

# Project Apollo: Full Circle

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The prisoner stood there, hands cuffed behind his back and a metallic electro-collar around his neck, on stage for the whole community to see. Dark hair and dark skin, it was the same features as almost all of the Apollans. Dravin could see the fear in the man's eyes, as his execution was about to begin. The guard motioned for the convict to step forward and give his last words.

His steps were small and cautious as if stalling would bring him a reprieve. "I know I did something wrong," the man said through the trembling in his voice. A deep breath attempted to sooth his fears as he looked out over the community that had gathered to see his "terror" come to an end. "I deserve to be punished, but what about rehab? What about fixing the problems in my head rather than just eradication? Do I not have a right to life?" He stopped. He saw no compassion among his peers; the only response he got were a few shouts of Earth lover.

The man nodded his head and stepped back as he realized his words did nothing, but allow him to come to terms with his own death. As soon as he returned to his original spot, the metal collar secured around his throat began to glow. A low buzz reverberated in the audiences ears as a fatal charge built within the device. Within seconds the collar shot its electrical charge directly into the man's cardiovascular system. It was almost too quick for the crowd to see, but there was a brief moment of pure torture as the man's muscles tightened beyond their limits. His muscles tore themselves in half while his skin quickly melted into a pile of goo. His bones burned and broke under the heat and pressure. Before anyone could tell what was happening the man was a bloody lump of broken bones and dissolved flesh.

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

Dravin closed his eyes trying to take it all in, his long black hair dangled in front of his sunken eyes while they created new creases from their tightened state. His strong jaw clenched with the burden of witnessing the execution. As a journalist he had to capture the essence of an event regardless of how he personally felt about it. He knew he had enough information to write his article, but his body would not allow him to return home. He was stuck in disgusted awe of the scene he just voluntarily witnessed. In his frozen state a child had caught Dravin's attention out of the corner of his eye.

A little girl, no older than five, was holding onto her mother's hand staring at the death on the stage. She had no tears and showed no fear. She just stood there in childhood innocence staring off at the remains of the prisoner. Dravin wanted to scream at the mother for bringing her there, at the government for allowing society to kill the emotions of a child, and at the bloody mound for deserving his execution. The real frustration with the situation was that the community felt these displays were good for everybody, there was punishment, deterrent, and proof that they meant business, but they seemed to ignore the psychological injuries it could cause. Of course nobody cared about psychological effects, that was an Earth theory and no Apollan would freely agree with Earth rituals. Even Dravin had jeopardized his career by siding against Earthlings, framing people as Earth sympathizers...

His focus on the desensitized child was broken as the foul smell of death lingered into his vicinity. He began to walk home, not because he wanted to, but as an instinctive reaction to the horrid aroma of rust and feces.

The entire crowd quickly began to disperse as the stench wafted out across the town square.

Dravin attempted to force his mind to leave the execution behind. As he walked he tried to appreciate the beautiful scenery around him the purple glow of the Apollon sky, the bright green grass in its oxygenated dome, the perfect placement of each pewter block on the sidewalk, but nothing could hold his attention. His mind kept crawling back to the vision of the little girl just accepting the death of a person in her own town a crime the society committed on her psyche.

Why did the man have to speak? His words about his right to life may have done just as much damage as the ritual itself. He was disgusted to know that society had become less and less compassionate for life. Maybe it was not the girls cross to bear, but his own. To know that he was influential enough to get a man kicked out of his career, but he had not spent a solitary second on removing these terrible acts of public violence. He felt sick to his stomach thinking how it was his own fault.

His worry for this child bore so heavily on his conscience that he could envision her standing across the street from his house asking him why. "Why would you let this happen to me? Why must I live with this on my conscience?" The phantom vision said to him.

His horrific vision continued. He saw himself covered in blood. Not the blood of a man, but of the dying compassion in his society. The image was so strong, for a moment it became all he saw, yet his body still walked home without thinking, just his subconscious programming following its daily routine. The image became more haunting as all emotion flushed from the

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

girl's face and all that was left was a body with no soul asking him why. Suddenly a warm tingle bubbled in Dravin's stomach. His neck began to strain preparing to push the bile of his abdomen up and out of his mouth.

He found himself on all fours, vomiting on the sidewalk. A sharp burning pain rang through Dravin's hands followed by a dull vibrating ache that resonated through his kneecaps and into his shins. The unrelenting vision of the girl had become too much. Thankful that he only heaved on the sidewalk and not himself, he returned to his feet to finish his journey. He took a deep breath as he removed the oxygen generator from his mouth and shook the bile from the retainer like mechanism.

Still trudging home, the torture from his mind would not stop. Each step he took he heard another step right behind him. Although the sensations of vomiting still lingered in his stomach, a new falling sensation began to flutter. Step after step the echoing continued. Dravin stared directly ahead as he walked. He knew he had nothing to fear, but he still would not look behind him; his mind kept telling him there may be a soulless child following him, wanting to know why.

His respiratory rate increased as his pulse soared. Dravin was walking at a very quick pace, each step slamming down on the metallic sidewalk trying to escape a possible incarnation of his imagination. He saw his house which brought some immediate relaxation. He quickly walked through the domed garden and came to his door.

He stared into his steel, lithium lined door and forcefully slowed his breathing. Reaching his hand up, he placed it on the security panel. The panel glowed various colors as it scanned Dravin's handprint and bone structure.



The glowing drifted away while the door and airlock slid open with a whooshing sound as if the door was a wave at the instant of its break.

Dravin took a couple of steps into the house and fell to his knees, the immediate throbbing pulsed in his kneecaps as the steel floor left no give for his bones. A breeze came in through the door, reminding him of the soulless child as if she had just run by him. He moaned in anguish not just for the physical discomfort, but the incessant haunting from the phantom girl. The terror in his mind meant there would be no sleep tonight. He had no choice but to write his article on the execution; hopefully, he would be able to omit his fears of the child from his story. The last thing he needed was to report on such an earthbound philosophy such as lasting psychological effects.

Dravin returned to his feet and walked over to the oxygen generator that was installed in the room. He took a deep breath and placed his hand on the security panel of the generator while removing the portable generator from his mouth. The panel glowed its rainbow of colors and Dravin tossed his portable generator onto his bed.

All the electricity in the house went off. Staring into the blackness of his room distress consumed his body. The fact that there was no breathable air in the room was his main concern, but the thought that the little girl could be in the room with him invisible in the darkness of the power outage shook his core. Panic stricken, Dravin jumped towards his bed fumbling for his portable oxygen generator in the dark. His hands swept across the bedcovers in search of the device, feeling the need to get more air in his panic, he feared that he might run out of breath before he found the machine.

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

An electronic voice screamed over Dravin's security speaker, "Intruder! The premises have been sealed. The police will arrive in two minutes. Do not try to escape. We have stored your identity from the hand scan." The speaker sang out an endless array of instructions.

Dravin found his generator and popped the device back in his mouth. Relief tingled up and down his body as he was able to breathe again. He knew he was in the right house yet he was being considered an intruder. He tried to relax hoping the police would listen to him, but the only thing in his mind was still the child. "Why?"

Sam Kenguard walked out of the office, satisfied with his work for the day. He had accomplished amazing advances in cleaning up the atmosphere of his planet, Project Apollo. Only a few hours remained; his resignation would take effect in two days then he would no longer be environmental commissioner.

It still baffled him. It only took a couple of lies to destroy a political career.

Sam walked down the sidewalk thinking about the same thing he had been for the last six months. Regardless of how dedicated he was to a cause, it only took one reporter to convince the public that he deserved to be removed from office. He wouldn't be removed. His resignation insured his leaving "on his own terms".

As Sam treaded the usual path to his abode, he understood his existence as he knew it was over. He stopped walking. It was a revelation that he should have grasped before that moment, but the enormity of the scandal had not sunk in. An amazing calm came over him as he questioned

why his entire life had been modeled after politics and the environment. Ever since he was a child, all he wanted was to protect Project Apollo. He was not an Earth sympathizer, but it only mattered what public opinion thought. Thankfully there was enough damage control that he did not fear a mob coming for him in the night. But his life, career, and respected existence were gone.

No one would hire Sam after the papers claimed he was wasting government money, endangering the lives of Apollans, and ignoring his duty to help return the environment to what it once was. The story headlined the papers, Another Earth Spy in Project Apollo Government. It was all lies, but libel was not a crime, the people of his planet were determined to ensure free speech.

His wife was sure to leave him by the week's end; she only married him to be a politician's wife; they had no personal connection. He felt nothing towards her, but that wasn't the point. He was comfortable in his life, he had control. Then Dravin Stair created a scandal to protect his own political hide.

The raucous ride of emotions that Sam had endured over the past half year was slowing down and leaving him in a strange funk. He was thankful for the activist groups, after a couple of months of hiding from the protestors and possible assassins, they took Sam under their wing to protect him from the agenda driven media. By that time the cries for his head had dulled to a dismal howl of "traitor". The groups who were protecting him, the PAVS and PAWAA, had suggested he not speak to the media. It was fine advice since it kept him from saying things that could provoke retaliation, but it was hard for him. He was proud of his work and knew that he had not

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

broken any laws or decrees, however just knowing the truth would not save his career.

Since Sam was safe from the threat of death and legal persecution, his mind could do nothing but focus on revenge. He would have thought this normal if it were not for the fact that he was not plotting vengeance in anger, but in joy. He thought he might be going mad; his mind picturing Dravin Stair's body being forced to breath the toxic Project Apollan atmosphere causing Sam's physical body a breath of needed repose.

Sam watched his feet step along the perfectly aligned Pewter sidewalk. He remembered his family had gone to the execution. In the past he worried about not making an appearance to the executions, but now knowing that he would never be elected to another public office, he did not worry about his PR. Instead he wondered if he would get home to a nice quiet house before his soon to be ex-wife came in to scream at him with their crying children. At least it would not be long until she left him, then he could have his peace and quiet all the time.

Each step that Sam took clicked on the alloy sidewalk. He imagined Dravin's body being pelted with rocks to the rhythm of his steps. His muscles relaxed. In his daydream he asked how Dravin could question his allegiance to their planet. He softly asked how any man could live on this destroyed and forgotten rock and even consider that another could possibly feel for the Earthlings who abandoned them there and left them to rot. He was lost in a dream state, recalling all of his school lessons about the Earthlings leaving them there to wither and die as an experiment. If anyone was an Earth spy it was Dravin, bringing an honest man down in the name of Project Apollan

Loyalty. He would probably use his influence to replace Sam with a true Earth sympathizer.

Sam stopped as he noticed he had passed his house. Unsure of where he was heading, he looked up at the stars and wondered which were actual balls of fire and which were the Earth ships orbiting the planet to watch for escaped prisoners. They were captives left to die for the sake of science. He wondered if he should end his own life in the name of science, remove his oxygen generator from his mouth and let their observers see how the atmosphere treats their human biology. Everything he had prepared to do for the rest of his existence was now impossible. Suicide began to make sense.

‘Let everyone see how Dravin Stair is a murderer.’ Sam thought as his muscles began to tense. ‘He murdered my career. Maybe if I was found dead, draped over a garden’s dome they would see what I see.’ But just as quickly as these thoughts flowed through his mind, they left.

A gut wrenching sound came from in front of Sam. Looking over he stood frozen as he saw Dravin Stair getting to his feet, standing straddled over his lunch. Dravin began to walk blindly with no notice of Sam behind him.

Sam’s vision focused in on Dravin. All other objects became as black as the shadows from the street lamps. He instinctively began walking after Dravin seeing nothing but his enemy. His tunnel vision seemed to affect his thought process as well, he could think of nothing but revenge.

As he fell in line behind Dravin his feet began trotting in step with the reporter’s. He stared into the back of his nemesis’s head wishing that his

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

hatred would manifest into fire, scalding the man's hair and face to melt his skin from his skull.

At some point during the walk Sam had a realization that Dravin was returning home. Reporting on the execution? Sam was surprised that a reporter with such a groundbreaking story such as the treason of Sam Kenguard would be forced to do such typical stories like executions. It was not even an important crime, just a random act of violence being made an example of. He figured Dravin would be out picking a new environmental commissioner.

Knowing that the execution was over and returning home would definitely pit him in a confrontation with his wife, he decided that was the last place he wanted to go, anywhere but there.

Dravin's pace began to quicken slightly, but Sam continued in perfect step, echoing each of Dravin's clicks of the sidewalk with one of his own. Sam wanted to attack Dravin, break his neck before he was safe in his home, but he knew that would be the last free act he would ever make. He could not jump Dravin outright, but he also knew that this was his chance to hurt his accuser.

Without losing a step Sam pulled his pocket PC from his slacks and began searching through Dravin's personal information, his license, his contracts, his medical records... The fact that Sam was still technically working for the government gave him access to everything he could possibly imagine. While he was frantically scouring the government web for anything he could use against his prey, Dravin's tempo picked up again. He was nearing

a jog. Sam still right on his heels, he grasped the pocket PC with both hands trying to read and run at the same time.

Sam looked up and saw that Dravin was nearing his house. Suddenly it became clear. Sam pulled up Dravin's property title on his PC and quickly transferred his own information into the document. His hands were grabbing information as possible on the touch screen.

Dravin reached up and unlocked the door with the security panel. Sam's talented hands were nearly finished changing the information on the title. When the door slid open Dravin collapsed onto his knees and Sam swiftly sprinted past him to hide in a dark corner of the room. As he crouched down he pressed the corner of the screen of his PC to upload the revised property title into his own name.

The pocket PC flashed as the door slammed shut. The PC displayed an approval message leaving everything in the home belonging to Sam. All of the sensors immediately reconfigured for Sam's body scans, not Dravin's.

Sam cowered in the corner with his head buried in his arms praying that he would not be found before the calamity ensued.

Sam pressed his face into his knees, curled into a ball on the floor when, a loud voice thundered from the security speaker, "Intruder! The premises have been sealed. The police will arrive in two minutes."

Sam quickly came to the realization of what he had done. A small amount of redemption slid across his face, as he scrambled in his mind on what to tell the police when they arrived.

Dravin stood on the stage looking out into the crowd of people. He grasped the idea that none of them cared about his side of the story. He felt

## Project Apollo: Full Circle

the electro-collar bearing down on his shoulders. He had prepared a speech to explain himself, that he had lost his mind, that his house was stolen from him, that the man he killed was a traitor to their planet. He waited for his chance to plead his case when he saw the girl from the last execution staring at him and holding her mother's hand.

He looked at her matted brown hair and noticed that she still looked desensitized. He glanced up at her mother and noticed that she was wearing all black and was attempting to cry. He turned his focus back to the child and noticed that her sundress was also black, the color of mourning.

As the guard motioned for Dravin to make his last words, Dravin realized that the girl was Sam's daughter. She was accompanied by her mother, soon to be inaugurated into her dead husband's governmental position. His lies had truly come back to haunt him. The man Dravin led to the wolves as a the traitor he was not, the man Dravin killed in cold blood on the front lawn while the police attempted to arrest Dravin, the man whose job was given to the widow who was a scumbag, was also the father of the child who Dravin so desperately wanted to save. It was a sordid moment for Dravin. Maybe he deserved it. Maybe he was the traitor and needed to be killed.

He was too lost in his own thoughts to step forward and speak. He could not take his eyes off of the girl. He began to wonder if she did follow him home that night. He had understood that Sam trailed behind him in an attempt to exact revenge, but he had not considered the idea that the girl may have also been following her father. He began to wish for his death to come more quickly.



The guard decided that Dravin was waving his right to his final words and approached the convicted. Dravin just stared straight into the eyes of the girl. He imagined what she saw if she was in fact there that night. He remembered stomping on Sam's throat, watching the dark purplish blood flow from his mouth and eyes. He relived ripping the oxygen generator out of Sam's mouth and watching him struggle for breath just as the plants did as he fell on the domed gardens shattering their protection from the atmosphere. Still staring into the soulless face of the girl, she spoke to him at an inaudible level, "I saw everything."

He looked at the girl as his collar began to glow. The last thing Dravin saw as his body began to pulsate from the nearing electricity about to enter his body was the five year old child with eyes as dead as her father, mouth the word, "Why?"