

*The Fallen Grim*  
By Danny Cove

There was a faint hush, a hiss, a swirling of colors, then an abysmal blackness. When Vaughan's vision cleared, he looked around. There was merely red in all directions, a pale, indefinite red reaching the horizon. Before the horizon, small lumps and mounds - craters? - protruded into the sky. Vaughan looked down at his feet as he took a few steps forward. It felt fine; the gravity was comparable. There must have been very little loss of matter. The soil beneath was as red clay, the same tinge and hue as the mountains in the distance. There were a few clumps in the burned sand, but nothing large enough to even be considered a rock.

"You okay, Nicky?" Hamilton's voice echoed in his receiver. Vaughan looked over at the large man in the suit beside him. "Yeah, I feel fine."

"The suits are reading normal on our vitals," Parks said on Vaughan's other side. "Gravity's one-fifteenth less." He bounced up and down on his shins, as if trying to feel any difference. "It's too minute for me to feel," he said after a moment.

"Hey, Rico, can you get me a data sample?" Vaughan asked.

"Sure thing, Nicky," Hamilton responded. "I'll try some carbon dating, but there's not much to work with here." He leaned over and scooped up some of the red sand and placed it in a tubular container that had been strapped to his pack. The sand spun around for a moment as it fell in, almost forming a miniature, red tornado.

"There's very little oxygen here," Parks said, holding up his arm and fumbling with a screen on his wrist. "Most of it's been burned up. Anything left would be in the soil."

“Almost nothing there, either,” Hamilton answered. “The system tried three different dating methods, and the best I can figure...this sand’s been like this for approximately nine or ten billion years with almost no change.”

“That’s a dead-ass planet,” Parks muttered under his breath, his whisper echoing in the helmets of his companions.

“Not entirely,” Hamilton went on. “There are still a few cells left in the soil.”

“Cells?” Vaughan asked. “What do you mean? Cells in the soil?”

“Human cells,” Hamilton continued. “Or at least they used to be. They’ve nearly decayed by now.”

“What do you mean ‘decayed’?” Parks asked. “Cells don’t so much decay as wear out and die.”

“They’re not average human cells. The DNA’s been modified against wearing out, and the energy in them is almost refusing to dissipate.”

“You mean they’re immortal?” Vaughan asked.

“I wouldn’t put it like that-” Hamilton began.

“But that’s what it sounds like to me,” Parks said, putting his hand on Vaughan’s shoulder. “Brother, we just discovered the last of our kind. The last remaining cells of immortal humanity...”

They walked on for awhile, looking for any noticeable landmarks, anything that indicated a slight variation to the endless landscape of the dead, red planet. Parks kept a close eye on their time, though; they only had three hours’ worth of reserves before they needed to re-open the gateway and head back to the base.

They ascended a small mountain, climbing and pushing themselves upward toward the summit. They hoped they might see something on the other side, something hidden from view. Upon reaching the top, they looked down to see...

Nothing. More of the same. Red sand, pinkish skies lit by a dying sun, pale white on the borders of the horizon, a slight hint of the world they'd come from. But no blue, nothing that could be connected with the world from which they'd come. Hamilton pulled out a small drone, which hovered in the air upon its release. He tapped a dial on its back and, after three seconds, it shot into the sky and vanished. A moment later, readings began showing up on the screen on Parks' arm. "There's no ocean," he read to them. "Not even a puddle on this entire planet." Vaughan and Hamilton looked behind them while Parks stood on the edge before them, looking down the steep embankment at the nothing below. "It's weird that it would come to this," he said. "I guess everyone must have left." He paused. Down below them, in the valley, he'd heard something, like a faint whine on the nonexistent wind, a cry so forlorn that it seemed almost... automatic. "What was that?" Parks asked.

"I don't know," Vaughan replied. "Should we investigate?"

"If we're going to investigate something, how about we look at that?" Hamilton said, his helmet tilted back as he stared at a light that had formed in and begun to descend from the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Parks moved forward toward it. "Mitch, get back!" Vaughan cried out and Rico's arms wrapped around Parks to restrain him. Parks thrashed for a moment in surprise before he calmed enough for Hamilton to let him go.

As they watched, the light continued to descend until it rested on the top of the mountain, scarcely twenty feet away from them. The three moved cautiously forward,

Vaughan in the lead. The light dimmed and opened up, and someone stepped out.

It looked to be human, except for the fact that it glowed. Its skin was a golden hue, almost chromic, and it had a powerfully muscular body. It was slightly taller than Hamilton, towering above Parks and Vaughan. Its eyes were a soft brown and it had light facial hair. “Hello,” it said. Its mouth moved, but it didn’t seem to match the spoken word.

Parks managed to drag his eyes off the being and turn to the screen on his arm. “Fascinating…” he said. “When it spoke, it sent a signal that automatically translated itself. We don’t even have that technology.”

“What…what is your name?” Vaughan stammered.

“Call me Andreas,” the glowing man responded. “That is the name I’ve used for all this time.”

“Where do you come from?” Vaughan asked.

Andreas smiled. “From here. Just like you.”

“Then you’re human,” Hamilton asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m Vaughan, and this is Parks and Hamilton,” Vaughan stuttered, forgetting all of their official classifications. All he could remember were the names, and even that was a strain.

“You are very old types of humans,” Andreas said, looking at them. He seemed to wear only a white robe and nothing else, not even shoes or boots. “Mortal?”

“You’re immortal, aren’t you?” Parks stuttered. “Those cells we found in the dirt…those were from people like you!”

“People like us,” Andreas said. “But don’t worry, you’ll get there.”

“So this proves it: the humans migrate to the stars, don’t they? And they leave the old Earth behind?”

“The Old Earth, yes,” Andreas said. “In exchange for the New. But I had to come back. I had to know the truth behind the old legends.”

“What do you mean?” Vaughan asked.

“I used to live here,” Andreas said. He took a deep breath. “Ten billion years ago, I lived here. We were mortal when God returned.”

“God?” Parks asked for clarification.

“God,” Andreas said. “We lived on the Old Earth when he returned. He accepted all who would come to him, but many refused. We were all made immortal, unable to die. We left, and so many remained behind. Then the world...it caught fire and burned itself away.”

“So this is the smoldering remnants of...” Hamilton began.

“Those who remained lit the fires, and they suffered in the fires.” Andreas closed his eyes and looked down, apparently praying.

“And the rest of humanity burned away,” Vaughan said.

Andreas nodded and then shook his head. “That which is immortal cannot die. But in the fires, they lost their humanity, and then their intelligence, and finally...the souls themselves began to dissipate. They became mad, and then they became nothing. The strongest of them lasted less than a billion years. And now all that’s left are a few cells and a disembodied cry out among the desert sands. And soon that, too, will disappear.”

“Why did you come back?” Vaughan asked. “If you were with God, why did you come back to a dead Earth?”

“I wanted to remember,” Andreas answered. “I lived an entire life here, but that memory is nothing more than the memory of a single drink of water over the course of a hundred lifetimes. As the millennia became millions, and the millions billions, our memories became legends and myths, a vague rumor of what happened so long ago. I needed to see what those rumors were, where their origin came from. And as soon as I set foot here, I remembered it all. The memories are so old, so crumbly, and yet...so vivid. The pain of seeing my old home burn...”

“So what will you do now?” Hamilton asked.

“Return home,” Andreas said. “Rejoice in my fate. This world...it’s so dead, it’s not even haunted anymore. Soon the sun itself will die, and this remnant will vanish like all the souls that went before it.”

An alarm beeped on Parks’ arm. “We have to go,” he said. “Our time’s up.”

Hamilton laid out a small tripod and twisted a node on it. A gateway appeared a few feet beyond it, an electrified vortex of swirling lights surrounding a pit of darkness that led to their past. A ten billion year journey backward through time. Parks stepped through and vanished, but Hamilton waited on the periphery. “Come on, Nicky, it’s time to go.”

“Will anything even matter?” Vaughan asked Andreas. “After ten billion years, will anything we do have any importance?”

“The small decisions support the large ones,” Andreas said as he began backing into his ship. “And the large ones matter more than anything else. To exist and to live, or

to lose your own existence. That's a small question compared to spending eternity with God." Andreas turned and stepped into his ship, but then stopped and turned back. "Save them," he said. "Save as many as you can from this."

A hand grabbed Vaughan and pulled him back into the darkness, away from the empty red planet that was the doom of his homeworld. And all that remained was a last, shrill wail out among the desert sands, and then silence.