

THE LAST ITINERANT

He has travelled an unimaginable distance for the ceremony to which he is not invited.

Having long ago surmounted the barriers of distance, time, velocity, he has traversed Infinity more often than he cares to recall, riding the vehicle of his mind. He is everywhere and nowhere, seen, and yet unseen—he simply Is.

And being the last of his kind, he travels alone.

He has lean, weathered features: impossible to assess his age. The vestments he wears, anonymous and unexceptional, are eminently suited to one of his Calling. He carries only a small, battered case, scarred and striated by frequent passages through the Vortex. He knows no home, answers to no-one, and journeys wherever the need lies.

But this Occasion, he attends out of curiosity, tempered with professional pride: although those gathered are unaware of his presence, or, indeed, his existence.

He passes freely among them, slipping in and out of the Vortex at will, dissolving and re-materialising in their midst. Few notice him: those who do, dismiss him as an Improbable and therefore, non-existent.

He has forgotten how self-absorbed they are, these brilliant, glittering creatures who could have conquered all Existence, but for their bitter rivalries. Yet he finds himself amused by their small vanities, and in a troubled universe, welcomes their ability to trivialise. It recalls a long-ago part of himself, before he was alone. Before he was burdened with the grimness of Being, and Overseeing.

He reminds himself that he is here for a purpose: a pleasurable one, he anticipates. Unseen, he passes smoothly towards the exhibits, the Prototype Models, waiting to be revealed by their creators. There is fierce competition here, with glory and kudos for the winners.

Emerging without need of concealment, he studies the products of their flawed genius, and, despite himself, is impressed. There are nine of them, markedly different, all unique. Nine perfect miniature worlds, each rotating on its axis, each caught in perfect elliptical orbit around a fiery young sun. Some are equipped with satellites of their own, invisibly held by the umbilicus of gravity.

One, too close to its parent star, is scorched, steaming: another, veiled in perpetual mist, and a third, choked in swirling red dust, making it impossible to discern their geography. Faults in both design and aesthetics will mark them down. A heavy, untalented hand has created another, an obese, unwieldy sphere, attended by ten acolyte moons—and an onvicious showman has opted for the flashy, spinning rings around its neighbour.

The three outermost worlds are insignificant, forlorn, and ice-bound, as though overlooked, or completed to a rushed deadline. But one small sphere catches his attention.

It is far from perfect in design, being elliptical rather than round, and yet it is exquisite. This is the work of an artisan—showing flair, imagination, and a loving hand. It reminds him, aching, of his own, one-time world. It glows with colour, and pleases the eye with contours, undulations and contrasts, but, although

beautifully executed, remains strangely unfinished, like a preliminary sketch, without dimension. It wants—refinement.

Opening the dented case, he extracts a phial of colourless liquid, half-removing the glass stopper.

Carefully halting the small rotation with a finger, he drips fluid onto his chosen areas, watching with satisfaction as drops become trickles become streams become rivers become waterfalls, cascade towards lakes, expand into oceans.

He nods, pleased with the effect. Now the contours are balanced, the land has definition. But he pauses, not yet satisfied. The embryo world pulses beneath his finger, eager to resume its new-found motion.

And then he smiles, as he has not smiled in eons. Reaching once more into the case, he withdraws another phial, peering at it closely. This one, he has been saving. This one is Special.

At first glance, it looks colourless, sterile even, but he knows it is not so. This teeming, microscopic mass is only the Beginning.

Infinitely gentle, he tips the vessel over the virgin waters, watching it connect, combine, merge into one element.

Pleasure lights his eyes: he removes the restraining finger. The world settles back into its steady, even spiral.

Content, he closes the case, and steps back into the Vortex.