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Mars Needs Baby Seals by Lawrence M. Schoen

In Mars' pitifully under funded Department of Temporal Solutions, located in a too small facility one hundred meters beneath the bottom of the rehydrated Mare Sirenum—just down the hall from the Martian Department of Tax Relief and Prosthetic Enhancements—history was about to be made. Their names were Threm and Grelnak, as common among the Trans-humans living and working on Mars in the twenty-third century, as Roberta and Doug would be in New Jersey during Earth's late twentieth. Threm was a senior specialist, and Grelnak was her underqualified, probationary assistant. The two of them lay sprawled upon a mildewed stadium couch that Grelnak had liberated from his alma mater's flipperball arena two weeks before. Standing behind and above them, a female technician with the kind of figure that could make a lab coat resemble a cheerleader's outfit popped her wad of fishgum and said, "activating the sluice . . . now!" The pair on the couch closed their eyes and left their physical bodies behind.

Grelnak went first, athletically wriggling his consciousness into the initiation portal of the chronal sluice. His personality matrix latched onto the organic receptacle that Threm had assured him, repeatedly, would be waiting there in the desired endspace. He seized full possession of his target, shunted the resident mind aside, and opened his eyes.

White. Everything was white.

"Damn it, Threm, I'm blind. You put me in a blind body."

Threm winced at the complaint as she exited the sluice and claimed her own terrestrial body. Adjusting to her new sensorium, she sighed. The mission had barely begun, and Grelnak had started in already. She liked the big lug, but sometimes found herself pondering possible explanations she might offer to the Director—explanations that justified repeatedly bludgeoning her partner with a handy temporal artifact. She'd never do it, of course, not least because Grelnak was the Director's favorite nephew.

Instead Threm said, "Stop whining. Why do you always make assumptions? Remember the last time you thought you were blind? It was

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just local night. And the time before that, we were in a cave. Trust me, you're not blind."

"I'm blind. There's nothing but blankness. Not darkness, blankness. Everything is white."

"Grel, you're in a snow bank."

"What? That's crazy. I'd notice if I were in a snow bank. For one thing, I'd be cold. And I'm not. In fact, other than this blindness, I'm quite comfortable."

"That's due to your double layer of fur."

"No way! This is late twenty-first century. Human genemods won't reach that level for eight decades. I can't possibly have fur."

"Again with the assumptions! I never said we'd be humans. Now dig yourself out. We've got work to do."

Grelnak stimulated analog pathways and felt a satisfying proprioception as four limbs responded with immediate strength and movement. After a brief flurry of white, he could suddenly see. There was a flawless sky of blue, smoothed mounds of snow all around, and a high, concrete wall that his snow bank had piled up against.

And a bear. A massive, ferocious, deadly, polar bear stood directly in front of him on all fours.

"Threm! Where are you? There's a bear here! Damn it, Threm, if I get mauled before I'm even settled into this body you'll have to finish our assignment entirely by yourself."

As a child, Grelnak had visited numerous zoological and historical simulations, and knew better than to shout at ferocious animals in proximity. His conversation with Threm occurred telepathically, courtesy of the chronal sluice that maintained a tenuous link through time and space to their physical bodies.

"It's February 27th," Threm replied. "In this era, that date signified International Polar Bear Day."

"Fine. Wonderful. Let's go to a restaurant that specializes in arctic monsters. We can order some polar bear steaks, and celebrate by gorging ourselves. Not by offering me up as a sacrifice to this one."

The bear reared up on its hind legs, two and a half meters of ursine carnivore. Grelnak tried to retreat, but with the snow bank and wall at his back he had nowhere to go. He fully expected to be killed, or rather his late twenty-first century host would be killed. Threm would probably be able to reopen the portal and spew him back uptime to Mars's latest ecological

disaster, with nothing to show for it except a vivid memory of being eaten by a polar bear.

But, the bear didn't touch him. Instead, it just stood there and lowered its forelimbs until it stood in an ursine akimbo pose that defied everything Grelnak had experienced in his simulations.

"You dummy, will you look at yourself?"

"Threm? Where are you? Did you get away? Or are you hiding so it gets me instead?"

"Look at yourself!"

Grelnak tore his eyes off the bear in front of him and directed his gaze downward, taking in his shaggy chest. He noticed that his field of vision included a view down his own white furred snout. He held up his right forelimb and examined the paw he found at the end of it. He repeated the action with the left one.

"I'm a polar bear?"

"You're a polar bear," said Threm. "And so am I. See?" The animal standing in front of Grelnak waved a paw.

"Why are we polar bears?"

"The environment isn't exactly hospitable, and the nearest human receptacles are even further away from our targets. Besides, can you think of a better way to celebrate International Polar Bear Day?"

"So where are we?"

"Nunavut. Specifically the Baffin Arctic Wildlife Refuge, established 2027. About sixteen square kilometers of protected land; most of it used to be Auyuittuq National Park. Now come on, we need to be on the other side of this wall. Toss me over."

Grelnak growled as he perambulated toward Threm, picking up speed and barely aware that he did so on all fours. He dipped his head and neck down and to the left, in a gesture that anyone who had ever seen him on the flipperball mound back in his college days would have recognized as his signature wind-up. Then he let fly, putting the full weight of his ursine form behind a massive head-and-shoulder lift. He caught Threm below the midriff and flung her, all two hundred fifty kilos of her. Her forelimbs scrambled for purchase as she crested the top of the four-meter wall, stabilized, and perched.

"Nicely done," said Threm. She repositioned herself with most of lower body hanging over the other side of the wall. "Now back way up, and give yourself a good running start. Polar bears aren't normally known for jumping. I'll help haul you over."

“That’s your escape plan? Run and jump? You’re supposed to be the smart one; that’s why Uncle Philo assigned me to you.”

Threm glared at her partner. “Escape plan? What are you—Did you even read the mission report, Grel? Or were you too busy flirting with our sluice tech?”

Grelnak dropped his snout and refused to meet Threm’s eyes. “Of course I read the briefing. I’m not a novice. I skimmed the introduction, table captions, and the summary too. You’re supposed to handle the details.”

Threm’s irritation dissolved in the face of Grelnak’s little boy routine. Despite herself, she couldn’t stay mad at him. With the patience of much practice she asked, “do you even know why we’re here?”

“Cod?” said Grelnak, his hesitant voice turning the statement into a question. “Something wrong with the cod in the Sirenum hatcheries.”

“The cod are fine,” said Threm. “They’re better than fine. They’re übercod. The current generation is bigger, faster, and thirteen times more prolific, than previous cod.”

“Then why are we here? That doesn’t sound like a problem? I like cod. Everyone likes cod. Why, before I came to the department I used to work in cod marketing.” Grelnak’s head bobbed up and down with enthusiasm. “Did you know that cod and cod byproducts account for 26% of all protein consumed on Mars? According to the Planetary Academy, they’re the most adapted fish from pre-war Earth. The bungalow Uncle Philo gave me last summer is constructed of reprocessed, post-cod fibers. It’s first rate, not like those imitation—”

Threm interrupted his ramblings. “That’s the problem,” she said. “They’ve outgrown the ecological niche the Academy set up for them. They’re endangering the eco-balance of everything else in Mare Sirenum.”

“If you say so,” said Grelnak, managing to look sullen despite being a bear. He raised his snout and sniffed the air. “Hey, all this talk about cod is making me hungry. What do polar bears eat, anyway?”

Threm smiled, showing bright teeth. “Ringed seals, mostly” she said. “I programmed our hosts with a temporary olfactory tropism to track them. Just follow your nose. That is, once you get over the wall. C’mon, we’ve got a mission to complete.”

Grelnak nodded, and ambled backwards. He stared at the wall, eyeing it like an opponent on an athletic field, and planned his assault. The polar bear body he wore had plenty of muscle, but also no small amount of mass. But he had the reflexes of a championship flipperballer. He hurtled forward,

leaped while still several meters from the wall, and somersaulted in a very unbearlike manner high into the air easily clearing Threm's position.

"Whuff!" he said as he sprawled in the snow on the other side. A moment later Threm shoved off and landed alongside him.

"Seeing that was worth the price of admission," said Threm. She thwacked him affectionately on the head and began moving, strolling easily across the ice and snow. Grelnak stared after her a moment, and then quickly caught up.

"So, can we catch us a couple of these seals before we get on with the mission?"

"We're going to need more than a couple of them, Grel."

"I don't think so. I'm not that hungry."

"Not for you, dummy. For the mission."

"I thought the mission was about cod," said Grelnak.

"It is," replied Threm. The ridge they were on descended and they climbed lower, following the faint scent of seal wafting in the arctic air. She scanned the snow plain below them, giving him time to work it through.

"Polar bears don't eat cod," said Grelnak.

"Not usually, no."

"Polar bears eat ringed seals. You said so."

"Right. And what do you suppose seals eat?"

The dawning of comprehension on a Martian Trans-human inhabiting a healthy *Ursus maritimus* specimen is the kind of image few sentient beings are fortunate enough to witness. Threm savored the experience, mourning only the unavailability of recording equipment.

"Cod!" exclaimed Grelnak, slapping himself in the head with a heavy paw. "They eat cod."

"They do," said Threm. "Which is what makes them perfect for keeping the Martian cod population under control."

"So, we're supposed to bring back seals? But they'll be too big. The sluice's mass limit is fifty kilos."

"True enough," said Threm, "and the average seal weighs in at over sixty."

Grelnak considered this and snorted, fully engaged with the plan at last. "We're here to get baby seals!"

After half an hour's walk their path curved and sloped down onto a broad ice field. Near the field's edge Threm spotted the colony of seals

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they'd been tracking. Dozens of them lounged and sprawled along the shoreline, including plenty of pups. Threm smiled as a brisk breeze caressed her muzzle. With the wind blowing in from the water, they'd be able to sneak up without alerting a single seal. As they crept closer, she spoke to Grelnak through the chroral sluice's telepathic channel.

"We don't need that many of them. Six would be fine, eight or ten even better."

Grelnak responded with a mental glyph of smacking lips. "They smell delicious," he added.

"Don't even think it," said Threm. "Our mission is to help ourselves to a few baby seals and try not to damage any adults. Both species are endangered, Grel. After we get the pups through the sluice, you and I have to hustle these bear bodies back over to their own section of the wildlife refuge. Only then do we get to go home."

"But I'm hungry, and this body *wants* me to eat seal."

"No snacking. Now pay attention. We're going to split up here. I'll sneak around to the far side of the colony. I want you to wait here a few minutes and then continue straight toward them. As soon as they see or hear you, the seals will panic and race for the water. The instant you see that happening, move to cut them off. You don't have catch them, just steer them back. Understand?"

Grelnak nodded. "Sure, it's a classic intercept play, just like in flipperball. But . . . what will you be doing?"

"I'll come from the other side, rounding up straggling pups as I go. Then I'll open the sluice and we'll start tossing them through."

Threm dropped back, taking advantage of a low berm of snow, and loped rapidly around the colony. She was comfortably in position and catching her breath before she caught a glimpse of Grelnak in the distance, and then only because she was looking for him. Credit where it was due, the big oaf crept with a stealth she hadn't believed him capable of. He managed to get closer than half the distance the seals had to the water before the unexpected happened.

A human being in a heavy parka crawled out of a mound of snow near the water's edge, dragging a pack behind him. The seals—who seemed to have known he'd built himself an impromptu snow cave in their midst—paid no mind as he stood up, took a video device from his pack, and began filming then. He panned from one end of the colony to the other, then stopped abruptly, probably because he caught Grelnak in frame.

“What the hell?”

Grelnak rose up on his hind legs, quite literally ready for bear. The chronal sluice’s telepathic channel translated his battle roar as “For Cod!” The seals heard only the roar. Panic ensued. An answering cry rose up from the colony as their lethargic sprawl transformed into a single-minded blur toward aquatic safety. The human dropped his camera, but otherwise seemed rooted to the spot.

“Move, you lummoX,” said Threm, not sure herself whether she meant Grelnak or the unanticipated human.

Grelnak bounded across the ice, his mighty polar bear muscles churning, propelling him far faster than the seals could move. He charged with the same intensity that had crippled more than a few collegiate flipperball players back in the day.

As Grelnak began herding the seals her way, Threm leapt forward, her attention on a collection of pups scampering in her direction. She estimated where their paths would intersect and, as she lumbered toward her targets, began the cognitive gymnastics to prime the sluice to reopen.

Back in his flipperball days, Grelnak had dominated the playing field. His performance on the ice field was no less impressive. His rapid charge had overshot a third of the colony, cutting off their escape to the sea and forcing them to flee toward Threm, with plenty of pups among them. He bounded after at full speed, feeling oddly nostalgic. He hadn’t seen the human since he’d roared, hadn’t thought about him either. The man had been lost in the tumult of frenzied seals.

Until now.

He’d huddled into a ball, arms wrapped protectively around his head, as seals passed left, right, and sometimes directly over him. Grelnak saw him too late to attempt any of those choices. He ploughed into him with the force of a ravaging former athlete, wistful for the glory days of yore, who just happens to be inhabiting a monstrous juggernaut-like animal body.

To say nothing of inertia.

Threm heard bones break. She winced at the sound, then winced again when telemetry from the chronal sluice alerted her to the opening crackle of a paradox wave. Freshly formed it was manageable, but risky.

“Did you have to cripple him, Grel? You’ve started a ripple.”

Grelnak didn’t answer. His collision with the man had entangled them. Together they tumbled over the ice and snow for several meters, striking a pair of tardy seals along the way and knocking them unconscious,

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before all four bodies finally came to rest less than fifty meters from Threm's position.

"Um, Threm? I think I've got a problem."

"You're darn right you do. We've got maybe ten minutes to get those baby seals through the sluice or we'll be caught up in whatever temporal change you just initiated."

Threm stood amidst a tide of seals. She bared her jaws, scaring off adults, while simultaneously bapping at passing pups. Light blows of her massive paws were sufficient to stun the pups as their kin fled around them.

"Yeah, about that, see. . ."

Most of the seals had passed her by, or had already found an alternate route to safety. No matter, she had a dozen baby seals lying dazed within a five meter radius of her, and that would serve. Telemetry buzzed in her cerebellum; the ripple was expanding faster than expected. Where was Grelnak?

"Get over here and help me with these guys. The sluice is about to open."

"That's the thing, Threm, I can't move."

She spun around to look back at him. He still lay in a heap on the man he'd injured profoundly enough to trigger a paradox wave.

"Grel? Get up!"

"I'm trying. Nothing's working. I think I blew out my spine. And I'm bleeding an awful lot."

"Oh crap. I told you, polar bears are an endangered species. Hang on; let me get the sluice open. You'll go through first, and I'll manage the seal pups on my own." Threm issued the mental sequence to reopen their gateway home.

"Everything's going kind of black," said Grelnak.

"Don't even think about being in that host when it dies," said Threm. She no longer needed the sluice's telemetry to describe the growth of the wave; she could see wisps of entropy forming in the air above Grelnak's body. "I refuse to have to explain this to your uncle."

"But what about the mission?"

"You moron, don't worry about the mission. I'll manage it. There's still adequate time before the wave picks up speed. But you need to let go and get out of here. Now!"

A small tear opened in the air next to her, tufts of unreality marking the edges. She heard the chime that signaled her partner's personality matrix

relinquishing its hold as it was sucked back through time and space. To her horror and surprise, a thread of the paradox wave's temporal entropy trailed after and followed him through. The portal shuddered slightly.

Threm glanced back at the body that had been Grelnak's host, and the still-breathing human in a broken heap beneath it, the source of the paradox wave. According to the sluice's telemetry, its leading edge still hadn't expanded, thread or no thread. So the timeline hadn't been changed yet. *Something* had happened, but there wasn't time to figure out what. In moments the paradox wave would begin expanding exponentially. If she hadn't made it home before that, Threm knew she'd be stuck in an alternate timeline and never get back.

She thought about bolting, just scrubbing the mission and trying again, maybe coming back after the wave had expanded and dissipated. But from this end there was no knowing how long that might take. Mars needed baby seals, and this could well be the only available window. She'd just have to hurry. Activating the sluice's matter stream, Threm began rounding up the stunned seal pups and shoving them through. They barked at the indignity, their tiny whiskered faces twitching as she shoved them into the tear, tagging each with a mental marker of the mission's ID code, just as the boys in accounting insisted. One by one they vanished, until the ice field fell silent, except for the labored breathing of the man and the two injured adult seals.

The front edge of the paradox wave had crept closer. It rippled seductively, a visible arc of entropy preparing to alter the world. Threm felt a surge of pride. She'd completed her mission, with a full minute to spare. Ideally, she'd have liked to return her host body back to the portion of the preserve where it belonged, but she didn't have that option now. About all she could do was turn to face away from the seals and human and hope that once she'd gone the bear would be disoriented enough to just lumber off in that direction, without pausing to attack or further injure any of them.

Before that though, something intangible came tumbling through the portal.

"Owwwww. Threm, why do I always get the injured bodies?"

"Grelnak?" His voice rang in her mind, strong and close. Threm spun her incredulous polar bear head toward the nearest living thing, the pair of seals. One of them stared right back at her.

"What are you doing here?"

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“I had to come back, to save you.”

“Save me? From what? I’ve still got time to get through before the wave front breaks.”

“Not that, something else. The return settings got munged when I went through. I landed fine, right in our underground office, but the time and space for all the seal pups coming after me went flooey.”

“Define ‘flooey,’” said Threm.

“Straight up a couple hundred meters and sixteen and a half years earlier.”

“What happened to the baby seals?”

Grelnak’s seal face grinned. “They landed in the sea, and started doing what seals do. They ate cod, grew up, and started making more baby seals. You set off a miniature paradox wave and solved the übercod problem before it even started. They’re calling you the Cod Queen.”

“What? Why not the Seal Queen?”

His long neck shrugged. “No idea. Alliteration, maybe?”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here?”

“Coming back through was the only way to recalibrate the settings. Otherwise you’d have come back years early and burnt out the brain of the younger you.”

Despite her double layer of fur, Threm shuddered. “Oh. Thanks, Grelnak.”

“Hey, no problem. I’m just glad I got here in time.”

Timing is everything, especially for operatives of the Department of Temporal Solutions. As if out of spite for being ignored, the front edge of the paradox wave broke over Threm and Grelnak. It rippled outward, traveling ever faster, expanding across both space and time, shoving everything it crossed into a new timeline.

“Double crap,” said Threm.

“Um, now what do we do?” said Grelnak.

Before she could answer, something intangible came tumbling through the portal.

“Owwwww. Threm, why do I always get the injured bodies?” The second of the bruised seals raised its head.

“Grelnak?” said Threm.

“I had to come back, to save you,” said the second Grelnak.

“No way,” said the first Grelnak. “I already did that.”

The second Grelnak ignored the seal to his left. “The return settings got munged when I went through,” he explained.

“Right, right, but the baby seals got through safely, didn’t they? Early, but safe.”

“Heck yeah. They’re calling you—”

“The Queen of Cod,” finished the first Grelnak.

“Who are you?” said the second Grelnak, pulling back to get a look at the other seal.

“He’s you,” said Threm. “He came through just before you. Which doesn’t make sense. What delayed you?”

“I was signing autographs,” said the second Grelnak.

“Autographs?”

“For eager fans. They show up at the department almost every day.” The seal waved a flipper in the direction of the human an earlier Grelnak had smashed into, the source of the original ripple. “Turns out that guy is the several-times-great grandfather of a major supporter of flipperball. He grew up on stories of his grandfather’s near death encounter with a polar bear while trespassing in a nature preserve. Those stories inspired him to become a huge success. Flipperball is a much more popular sport back home now, and I’m one of the most famous Martians to ever play the game. I’m in the hall of fame.”

Threm grimaced. “Any other changes?”

“We both get paid a heck of a lot more,” said the second Grelnak. “And the Department has much better funding. Bigger offices too. I have a Jacuzzi in mine.”

“A Jacuzzi? Oh man, I am gonna love that,” said the first Grelnak.

“Yeah, about that,” said Threm. “Going back through the portal and having the sluice fold ourselves into a new timeline is an occupational hazard. But I’ve never heard of a case where two versions of the same personality matrix went back together.”

The two seals stared at one another and then, as if reaching the same conclusion at the same time, lunged forward and began biting and slapping at each other.

Threm tapped one polar bear foot, waiting. Both seals were already battered and the fight didn’t last long. In the end, one Grelnak swayed unsteadily upon the chest of the other, both breathing heavily. “I win,” he said. “I get to go back.”

“You both have to go back,” said Threm. “Or at least try.”

“What will happen,” panted the other Grelnak, “when we both go back through the sluice?”

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Threm shrugged. “Maybe nothing. Maybe you’ll both blend together, with slightly divergent memories, just like I’ll have memories of both the old timeline and the new one. Either that, or you’ll maintain two nearly identical minds in the same body.”

“That would be codderfic!” said both seals at once.

“Stop! No simultaneous cod talk,” said Threm.

“Yes, oh queen,” said both Grelnaks together, and then burst out barking.

“Fine, let’s get this over with,” said Threm. It wouldn’t be too bad, she told herself. Sure, Grel had been elevated to the status of an insufferable sports icon, and yeah, there might be twice the exasperation to deal with now. But the important thing was they’d completed the mission. Once again operatives of the Department of Temporal Solutions had saved Mars. Maybe it would justify the request she intended to file for ongoing hazard pay. The department would surely owe her that with two Grelnaks under her. And if it didn’t work out, well, she could always fall back on being the Cod Queen.