

*Since his earliest days, mankind has sought to embrace warmth and fight the cold. Perhaps instinct knows something logic forgot in its development. Perhaps man's conquering fires might find something they can't dominate. Please enjoy the following, with my thanks for your interest.*

## MANIFEST HEGEMONY

BY

Jonathan C. Gillespie

**“Thirty-six days,”** said Maddox. He shook his head. **“Thirty-six days since we had a single order.”**

He stood in the meeting room, which was hewn from the ice, holographic displays at his back, and slapped the gel sheet containing the quarter’s sales records on his simple steel desk like a man throwing down a gauntlet.

The sound echoed off the brown-tinted walls.

He looked across his desk to his five associates, whom had gathered in the room. They were nervous, tired, and bored. It was the kind of amalgamation of emotions that one found possible after months or years on the ice.

Maddox had graying hair. The rays of the distant sun had left their mark over the years — to a degree that he looked like some old war-weary general addressing his troops. His polysynthetic thermal suit was scuffed and dirty. His nearly gray eyes were tired; faded. The rumor was that they’d been green before he’d established Meridian Farm, but that the ice itself had robbed his eyes of their color.

**“People,”** he said, **“We’ve been over this before. If we don’t sell crops, then we don’t justify our existence to our investors. Then our financial backers will start calling, and they’ll have their staff make the trip out here just to sue me and fire you.”**

A pale pointed finger followed the last word, directed at the motley crew of workers in front of him.

**“Chip,”** said Rosenthal, one of the older farmers present — a towering, red-haired man whose muscles defied his age — **“We expanded seven hundred acres last season. We knew that would be stretching us thin, but we did it, didn’t we?”**

**"I ain't arguing with that," replied Maddox. He sat back down in his chair, which squeaked on its joints as he did. "We have to undercut Red Eye station, and that let us do it. But the people just ain't coming out."**

**"It's obvious," said Marissa, a young, black woman with almond-shaped eyes. She was the team's sole geologist. "They don't want to fight the gravity fields that much longer just to buy cheaper biofeed when Red Eye Station is practically a pit stop on the way to the outer colonies."**

**Maddox threw his irritation at her in his glare.**

**"Yes, Marissa," he said, "I think that's obvious. So, we'll have to get the lichens so much cheaper that they won't be able to resist us next season."**

**He laid out a paper topographical map — a rarity in this age of gel screen and holo-displays, but Maddox was old-fashioned like that. He trailed a finger along the map away from a green-colored area showing the farm's current borders.**

**"We'll have to expand across the chasm and start here," he said, as he tapped his finger on the map point. "A thousand new acres should get it cheap enough for us to skim out and beat Red Eye Station's operation by at least half their price."**

**Faces were aghast across the other side of the desk.**

**He folded his arms and glared at them. "What do you expect me to do? Now let's move and use daylight while we still have some. We have sixteen days to keep our jobs."**

**He stood up from the desk and marched out into the hallway. Slowly, reluctantly, his workers followed him.**



**The ice on Europa's watery skin was like a second planet onto itself. The ice layer actually rotated at a different rate than the metal core so many miles below, although an instrument would have to measure the varying rates for thousands of years to notice the difference.**

**They said the rock-hard frozen carbon dioxide was twenty-six miles thick; at least that's what the first scientists on the ice ball had indicated decades ago. Below that, there was ocean, perhaps dozens of miles deep, buried far under the ice like some distant memory in the back of the mind.**



**Sid Daniels, one of the younger miners, stood on the shelf overlooking a chasm, and glanced down from his frost-trimmed helmet into the blue depths of the rift.**

The chasm was an open mouth three miles deep; so far down did its depths go that it appeared the walls came together before they did.

Across the yellow and brown flesh of this wound was the sand-colored ice plain of Tiger Flat.

It was there that the next thousand acres would be targeted for lichen growth.

Sid walked back to the cylindrical distribution unit, which squatted on the ice behind him like some sort of steel obelisk. Past the cylinder the bumpy horizon stretched, and above the potmarked landscape's thin atmosphere was Jupiter. Europeans called it King Jupiter.

Their ever-present companion was so large in the sky that one defined the color of the firmament's flesh as that portion of Jupiter currently blotting out nearly everything else.

Beyond the gentle arch of Jupiter's curving form was the distant sun. Sol's light arrived at its children like a distant shout from home; rendered barely a whisper by the distance.

Sid touched the panel of the cylinder and its metal skin slid back in one area; from this emerged a control panel of insulated buttons. There was no discernable sound as the panel did this, because there was almost no atmosphere.

Traffic came over the comlink in his suit. It was Rosenthal.

"Ready, Sid?" Rosenthal asked.

"All set, Pop. The cylinder was no problem, for once," he replied.

"Good. Stand clear."

Sid stepped back from the cylinder several feet. He didn't want to be anywhere near the spray that would rise from the distribution unit. One risked a remote chance of being propelled dozens of feet into the air if they did. If there was anything wrong with the regulator — and Sid had seen it happen before — then the distribution could volley out at many times the required speed.

But there was only a gentle hiss from the top of the cylinder, and Sid watched as a plume of blue-green spores arched over his head and across the chasm to the plain on the other side.

The lichen spores were only lightly bioengineered. The resilient life they would unleash on the ice had already proven to be hardened against the effects of vacuum and radiation centuries prior.

Sid watched the flow of the particles as they soared by, then he noticed them disappear over the chasm; no longer visible to him as they dissipated.

Across the rift, at the opposite edge of the chasm, was a figure.

At first Sid thought nothing of this — several of the workers were out and about this morning.

"Hey," he sent over his comlink, "You, on the Tiger Flat."

He walked forward. His boots clapped on the ice. Micro-pitons drove into the ice with each step and retracted back when he lifted his feet; these were designed to mimic the microscopic hairs on a Chameleon's foot.

"Hey, you're gonna screw up the distribution," Sid said again. "Get out of the stream."

The figure seemed to wander back and forth, aimlessly.

"No, to the right," he said, "Move off to the right."

The figure paused, then sat down, and folded its gloved hands over its helmet.

"All right," said Sid, "Who's on the Tiger Flat? Are you okay?"

Rosenthal replied, "Sid, no one's out there."

"Someone is," said Sid. "I'm watching them. Where is everyone?"

A chorus of voices, unordered and overlapping, responded, giving their positions. The nearest person was Lars Binkley, and he was over a mile behind Sid.

"Rosenthal," said Sid, "I'm going to check this out. I think one of the locals might be lost."

He released his pitons and activated the ramjet booster attached to his back.

With gentle bursts, he made his way over the chasm.



Maddox was in the maintenance bay, hunched over the alloy flesh of a broken distribution unit when he heard the commotion come from the airlock a hundred feet away.

The ice was a terrific sound conductor – he had no problem hearing everything that was said. And some of it was quite loud.

He got up and hurried to the airlock. The voices carried to him through the passages like ghosts speaking in his ears.

He walked into the personnel entrance and was immediately shocked.

A man lay on the floor in the fetal position. His suit was gray-colored in contrast to the off-yellow the farmers wore. On this gray suit were bright swashes of color; geometric designs painted on the material by hand. The suit had a fine layer of blue and green silt on it -- spores from one of the distribution units.

The man's helmet was off; his brown hair was ruffled, and he kept his tanned face turned away from the others. Rosenthal and Sid stood near him. Lars, whom was their bald, muscular Samoan security guard, stood panting, closest to the man.

"What the hell happened?" asked Maddox.

"I was out by Tiger Flat, starting the first distribution unit," said Sid, catching his breath, "And this guy's on the other side. He was wandering around; I got near him and he completely lost it. Took three of us to get him here. We were on a sled, Boss, and this guy says we weren't getting away fast enough."

"Getting away..." said Maddox. "What the hell from? We got a magnetic storm coming?"

"No," said Rosenthal, "Everything was fine out there...except him."

Maddox lowered himself on his knees, down to the floor. He put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"I know you," the boss said. "Yeah, I recognize you now. Tucker?"

The man seemed to relax a little; he sat up, resting his arms on his knees. When he looked at Maddox, the first thing the Boss noticed were the cuts and bruises all over his face.

"Tucker," asked Maddox, "What happened?"

"Who is this guy?" asked Sid.

"He's a local," said Maddox. "Been out here almost since the first groups of people came. He's an ice sculptor. Bit of a hermit — occasionally one of those rare tourist groups will come down to see his 'gallery'."

"Yes, Tucker Wilson," said Rosenthal, "Right?"

Tucker shot a glance at Rosenthal. It was reflexive; like a fox jerking its eyes towards an unexpected sound.

"I'm...sorry," said Tucker, in a near-whisper, "I was just...it just didn't make sense. Maybe it was something under the surface."

"Tucker," said Maddox, "You're okay now. You're at Meridian Farm. But you're sixteen *miles* from your home."

Tucker nodded, still shaken but calming down somewhat.

"What made you walk sixteen miles across Tiger Flat?"

"...They started moving," said Tucker, quietly.

Sid raised an eyebrow. "What?" he asked.

"The statues," said Tucker, "My statues...I came up to start my work this morning...they were moving. All of them...moving."

Maddox looked up to Lars and nodded.

Lars kneeled down and wrapped a thick arm around Tucker.

"Hey, buddy," said Lars, gently, "Let's get you some hot soup and you can tell me a little more about it."

Tucker rose slowly as Lars helped him up.

Rosenthal crossed two fingers – medical bay, he signaled.

Lars nodded and walked Tucker away.

Maddox sighed. "Rosenthal."

"Yeah, boss?"

"Do me a favor, and call everyone else in."



Almost no one spoke at dinner. Maddox sat at the head of the table spooning chicken flakes into his mouth. Sid and Marissa sat nearest him. They glanced at each other; there was a brief smile, and then Marissa stood up and left the room.

Sid nonchalantly rose a moment later and scooped the rest of his food into the disposal unit, then left the galley.

Rosenthal smirked as he left. Lars chuckled. Finally, there was something to break the somber mood.

Sid turned back. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, son," replied Rosenthal. "Just save some energy for tomorrow."

Lars burst into laughter, losing a mouthful of his soup. Sid walked out, embarrassed. Even Maddox grinned — until he caught the glance of the woman across the table.

She was a younger woman, an equal to Maddox in attitude, but small and thin. Her brown hair was tied into a small bun, and her eyes were the equal of an owl's — stern and serious.

To her left, another man had been laughing, but he saw her expression and went silent, picking through his food. He was a tall, young black man with a thick beard and warm eyes. His name was Douglas.

Lars still smiled. Maddox knew better than to risk such a gesture himself.

"Dad," the woman said, "Aren't you going to ask me about our patient?"

"Mary, I kind of wanted to unwind for just a little while first. We've had a strange day — and we'll have extra work tomorrow because of it. So, don't get mad."

"Well, he's okay, if you care," she replied.

"I care," said Maddox.

"I put him out with some klanarx," Mary replied, "and other than a little sunburn and dehydration, he'll be okay. Good thing Sid found him when he did."

Maddox grunted a questioning sound.

"His suit had an hour of power left," she replied. "It's an older model, not designed for an extended surface trek. No solar fibers sewn into the microweave."

"He probably just went ice-wacky," said Lars.

Douglas nodded; snapped a stale roll in half and shoved some of it in his mouth.

"No," said Mary, "He was very coherent just before I put him under. He said those statues were moving."

Maddox dropped his fork; with a loud clang it struck his platter.

"Mary," he said, "You don't work on the surface all day. Your eyes play tricks on you. You ain't got no frame of reference out there, understand? Things seem like they move, but they don't. A bit of ice formation you remember being out to your left earlier in the day winds up being on the right when you see it again — then you realize it's because you're facing in a whole different direction and you lost your bearings for a bit."

Lars added, through a mouthful of food, "That's why we have GPS units, emergency locators, all that."

Maddox waved a hand palm up, at Lars, in triumph.

"It just doesn't make sense," said Mary. "He said it like it had happened right in front of him. It might indicate instability with that area of the ice. We should let Crater Valley know about this, just so they'll be prepared."

Maddox sighed. "Now you're just blowing this out of proportion."

Mary folded her arms.

“Fine,” replied Maddox. “I’ll tell that settlement about it tomorrow. Can I finish my food?”

Mary rolled her eyes. “There are over three hundred people at Crater Valley, dad. Don’t get mad at me.”

“Yeah,” he replied, “Well, extend me the same favor. All I’m asking, okay?”

She smiled. “Fair enough.”

Maddox had a fork of hot food almost to his lips when he heard the com signal indicator go off.

He glanced around the table. There was utter confusion on everyone’s faces.

“Someone expecting a call?” He asked.

No one was.



Douglas reached the door to the com room first – he was always faster than anyone else, probably due to the fact that he hadn’t been on Europa as long as the others. He still had very good knees.

As was the base’s policy, whoever reached the equipment first jumped on it. At two hundred feet below the ice, every call was treated as a potential emergency. An ice quake hadn’t occurred in years, but comets, large meteorites, and the like were still very real threats.

Douglas sat down at the small chair in front of the tiny console and pressed a button. The com notification alarm gave way and a holographic screen appeared instead, showing a man with a smug expression, a chiseled chin, and black hair fading into gray at the edges.

The farmer hid his disgust.

“Hello, Meridian Farm,” the man said, “Red Eye Station greets you.”

Douglas *hated* when Doctor Johannson spoke past whomever was at the console like that. The prick from Red Eye Station knew everyone’s name at the Farm, but the only one that he ever acknowledged by first name was Maddox.

“What do you want?” asked Douglas.

Doctor Johannson cocked an eyebrow. Then he said, “Him.”

Everyone else that had been at the table was now behind Douglas. Maddox was up front; they knew to part and let the older man by.

“Is everything okay?” asked Maddox.

“Just fine, Chip,” said the Doctor, with the tone of a rival general meeting on the battlefield. “We require something, though.”

“Which would be?” asked Maddox.

“Chip, we need access to the chasm to the west of your farm, near Tiger Ridge.”

“To the west of my farm?” replied Maddox, “You mean *in* my farm. My company owns that land, Doctor.”

**“Very well. Anyway, we are requesting your permission to test a new scientific project in that area. I have a team here from Mars, under a Doctor Freeborn. They are the same ones that made the Olympus Mons descent. Have you heard of them?”**

**“No,” said Maddox, “We don’t keep up with the news much here.”**

**“Surprising, Chip,” Doctor Johannson added, without a trace of emotion. “Basically, this team believes they can access Europa’s ocean.”**

**Maddox wasn’t buying it.**

**“You should stay off the channel when you’re drunk, Johannson,” said Maddox.**

**Lars chuckled somewhere behind him.**

**“Chip,” the Doctor replied, “This is a very important mission. If they can get to Europa’s liquid water, we’ll have a much easier source of it for the Venus and Neptune colonies than we do now.”**

**“Wait, wait,” someone said, pushing her way to the front of the group.**

**“Lars,” she snapped, “Get out of my way for God’s sake.”**

**It was Marissa. Her hair was a little messed up; her off-duty clothes appeared to have been hastily thrown back on. Behind her was Sid, whose face was red.**

**Rosenthal threw Sid a sly grin. The look in return could have been lifted from an angry toddler, pouting over being deprived of his candy.**

**“Doctor Johannson,” said Marissa, “How do they intend to reach the liquid water?”**

**Maddox, normally bearish, knew when to step aside and let an expert take over.**

**“They have a super-heated bladed coring unit,” he replied. “It’s a cylindrical craft, with enough room for two operators. It’s quite remarkable.”**

**“Fusion powered?” asked Marissa.**

**“Yes. It siphons off the hydrogen molecules as it melts the ice. Then it uses those to keep the blades at seven hundred degrees.”**

**“And you want to drop through the Tiger’s teeth?” asked Marissa. “Why not anywhere else?”**

**“This craft can pull itself out of the holes it digs,” replied Doctor Johannson, “But the blades are not designed to operate indefinitely. One set sits atop another, then another above that. That’s how they claw through the ice. The blades wear out and are retracted inside the craft, and a new set pushes down, but they need multiple sets mounted atop one another to keep going continually. That’s why they call the device a ground shark. The problem is the team was betting on a thirty-seven kilometer entry point. They had been planning on Striker’s Gorge...but Striker’s Gorge isn’t there anymore.”**

**“What the hell do you mean?” asked Maddox. Striker’s Gorge was a narrow crevasse five miles deep. It trailed into the southern pole of Europa, which meant it was only visible to instruments every third day.**

**The Doctor replied, “It’s full...of ice. We’re still not sure why. You didn’t hear?”**

**Maddox folded his arms. “No, we didn’t.”**

**“Despite that,” said Doctor Johannson, “It is filled, and the chasm near your settlement is our only option left.”**

**“Well,” said Maddox, “I want a cut.”**

**“A cut?” asked Johannson. “What do you mean?”**

**“Please, Johannson. Don’t you insult us both, now. I want a percentage on the water that will inevitably be harvested from that chasm.”**

**“We’ll pay you a one-time fee, and not any more than that,” said the Doctor.**

**“Fine, then you’re not coming down here,” said Johannson. “Switch this off, Douglas.”**

**Douglas reached forward, fingers raised to strike the keys, but Johannson immediately protested.**

**“Wait, wait!” He said. “We’ll give you a thirty-percent cut.”**

**“Half,” said Maddox, evenly. “Since this is obviously a commercial expedition and not scientific, I’m sure their backers can afford that.”**

**Johannson hit mute. He turned to his left and addressed someone out of the range of the camera.**

**He switched the audio back on.**

**“Half.”**

**“Great,” said Maddox, “Then you got your dig location. When do you want to be here?”**

**“Tomorrow, 0700 Solar Synchronized Time,” the Doctor replied, defeated.**

**“We’ll see you then,” said Maddox. He nodded to Douglas, and the transmission died.**

**The last image onscreen was Doctor Johannson, wearing a frown like a tragic statue.**



**0700 on Europa that day was darker than midnight, but the surface was still highly visible, thanks to the moon’s sisters, which danced in the embrace of Jupiter’s gravity field like a group of young women pining for the attention of a potential husband. Ganymede and Callisto were the brightest and most obvious.**

**Beyond the moons, the stars shown like a million buoys anchored in the celestial sea; the ancient beacons lit up the moon’s skin with the glory of infinity given purchase over the partially-reflective surface of ice.**

**Maddox stood near Tiger Chasm; his face lit up by the soft interior lighting of his suit. Nearby, Rosenthal, Lars, and Marissa waited for the arrival of their guests. Everyone else was back at the facility, asleep.**

**There wasn’t so much tension in the air as irritation; it was the equivalent of three in morning based on the farmers’ sleep cycles. But if what Johannson was saying was true, then Meridian Farm stood an excellent chance of making up for last quarter — and then some.**

**A dot separated from its brethren and moved across the horizon, and the approaching glow of engines could be seen.**

**“Finally,” grumbled Maddox. They said you couldn’t fill any traces of the cold through the suits, but anyone that had ever spent time in Jupiter’s shadow would tell you different.**

**The ship that drifted over them, and then behind them, was over two hundred feet long. It was a dedicated mid-range freighter that borrowed its shape from the stingrays of Earth’s distant oceans.**

**During the last few hundred feet or so, it eased down to the planet on magnetic fields, as no one was interested in ice and other particles being flung into the farmers at greater-than-mach speeds.**

**The craft settled down and touched the ice, then powered down its engines.**

**From the side an airlock door opened, and onto the ice stepped Doctor Johannson and five or six workers, whom immediately fanned out.**

**Next to the Doctor was a thin, wiry man with pale skin and eyes that darted around continually.**

**“Is he going to be all right?” Maddox asked, nodding to the other man as he and the Doctor approached.**

**“Chip,” said Doctor Johannson, “meet David Freeborn. Doctor Freeborn, this is Chip Maddox, owner of Meridian Farm.”**

**The two shook hands. Freeborn pulled his glove away almost immediately and turned to Johannson.**

**“We have the clearance, right, Doctor?” he asked.**

**“That’s right.”**

**“Good,” replied Freeborn. “We’ll start in fifteen minutes.”**

**Maddox ignored the rude gesture. He would remain civil. As Freeborn walked back to the ship, he called out over the public channel: “Good luck, Dr. Freeborn.”**

**Freeborn turned back to face Maddox. He looked like a gremlin, with his face lit up by the helmet.**

**“Luck?” he said, with something that was similar to a grin. “Mr. Maddox, in two hours the *Maco* will be the first craft to penetrate Europa’s liquid ocean.”**

**He turned back and walked over to the workers, whom were already busy spreading odd equipment over the ice. A few scorpion-like robots had emerged from the freighter, and they carried heavy loads of gear towards the workers.**

**“You can wait at the base, if you like,” said Doctor Johannson.**

**“We’ll wait here,” replied Maddox, “And, I’ll be signing that equal share agreement, now.”**

**The two competitors glared at each other for a moment. Johannson balled his fists up, then walked back to the ship to retrieve the data pad.**



**Across the chasm stretched a long beam of metal, anchored onto the edge of the ridge, forty feet away. At the end of the arm was a single transmitting unit;**

the focusing element would cast the signal directly into the pitch depths of the chasm below.

Doctors Johannson and Freeborn had climbed into the fifty-foot *Maco*, which was a ship like nothing Maddox had ever seen before.

The entire craft was cylindrical; along all sides were blades, but these were stowed safely back from what would be the walls the ship would carve as it descended. There was a rotating ring on the front of the craft. This ring was wider in circumference than the rest of the ship; the current "loaded" set of blades could be seen up front; these were already glowing red hot.

At the very rear of the ship was the crew compartment – a dome made of transparent titanium-uranium alloy, in which two seats lying on their seatbacks could be seen. In these seats were the two Doctors.

The craft activated its magnetic engines, and the vessel slowly righted itself automatically. Inside, Freeborn could be seen operating the controls beneath a projected display; a wire-frame of the surrounding terrain was barely visible.

Maddox and the other people on the ridge (that weren't operating equipment) walked to the edge of the ridge and watched as the craft descended into the chasm. The blades began spinning a kilometer down, casting their red glow across either side of the ice, and for a moment Maddox had the impression that he was watching an angler fish bob a bright lure inside its great jaws.



By the time the sun could be seen cresting the horizon, it was already five hours later. A general panic had set in along the ridge. Maddox and the other farmers watched, helpless, as the suited technicians ran around the top of the ridge in a flurry of activity.

Someone rushed up to Maddox, wearing a suit with the characteristic image of Jupiter and its Great Storm. This was another man from Johannson's team.

"We've a problem," said the man. Inside the suit, sweat could be seen beading up on his forehead.

"Not going as planned, I take it," said Maddox, "Can we help?"

"I'm surprised you offered," the man replied.

"Look," said Maddox, "I don't know how the hell you guys do things on your orbiting biosphere, but out here on the ice if someone has a problem anyone that can help does."

"I don't think you *can* help," was the reply, "We lost the signal to the ship an hour ago, and the transmissions down there before that weren't....pleasant."

Marissa had stepped up, as had Lars. Even Rosenthal, normally laid back, sensed trouble and was walking over.

"What did they say before you lost contact?" asked Maddox.

**“They reported they’d reached water, but they were trying to analyze something unusual in the ice. Then they said the ice...changed. Then I heard a shout, and then we lost their signal.”**

**Suddenly, there was a distant rumble beneath their feet.**

**“Get everyone away from the chasm,” said Marissa. She had a look of utter terror in her eyes.**

**Maddox wasn’t going to argue: “Get your people back,” he said to Johannson’s coworker. The man stood there, hesitant.**

**“Now!” Maddox demanded, and the man from Red Eye Station turned and began shouting orders over the public channel.**

**Maddox launched himself upwards; his team followed suit. Their suit-attached mag-repulsors fired and carried them away from the low-gravity surface and a hundred feet into the air.**

**Below, the workers from Red Eye Station scrambled to clear back from the edge. Finally, the last one got aboard the freighter, and it eased off the surface.**

**No sooner had it done this than Marissa indicated the direction of the chasm.**

**Chunks of ice broke off and fell into the gulf of space between the two masses of ice on either side; large pieces tumbled and smashed their way down the glass-smooth, bluish sides of the rift.**

**A great geyser of slush erupted from the chasm. It went into the air fifty feet before falling and spreading like blood from a wound onto the surrounding ice. This was new ice; likely wrapped around a core of water, *liquid* water — an unseen thing on Europa’s surface.**

**As if to punctuate this, some of the ice cracked and parted and a torrent of bluish-green water poured forward; vapor erupted from its surface as the sun struck it.**

**Almost immediately, this water slowed and froze anew, and became just a hardened, smooth surface over its older sub-layer.**

**Over the public channel, there were collective gasps; a few hushed exclamations. It wasn’t from the now-filled chasm, or its unexpected torrent. Everyone had managed to dodge that. Some dark shapes could be seen in the ice — equipment that would have to be mined out and checked to see if it was salvageable.**

**No, instead the shock came from what could be seen jutting from the recently-liquid flow of ice. To the right of the freighter’s landing point was a panel of twisted metal from the *Maco*, and just past that was a crushed pulp of rock-solid ice stained red. A single, pale human hand jutted from it, barely recognizable from what the ice had done to it.**



**There was no investigation — out here on the frontier, laws felt as distant as warm air over a desert.**

Instead, terrible news arrived; met with protest by the various settlements scattered around Europa. But, there was nothing they could do.

A fourth incident had occurred the same day the *Maco* had met its end: a settlement on the western plains lost ten people in an ice slide. The governing bodies on Earth had ordered an evacuation of the moon's surface until the unexplained, recent geological instability could be studied by its scientists.

Europa had become a restricted moon; with this news came the crushing realization that Meridian Farm was finished. The farm had been crushed by government worry, and just when the ice around the farm was taking on the best bluish-green it had seen in years. It would have been a tremendous harvest. It would have set everything right and given the farm a few seasons' worth of financial stability.

In death, it seemed, Johansson had the last laugh. Red Eye Station would sit like a laughing jester in King Jupiter's celestial court, forever mocking Meridian Farm's failure.

Three days later, Maddox and Lars saw to one last task: a favor to their nearest neighbor. Maddox was secretly glad for the trip; a final flyover above the ice would do him some good before he slowly made his way back to Mars to face his investors.

They touched the sled down just outside Tucker's farm, and the artist slowly stepped off, unsure, and stayed right behind Lars.

"Relax," said Maddox, who leaned up against a partially-carved ice sculpture. "It's safe, Tuck. We're right here, too."

Lars nodded in agreement and leaned an elbow on the railing of the sled.

"Thanks," replied Tucker. "I don't have much I need. The rest can stay until they let us back on the surface."

He turned and hurried towards the igloo-like entrance to his home.

Lars glanced at Maddox. They both silently agreed. Tucker was kidding himself; odds were strong none of them would ever see this place again.

Up ahead, Tucker had stopped. He stood mid-stride; his helmet was turned slightly to the left.

"Tuck?" asked Maddox. "You all right?"

There was no reply.

Maddox nodded to Lars. The two of them approached Tucker. He must have lost it again, for some reason, and the tow men prepared to subdue a panic-stricken man.

But when they arrived near Tucker, they stopped and stood, jaws agape.

Tucker had a new ice sculpture near his home, but he couldn't have made it. No one could have made it — as Maddox stared at it, he became more inclined to leave Europa.

The sculpture was in the form of a transparent ball of ice; perfectly shaped, freshly frozen, roughly twenty feet across.

Atop the sphere was an area of deliberate, patchwork cracks. The ice there was thicker, whiter, and atop it were tiny structures.

The structures were buildings; distribution units...and people. And near each structure was a patch of blue-green, off-colored ice.

Into the sphere from each patch went ghostly tendrils the same color. These were wrapped around *shapes* -- shapes that seemed to cavort in agony and pain.

The shapes were smooth-sided; much larger than the figures on the top of the sphere. Maddox realized with shock that they had to be organic. He could even make out fins. As a whole, they resembled whales with the eyes removed, but with long tentacles drifting out from their sides. These tendrils were wrapped around bizarre, cubic tools.

In the center of the sphere, one of these figures had raised a tool over its head. Impaled on the tip was a small, cylindrical shape. The ice was colored off-red around the shape.

The figure held the impaled representation over its head; jaws open, victorious over the invaders: a mute, triumphant display.

End

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