

The Cage

Leo crawled to the lip of the ravine and peered over its edge through the spiderweb of cracks in his glasses. His spirits soared. Bingo! The blow-cage was there, precisely where it was supposed to be, at the confluence of two barren riverbeds. It was one of the old-fashioned cages, a squat cube of steel bars welded to a steel frame, much like a primitive jail cell, but Leo wasn't about to complain. His odds of living through the night had just spiked dramatically. Thank you, Richard Branson, and your humanitarian cohort Elon Musk! Without strategically placed blow-cages...well, Leo didn't care to speculate. He certainly didn't want to dwell on how lucky he'd been to survive last night's relatively puny blow without one. A quick glance at the eastern horizon showed a swirling cloud of debris slowly rising from the desert floor and staining the sky. A beast, that one, he thought. He ran his hand over his scabbed knees and winced. He moistened his gums with a mouthful of stale canteen water and slid down the scree slope on his backside, chased by a plume of dust.

The cage was anchored to a granite boulder that loomed over an expanse of bleached sand and gravel. It was bolted to the boulder's leeward side, which Leo found comforting. The boulder itself was massive; it wasn't going anywhere, no matter how savage the wind. He examined the cage with a critical eye. It had obviously been left to the elements when the Others, Richard and Elon no doubt among them, abandoned the planet and split for the stars, the lucky fucks. The interior padding and restraint webbing were in tattered shreds. The trapdoor on top, the sole entrance to the cage, was warped and pockmarked. The access ladder had long since

been torn from its moorings. Leo managed to shinny up the pitted steel frame itself without scraping the scabs off his knees. The sky was darkening and he hurried. A pair of unwilling hinges squealed in protest as he wrenched the hatch open. He dropped inside with a grunt, lowered the lid and forced the rusted bolts home. A dust-devil spun past and danced around the cage before racing westward and disappearing. Seconds later it was followed by another, and then another, each one larger and more turbulent than the one before. It was hard not to admire their spunk.

The blow-cage was five feet tall by six feet square and Leo was forced to crouch in order to limp about in it. You know, Elon, Richard, you could have designed these things a skosh taller, he thought. I mean, really. The first gust roared around the boulder and bit at him as he settled into position with his rucksack in his lap, his back to the storm's leading edge. The sky turned from beige to a tumultuous mix of brown and ochre to pitch black. Pebbles the size of a monkey's fist skittered across the desert floor and pinged against the bars as the wind screamed its fury. Larger stones began to shift uneasily in their resting places as gale after ferocious gale scoured the ground and loosened them. He mourned the lack of padding, and the nonexistent restraint harness. The afternoon sky grew even uglier and the howl of the wind drowned out all other sound. Sand accumulated in his ears. He pulled out his jacket and wrapped it around his head. Gravel whipped up by the wind peppered his back like buckshot. He settled in for another long night, thinking about Richard, and Elon, and the Others. Those lucky fucks.