

7900 words

## The Abyss

The biggest takeaway I got from this internship was that I definitely don't want to go into research. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm still in love with academia and still bothered by the deep underlying mysteries of the universe like, *Why are we all here?* and *Where did it all come from?* It's just that after spending the summer at the ALMA Observatory in the middle of the Atacama desert, I decided that I was going into industry where I would just have to answer questions like *Is this physically possible?* To which the answer is almost always, *Theoretically, yes, but it's going to cost way more than you're willing to pay.*

I suppose I should start at the beginning, when I decided to travel abroad the summer before I finished up my PhD in Astrophysics. Sure, I probably should've been working on my thesis, but I was burnt out and needed a change of scenery. My lab, which had the very descriptive title of "The Center of Sensing Science and Technology" had a joint-research position with a lab in Chile that was working on a project called *The Abyss*. When it comes to names, most academic research I've found falls into two camps.

The first is named to sound as long and complicated as possible because in essence it is doing very little, such as my first research paper as an undergraduate *Exploring Methods of Characterizing Dynamic Complexity and Intermittent Turbulence*. Most of it was complete and

utter bullshit because while I was supposed to actually be doing spectral analysis, my professor failed to actually provide me with access to the lab's data. I spent a whole semester trying to track him down so I could do something but to no avail. I think he put me down as a fifth author on that paper more out of pity than any real contribution on my part.

The other type of research you have is named to sound really cool, but is not really well defined. *Project X*, *Black Hole Horizon*, and *Antimatter Generator* just to name a few. Usually the professor in charge of them is more in love with the idea of the research than actually getting anything done. He's most likely tenured and couldn't give two shits about his papers getting published and is always at least a little bit off his rocker. I should've known that with a project title like *The Abyss*, I was due for something strange from the start. Perhaps I should've taken the nice, safe, boring internship that basically involved running statistics on gamma ray emissions of neutron stars for hours on end.

But this project had a cool title, and after giving it a quick skim decided that it was vaguely related to my thesis: *Quantum Cosmology and the Origin of the Universe*. So I packed a single, beaten up suitcase (I'm a grad student; everything I have is worse for wear), sublet my room in the small, cramped four-bedroom house I shared with three other grad students (seriously, I think "closets" is a more accurate word than "bedrooms"), emptied my savings account for a round trip ticket to Chile (because my advisor won't pay for shit), and was ready to have an adventure.

It was there, in the middle of the Atacama desert (or as I grew to lovingly call it, the middle of fucking nowhere) that I learned to be careful of what I wished for. You may think that

with 200,000 square kilometers of nothing but dry, sand, and no one else around but the handful of scientists, that nothing exciting could possibly happen. You would be 100% wrong.

At first, I was disappointed that the internet connection wasn't fast enough to stream Netflix. For being the most expensive and technologically advanced telescopic array, the computer situation was surprisingly old-fashioned. A few computers in the lab even had dial-up. The comical boings and bings and beeps and whirrs as it slowly connected brought me back to my childhood. It took me a full half hour before I could send a quick email and update my professor back in Indiana that I had gotten to the lab, and in that time I decided that nostalgia for how things used to be was highly overrated. How on earth was I supposed to survive without normal internet access and pictures of cats to distract me from the work I was supposed to be doing?

Thankfully, on my first day there, I found out that watching the greatest minds in the field bicker about whose turn it is to use the Large Millimeter Array and try and seeing them sabotage each other's work is way more entertaining than any *Real Housewives* episode. (Yes, I'll admit, I have a thing for trashy TV). You'd be surprised how catty researchers are.

I was wandering around the white walled hallways trying to find my advisor for *The Abyss* project, to no avail. Everyone I had talked to was particularly unhelpful and either didn't speak English or pretended not to, even though they magically learned how to after I had turned away to talk to someone else. I was becoming increasingly unenthused about this scientific community. Back in Indiana, everyone was nice to your face and made an attempt to be helpful, even if after they left they talked about how much they hated your guts. Here, everyone was just cold.

Anyways, I walked out to the main room, under a large white domed ceiling, around the main telescope control center, past the large picture windows that showed nothing but endless mountains of sand, trying to find someone else to help me. I noticed there was this feeble looking old man, he must've been in his seventies, with wispy white hair, wrinkles, and the type of pale skin you only can get from spending all night looking at the stars, and all day hunched over while running analysis. I think I vaguely recognized him from one of my textbooks or papers I had read. He was hobbling past a researcher who was busy collecting her data readouts from the telescope array's main computer, relying heavily on his cane. After taking a quick glance around to check that no one else was looking and a mischievous smirk, he used his cane to flick the power switch of her computer and walked away as though nothing had happened. She was furious. I decided right then and there that the German scientists have the best insults. Most German sounds angry, but their curse words sound like pure poison.

“Du hurensohn!” She screamed at him. “That was my last bit of research you miststück. I was almost done and now I have to start all over you...you...Hosenscheisser.” He giggled, claimed he was old and must've accidentally slipped, and tried to walk away. She grabbed him by the scruff of his white collared shirt that was too small for him, and pulled him back.

“You pull this shit all the damn time du verdammter Arschficker. Stop fucking with my research. Just because you haven't published a paper in over a decade doesn't mean the rest of us can't.”

By this time, the rest of the researchers had floated over to the commotion and formed a casual semi-circle around them. A man with a scruffy black beard asked me if I wanted to place bets on who would throw the first punch. I was so dumbfounded at what was going on, I forgot

to answer him, but it didn't matter. The old man had poked her in the side with his cane, hard enough to make her let go. She retaliated and kicked his cane out from under him, sending him sprawling across the floor. At this point, the man I recognized as the director of the facility, stood up, looking almost happy at the fact a little old man was just kicked across the floor of his lab. The director was over six feet tall, had a slight potbelly, and his short red hair was showing the smallest circle of a bald patch. He looked like an old football coach. At one point in his life, he was incredibly athletic, but a few too many years of sitting on the sidelines and eating snacks had rounded most of his chiseled muscles. Sighing and handing a 5,000 peso bill to the smug-looking Japanese woman next to him step, the director told them to get back to work. The crowd dispersed, and the old man stuck out his tongue after the director had turned his back before walking up to me.

“Ah, well that old bastard was always a killjoy. You must be Ben. I'm Professor Gerhard but you can just call me Jack. Welcome to ALMA.” He stuck out his hand. I was floored. *This* was the guy I was supposed to be working with all summer? Still, my midwestern politeness instincts kicking in, I extended my hand to shake his. He pulled his away and smacked my outstretched hand hard with his cane.

“You gotta be faster than that to work on my research team. Richard told me you were intelligent when he sent you down here. Hah, I told him, brains ain't what they were when we were in school. Back in our day you actually had to know stuff and think about it. Now these newfangled computers try and do it all for us. Well I don't trust em...”

He rambled on as he teetered down the wide hallway, his cane clicking off the white tile floors on every other step. Most of the people we passed rolled their eyes as he walked by and

didn't give him a second glance. Jack didn't seem to notice or if he did, he didn't mind. His eyes swept around the corridor and he opened a small door, and motioned to me to follow him. We walked down a set of concrete stairs into the basement, down through a twisting maze of corridors and tunnels. Down another set of stairs, then through what I assumed to be a steam tunnel, through a crumbled hole in the wall, through a machine room.

He kept whispering to himself "Round and round and down and down back to the rabbit hole we go". I was only 75% certain he was going to murder me down here and no one was ever going to find my body and was about to ask where on earth we were going but then he stopped in front of an ancient wooden door with a red "KEEP OUT: High Voltage" sign on it. "Now in here," he said pulling a large, old fashion metal key from a gold chain he had around his neck, "is where I do my work. We can't trust those other scientists. They're all crazy. Every last one of them. I don't know about you yet. Richard said you would be okay and I trust him, but you never know."

I was beginning to feel sick. I'm not sure if it was the altitude (going up to 14,000 feet in a day will do that to you) or if I was just coming to terms with how screwed I was for the summer. Despite what Jack was insisting, I was pretty sure that *he* was the crazy one. I really wished my advisor had warned me that he was sending me off to work with someone who belonged in an old folks home instead of in a lab. Jack rambled on, unaware I had drifted off in my own thoughts.

"And here," he said throwing open the door with a loud *CLANG* "Is where we do all our real work." He stepped aside to show me, what looked like a machine room. I was beginning to wonder if this was all just a joke, that Jack was just pulling my leg, when he squeezed in between

the roaring metal furnace and the big black boiler, into a small space that led to a chamber barely big enough for the two of us to stand. It was damp in here, and the pipes shuddered and occasionally dripped a strange silvery liquid. Most of the space was taken up by a large desk, piled high with papers. A small, cracked, fluorescent lamp emitted the only light and cast strange shadows on the walls around us. Stacked on top of the pipes were hundreds of logbooks, each one labeled with a month and a year. They were dusty, bound shut by what looked like rusted chains, and looked as though they had been there for years. The closest one read May 1953. As I looked at them, I could've sworn I heard a faint hum emanating from them, though it was probably just the furnace. Jack followed my gaze, and moved to stand in front of the books, blocking them from my view.

“Those are just old notes,” he said nonchalantly. “I don't want you working with those. Otherwise you'll realize what a fool I was back then. Anyways, welcome to my lab.”

I finally found my voice.

“You...you work *here*?”

“Of course my boy, where else would I?”

“But this place has the some of the largest astronomy labs in the world. Richard told me you had a huge lab with several other researchers. Why aren't we in there?”

“I do” he said flatly. “But here is better. It's more peaceful. Less chance of getting interrupted by those nasty nasty people”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all my boy,” his tone suddenly cheerful. “Now, all I need you to do is to bring me snacks and coffee and fetch me new pens and such. You can do that right?”

I was taken aback. I was a grad student, I mean sure, maybe an undergrad would have to do silly errands, but I nearly had a doctorate, I could at least be productive rather than just snivel over not knowing how to read an x-ray response like one of the kids that tried working in my lab back home. How dare he expect me to just bring him coffee. I opened my mouth to protest, but he just waved me away.

“Go bring me my lunch now kid. Knock on the door when you get back and I’ll let you in.” I turned, squeezed back through the passageway, and fetched his lunch like an obedient little puppy.

It was rather lonely at ALMA. For my first few weeks, all the other researched ignored me. They were here running around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to make the most of the time they had on the array, and at the same time watch out for other malicious research groups and had no time to spare. I, on the other hand, was left with nothing but. Much as I begged Jack to let me do something, *anything*, remotely academical, he didn’t budge. So I was left on my own to waste away my time there, gazing out at the beautiful desert formations and for the first time in a while, just enjoying spending time doing nothing. Of course, I was sure to make it to every lab squabble. I wouldn’t miss those for the world. Soon I began to understand the loose alliances and rivalries between the various teams although those changed almost daily. The German team, in general, hated the Spanish team that was there because, from what I gathered from the all-too-frequent shout outs, they had ‘accidentally’ deleted several months of data from the main computer that hadn’t been saved elsewhere yet. This had very nearly gotten them kicked out of the lab, but apparently the director had received a large mysterious shipment of Spanish wine that somehow convinced him to drop the issue. The Japanese and the other



American team seemed to have a loose unspoken agreement that they wouldn't do anything more than the occasional prank such as replacing all the pens in the lab with ones that had ink that evaporated a few hours after writing them down and replacing all the coffee with decaf.

Unfortunately for me, all the teams seemed to have it out for me. I was the weird new outsider, and they made sure I didn't forget that. I got the silent treatment, the occasional rough elbow in passing, and the frequent glare over the shoulder as they ran by. Being from the midwest, I just responded with a jovial wave, or "good morning" and got a nice sense of self righteousness from it. It was like the time I went to the east coast for a conference in Boston. Everyone was all grumpy and impolite and looked at me like I was an alien when I held open the door for them and said "hello" or "excuse me." I don't mind people being jerks, so long as I can make them realize it.

I tried to talk to the staff—local Chileans who lived in the facility with the rest of us—but mostly they kept to themselves, didn't speak English, or just didn't want to talk to an outsider like me. Only the chef, Abuelita, would talk to me.

The first time she saw me, she scolded me for being lazy and told me to make myself useful in the kitchen. She was a deeply religious old woman with grey hair that she always wore in a long braid and tanned skin that wrinkled around her pale grey eyes. Although she didn't look it, she was strong-stronger than me at least. The first day I met her, she handed me a cleaver, motioned to half of a pig carcass and told me to get to work. I spent about ten minutes of watching me hack away at the bones, succeeding in nothing other than nearly cutting off a finger and sending bits of blood and flesh flying across the spotless stainless steel industrial kitchen. Finally, she sighed, got up off her stool, grabbed the cleaver out of my hand, and made a single,

heavy swing at the leg, which came off instantly. I tried to mimic her motion on the other leg, but ended up hurting my shoulder after only a few tries. She tutted at me, handed me a mop and told me to clean up my mess, and went back to chopping up the carcass.

She loved telling me stories, so long as I was helping out in the kitchen. “Did I ever tell you, niñito,” she began, peeling a pile of potatoes swiftly and skillfully with a paring knife, as I fumbled with mine “Of the man who saw the Alicanto?” I shook my head no, and she continued. “A long time ago, there was a tribe of Atacameños people living here in this desert. They told stories of the Alicanto, a large bird that guided them through to the next life. It was said that the Alicanto's wings would shine during the darkest desert nights, and their eyes emit strange lights. The presence of the Alicanto meant great fortune for the tribe, but to see one, to look one in the eyes was considered terrible luck. The only ones who ever saw the Alicanto were driven mad. They say, that if you ever look up into darkest part of the skies, you'll see the fiery lights of the Alicanto's gaze and you'll be doomed to a fate worse than death. For to look into the eyes of the Alicanto is to discover the meaning of everything, to comprehend the universe in its entirety in a single moment.” She ended, staring sternly at me as though daring me to contradict her. While I personally didn't believe such mythological nonsense, I enjoyed hearing Abuelita's stories. It made the time pass faster. She told me the legends of Lola, el Yastay, the Achaches, the Umpillay, and the Quilpaná, and I listened with rapt attention, peeling vegetables, chopping up fruit, unloading shipments or anything else she needed me to do (Abuelita made me *earn* those stories). It wasn't research, but at least I felt *useful*.

After about a month of being there, I started getting a chance to talk to the other researchers. Of course, none of them were nearly as friendly as Abuelita though perhaps it was because I wasn't nearly as useful to them.

“Some research you're doing, Ben” the German woman I saw on my first day chided at me at breakfast one day. She had just come off a long night at the array. I could tell by the dark circles under her eyes and how she clung to her cup of coffee like it was life support. “Not even crazy Jack wants to work with you. You must be really stupid,” she scoffed, glowering at me as though my mere existence annoyed her. I smiled, and told her I was perfectly happy with what I was doing and wished her a nice day. She sulked off. If I'm completely honest it did bother me that I didn't get to do any real research, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let them know that. The comments, like the dirty looks they shot me, bounced off me. I didn't care what a bunch of half-crazed academics said. The Dalai Lama himself would be spiteful if he had to run on the mixture of caffeine, sleep deprivation, paranoia, and desperation that seemed to fuel everyone here. It was, for the most part, forgivable. It only really got to me once. I was sitting in my chair in the cafe having just finished lunch, my nose stuck in a book of Chilean myths Abuelita had lent me. It was in Spanish, and I was struggling to decode it word by word.

“You know what happened to all of Jack's other research assistants, don't ya?” The director said conspiratorially as he slid into the empty chair beside me, placing his heavy work boots on the table and leaning back, “They all went mad. One by one.” He looked over at me, and casually swiped the salt I had spilled earlier into his hand and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Oh, really?” I said unamused, trying not to think too much about what he was saying, resisting the urge to ask if it was due to the boredom of doing nothing.

“Yeah, I mean a few years ago there were what, at least six of em all working here. Jack’s big project to see what was out there before the big bang. Working on a way to see past this big line in the history of this universe, you know. Well, he claimed to have figured out how to find what came before the CMB, you know, all those nearly dead photons from the beginning of the universe.” Of course I knew about the earliest light in the universe. That was my whole thesis. If the guy had even bothered to read my profile, he would’ve known that. But I just nodded and smiled and hoped he’d go away, but he carried on.

“Well anyways, there was this patch of sky that Jack was obsessed with. Kept imaging it over and over any time his team had the array. He said it held the answer to what he was looking for. I mean, we all thought he was a bit mad, even back then. One day, he came into lunch all excited, said one of his assistants had found something that was further away than 15 billion light years and even older than the CMB’s. Well, I mean, we were all curious of course, and to be honest, a bit jealous. Everyone wants to be behind the next huge discovery. He was going in to verify it when he found the body. The poor kid, he was a fourth grad student just like you. I don’t know how he got the gun, but well, it took the cleaning team a while to mop it all up. Of course, these sorts of things happen when you’re in a high-pressured situation like this. But the next day another member of the team simply walked out into the desert with nothing but the clothes on her back. We didn’t realize she had left until it was almost too late. When we finally found her, her face was one I wasn’t going to forget in a hurry. She was wide-eyed and looked like she had seen a ghost or was possessed or something. It was freaky. Kept muttering about something being impossible and needing to get away from them”

“Over the next few weeks the rest of the team left...”

“Excuse me,” I said standing up, my stomach in a tight knot. “I need to go check on Jack.”

“All I’m saying kid is be careful around old Jack,” he shouted after me. You make sure stay away from whatever research he tries to rope you into. We never did find any records of it, and his assistants wouldn’t talk to us, so we didn’t have any grounds to dismiss him. But believe me, I’d like to. He gives me the creeps, but he brings the lab a ton of money from his endowment, so what can I do?”

I strode swiftly away from the director, my mind whirling dizzily, trying to make sense of what I had just heard. It was a prank, I decided. He was just trying to scare me. But the look on the director’s face was that of a haunted man. It couldn’t hurt to ask Jack, I decided. Just to put my mind at rest. I knocked on the boiler room door and Jack opened it up for me, ushering me inside.

“You’re not usually in here til noon. What brings you round these parts?” He asked peering suspiciously towards me.

“I was talking with the director,” I said in what I hoped was a nonchalant tone. “He was telling me what happened to your team.”

“Lies. All of it. See they’re trying to tell me I’m crazy. Well I think if I were I’d be the first to know it.” Jack mumbled looking miffed. “That’s just the stories they tell to scare the new folk. Don’t worry. Anything else I can do for you old boy?”

I wasn’t really convinced, but decided on a different approach. “Look, can I do some real research? I mean I’ve been sitting around most of the day and I need to do something. Your lab is paying me to be here after all. I’m sure there’s something I could be helping out with. Like

digitizing your lab books.” I reached out to touch one of the books, but I had barely laid my hand on the leather bound cover when Jack’s stick smacked it away.

“OUT!” He screamed at me, a maniacal look in his eye. I jumped at his violent reaction, my hand smarting from where he had hit me.

“NEVER TOUCH THOSE, YOU HEAR ME?” Jack shouted, grabbing me by the collar, and pushing me out of the room with a surprising amount of force for such an old man. I was shocked at this abrupt change in demeanor, but barely had time to process it before I was tossed into the hallway right before the door slammed behind me. On my way out, I could’ve sworn I saw the books shaking against their chains.

I didn’t see Jack for the next three days. I tried knocking on the door several times before finally giving up. I left a tray of food outside, but he didn’t touch it. When I told Abuelita about his absence, she sighed, shook her head and said it was probably the Anches, the mythical beasts that roamed the Atacama consuming the eager minds of the old and weak making them do terrible things; that if I heard the call of the Anches, I should never follow it to the source, for the call itself isn’t dangerous, but once you let it into your head, it will destroy you from within. Speaking of mythical beasts and stories, she had more of them back in the kitchen along with a mountain of chickens that needed to be deboned should I care to join her.

When I did see him again, he looked even paler than he had when I met him. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in days and patches of his wispy white hair were missing in places, but he acted like nothing had happened. I knew better than to bring it up. The next few days passed without much incident, though I found Jack answering the door less and less. The contents of the lab books intrigued me, though every time I even glanced at them, Jack quickly made an excuse

for why I had to leave. I wanted to know what was in them, mostly because he had so expressly forbidden me from finding out. It was my inner scientist yearning to find out the mysteries of the unknown and perhaps the contrary kid in me that really wanted to understand them just because he said I couldn't. I'm sure if he had *wanted* me to read them, they would've repulsed me so much that I'd never even bother to open them.

What was in them that could make him so crazy? Well, I mean beyond his usual crazy. The whole messing up other people's experiments and picking fights was fairly normal here, though I noticed he was doing it with much less enthusiasm and frequency. I tried asking him what was wrong, but he shrugged it off, saying it was just old age catching up to him. Everyone else I tried to talk to just ignored me or made some comment about how he was always that old and crazy. Something was off, and if he wasn't going to tell me, I was going to find out.

I asked the janitors if they had a key to the door.

"Lo siento, sólo hablo español, señor," he told me. I tried again, my Spanish a bit rusty from the one semester I took it in college. I had hoped being in Chile would give me a chance to practice it, but we were thousands of miles from anyone else, and because it was an international facility, most people here conversed in English.

"No lo tengo, se perdió," he said, which either meant I had butchered my question and he didn't tango, or that the key was lost and he didn't have it anymore. I thanked him or said he was funny.

My legal means of entering blocked, I took a more illicit approach. I tried picking the lock on the door after I knew he had gone to bed, but the old metal door's lock was rusted and far

too intricate for the two paper clips, which broke almost immediately after I had tried to push them in.

The same fate met the hairpin I borrowed from Abuelita. “Now I know what you’re going to do with it, but I don’t wanna know why,” she warned me when I asked her for one while we were slicing tomatoes. “And I know you won’t listen to me niñito, because you children never do, but you’d do good to remember that some things aren’t worth messing around in. Take my son, Matias for instance...” A thirty minute story about her son breaking into a military base just to play pool with his buddy and a half bushel of tomatoes later, I had my shiny new hairpin that split in two after thirty seconds of ramming it into the lock.

There had to be some way into that room. I remember trying to casually stand outside the door and catch it as he left, but that only earned me a smack on the shins from Jack’s cane as he told me to “bugger off and forget about those dumb books.”

After that, I tried sneaking into his room. The dormitory doors were newer and much easier to pick, but he woke up to go to the bathroom as soon as I had entered, and I had to dive behind the couch to avoid being seen. I bashed my shin on the oak coffee table, and it took all the willpower in the world not to scream out. My heart was already racing at a thousand beats per minute. I was sure Jack would hear it as he tottered back from the toilet. It’s a good thing hearing goes with age I guess.

The near miss in Jack’s dormitory made me back off. I was getting in over my head. It was just some silly books after all, not worth getting put on academic probation or expelled. While my time here wouldn’t exactly improve my academic career, it could certainly destroy it. I resolved myself to put the lab books out of my mind, and work on writing up my thesis draft, so I



found it odd, when I found my fingers tapeing the backplate of the boiler room's lock so it would stay open even after I closed the door. I knew that I shouldn't try and open it, especially not when Jack was there. That it would be morally wrong. But the mystery of these books bore through my mind like a drill, pounding away my last bit of self control. I convinced myself that this was a test, that Jack really wanted me to read those books-otherwise he wouldn't have forbidden them- but I had to somehow prove to him I was ready. It seemed like the sort crazy thing he'd come up with. It was something I'd have to earn myself. Much more confident that this was the right thing to do, that by banning me from those books, he had basically granted me permission to, I decided to find out once and for all what this was about.

So at 1am that day, when I saw Jack leave his office and head toward the dormitories, I simply opened up the door and walked in. One of the books lay open on the desk. I walked over to it and read the entry. It was dated for today, June 26th.

*Ben, I know you're reading this you nosy bastard, so do yourself and the world a favor and burn everything in this place. I just wish I had the strength to do so myself, but I'm a sentimental old fool and it's my life's work. I can't bear to lose it.*

*-Jackson Gerhard*

I stared at the note, trying to make sense of it. I decided I would burn them after I had read them. After all, I had gone through all this trouble to get here. What was the point in giving up right before I understood it all? Besides, what could words do? It wasn't as though they were dangerous. I pulled the desk chair, broke the chains that bound the first ten notebooks together, grabbed the first one, and began reading.

At first it was very dull, all about the theory behind obtaining older and older pictures of the universe, how one could theoretically observe what existed beyond the barrier that was the beginning of everything we knew. Theoretical quantum mechanics was never really my thing, mostly because it made my head hurt whenever I thought too long about it. I skimmed most of the volumes, slowing down once I started the ones from two years ago. I looked through thousands of images of empty sky, with calculations and analysis scratched next to them in blue or green ink and remembered what the director had told me: *there was this patch of sky that Jack was obsessed with. Kept imaging it over and over.* A loud pounding brought me out of the books, though the knowledge that awaited me begged and pleaded for my attention.

“Are you in there? Open up!,” a voice called out, punctuated by pounding on mental. I looked up, debating if I should go out. At least in here I was safe. Here I was with the books and the books needed me. They called out to me. They had to be read. It was my duty. I turned the page. The RA and DEC next to the image showed it was the same patch of sky. But this time, there was something there. Something indistinguishable. I bent closer trying to see what it was, but I couldn’t make anything else out other than a note in the margin written in wobbly, loopy cursive: “EYE?” I could feel that the answers to everything were in reach, the words were calling to me, that I had to keep going. The books around me were humming, cheering me on, pleading with me to keep going.

Intrigued, I flipped to the next page, and saw something. An eye? But this was well past the frequencies of any sort of light theoretically nothing should exist. It wasn’t possible. But in my heart I knew it did exist and that it held answers. I knew not only my in my heart, but in my spine, in my nerves, in my skin. Every fiber of my being resonated with the truth that lay before

me so clearly on the paper that I wondered how I had not known it before. My mind began racing with the billions of possibilities as the knowledge poured into me, overflowing my brain to the point where it hurt to think anymore. Still, I bent down to examine it, and heard a far off bang, like a gunshot from miles away. But that didn't matter. I just needed to look into the eyes of the creator that glowed billions of years ago, ice blue and fiery hot-for there was no mistaking the shape that seem to lift out of the book itself. This was no catseye supernova. It was unmistakably the eye of the creator. I had never seen anything like it. It spoke to me, told me to listen and discover my purpose and I knew that if I just stared into them everything would be alright.

“Stop...No,” the words sounded far off, and garbled as though I was underwater or half-asleep. I blinked, and saw the book slam in front of me. Looking up, my eyes unfocused, for my brain was unconcerned with the feeble inputs from my body when there was so much to know about the millions of worlds around me, I saw a huge towering figure. I tried to open the book again, but the figure snatched it off the table and threw it in the boiler fire. It screamed as it touched the flames and my head felt like it too was burning. Desperate to retrieve it, I got up trying to try and dig it out of the flames, but I was lifted off my feet and pinned to the ground, a knee pressing into my stomach.

“What do you think you're doing? You'll burn yourself,” the figure said incredulously. It's voice sounded muffled as though it was coming a long way away. But in the grand scheme of the universe, is a bit of scorched flesh important? The thought squeezed itself through the rush of ideas that was trying to fill my brain, and the voice of the remaining books chorused a resounding “NO!” I tried to shake off the figure, but it had a firm grip I could not shake. Though I twisted and fought with all my might, I was helpless, as I felt each book sizzled into ash. It like

my very brain would be ripped apart. The answers to the universe were in there. I struggled, kicking, biting, screaming, trying to break free of the grip, but there was this huge weight pinning me against the hard concrete. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. I heard a loud POP! And felt a flash of pain spasm down my arm. Remotely I realized I had broken a bone or something, but in the entire universe, it was only a small number of neurons firing. The only thing that mattered was saving the books. There were only a few left. I could feel them, begging, pleading with me to save them. The blood was pounding through my brain, echoing across the universe.

"I'm sorry niño," I remember the figure saying, and then I fell into darkness. As the light faded away, I could hear the books curse me for failing them.

\* \* \*

I woke up on a cold metal table and tried to sit up, but a piercing pain shot down my arm. "Easy there kid," the director said. "You broke your arm. I bandaged it up as best I could but the medics are still about 30 minutes out"

"Wh...wha...what happened?" I stammered. The pain in my arm was growing and making it hard to concentrate.

"I don't really know. Abuelita muttered something about ancient beasts after she brought you up. She's gone to make you some tea."

"You don't believe that sort of thing do you?" I asked incredulously. Coming from an old Chilean woman, I could understand, but the director was a man of science. A man of logic.

"Of course not," he said dismissively. "She's always chock full of old stories like that."

“Where is Jack?” I asked nervously glancing around the room, “Where is he?” I asked again, this time a bit of panic had entered my voice.

“Gone.”

“What do you mean, gone? Gone where?,” I looked up panicked. The director looked at me quizzically.

“He left about an hour ago. I sacked him. Couldn’t risk having him terrorize any more of his assistants. I honestly thought he’d moved past that. But I guess people don’t change. I still can’t believe he actually broke your arm and knocked you out cold”

“He didn’t,” I began

“It’s okay, I’m sure you’re confused now what with everything that happened. Now if you’ll just sign these forms” The director pushed some papers in front of me and a pen, which I took and sloppily scrawled my name on.

“What are they for?”

“Oh just some legal stuff in case he challenges his termination. Don’t you worry. It’s all written out about how he hurt you. I’m glad to be rid of the man. He was crazy, but, well, foreign relations in a lab are important and whatnot...” he mumbled off. I was about to explain that it wasn’t Jack’s fault, but at that moment, Abuelita bustled in with some tea, shooing away the director, saying that she’d take care of me. He left, looking back over his shoulder at me sympathetically, clutching the papers in his hands.

“Niñito, you idiot,” she said as soon as the door had shut, smacking me hard on the head, making white dots dance across my vision. “You children never listen do you? I told you about the Anches didn’t I? And then I find you went and chased after them anyways. It’s a good thing

their calls are louder when they've just been fed. Otherwise I would've never been able to find you in that maze of tunnels."

"What happened?" I asked. My head hurt, not just from where Abuelita had hit me, but a long, dull ache, and I tried to piece together what had happened. My brain felt as though it was trying to remember a dream. The sensation was still there, but the details and description couldn't be pinned down with mere words and the more I thought about it the more my head hurt.

"Drink this," Abuelita said, thrusting a steaming mug of putrid-smelling liquid into my hand.

"What happened," I asked, not wanting to put the oozing green liquid anywhere near my mouth. She ignored my question and began chastising me.

"I thought you were smarter than them niño, you listened to my stories. But you heard their cries and still went after them just like Jack did. Of course, he at least was careful about it. Crept around it slowly, didn't just try and dive in and understand everything all at once like you. He wanted to know how the universe worked so he went and summoned them down here using that big fancy telescope. Most of his lab had the sense to get away. They knew what was coming. You live out here long enough you get a feel for when the bad things come. It's the way the air crackles like it does right before a huge storm. But Jack was just starting out, and he thought the knowledge was worth the risk."

"It was just some lab books," I protested, confused. The whole thing made my head pound and I was starting to feel dizzy and sick to my stomach.

“Tsch, are you hearing yourself niño? You tried to stick your hand in the furnace. Now drink up, it’ll make you feel better” Abuelita tutted and looked at me like I was a fool. My brain was still fuzzy, but I was fairly positive she was the crazy one. After much encouragement from Abuelita, I managed to gulp down the liquid, which tasted almost as bad as it smelled. The strong sting of booze lingered on my tastebuds and while it made my head ache a little less, it also made me more aware of the stabbing pain in my arm.

I was glad when the medics finally arrived and lifted me on the stretcher and drove me to the nearest hospital over an hour away. I was diagnosed with a broken arm, internal bruising, and a mild concussion. While I was recovering in the hospital, my things were sent over from ALMA along with a return ticket home. It also came with a bottle of the foul-smelling liquid Abuelita had given me, but I promptly poured it out, not wanting to taste anything like it ever again.

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the whole thing even though it’s been months since I left Chile. Whenever my advisor brings it up, I answer as vaguely as possible. To be honest, sometimes I think I dreamt the whole thing, it seemed so surreal. It took me a while to remember what really happened in the boiler room and I wonder if Abuelita was right about the Anches or just crazy. The more I think about it, the less I understand. Some nights I still dream about the books scratching on the walls of the furnace, trying to escape. Other nights, I don’t sleep at all, and lie awake wondering if some mysteries of the universe are better left unknown. On the nights like those, I go up on my roof and look up into the all encompassing darkness, and start searching for answers.

Notes:

I tried to keep this cross-genre since I very much like the idea of being both horror and SF. I think this goes a bit towards horror to the end once he opens the books, but it's his desire to discover that leads him to opening them, thus spelling out his own doom according to Abuelita's theory at least. The more SF reading is that Ben just went crazy due to the mercury poisoning (strange silvery liquid/cracked fluorescent bulb) in Jack's lab. Jack was also crazy, which is why his assistants left/there's some truth to him traumatizing his research assistants, but that's a more subtle reading which most people probably won't notice. Personally, I'd like to think that Abuelita's right. That there's some myths that are real and inexplicable and there's something out there in the great beyond that will try and control you. This also means that Ben didn't learn his lesson and still has this underlying desire to figure out the universe, setting up the story to potentially repeat itself.



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