to its silver-touched, undulating body. Its arid gorges leapt in sandstone valleys. Trees girdled stony rivers that seemed to have just tumbled into being. Blight upon blight welcomed anything that followed the upgraded trans-state highway, which pierced what had once been a popular national park.

Zane urged himself forward. He made it to the utility and aimed a barrel inside. A quick scan revealed a fatal struggle—blood splashed over the seat and spilled onto the floor.

"Ah, Jesus. I wonder what happened to that poor bastard." Suddenly, a whining roar erupted above him and he was bathed in quartz light. As quickly as the light had ignited, it moved behind him, and landed between him and his truck. The lights dimmed. He could make out the distinctive shape of a Skypilot cockpit. The Terravolva Skypilot was a mesospheric-drift flying car, both commanding and sleek. It combined hybridised air-vehicle technology with a rift-board base of helicon-plasma thrusters. There was only one despot he knew in this place who owned one. The door of the craft released and slid back. Out stepped a figure clad in platinum-grey.

"Marauder Pale. I might've known."

"*Careful Dekker.*" The man strode forward. A black beard hid most of his face and the deep scar that paled white below his temple. "Still doing this run?"

Cold fear introduced itself and pledged its vulnerability in Zane's stomach. On the surface, he didn't flinch.

"I don't want any trouble, Pale. I'm just hauling my shipment through."

"Everywhere I go, people are keeping themselves busy, and business is what, a means to keep them thinking of the truth?" replied Pale.

"And what would that be?" asked Zane.

"That everything is free. The world's full of unclaimed wants. Who's to say which ones we're allowed to have?"

"What about being free to live in a place that doesn't value destruction?"

"I said 'free,' not freedom. None of us have that anymore." Pale's words closed the distance between them, and at once his hard nose and sharp eyes loomed forth. "When we are taught what our freedoms are, we will never know if what we have is what we want. What of it? *So much control,*" Pale hissed and his face tore open in rage. "The world quakes, and that is just how I *like* it." While Pale spoke, he raised his weapon from his side surreptitiously, and held it aloft. "No worries, Dekker. All I want is everything that is of value to you."

Zane's eyes whipped to the panther-cool MP7 sleeping in his hands. "Well, I guess there's no way of cuttin' to the heart of it quicker than that." He took a step forward and drew his secondary weapon.

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Blood: a river of life in the body. It escaped Zane now in a purging flood and ruined red the earth beneath him. He'd emptied both clips at his opponent, but Pale had proved untouchable. Pale had waited for a clear shot, and at the crucial moment, Zane had bolted, doubling back to his truck. A tirade of searing hot metal peppered his legs, crippling him.

"You did so well. I am sorry it has to end this way: without more of a fight." Pale spoke the words gently. Zane coughed and looked wildly around him.

"I'll do it right. I'll do it fast." Pale raised his gun.

"No," Zane croaked.

"It's ok. Nothing will happen to your things. I'll take care of them."

"Who cares about that?" The words choked in his throat.

"Come now, don't be like that." Heated gun metal pressed against Zane's temple. "It will pass easier for you than me."

Zane clamoured for his soul. "Be a man, Pale. Let me be. I'm already dying."

"Can't have that. *Can't*. There isn't much to take in this life. But if I take your life... don't you see? Then I stay free. Understand me, don't you?" Pale smiled down at him. Zane recalled that look. It was the look you gave a child when they won a game and you were proud of them. Pale was happy, and Zane realised the man was tethered to the world that had warped him.

"By the cruel judgment of the world, we are all again animals. By taking your life, I preserve my own."

An alarm quelled the silence around them, and the flashing lights of a Simian Drone drew up behind them. "MP739! Stay where you are."

Pale rose. His face was flooded red from the warning lights. His mouth became a white line of gritted teeth. He toed forward. The Simian Drone followed his movements and dropped down to his level. "Marauder Pale, wanted for armed theft, murder, restricted zone violations—drop your weapon. This is your final warning."

"My warning? You fucking machine!" He took aim and fired. A spray of bullets ate into the night. The drone dodged them, spearing him in return with its pulse weapon. Pale fell on top of Zane. The last that Zane registered was the beacon call of the drone as it called human personnel to the scene.

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Hours in darkness. Zane awoke in featureless purgatory. It was a harsh white room with bare walls and little in the way of furniture. He was alone in there, like a living human relish laid out as decoration.

He lay on a medical recliner, staring at the ceiling. "Where am I?" he asked in an audible whisper, and his voice boomed loud with echo.

"You are in 'burcht.' Safe. For the last eight days you have been in a SIRTl regeneration-

healing chamber. You've emerged from a state of hibernation: any sickness or nausea you may feel is perfectly normal. These are only the residual effects of the treatment. As part of the healing process, your legs and spine have undergone redefinition. Our healing chamber successfully repaired damaged cells in your muscles and re-layered your bone structure through our 4D biological medical replicator. We've rebuilt your bones."

Zane craned his neck, but the voice was formless sound.

"I'm here."

"Here?" Zane looked around the featureless white room, and his eyes fell on a flat tablet display with silver speakers. An image of two blue hands grasping each other floated aimlessly around the display. The image wheeled around when it met the side of the screen and bounced back out into open space. Its ceaseless movement reminded him of poison-sick rats, mindlessly seeking escape from their inevitable deaths. Zane imagined one, right down there in the pit of his stomach, gnawing at him from within.

At that moment a small part of the wall retracted and created a door space. In strode a woman in a navy-blue coat with pale silver buttons. Her gait was swift and soundless. Like her feet never touched the floor. She wore her coat over a dark woollen vest and long-sleeved shirt, which insulated her from the aching cold that Zane was beginning to feel. The blood in his legs rushed with ice. She was there to care for him, but he feared her.

The woman stood before him. She wore an ID badge that announced her name in slanted vermillion scrawl. "I am Dr Hault Rapella," she confirmed. "You have been recuperating for some time."

"So now I guess you're here to escort me home so I can rest for whatever number of days?" His voice scratched over every letter. He knew the regulations. He would be ordered to remain at home for an undisclosed period of time, during which he'd earn nothing, and his bills would stack up; his company would have him in for intensive psych re-evaluation, which meant more recouping and less money. He eased himself up as he spoke, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The movement sent waves of pain through his spine. It was like being crushed in a vice. He gasped aloud.

"Slowly, Mr Dekker. We have worked on you for days. The last thing we want is for you to hurt yourself again."

Zane refocused and spliced her with his blackest stare. "It wasn't something I particularly wanted either."

Her eyes: intense, never blinking, and always watchful. She was quick and methodical; every movement she made was precise and deliberate, like she had given a great deal of thought to her future actions, well before she had entered the room. Her lip had a deep scar that curled its way up the inside of her cheek and arched around her eye. When Hault Rapella found him peering at the side of her face, she averted her eyes and hooked a lock of hair over her ear.

“So? Am I going home?”

Rapella regained her composure. “I’m afraid it’s not as easy as that. If you’ll follow me?” She turned around briskly and made for the doorway.

“Hang on!” he shouted, incredulously. She turned and eyed him, waiting.

“Well?”

“Well, *where to*, for a start?” he barked.

“The Atman’s Oculus,” she said, unperturbed. She studied him for a moment, calculating his response, pursed her lips in a firm line and turned away again.

He hadn’t heard of it. Or else, he would have known what was coming.

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Zane Dekker sat still. The old warrior peered out of his grey cell of metal and glass and gazed upon the towering silent city. The guarded miniature metropolis was a microcosm of peaceful life, of life before everything went to hell. It had everything, or enough to block out the desperate nothingness that lay outside the city walls. There were bordered boulevards; layered garden parks; sheer glass skyscrapers of green, blue and black; and great megaliths of stone banks and temples that overshadowed homes just as they had always done. But the people grabbed Zane’s attention the most. They moved about in an ordered way, the same way a line of ants would have done a million years ago and will a million years hence, all so intently focused on some small purpose that would never change because, right then, nothing was forcing them to.

A computer bay made up one corner. Zane lay in the centre within the oculus: a gyrospheric virtual containment pod. In front of him aluminosilicate glass curved up from his feet to above his head. It was covered with haptic visual displays, touch-manipulated print and imagery. Through this he could see to the other wall. Hanging there was a portrait of an old cloaked figure surrounded by the tools of alchemy. Rapella watched him, sensing his enquiry, and spoke to Zane as she entered a command on her screen keyboard.



"Nostradamus," she declared. Her voice was heavy and loud in the concealed cell. She looked up through the ceiling at the sky, as if spying on the sun's downward sojourn. "A prophet unlike any other. He saw a great many things, and, some people think, envisioned the end of our world." Hault Rapella was not someone he had known for long, but there was a whisper of sadness in her words that moulded her into a vulnerable humanity. A glance to the lonely city skyline.

"Some would say, another madman predicting fear to the masses." Zane Dekker's distinct gravelly tone echoed loudly in the space between them.

"And time present and time past will be judged by the great comedian. The world will tire of him when it's too late, having forsaken its conventional clergy," she proclaimed. Something read and memorised straight from a treasured book of prophecies, no doubt. "Not words that one can pass by lightly."

"So when the world's ravaged enough, the devil will take what's his?" Zane queried.

"The comedian doesn't have to be the devil, only someone inspired by him," Rapella returned.

"That'd be God then, doctor, wouldn't it? Who else would scatter humankind on this desolate place and watch as they destroy each other and tear their lives apart?"

Rapella paused, glancing thoughtfully at her patient, then swiped away an onscreen prompt. She pushed her chair back, walked over to his side and stared into the pod.

"Do you know what it is you are here for?" she asked him straight.

Zane answered with a questioning look. "I would have thought that was obvious, all things considered."

"We—you and I—are here for equanimity. For equilibrium."

Zane averted his gaze in disgust. "I drive a thousand kilometres in the dust, delivering supplies to help those who already have the means to help themselves, and I risk my neck so many times. Sometimes I feel it's not my rations I trade with, it's my life. And you want to make it out that we're equals?"

"The equanimity of which I speak simply relates to purpose. We are both equal in the sense that I have a purpose to heal, and you have a purpose by being a patient. We co-exist for a short time like a binary biological system, each needing each other."

“The same could be said of a drunk and his poison. A drinker exists because of the poison. The poison is created and is drunk, so creating the drinker.” Zane coughed spasmodically.

Hault Rapella paused. “The healing is not yet fully complete. We need to work on your mind. Altering the positive thought processes is an important part of your brain’s recalibration, and is also key to your full recovery.”

“My mind, Miss, is fine. Always has been.”

Hault Rapella continued, composed, “We created the Atman’s Oculus with one specific purpose, Mr Dekker, to capture and record the dream state. I have succeeded in creating the technology that allows us to do more than observe our physiological responses, and manipulate psychosomatic impulses; we can capture the thought space of dreams and record them. The research we are pioneering will help us delve into the very fundamentals of life, to explore the self and its physical and metaphysical manifestations, and recreate attuned thought patterns that enable us to lead more fulfilled, happy lives. It is through this technology that we hope to explore the mind, the emotions, the soul if you will, and help to bring a rebalancing to a society that is so overrun with fear, hate and aggression.”

“God. Don’t try to convince me with your doctor-speak. Do what you think you need to do and let me get out of here.” Zane shifted his view to the ceiling and closed his eyes.

“Very well.” Hault Rapella turned her head and issued a voice command to her computing station. “Run Program Thoughtspace.”

That instant, Zane felt a cold vacuum overcome his brain. He looked, but what he saw was circumstantial nonsense; he tried to speak, but there was no seed of thought in his mind that made the action possible. It was true then what many feared about the end of times: it was not that distant, far-away end of all humanity or civilisation.

No. The apocalypse was the loss of consciousness, the disconnection of mind. He was a child, gazing at the marvellous world without knowing what a marvel was. Gradually, he became aware of a fiery sensation running over his brain, like an iron-rod electrode touching places and jump-starting the unused recesses. From the frontal lobes of his brain to its base, where the reptilian seat of our anger is said to lie, Zane distinctly sensed that, each time these areas were infused with unnatural warmth, they were awash with a lightness followed by an intense throbbing pulse. He felt his mind was being remoulded, or maybe he was being prepped emotionally for what lay in his dream state. As he thought this, Zane was immediately transported back to his fight with Marauder Pale. The strangeness of reliving an event, doubled with seeing it replayed on the glass screen in sync with his own memory, made him feel weightless, watching himself watch his memory unfold as he lay back in the

Atman's Oculus. He felt the fear of that encounter. The terror that his life could again end was made, by the mind, a very real possibility.

"Stop that," Hault Rapella warned. Exactly what that was, Zane wasn't sure.

"You are letting your emotions take you over. It feels overwhelming to you, as focusing too intently on the negative event is causing the right portion of your pre-frontal cortex to hyper-activate."

"Mon—*bloody*—dieu," Zane remarked as he tried to splice his concentration between past reality and the now. He felt his body surrendering to the drug of the imagined happenstance. "Maybe next time, your next patient, you could brief them on that." He broke away, as the lurch in his memory of being shot made him pale and faint.

Zane awoke. When the doctor had induced in him a partial dream state, she had deliberately sought out this past event. He wondered whether or not it was because she needed a recent powerful memory strong enough for her technology to work. He looked up at the recording now, replaying on the curved glass visual display.

"Good, Mr Dekker. Good. Now, the last step."

"No suppositories please. I don't want to remember my visit that way."

"Remember? That's not going to factor for you. I am going to delete your memory."

As terrifying as the battle was, Zane didn't know if he agreed with this. After all, our collected long-term memories keep our personalities in check. They are a point of reference from which we engage with our life situations. If we only had a memory that lasted hours, it would stop us waking up and starting anew. Instead, we are able to recount what we did before and use the memory to move forward. Zane Dekker wouldn't give that up. He'd earned his courage time and again. That was one thing he didn't want to redo all over.

"*No doctor*," he said.

"Don't worry. The loss won't be great. Perhaps only some minor corruption exists in socially interactive memories, like going to a busy restaurant and waiting in line. But these may appear again over time."

"You're talking about taking away who I am!"

"Well, the research speaks for itself. We expect you to make a good recovery."

Unfortunately, you may also lose your short-term memory as a side effect of the recalibration. We've stored a map of all your life's memories on our virtual cloud network and in our storage banks as backup. You will still be you Mr Dekker: your conscience will remain intact, but we will have to run the Oculus's full Thoughtspace Program, which will take some time. It means that things might be a little confusing for a while." Hault Rapella smiled sweetly at him. The attempted smile became contorted and ravaged, adding to the horror that he had only seconds left. It made the scar bend and pout around her lips. As she gleamed in her moment on the cusp, on the edge of discovering the validity of her research and finding if her machine worked, she became childlike.

"Doctor—" Zane yelled. The pain neared the golden moment of its manifestation.

And then the doctor pressed the button. By chain reaction, the deletion carried on passing between synapses in his brain at an exponential rate. The wipe was almost instantaneous. Only his reflexive actions and speech ability remained.

"Who am I?" he pleaded, his face creased in fear.

"You are Zane Dekker."

"I am Zane Dekker," he repeated dutifully. And then he burst into tears, although he couldn't remember why.

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