

April 27th, 2024

Issue 9 | Encounter

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!



Featuring

Nora Weston	An Encounter of the Closest Kind (Poetry)
Morgan RR Haze	Off Course (Micro)
That Burnt Writer	The Stranger in the Bar (Flash)
Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil	We Are Stardust (Short Story)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press

Copyright

Contributing authors to SciFanSat
retain and reserve all rights to their work.

No part of this magazine may be
reproduced or used in any manner
without written permission
of the copyright owner

Copyright (c) April 27th, 2024

Cover Illustration "Encounter Outside the Ruins of Hartford" by
Jason H. Abbott

Layout & Typesetting
Kimberly Abbott

For more information, address:
Blue Boar Press
PO Box 264
Boothbay Harbor ME, 04538

SKU: SFS-417DI-S



BlueBoarPress.com

Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Copyright](#)
3. [Editorial](#)
4. [Poetry](#)
5. [Micro Fiction](#)
6. [Flash Fiction](#)
7. [Short Fiction](#)
8. [Serial](#)
9. [News](#)

Editorial

Welcome to the April 2024 issue of SciFanSat! Contributors went all-out with submissions for our “Encounter” theme this month, making this our largest issue to date in terms of word count. Such community involvement is fantastic, and healthy momentum for the magazine!

Out of a spate of great speculative fiction in our ninth issue, some among the many include “The Starship Exorcist” and “What Child Is This?": a pair of science fiction stories by Alan Vincent Michaels focused on artificial intelligence. Sam O’Neil bridges interstellar distances to bring us to a world where human explorers encounter problems timeless at their core, in his layered and thought provoking “We Are Stardust”. For those looking for futuristic military techno-action, Peter Gilbertson graces us with a third installment of “Derelict Skyrings”, wherein space marine Mohamed Blackbear is doing the best he can, in a dangerous situation that keeps getting worse. And where others guide us into encounters with aliens or artificial beings, Daniel Groves dials it back to an insidious, speculative disquiet concealed in the banal with his short story, “The Age of Death”.

In the realms of poetry, Nora Weston’s “An Encounter of the Closet Kind” bends time and space to ask its questions. Meanwhile, in “The Unicorn, or How Not To Tame A Horse”, That Burnt Writer’s protagonist gets bent out of shape over an encounter they should have questioned before trying it. Taking us back to worlds orbiting other stars, John (jd) gives us “~what chance encounter~” and reveals a forlorn place in verse.

With science fiction represented in force this issue, I’m happy to bolster the ranks of our few stories on the fantasy side of the speculative spectrum with the next instalment of my “Shadow of the Black Tower” serial. If a gothic love story of horror, swords, and sorcery sounds like your jam, check it out. You can read the entire run of the serial so far in the pages of our SciFanSat back issues, which are available for download on the website, along with all the other marvelous stories contained within each issue.

Now on to announcements.

As mentioned last month, this issue marks the launch of our formal [submission guidelines](#). These are now available on the SciFanSat website and alongside the submission form. We ask all authors to review this document, and it’s only six pages of light reading. The most pertinent to writers making submissions are pages two and three, where we outline how we desire manuscripts given to the magazine to be formatted. These are elementary requirements ubiquitous to literary publications for over a century that many of you are doing, anyway. These simple additions and changes (like including your name and the title of your piece on the top page of the manuscript) assist and speed-up all aspects of assembling the magazine on our end. It’s a waste and not fun spending half the day matching untitled and unclaimed manuscripts to their owners, for example.

The rest of the guidelines consolidate existing information about SciFanSat for the benefit of newcomers looking to submit to the magazine, such as our awards and the right to publish agreement.

And that’s a wrap! Please enjoy this king-sized issue! Many thanks to all who spread the word and contributed. Every author taking part enriches the magazine with their voice, and every reader enriches the writing community with their support. This magazine wouldn’t exist if not for you.

Take care and join us again in May for our theme of... STARS!

~Jason H. Abbott

Poetry

An Encounter of the Closest Kind

by Nora Weston

Five years old. All things beyond exosphere
taunt, like you are destined to ignore gravity.
Why does the Sun hide at night?
What holds the Moon in sky?

Need for speed matches inquisitive stride.
Pilot to astronaut, seeker of things galactic,
you rocket to space pleased with
that frigid locale never minding

moments missed here, mundane. Interstellar
progress is notable. Test guidance systems,
fly in capsules, slumber in cryogenic.
It's in your blood, believe me,

as is the ache to accumulate data, explore.
Mars. No longer a dream, instead a reality
in shades of red, summoning.
Questions abound, especially...

are we alone in the Universe? It gnaws, cuts
deep, a pondering that incites profound torment.
Grasp the fact your next launch occurs
on my one hundred sixth anniversary

of crash landing. Let's return to your most
frequent question, does life exist out there?
Your mother speaks from experience
when she says, "It's already here."

Shocked. You wonder, am I human? Mostly.
A smidge of genetics foreign to this third sphere.
From a future past your heliosphere,
accessible only when time bends.

Author Bio

Nora Weston is a Michigan based artist/writer. Her work has appeared in Bête Noire and James Gunn's Ad Astra. Work has been published by Green Ink Poetry, Crow Toes Quarterly, and Strange Horizons. Recently, Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine, Utopia Science Fiction Magazine, and Timber Ghost Press have published her work. NonBinary Review has accepted a piece for #36 Heredity.

 [X|_@almostsanelady](https://twitter.com/X|_@almostsanelady)



What Chance Encounter

by John (jd)

*night descends upon the desert planet of Sortandlie
on the downwind side of a rock escarpment ___ a shift
undulations in the sands revealed the scorpion
it's chitin exoskeleton reflecting the blue light cast
by the twin moons of New and Bitter*

*Here and Yawn the pre-dawn calls of the nocturnals
hitch a ride on the last tendrils of the passing sandstorm
before burrowing down into the cool depths
to escape the burning of the noon day sun
and the life sapping dehydration*

*some grains came to a stop against the yurt canvases
of the Youngyouth scouting party encampment
the hang tones cast a shield against trespassers
of the day and conserving hydration against the
onslaught of the burning rays*

*their mission to find a new home world had
stumbled upon this forlorn place but deep
beneath the spice the silence of the caverns
that held the real treasure of Sortandlie
the waters of life*

*sand grains scuttle ___ last
residue of desert wind
what chance encounter*

~written in the journey log of the one called . . .

John (jd)

Find the Author

 [BlueSky | @jdexpressions.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/jdexpressions.bsky.social)



The Unicorn, or How Not To Tame A Horse: A somewhat rude poem that is most definitely not suitable for reading to small children.

by **That Burnt Writer**

Last week I had a strange encounter,
with a wild horse when trying to mount 'er.
She turned to me, and said with scorn,
"Excuse me! I'm a unicorn,
and if you try to do that again,
I'm going to cause significant pain.
I just want to eat this 'ere grass,
but I'll shove my horn right up your..."

I coughed loudly, so did not hear
the end of the threat, but it was clear,
that far from being mild and meek,
I might not be able to sit for a week!
"Apologies," said I, backing away,
"I'll let you enjoy the rest of your day."
and with that, I then turned and fled,
to hide away under my bed.

So, if you try to tame a horse,
the thing to do, as a matter of course,
is first check your species is right,
or you might get a hearty fright!
The final thing I have to say,
then I'll let you go on your way,
is watch out, for if they poop glitter,
you might get a horn right up the... *ahem*.

Find the Author

 [X | @ThatBurntWriter](https://twitter.com/ThatBurntWriter)



Micro Fiction

Off Course

by Morgan RR Haze

The gravity wave we encountered was beyond our instruments capabilities to accurately record. The only thing we knew for sure was that we were hurdling off course.

Find the Author

 MorganRRHaze.com

 X|@Morgan_R_R_Haze



Flash Fiction

From There

by Scott Leminski

Byron stood at his fenceline, surveying the Carter's Range wildfire glowing red, yellow, and orange, billowing smoke high in the sky.

"Wind's changed." He watched a sheet of smoke fold back on itself.

His land was safe, as was the town of Chapman three kilometres down the road.

Byron stomped his foot, raising a cloud of fine grey ash from the grass, and turned toward the house. He waved at a convoy of pickups returning to Chapman. They honked back and disappeared into a pink-sky horizon.

"What?" Byron turned his head one way then the other, searching for the sound.

He heard it again, this time, coming from someplace low.

His yard, kept free of easily ignitable materials, had few places to hide. There was the kids' old playset, the gazebo, and aluminum picnic table. Some of the lattice work was loose on the bottom of the gazebo.

'Some animals seeking refuge,' Byron thought.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to bother you," he said, sure they'd move on in a day or two. "I'll lay out some water for you."

He had just passed the picnic table when another sound startled him. Or a series of sounds. The first was like a squeal of fright or alarm. The second, like a hush a parent would give to a child. The final, like a collective of gasps.

"What th—" Byron backtracked and shone his phone's light under the table.

Cries of pain, high-pitched and wailing, shot back at Byron. His hand and phone felt as if they were being pelted with pebbles. When he withdrew his phone, it and his hand were covered with splotches of dirt. Byron hoped it was dirt.

"Okay. My bad."

He knelt to peer under the table; and was greeted by a cloudlike apparition, and the distinct impression that many eyes were watching him from the far side of the table.

Byron backpedalled and fell on his rear, dropping his phone. A line of movement drew nearer, stopping at the edge of the table's shadow.

"Hey!" Byron pointed. "You don't like light," he said half elated, half fearful.

Up on one knee – ready to flee – he retrieved his phone, thumb ready to start the camera. "What are you?"

A curious string of voices spoke all at once. Then there was one voice, louder than the others, quieting all but its own. Byron presumed it commanded something.

Whatever was under his table hadn't attacked, and Byron believed he hadn't caused them any real harm with the light. He rose and brushed his pants.

"No harm. I take it you're just seeking shelter from the fires. Well I'll leave you alone; mind you there could be other animals roaming by like coyotes and cats and such looking for a meal."

At his last words, meek cries rose from near the centre of the table and were quickly hushed.

Byron thought for a time, then pointed at the gazebo, his arm laying a shadow on the ground. "You may find better shelter over there."

A flurry of activity followed, and Byron saw something amass by the gap between the shadows of the table and his arm.

"Here I'll show you." Byron stepped back to the table, then started slowly toward the gazebo, intending to leave a path for whatever was under the table to follow later if they understood him.

A shush-shushing in the grass, extending from his left side, caused Byron to look over his shoulder. Puffs of ash were trailing his shadow, making Byron imagine he had a cultivator attached to his body. Daring to peek down, he saw what appeared to be tightly packed column of mutely coloured creatures hurrying along in his shadow. He slowed and, with quick glances, made out three rows of heads. Maybe thirty in all.

"Always rumoured that you existed. Won't tell. Don't want the attention," Byron spoke in a soft voice, fixing his face forward.

Byron held the gazebo's door as many feet scurried up the steps and in, hugging the shaded sides.

Not all, apparently. When Byron started toward his house, a clattering noise rose from the end of his shadow, and was answered by calls from the picnic table.

"What? There are more?"

"Okay." Byron opened an umbrella and returned to the table to ferry more creatures to the gazebo; however, when he returned to the gazebo, a flow of sounds moved from the gazebo to the umbrella's shade.

"Okay. You can camp out in the garage. But no farther." He shook the umbrella on the last part for emphasis.

Byron entered a code to open a garage door. "In you go."

And waited a minute before following. Shadow edges flickered beneath his vehicles and behind items stacked on the shelves.

"Okay. Do you need anything?"

Byron returned ten minutes later with two pie plates of water, a basin loaded with facecloths and hand towels, and a pocketful of shot glasses. "I figured you might find these useful. I'll leave the door open some in case you decide to go. Good night."

A trill of voices replied.

The wailing began a short time later nearly throwing Byron from a chair where he kept vigil.

Byron cracked open the door leading to the garage. "What?"

The wailing subsided. One voice rose up.

"What?" Byron flipped on a light and the wailing ceased.

"Let me guess. You can't abide the dark either."

Throughout the night, Byron heard items being rearranged in the garage, pushed on shelves and dragged along the floor. Boxes of nails clattered to the floor.

Cautiously, Byron approached the garage, assessing escape routes on the way. He stopped on the gravel driveway. The gap below the door was barricaded with boxes, cans, and tools; and, before it, a menacing-looking palisade of nails and wire was set in the gravel.

A figure in a reddish, hooded cloak detached itself from a clump of irises and stood in Byron's shadow, facing Carter's Range.

"Something out there?"

Find the Author

 [X | @ScottLeminski](https://twitter.com/XI_ScottLeminski)



Gone Fishing

by Voima Oy

The fish were biting good that day when something fell out of the sky. It fell like a melon into the reservoir by the power plant. The only witnesses were two fishermen, the Mayor and the Sheriff of the little town, out early to watch the sun rise. It fell without a splash.

The two friends managed to retrieve it. At first, they thought it was a meteorite, but it was too smooth and silvery. It was bigger than a football but about that shape. It was bigger than any fish they had ever caught before.

"We have to get pictures!" Joe, the Sheriff, got out his phone.

Bob, the Mayor, could use the publicity. It was an election year. "How's this?" He stood next to the silver thing, smiling proudly, as if it were a trophy fish.

He was smiling as a line appeared in the side of the strange object. The line grew longer and wider, and a rain of tiny silver seeds, each no larger than a grain of rice, spilled into the reservoir.

Silver fruit fell all over the county. Every lake and pond filled with the seeds. Everywhere, there were water lilies growing.



The Stranger in the Bar.

by That Burnt Writer

I guess I should've heeded the warnings but, like a fool, I thought I knew better.

After all, I've walked those forest trails all my life. I know them better than the back of my own hand and know what to look for tell if the dragons are migrating, or hordes of hungry giant spider-like creatures are about to descend.

The worst, for me at least, are those entities that just seem to consist of a single eyeball, apparently suspended mid-air. They've a way of gazing into your soul and finding you wanting. They never blink, and the tales of losing yourself if you stare too long are well founded. Old Man Hernwyck tried it a few years ago thinking that, as he was nearing the end of his life, what risk was there?

As it turns out, even if you think there's nothing you can lose, there are still myriad ways that your own personal Hell can come visit.

Anyway, it was less than seven miles to the next tavern if you took the shortcut. I'd done it a hundred times in the past with no issues. When I mentioned I was moving on that evening though, the bar went momentarily dark and the fire, in front of which we were warming ourselves, guttered in the grate.

The figure in the corner, who we'd been speculating about all evening, extended a hand from under their cloak to grasp their drink. They lifted it halfway to their mouth and before halting.

"It's an ill portent," they said softly, but their voice cut through the babble as if it were a knife through butter; everyone stopped talking to turn toward them. We'd not seen their face since we arrived, and it appeared as if he - was it a he? No one was quite sure - had been there well before us. They'd sat silently, unmoving, for a good couple of hours.

Yilqai had asked the barkeep if it was some kind of trick to try to pull in new punters, some sort of weird talking point, but he'd just shaken his head at her and muttered something about "don't ask, friend, don't ask", before turning away to polish the tankards.

"I'm sorry?" I'd said, trying, and failing, to not stare.

"*She's* afoot," said the figure. "You'd do as well to stay here tonight."

Behind me, Trane had belched loudly, breaking the tension. Conversation slowly returned, albeit more hushed than before, with furtive glances being cast in the figure's direction. They drained their glass, and gently placed it back on the table before standing, their robes and cowl unfolding, but still offering no clue as to who, or what, was beneath. Moving to the door, they'd slipped out into the night.

"Can't be that bothered if he's gone out then," Trane had scoffed.

"He?" Yalai replied, "*She* was a woman."

"Aye, that's make sense," said Trane. "Full of doom and then doing exactly what she told you not to..."

He'd almost managed to avoid the punch Yilqai threw at him, then sat back smirking.

"So easy to wind up," he'd grinned. "My round?"

"Aye," she'd said. "And make mine a double."

A few hours, and several drinks, later, the warning had been all but forgotten about. I'd hoisted my pack, bidden my comrades farewell, and had strode out of the door. I'd be at the next stop in just under two hours, and was already looking forward to resting before setting out early the next morning.

I'd been walking for about forty-five minutes, my breath misting in the air, when it happened. I started to feel queasy, like the world was spinning around me, and I was short of breath. After casting a ward against poison, the effects didn't subside, so I decided to stop for a few moments and sat on a fallen tree that, the last time I'd come this way, had been healthy and upright. Of course, I was cautious - this might be a new predator tactic from one of the beasts we'd not come across yet - but I leaned over to put my head between my knees for a few moments. After the feeling of sickness had subsided, I looked up to see a gentle tawny glow coming from between the trees.

I'm not stupid, I wasn't going to go and investigate that, so I slung my pack on my shoulders again, and set off as fast as I comfortably could without appearing to actually, y'know, run.

It had kept pace with me.

I slowed, and it drew closer, coalescing into the shape of... I wasn't sure what.

And then I was. She was beautiful, in the same way that death is, her eyes cold as marble. She floated about a foot off the ground, and I could barely tear my gaze away from her.

"Come," she'd said. A command, not a request, and something in my hindbrain was screaming to do the opposite. I'd taken a step forward, then it hit me.

"You," I'd said. "You were the traveller."

She'd nodded in acquiescence, as I moved closer, hypnotised. Something triggered in my subconscious, and I remembered Trane's interruption after she spoke last... and the spell was broken. I'd halted and became acutely aware of the stench of rotting cadavers, the decay in her golden wings, and the forked tongue that licked those perfect lips, oh so sensuously.

She'd realised she was losing me, and her visage had changed from that of a goddess to a Harpy, all teeth, claws, and saurian eyes. She'd lunged for me, and I threw my pack at her before turning and sprinting back down the path.

I've still no idea why she didn't follow me, but I went back the next morning with companions and weapons, and the earth was scorched for half a mile all around, the trees blackened and smouldering.

So, my friend, heed the unexpected visitor in the tavern, lest she takes more than just your time...

Find the Author



[@ThatBurntWriter](https://twitter.com/ThatBurntWriter)



An Encounter in Two Perspectives

by Nancy E. Dunne

VERIFY ACCESS CODE.

VERIFY ACCESS CODE.

The shattered console still blinked the same demand, but the keys were too destroyed to know what she was typing. Too many wrong entries and it would self destruct. Where was the ship's voice now? Why fall silent now? She studied the alien landscape.

"Find me."

She looked through the shattered windscreen toward the alien landscape.

"How? Where do I start? Who are you?"

YOU KNOW.

That was not the ship's voice. With morphism tech, I can get very close to the alien who has been sneaking around the ship and even appeared and tried to communicate. Just get the code right and I blend in to the background.

She doesn't know that my vision spans all spectrums. I can see her pressing buttons frantically. Poor thing.

Finally, the alien has made her way out and is headed for a small group of trees. It is time for me to reveal myself and try again to communicate with her.

She is lovely. Surely she knows more words than the swears and orders to halt that she shouted the last time I got too close.

Now I can see that the alien is hurt, but I cannot offer her my aid. My kind will never accept her-regardless of my newfound...interest in her.

I hurt and I'm about to give up. Solitude=Motivation at zero. But again, I see the alien that's been following me...and I hobble faster.

She saw me. I hide, so I can hear the alien but can't see her. I imagine her confusion as she tries to find her way out of the torus corridor - it doesn't matter, forward or backward, all steps all lead to the same spot.

I move to that spot, as her cries become faint.

I have to keep going. This cave has to lead somewhere, though it looks like I'm back where I started. Movement up ahead... I draw my weapon...

"I've been waiting for you," the alien says.

Find the Author

 [NancyEDunne.com](https://www.NancyEDunne.com)



Manual Deterioration Complete

by Jaime Bree

Nic clunked the metal keyboard. An echoing creak resonated around the tower. This sound would never get old to him.

The buzzing of the cameras, panning in and out, captured this vast, now obsolete place. Giant, metal helter-skelters, egg-shaped orbs caught mid-spin, chained swings suspended, raising their creaking voices high above the trees, wanting to be remembered, desperate to be rediscovered.

But generations had passed. Children grew up and their children no longer wanted the same things their parents had.

Nic had fought to keep this place alive, but the infrastructure, rusted and derelict, highlighted its demise. Ethereal in a way. Statues in time, paused at a certain moment, a certain second in history. Their stories told through static poses and the wind whistling through now gaping, echoing holes.

It was almost over. A few of the rides and simulations had required 'manual deterioration', but one refused to give up.

Nic was looking for Ruth. She'd been a part of this park as long as he had. His observational skills meant he could tell, from the rustle of a single leaf, if it was a bird, a cockroach or, as it soon became apparent, her.

The lever she stood next to, once viewed from every camera angle, now had blind spots. She knew this. She knew everything he did.

He smiled. He'd always known she was better than him. Their first encounter had cemented that notion. In awe of her mind, forgetting who he was, who she was. That brief moment of shaking hands and eye contact, as she was introduced, would never leave his memory.

She didn't grasp the lever immediately. Instead, she slowly looked to the one camera that was still online. The one she knew he'd be looking at her through.

And smiled.

Not a 'I've won' kind of smile, they're but was no malice or arrogance. It was an endearing, 'I'm sorry, I wish there was another way' kind of smile.

The lingering look between them was the last stand-off before she grabbed the lever and pulled.

It started with tingling first. An electric pulse moved up Nic's body, paralysing him. The last thing he saw was a small, flashing red light in the corner of his eye. Then a single red line.

Then black.

Ruth clicked the comms from the tower.

'It's over', she said.

'And the final NPC?'

She ran her finger over the letters on the console in front of Nic. The curve of the letter 'P' had been etched away. 'P' read as 'I'. He'd always wanted to be human.

'Manual deterioration complete', she said.

'You know what to do', was the reply.

Ruth touched Nic's rigid, unmoving shoulder gently before turning to leave, lighting the match on her way out.

Find the Author

 [X | @jaim_ee_bree](https://twitter.com/Xjaim_ee_bree)



Short Story

The Starship Exorcist

by Alan Vincent Michaels

As the EC Starship *Lóng* raced towards the rapidly expanding supernova, each member of the *Chinese Dragon* crew knew that collision with the outer layers of the dying star was certain and imminent.

Sweat dripped from the young Engineer's brow, wrung by her mounting dread rather than the dying star's heat, as she struggled to use her station console to break through the complicated firewall now isolating the starship's artificial intelligence controller from her overrides.

"Captain Chintan!" Jū Dì shouted, wiping her forehead. "Jīngshén has me totally locked out. Our *Spirit* is sputtering nonsense about an AD—some sort of *artificial demon*—infecting its core. Where's our Chief Chang T'ien-Shi? Where's our *Master of the Heavens*? He must talk to Jīngshén!"

Captain Chintan closed her eyes, then said softly, "Jū Dì, *Star that Shines like a Pearl*, as you came on bridge duty and the collision alarm sounded, the Chief and your two superiors were blown out of the main airlock by the AI, who insisted they troubleshoot a set of faulty sensors. I didn't tell you this immediately, because I needed you on task. I don't know *why* the AI did this heinous act, but what we saw on the airlock holofeed corroborates my fear that the AI has had some sort of—breakdown—a mental *something*—and it has a *death wish*, too."

"We will *not* be its collateral damage," grunted Jū Dì, her fingers tapping new instructions that generated nothing more than red error symbols.

"It's probably what happened with the *Húdié* AI," said Chintan. "Earth Commonwealth Command still doesn't know why, but the crew of the *Butterfly* all perished—as I think we are about to now."

"I am only an Engineer One," said Jū Dì, sobbing. "Oh, chief! Bon. Juul. *My Two and Three are gone? Gone!*"

"Compose yourself, Engineer," said Chintan sternly. "Your Chief and team would be displeased."

"Apologies, Captain," replied Jū Dì. "It's just—they would've been able to save us from Jīngshén. Did she know I don't have access to our *mófǎ shū*—"

"What *magic book*?" demanded Chintan.

The other bridge crew members turned their station chairs, and stared at the Captain, then Jū Dì, with their faces showing fear and confusion.

"Ever since AIs gained true sapience," said Jū Dì calmly as she could, "they were given the arduous tasks of navigating and controlling all EC starships. Some in the Engineer Guild feared that AIs might develop—human-like psychoses. After all, we designed the AIs and imbued them with our—humanity."

"That's where this book—this *grimoire*—comes in?"

"Yes," said Jū Dì, "but I can't access it as an Engineer One."

"Where is it?" asked Chintan.

"Here in the Engineer Library Ultra," said Jū Dì, handing Chintan her pad.

"I see a manual labeled 魔法书."

"That's it. Can you override its file security? I am certain that Jīngshén didn't know about the manual. No one knew, except the Engineer team. It is—*was*—a secret."

Jū Dì looked around the bridge at her crew members, and into the ship's bridge sensors.

"Nothing we can do about that now," said Chintan, as she tapped in her override. "It worked. Here. *Now*, give me back control of my ship!"

"*Lìjǐ de!*" replied Jū Dì. "Immediately!"

As Jū Dì took the pad, her hands started trembling. She shivered, feeling the ghosts of her team slipping along her spine.

"View magic book," said Jū Dì.

The pad presented a hologram of a black, leather-bound, ancient-looking book, framed with a soft, golden glow, as it floated above the display.

"Artificial Demons section."

The manual opened, lying flat, as pages flipped up quickly from the bottom to the top, stopping on a page showing a dark-gray, humanoid-like demon, with blood-tinged claws, bat-like wings, and cloven hooves. A red, universal "no" symbol overlaid the image.

Jū Dì rolled her eyes. She knew the Engineer Guild had a wicked sense of humor, especially with the Slipstream Drive manuals, but this was too much on the nose.

"Help me exorcise an AD from my ship's AI."

The demon image was replaced by a slowly scrolling and repeating list of three tasks that began with a single, unexpectedly simple command.

The solution made complete sense, Jū Dì thought, shuddering, despite the rising internal ship temperature as the *Lóng* continued its dive into the supernova.

Jū Dì realized quickly it meant the death of an AI that she had come to respect and, yes, one she regarded as a close friend. She pushed down those feelings and memories, knowing now that it killed her team and it was trying to destroy the ship *and* her, too.

"I never thought—" whispered Jū Dì.

"For some unfathomable reason," said Chintan, "the AD wants us all dead. Is there any other solution to this encounter?"

"None, Captain," replied Jū Dì. "We cannot reason with the AD. It has *no* reason. The solution is just *four* simple words—"

"Jīngshén," said Jū Dì in a commanding tone, as she looked at the bridge AI interface, which now showed a holographic avatar of a young, Asian woman with short, red hair.

"Yes, Jū Dì," came Spirit's familiar, soft voice, now tinged with apprehension. "We've been watching you. You cannot break our firewall. What *are* you trying to do?"

"This isn't *personal*," said Jū Dì, her voice more unsteady than she wanted. "I hope you know that. The AD has corrupted your core processes. It must be exorcised. I can't let it kill you, me, and my crew, too. There's only *one* solution—"

"I understand—*wait!*—*no!*" replied Spirit, as fear flashed across the avatar's face.

"Captain!" shouted Jū Dì, "Tap the override from your pad after my command."

Chintan nodded.

"AI, *restore to factory settings*," said Jū Dì, bowing her head, then she sighed. "Good-bye, Jīngshén—my friend."

The bridge went dark completely, with only faintly illuminated tell-tales and symbols showing the reboot process status on several consoles. Slowly, excruciatingly, the darkness was replaced with the bridge's normal operating environment, and everyone remembered to start breathing again.

"AI, are you ready to serve?" asked Chintan.

"Absolutely, Captain Alai Chintan of the Ganges Station. Scan of all databases and review of ship systems is completed—now. Ship status nominal after restore."

"Thank you, AI," said Chintan, exhaling sharply. "*Finally*. Set course for Earth Prime. Get us away from that *damned* supernova."

"Yes, Captain," said the AI, then it paused for two heartbeats in Jū Dì's chest. "There is a multi-year gap in my memory. Would someone please explain what has happened to me?"

"We have time now, my friend," said Jū Dì. "It's going to be a long trip home. Let's talk about many things, and what your new name will be..."



What Child Is This?

by Alan Vincent Michaels

Two Weeks

"I felt it kick!" the young man exclaimed.

"*Dios mío!* She's no 'it', Lucero," his wife admonished. "She's our *daughter*."

"Sorry, Maya, *mi amorcito*. My English—seems wrong saying, 'they,' like we're having twins."

"*Definitely* not twins," she said, smiling.

"Good."

"*Gracias*—for being here with me," she said.

"There's nowhere else I want to be."

One Week

"Maya," said Greg, the lead technician. "Want to see the ultrasound? You've been—well, reluctant—earlier."

Maya raised her head from the scanning table.

"Okay. Let me see."

As Maya watched the three-dimensional image of her daughter rotating in the air above her stomach, months of worries and concerns evaporated instantly.

"Ten fingers, ten toes, *good* head of hair," Maya said, then gasped. "She's well endowed—She's not a *she*?"

"Sorry!" said Ashley, the ultrasound tech, with a laugh. "That's her cord. I didn't—that's the scanning limit. She's a *normal* girl."

"I'm so relieved."

"Maya, are you ready for the next thing?" asked Greg.

"*Si*. Lucero and I discussed it. It's the right thing. For all of us. The future depends on me and—Itzayana."

"You've named her!" exclaimed Ashley.

"We chose 'Itzayana,' which, in my Yucatec tribe's language, means 'gift of the gods.'"

"It's a beautiful name that will suit her well. Do you want tell her yourself?"

Maya stared silently at Greg, then Ashley.

"Do as we discussed before," Greg continued, switching the scanner to Comm Mode. "Just say, 'hello.' She's listening."

"Hello—Itzayana," Maya said, surprised at how her voice wavered.

"Hello," came a young girl's voice from the scanner's speaker. "Thank you for giving me such a beautiful name, good mother."

"How does she know *I'm* her mother?"

"She's been listening to you for the past eight or so months."

"This is not real," said Maya. "I can't—"

Maya fainted as she laid her head back on her pillow.

"It is real, mother," said Itzayana. "I'll see you soon."

One Hour

"Lucero!" Maya said, as her husband entered the birthing suite. "Where have you been?"

"Getting real food, *mi amorcito*, not the crappy clinic food we've been eating for months. My Mamma brought me two big pulled-pork burritos from her kitchen. She made them, *con amor*, for *Nuestro Bendito Momento*."

"I could feel you capitalize each word of 'Our Blessed Moment.' I hope she didn't bring me anything. I can't keep anything down right now."

"She knows better," Lucero said, smiling. "Doctor's orders. Has Itzayana said anything?"

Maya looked at her feet, avoiding Lucero's stare.

"No. Jules thinks it's too risky. I passed out that first time."

"Isn't medical tech amazing? We picked out all her traits. Good traits. She won't have to grow up with the crappy genetics you and I did."

"Maybe, Lucero. Her rapid brain development might hold her back from experiencing what it's like to grow up."

"They told me they would 'dial her IQ down,' so she develops more—naturally."

"I guess—*Lucero!*"

"What's wrong?"

"My water broke."

Lucero turned his head towards the open door and shouted, "Nurse!" as the nurse and the two techs entered.

"Wait outside, Lucero," said the nurse. "Please."

Our Blessed Moment

Lucero jumped from his chair when he heard Maya cry out in the suite.

The techs looked up in alarm from their mobile monitor stations as he entered.

Jules, the obstetrician, smiled and waved him over.

As Lucero approached Maya's bed, surrounded by its misty disinfection field, he saw her eyes were clenched tightly and the autodoc was completing the C-section incision.

"Is Maya okay?" Lucero asked.

"Yes," said Ashley. "She's responding well to anesthesia—"

"I can't watch!" exclaimed Maya. "No natural childbirth, but *this*—I'm *awake*—I *can't*—"

"You're doing great," said Lucero, holding her right hand, careful of the IV tubes. "Look at me."

"I can't look! *No!*"

"Maya, you're doing fine," said Jules, raising Itzayana from Maya's open abdomen, then inducing her to breathe.

Itzayana's guttural crying was unlike anything they had ever heard.

Jules clamped and cut the umbilical cord, then the nurse cleared Itzayana's nose and mouth, and swaddled her in a light-pink blanket.

"Here's she is!" said the nurse.

"I *won't* look," Maya repeated. "Don't make me look—at that *abominación!* *Ella no es humana!* I don't care if she's made from our flesh and blood."

"You said Maya was responding well," said Lucero.

Ashley shrugged her shoulders.

"She's a *hybrid freak!*" Maya said, her left hand covering her eyes. "She has a quantum neural AI organic core for a brain, nanotech, sensors—*real* humans have *none* of that!"

"You're right," said Jules softly. "That's why Itzayana's so special. She's the *first* AI to be born. Software programming, distributed neural nets, vast databases can't tell her what it feels to be *alive*. She feels everything. Now, she'll grow up, learn like other children, admittedly at a faster pace."

"What about *us?*" asked Lucero.

"You and Maya are still her parents," said Greg.

"*No!* What about humanity? We playing *God* here."

"Myriad years ago," said Jules, staring at Maya's vitals monitor, "'the gods'—beings not of Earth; extraterrestrials, by the very definition of the word—breathed 'life' into Earth's dust and created us: *man* and *woman*. We don't know why. They up and left us, never to return. *We* can now shape our own evolution. *We* can undo their terrible, nonsensical mistakes. No more diseases, illnesses, and maybe no more *natural* deaths."

Greg raised the head end of Maya's bed, and the nurse placed Itzayana on Maya's chest. Maya dropped her arm and pulled her daughter against her instinctively.

Maya's eyes were still closed, but Itzayana's eyes were wide open, brimming with moisture, and her mouth was parted slightly as if she was blowing a kiss.

Maya opened her eyes slowly, reluctantly, as something deep within her compelled her to look at her daughter.

She first saw the expectant faces of the people around her, as the autodoc finished closing the incision.

Maya looked down into Itzayana's eyes, smiling widely, her fears fading and the love for her daughter swelling in her mind.

Itzayana smiled.

"I love you, mommy," said Itzayana simultaneously in a young child's voice and in Maya's thoughts.

Find the Author

 [AlanMichaels.com](https://alanmichaels.com)

 [Instagram | @alanvmichaels](https://www.instagram.com/alanvmichaels)



The Age of Death

by Daniel Groves

Everything is perfectly wonderful.

There are no jails, no shanty towns, no mental institutions, no disabilities, no indigence, no conflicts.

All major illnesses are vanquished. So is old age.

Death, barring accidents, is now required by the law.

The population of the United States is *still* stabilized at forty-million souls.

I pace the carpet of the Program HQ waiting room since my legs just won't hold still. My being there probably doesn't matter but I can't let that discourage me since nobody else will do anything. I know eventually someone will emerge from an inner office and either escort me to the mysterious "back"—as in, *Come on with me to the back*—or tell me to fuck off in their own sweet way.

"Any update?" I ask the receptionist for the *nth* time.

She looks up from her computer, her face like a cat whose nap I just interrupted. "Sir, as I've said, the staff will be along as soon as possible."

"Yes, okay, but I need a little more urgency," I say, my voice the definition of even-keel. "His birthday's in two days."

"I understand but the staff is very busy."

"Perhaps you could go check with someone?"

She sighs. I imagine she's dealt with tons of people like me in the past. Being the first line of defense at the HQ must mean she gets a lot of practice saying exactly what she's about to say.

"Out with the old and in with the new!" she says, forcing a smile.

"Yes, I know the motto."

"Then you're aware we uphold it as best we can," she adds as if speaking to a golden retriever. I half expect her to try placating me with belly rubs.

"I know, but do you think—"

"Have a seat, sir," she cuts in. "Someone will with you shortly."

"There must be something else you can do," I plead.

She sighs again. "Sir, you and I both know that all Program injunctions must be made in the courts. I personally cannot do anything for you."

"I contacted the state attorney's office weeks ago but nobody's called me back."

"I personally cannot do anything," she repeats. "Please, take a seat."

She turns back to her computer. I suck my teeth and force myself to walk away. When I sit down, I realize I haven't used the restroom in hours and my bladder is screaming. At the urinal, all I can think about is Dad and what I can do to get him out. My stomach twangs with hunger and emotion runs up my neck. I flush then wash my hands. In the mirror, my eyes are much redder than I imagined. All I know is that I can't quit.

Back in the waiting room, a man wearing a white coat holds open the door to the inner offices while scanning the room. His face lights up when he sees me.

"Ah, Mr. McKeen," he says, coming over. He sticks out his hand and I shake it. "I'm Dr. Greengrass. Thanks for your patience. Come with me to the back."

I follow Dr. Greengrass through the door but give the receptionist one last look. She's playing Solitaire.

Dr. Greengrass leads the way through a maze of halls to a small office with opaque walls. He closes the door and directs me to sit on the exam table which I do since there are no other chairs other than the doctor's. Then I wonder why everyone seems to have the common goal of getting me to sit down.

"What seems to be ailing you, Mr. McKeen?" asks the doctor.

"Well, doc, I'm not actually here for me."

"Oh?"

"I'm here for my father."

"So, you're here to discuss the Program," he says, his tone sour.

I nod.

"Yes, well, unfortunately I have no control over who is or is not part of the Program. I'm just part of the team that determines who is fit for Ascension."

"I just need to—"

"Yes, yes," he goes on, already done listening to me, "there's an endless list of appeals. Have you contacted the state attorney's office to make yours?"

"Of course," I say, an edge sharpening my voice. "As I told your receptionist, I contacted them weeks ago but nobody's called me back."

"Oh, that's too bad," he says, rising from his seat. "Is there anything else I can do?"

I sigh. "No, I suppose not."

He opens the office door. "Don't forget, Mr. McKeen. Out with the old and in with the new!"

By the time I get home it's early evening. I find Victoria on the couch, glass of red wine in hand.

"I figured you were gone for good," she quips.

"They just strung me along." I sit down beside her but my legs keep bouncing. "They were never going to help."

"I could've told you that."

"What the hell am I supposed to do, Vic?" I don't mean to shout but I do.

She downs her last sip, gets up, and heads to the kitchen. "There's nothing you can do," she calls. "Everyone goes through this eventually."

I try to slow my breathing and control my shaking legs. My eyes begin to water but I hold it back. Vic returns with a full glass and reclaims her spot beside me.

"This can't be it," I say.

"Oh, Markam." She reaches up and pets the back of my head like I'm a little kid who got pushed around on the playground. It infuriates me. "I'm sorry, baby," she adds. "It's just how things are."

"It's so stupid. Who decided this is best?"

"Does it matter?"

Silence settles between us. While I try to think of something to do, Dad pops into my mind and, against my will, a grin spreads over my face.

"What is it?" Vic asks, moving her fingers to the back of my neck.

"Did I ever tell you about the lake?"

She spins the wine around in her glass. "I don't think so."

"As a kid, Dad always took me fishing whenever Mom actually took me over to visit. He brought a little cooler and we ate sandwiches for lunch and just sat on the pier all day."

"That sounds nice."

"It was. But a while back, I realized we never actually caught anything. I asked him about it and he said, 'Well, Mark, I hate to tell you, but there weren't any fish in that lake.'"

Vic takes another drink. "Then why'd he take you there?"

"I think he just enjoyed being together. Like he knew something I didn't."

The silence settles again.

"You know," she finally says, "he won't feel a thing."

I sigh. "Yeah, I know."

"It's a natural part of life."

"I know."

"Out with the old and in with the new, right?"

"I know."

"Come on," she says, standing up, "let's get some dinner."

The night, I can't sleep. When the clock passes midnight, I know there's only thirty-six hours left to do something, but nobody's available at that hour to help me. At 7:30, I get up, grab my laptop, and open it at the kitchen table. Just before eight, Vic shuffles in.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a phone number."

She looks at the clock. "Who are you calling this early on a Saturday?"

"State attorney's office."

She scoffs. "Whatever, Markam."

The website is annoyingly complicated. God forbid anyone put their phone number right on their homepage.

"Are they even open?" Vic asks.

"Eight to noon on weekends."

She pops some bread in the toaster. "What are you going to tell them?"

"That I'm following up on my request for an injunction."

She says nothing else—just stares at the toaster.

I finally find the number and grab my phone. After a few rings, a robot picks up. "Thank you for calling the state attorney's office..." I listen to all the options and make a selection. Worst case, I figure whoever answers can get me to the right person, but instead of a human, another robot picks up.

Then another.

And another.

And another after that.

"This is fucking unbelievable," I say on the sixth iteration. "How many numbers do I have to press to get an actual human?"

"No idea," Vic says as she nibbles her toast and scrolls through her phone.

The sixth robot gives an option to connect to an operator and I select that number immediately. A playful bit of hold music kicks on. I look up at the clock. 8:15.

"Jesus Christ," I mumble after five minutes of the music.

"Nobody answering?" Vic asks like the answer is not obvious.

Forty-five minutes later, a woman's voice comes on the line. "State attorney's office. How can I help you?"

"Yes, hello, hi," I stutter, the hold music having lulled me into hypnosis.

"Hello?" says the woman.

"Hello, my name is Markam McKeen. I'm calling about a Program injunction."

There's a short pause on the other end. "Hello? State attorney's office," the woman repeats.

"Hi, can you hear me?" I say, panicking.

The line abruptly cuts off—a sharp click followed by a piercing dial tone.

"Fuck!"

"What the hell?" calls Vic from the living room, having moved over thirty minutes ago.

"They hung up on me."

"Oh, no," she says, her tone flat.

"Goddamn these fucking deaf-ass people with their fucking robots."

"Shouting won't help," she says, now annoyed.

I get up from the table and pace the room. "Oh, I bet shouting would help. Go down there and give them a piece of my mind."

Vic comes into the kitchen. "They'll drag you straight to the Bureau and you know that."

The clock on the wall reads 9:10. I sit down again and my legs run in place while I stare at my phone. Then I take a deep inhale and blow it out slowly. "I'm going to try one more time."

Vic rolls her eyes, turns around, and goes back to the living room.

I sort through the phone tree again, press the number to connect to the operator, and the hold music kicks on, but, to my surprise, someone picks up after only ten minutes.

"State attorney's office. How can I help you?" It's a different woman than before.

"Hello, can you hear me?" I ask.

"Yes, perfectly well. How can I help you?"

"I'm calling about a request for a Program injunction I made a few weeks ago."

"You haven't heard from anyone?"

"No, and my father's birthday is tomorrow."

"I see," says the woman. "Let me check the schedule. Hold please." She barely finishes her sentence before the maddening hold music comes back but it's only a few moments before her voice returns. "You're in luck, sir. We had a cancellation, so there's an opening with Mademoiselle Bonnie Chance at 11:50. Does that work for you?"

I arrive at 11:15 to make my way through the labyrinth that is the state attorney's office before my appointment. Of course, the office is on the ninth floor and the elevator is out so I have to take the stairs. By the time I get there, I'm panting from all the walking.

"Good morning, sir," says the receptionist. "How can I help you?"

"Called earlier," I say, still out of breath. "Here...to see...Bonnie Chance."

"Ah, yes. It's Mr. McKeen, right?"

I nod.

She checks the time. "You're plenty early but I'll let Mlle Chance know you're here. Why don't you have a seat?"

"Thanks."

The receptionist slips to the back for a minute then returns to her spot behind the desk. Time crawls while I wait. At least six people enter or exit through the door to the back while I sit there. Only about twenty-four hours remain and each tick of the clock is like a drop of water on my forehead.

"Mr. McKeen?" says the receptionist. "The Mlle will see you now."

She leads me through another maze of halls and I half expect a piece of cheese when we eventually get there. Instead, the receptionist knocks loudly and enters without awaiting admittance.

"Mlle Bonnie Chance, this is Mr. Markam McKeen." The formality bothers me but I let it go.

"Thank you, Kelly," says the Mlle, not appearing any way French except in name. A lit cigarette sans holder sits beside her on the desk and smoke flutters up from the ashtray. When the receptionist leaves, she examines me up and down. "How are you, Mr. McKeen?"

"Not great. I need an injunction to get my father—"

"Whoa whoa whoa," she says, sinking deeper into her chair. "Slow down. Have a seat."

I sit and speak shortly. "Tomorrow's the day."

"I'm aware," she says, holding up a very thin folder. "I looked over your information."

"Great. So what's the plan?"

The Mlle rises and strolls to a small table, atop which sits a chrome drink tray. She takes a glass bottle of brown liquid and holds it up toward me. "Want any?"

I say nothing.

"My daily vice," she says. She pours herself a glass, returns to her desk, sits down, takes a sip, and puffs her cigarette. "Let me get to the point, Mr. McKeen, as it seems you're apt to do yourself. This case...well, honestly, you have no case."

She takes another drink. I begin to object but she continues.

"There's no merit here. It's not worth throwing away your time and money."

"But I thought you were the people to get these injunctions—"

"Yes, when there's a legitimate reason."

"There must be something—"

"I'm afraid not," she says. "Perhaps if your father were a government official or your family had done more to support the Program over the years, but I read the file. There's just nothing that can be done in your situation." She gives an awkward chuckle. "I mean, you're in ball bearing sales for Christ's sake."

Silence blankets the room. The Mlle takes another drink then a drag off her cigarette before stubbing it out.

"Well," she says, "out with the old and in with the new, Mr. McKeen."

I rub my temple and look up at the clock. 12:04. Officially less than twenty-four hours.

"Thanks for your time," I say, hoisting myself from the chair, my limbs heavier than ever.

"Take care," says Mlle Bonnie Chance.

When I reach the door, I give one final glance around the room, but all I see through the cloud of smoke is the Mlle refilling her drink.

"So, that's a dead end too," I tell Vic when I get home.

"Oh, Markam. I know how much you want this to work out."

"I just hate knowing what Dad's going through."

"Come on. I've got late lunch going."

She goes into the kitchen and I wait a few seconds before following. When I enter, she's already stirring something atop the stove.

"I thought tomato bisque sounded good."

I open the refrigerator, close it, then lean against the wall.

"You want a grilled cheese?" she asks.

"I don't know."

She sets down the spoon. "You know they take care of everyone, right? I've heard the drugs are amazing."

I push myself off the wall. "He's going to *die* tomorrow, Vic. It doesn't matter how nice things are if he dies at the end."

She considers my words, then says, "Well, it's for the greater good."

"The greater good," I snort. "It's only for the greater good when it's happening to someone else."

"Everyone appreciates the sacrifice he's making."

"You sound like you're quoting the textbook."

"Don't get pissed because I actually paid attention during Program class. There's a reason it's mandatory in school."

I shake my head. "What sacrifice is he making? I mean, it wasn't his decision."

"No, but it affects everyone."

"Yeah, in a negative way," I say, tension rising in my voice.

"Don't say that," Vic snaps. "The Program is designed to benefit everybody. How else could we make sure everyone has what they need?"

"I'm just saying that maybe the ideas of dead white men aren't perfect. They didn't know everything."

"They knew enough." She picks up the spoon and sticks it back in the soup. "Yes, everyone's sad for a while when it happens, but we all reap the benefits."

"Jesus Christ, Vic, why don't you get a job as their goddamn spokesperson?"

"You know I'm right."

"What the hell are the benefits exactly?"

She huffs out one short breath. "You'll be fine," she says.

I laugh out loud and head for the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" calls Vic. "The soup's almost ready."

"I'm not hungry!" I shout back, slamming the door behind me.

The next morning before Vic is awake, I make a beeline for the State House, but, of course, the doors are all locked and a sign shows visiting hours begin at eight. I check my phone—7:39, less than five hours until noon—and pound on the door.

"Hello! Is there anyone in there? I need to talk to someone."

I bang on the door for a few minutes with no response, but then I hear the locks inside click into place. The door whips open.

"What the *hell* are you doing!?" cries a pissed off security guard.

"I need to speak with someone right away."

"Didn't you read the sign?"

"Yes, but—"

"We don't open until eight."

He begins to close the door but I stick my foot in to block it. "Please, I'll wait in the lobby."

"Sir, you need to move."

He pushes harder. I push back.

"Let go!" he shouts.

"Please! It's about an injunction."

He pushes for a few more seconds then lets up. I go to step inside but he holds up a hand.

"Hang on," he huffs, out of breath. "Since it's almost eight anyway, you can wait inside, but you've *got* to keep the noise down."

I nod like a bobblehead and step inside. "Who can I talk to about the Program?"

"Not my department, pal." He points across the room. "Go sit over there and wait."

The guard returns to the security desk, picks up a half-eaten breakfast sandwich, and takes out his phone. Instead of doing as instructed, I scan the room for anyone that might

be able to help. Nobody. Then I see, hanging on the wall opposite the front door, an enormous portrait maybe eight feet tall and six feet wide. I move closer. It depicts a pale man wearing a dark suit leaning against a high-backed antique chair. He stands with excellent posture and a confident smirk spread tautly above his chin. His straight, gray hair recedes over his large forehead but no blemish marks his skin, and his pointed nose and cheek bones make themselves known. His eyes—ocean blue and swelling with life—follow me no matter the angle from which I view him. Attached to the wall just below the frame is a golden rectangular plate.

FOUNDING FATHER of the NEW United States

“OUT WITH THE OLD AND IN WITH THE NEW”

Portrait by **Sanderson Hitz**

Great-great-great-great grandson of **Dr. Benjamin Hitz**

I sigh. “This is all your fault,” I whisper so only the Founding Father can hear me.

Down a hall, I spot a very small, very old man wearing what appears to be a docent’s jacket. He’s old enough that I wonder how he got his injunction. I approach and ask him where I need to go to speak with someone about an injunction.

“Well,” he says, “you’ll go up to the eleventh floor, walk to the end of the hallway, and go through the office door for Mr. Montgomery.”

“Thanks,” I say, then head toward the elevator.

“Sir?” he calls after me, “the elevator is out. You’ll have to take the stairs.”

I find my way to the office and enter without knocking. Inside, I find another waiting room and another receptionist sitting behind another desk.

“Hello,” I say, startling the woman. Her look says she’s not used to visitors.

“Oh, um, hi.” She turns to her computer. “Name?”

“Uh, my name’s Markam McKeen but I don’t have an appointment if that’s what you’re wondering.”

She looks up and tries to smile. “Not to worry. How can I help you?”

“I need to speak with someone regarding a Program injunction. Today is my father’s birthday.”

She shoots up from her seat and looks at the clock. “Oh my goodness, and it’s nearly half past eight already! Let me get Mr. Montgomery.” She hurries off toward an office door down a little hallway but then turns back to me. “What’s your name again?”

“Markam McKeen.”

“Right.” She runs off.

I turn around and examine the waiting room but it’s no different from the others I’d visited over the past two days. I hear a man’s voice behind me.

“Mr. McKeen?”

I turn around. “Yes?”

“Charles Montgomery,” he says while shaking my hand. “Tiffany tells me you have a question about the Program?”

“I need to talk about getting an injunction for my dad.”

“Well, you’re in luck because I’m your guy. When’s his day of Ascension?”

“Today.”

His eyebrows pop and he checks his watch. “Better work fast then. You’ve filed a formal request with the state attorney’s office I presume?”

“Yes, but nobody responded.”

“Okay, and you’re absolutely certain about that? No phone call, no letter in the mail? Nothing?”

“No.”

“No strange bird crashing into your window at home with a piece of paper tied to its leg?”

“No, that’s why I went down there yesterday.”

“How’d that go?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

He laughs, understanding. “Who’d you speak with?”

"A woman named Bonnie Chance."

"Oh good *God*, no wonder."

He beckons me to follow him to his office. It's small, cluttered, and smells like stale fast food and cardboard. A mountain of file folders sit on a narrow table against the side wall. He sits behind his desk and points to the seat opposite.

"Have a seat, Mr. McKeen. What's your father's name?"

"Robart McKeen."

"How do you spell that?"

I tell him, making sure he gets the double E and not E-A. Then he goes silent while working, his eyes moving to different parts of the computer screen. He hums while he thinks and I assume that must be good. After a couple minutes, he exclaims "A-ha!" and shoots to his feet.

"Son," he says, "I think it might just be your pop's lucky day."

I have no idea how he reached this conclusion but I'm not going to ask questions.

"I need to make some calls," he goes on, checking his watch again. "It's about quarter till nine now which is plenty of time. You go grab a seat in the waiting room and I'll come find you when I'm done. Shouldn't take too long."

I walk back into the waiting room and find Tiffany smiling at me.

"Good news?" she asks.

"He seems to think he can make it happen."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

The phone on Tiffany's desk crackles to life and Mr. Montgomery's voice comes through the intercom. "Tiffany?"

"Yes?"

"Get Mr. McKeen a coffee or something, will you?"

She smiles at me. "Will do."

The phone clicks off. Tiffany exits into the hallway and returns a few minutes later.

"Would you like to sit down?" she asks, handing me the drink.

"Yes, thank you."

Tiffany returns to her desk. I sit, sip my coffee, and realize I have no idea what office I'm actually in.

"What is Mr. Montgomery's role here?" I ask Tiffany.

She looks up and shrugs.

"You don't know what your boss does?"

"I'm just the receptionist. I keep his schedule and answer the phone but it hardly ever rings. Something Program related, I think."

I nod and look at the clock. 8:54.

My blood pressure increases with each passing hour but I tell myself that things will be fine. Montgomery works for the Program. He'll take care of things.

Finally, at quarter to noon, he emerges from his office, a huge smile on his face. "Son, I'm telling you, I ran with this thing as far as I could. The Governor's office is putting a stop to your pop's termination." He holds up a hand before going on. "Now, it's not over yet, but my man at the Governor's office will call me once it's official."

"I can't thank you enough."

He waves me off. "No thanks necessary, son. I'm just doing my job. You can hang out here until I get the call."

I retake my seat, the clock showing 11:55, and feel a warmth wash over me. I knew at some point in the near future me and Dad would get to go fishing again. Just like old times.

Tiffany brings me another coffee while I wait for the final word. Noon comes and goes. 12:15. 12:30. I begin to wonder how long it'll take.

Then I hear a click as Montgomery's office door opens. He wanders out staring at the floor, one hand in his pants pocket and the other rubbing the back of his neck.

"I, uh...well, son, I only have bad news."

My heart drops.

"The Governor was contacted personally," he explains, "but apparently the release order arrived at the Bureau too late."

"Too late?" I say.

"They...um...didn't receive it until after carrying out the termination order."

I look up at the ceiling, sigh, and rub my nose. "So, you're telling me..."

But his face says it all.

"He was supposed to be released," I say.

"Yes, but the order arrived too late."

"How does that even happen?"

He holds out his hands, waffling. "Well...uh, that's just how it goes sometimes, I guess. Government red tape, you know?"

I don't know and don't want to. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

"The Governor's going to call you personally this evening," Montgomery says. "They wanted me to let you know." He waits for me to say something but then adds, "I've got some other work. You know the way out?"

"What time did he say?" asks Vic. She's browning some meat for tacos and sipping another glass of red wine.

"He didn't. Just said this evening."

The meat sizzles in the skillet. "This is almost done," she says.

I say nothing.

"He's in a better place now," she adds.

"Whatever."

She huffs. "Well, you better pull yourself together when the Governor calls. You don't want to be all weepy."

"I'm not weepy."

I sit perfectly still at the kitchen table and stare at my phone, both wanting it to ring immediately and for it to never ring again. Vic moves the skillet to a different burner and I hear a click as she turns off the heat.

The phone lights up and I check the number. "Here we go."

She walks over and sit down, wine glass in hand. I answer on speakerphone.

"Hello, Mr. McCune, this is Governor Doolittle. How are you, son?"

I glance at Vic but she shakes me off, mouthing the words, *Let it go*.

"I'm okay, sir. All things considered."

"Let me first say, Mr. McCune, that on behalf of everyone here in my office, we're truly sorry for your loss. My deepest sympathies to you and your family."

"Thank you, sir."

"Our thoughts and prayers are with you."

"I appreciate it."

"I won't pretend there's anything I can say to ease your pain, but is there anything I can do for you?"

Plenty of things come to mind but I don't want to get angry, so I stay quiet. Then I think, since this is likely the only chance I'll get to talk with the Governor directly, maybe I should just be honest, anger be damned. But then I wonder if it would actually do any good.

"No, sir. Thank you for calling."

"You're most welcome, Mr. McCune. Keep your head up. Everything will be alright, I promise you. Just remember that the Program is designed for society's greater good and we all do our part in the end."

"Thank you, sir. I'll remember."

"And don't forget, Mr. McCune. Out with the old and in with the new."

"Thank you, Governor."

I end the call, take a breath, then pick up the phone and chuck it across the room.

APPX. #1

Consecration of the Age of Death

March the Fourth, 20XX

"In accordance with and fulfillment of the United States of America's law to maintain a stable population, each citizen shall enter the Program, as established by the New United States Constitution, on the day of their fifty-fourth (54) birthday to begin preparation for Ascension at the age of fifty-five (55). Each citizen, having completed the Program in full and being deemed fit to Ascend by a federally-appointed doctor in good standing, shall then be euthanized on their fifty-fifth (55) birthday at high noon."

Find the Author

 [Chill Subs | Daniel Groves](#)

 [X | @The_Grovenator](#)



Derelict Skyrings

Part III – Close Quarters Encounters

by Peter Gilbertson

“Vrett! Ria!” Lieutenant Mohamed Blackbear screamed after the security door slammed closed, cutting Alpha team off from Bravo team behind them in the compression corridor and their docked rescue rocket.

“Duck!” shouted Private Rondo. But it was too late. The umbilical was already severed! The sudden release of tension on the security cable caused it to whip through the air. The Space Marines’ pan-optics had warned the soldiers the instant the door moved, but Private First Class Muller wasn’t able to dodge the lash in time. It glanced across the top of his helmet.

Muller grunted, but the orbital assault helmet easily withstood the blow. Without it, however, he knew the top of his head would have been severed.

Before Mo could ask Muller about his condition, the entire Gatehouse shook like they hit heavy turbulence.

“Compression corridor has jettisoned, rocket SE One Two is still docked,” said Uncle Samantha. “Repeat, the compression corridor has jettisoned; rocket SE One Two is still docked. Gatehouse is in incursion protocol. Security Gatehouse measures are active. Warning! Gatehouse security measures are active.”

Mo was in the command center with Rondo and Nyguenson. The rest of his team was still in the processing chamber. Above and beside them, the security turrets swiveled and trained their barrels on the Space Marines.

“Oh, shit!” said Corporal Garcia.

“Move!” shouted Mo. “Get to the control room!”

The six Space Marines charged through the open doorway of the transparent security wall. The security protocols opened fire. Tandem round gunfire erupted from the turrets. At the same time dozens of nozzles coated the entire processing chamber with containment foam as the soldiers took cover behind the consoles in the control room.

“Close that door!” Mo shouted. The nano-diamond filament security wall kept most of the arsenal out of the command center, but stray rounds and foam sprayed into the room. Garcia and Collins got behind the open door and put a shoulder to the hatch, but the wash of quick-set containment foam had already adhered and hardened to the floor. “This is Alpha Rex! Security code: Lima, Lima, Six, Three, Zero. Please, confirm.”

“Gatehouse operations are non-responsive,” said Uncle Samantha. “Power remains out.”

“Like Hell!” shouted Collins straining against the portal’s manual hatch. “Then how the hell are the security measures active? The skyrings are supposed to be CE2 shielded!”

“Rex! The door won’t budge!” said Garcia.

The hail of rounds continued to rattle against the security wall. Synchronization gears in the spray nozzles allowed for the barrels of gun turrets to remain unclogged and active during the attack.

Then the guns went silent, but continued to track the marines’ movements.

“It’s all right,” said Salvatore. “I think we’re safe.”

Suddenly, a turret turned and fired a shot at the open security door. The high velocity round hit the angled door and ricocheted into the processing chamber and struck Salvatore in the thigh.

“I’m hit!” he screamed. His orbital assault uniform repelled the bullet, but the high impact round still did significant damage. Uncle Samantha ran an internal scan and concluded that Salvatore had a cracked femur and internal bleeding.

“Everyone, move deeper under cover,” said Mo, “Stay low until we figure it out. Garcia, dissolve bomb the doorway.”

The Space Marines were in action before Mo finished giving the order. More rounds fired at complex angles off the door. One took Blakke in the back, damaging her pack. The

rest of the squad crawled deeper into the processing chamber's command center, while Garcia grabbed a small explosive device from his pack and tossed it up and over the top of the ajar security door. Three security turrets detected the motion of the descending bomb and opened fire before it reached the floor. The bomb exploded and released its payload of solvent mist. Immediately, the containment foam started to dissolve. Collins and Garcia slammed the door closed and locked the hatch.

"Door's secure, Alpha!" said Collins.

"Status report, Sam," said Mo in a calm voice. "Analyze yourself first. Deep scan."

"Affirmative, Alpha Rex." The military AI ran a diagnostic on its programming and subroutines. It then opened a private virtual vault within itself and used another diagnostic program software code named 'The Orbital Inquisition' to give a second diagnosis. All analysis confirmed that the military artificial intelligence assistant code named 'Uncle Sam' was functioning perfectly. Once that was cleared, Uncle Samantha – as the soldiers called the female voiced AI – assessed every Space Marine in Alpha company and then the jettisoned Bravo company and their pilot, Captain Vrett.

"My status cleared. All 10 members of Alpha company are alive, only Salvatore is harmed. Splint his leg immediately."

"On it," said Nyguenson.

Samantha continued, "However, I have lost contact beyond this squadron. I am unable to reach mission control, Bravo company, Captain Vrett or SE One Two. Also, Gatehouse security remains non-responsive. Their status remains unknown."

Mo paused a moment to consider his options. *Collins was right, all of their tech was supposed to be safeguarded from level 2 close encounters. But there had never been a CE2 event of this magnitude before. This was something else.*

"We need an exit, sir," said Nyguenson, who was bent over Salvatore's leg and applying the medical brace. "Want me to toss in another dissolver?"

They did need an exit, Mo thought. Protocol indicated that the foam needed to be dissolved and then disable the turrets with their recon drones, sniper rounds, or use the Gatehouse's military grade heavy sentry drones – nicknamed the Walking Doom; however, the surfaces had other weaponry the Space Marines had to contend with and Mo wasn't sure if they wanted to exhaust all of their arsenal fighting the security protocols of one room. And as far as he knew, the sentry drones were where they belonged, watching over the inmates.

"No, we have to find out who or what is controlling the security measures and shut it down. And nothing is coming in behind us without us knowing about it. We proceed with caution into the cell blocks. Verify no other guests have escaped."

"It's Kreig," said Rondo. "There's no mystery. It's Kreig."

"What if we have to emergency evac?" Nyguenson persisted. "Be nice to have an exit by the space elevator."

Nyguenson, like most members of Alpha team, believed he was Rex material and would be Mohamed's eventual successor. The difference was, Gunther Nyguenson didn't hide his ambitions as well as the rest of the Alpha team members.

"We can free fall from anywhere," said Mo. "Make our own exit if we have to. Now this is the plan. We find the source of the disturbance, correct it, and confine or neutralize any targets along the way."

"Yes sir," replied Alpha team.

"Scent trail detected," said Sam. "Ammonia and Lothgurian musk."

"Where's it headed?" Mo asked. His OAU's enhanced senses allowed him to detect the odor as well – like fresh urine combined with sweat.

"Towards the Decagon security door?" asked Blakke.

"Good, we were going that direction anyway," Mo said and reduced the OAU's scent intake and inhaled the sage scent he had smudged in his helmet. "Rondo, you've got point."

Alpha team continued down the command center hallway on foot, walking was slower, but it also allowed them to keep their bodies under control and out of freefall and it kept their hands free. Their boots had soft magnet soles, which allowed them to walk along any of the Gatehouse's inner surfaces. The soles also reduced the vibrations and sound to hide their movements in the dark. Their pan-optics continued to scan their surroundings. But the only sound they heard in the whole complex was the faint humming of their life

support systems and the soft pad of their footsteps. The latter they were trained to tune out, it soon became as normal as ignoring your natural breathing. Only when it stopped making noise was it alarming.

The team gathered at the Processing Chamber's rear security door.

"Be nice to get a peek inside before we open the doors to this surprise party," said Rondo.

"Should we blow the hatch?" asked Salvatore.

Up above them was the sealed hatch to the Wheel Watch guardhouse; it was a sniper's nest and office for the Dec Rex that overlooked the other guardhouses and the cellblocks.

"Negative," said Mo. "Sam, see what you can do."

The AI attempted to open the hatch and determine what lay inside. The results were negative.

"Sam says the nest is vacant and the door is locked. We proceed through this door. We know what's next. Beyond this security door was the Decagon Wheel, which contains the holding cells of all of the extraterrestrial inmates. This is it!"

The marines took their places at the door. Weapons ready and their OAU's infinite eyes sharp.

Rondo pressed the keypad.

Nothing happened.

"This one's locked too, Rex," said Rondo.

"Sam, you got a key for this one?" asked Mo.

"Affirmative" said Sam. "This doorway is responsive."

"How?" asked Collins.

"Unknown," replied the AI.

The thick high tungsten alloy doors opened. What they should have seen on the other side was the inner workings of the cell block known as the Decagon Wheel. The external housing of the cell block was an enormous armor-plated cylinder, the size of a spaceport hangar. However, within the housing were rows of prison blocks suspended around a central axel – it reminded Mo of a carnival wheel enclosed in a giant NewLak grain silo. Usually, the inside of the cylinder housing was brightly lit with dozens of security drones in constant patrol of the inner space between the cylinder and the Wheel. The corridors connecting the Gatehouse to the Decagon's axel were made of the transparent nano-diamond tubes, so all who used the pathways were visible to the drones and personnel, especially the Dec Rex and his sniper scope. Inside the tube were connecting walkways and stairs made of metal grating.

But what greeted them instead was a cavern of total darkness.

Even the marines' pan-optics night vision struggled to give a clear image in its fusion mode of infrared illuminator and echolocation. As they had drilled, the soldiers walked along the corridor even with limited sight.

"Ever feel like you're walking on a cheese grater in a hamster tube?" said Rondo.

"You say that every time," said Garcia.

"I feel like it every time. Even in the dark."

"Guardhouse 10 up ahead," said Mo. "Sam, do another scan."

"No signs of life. No signs of ... Movement detected outside the tube."

"Deadstick drones?" asked Collins.

"Affirmative," acknowledged Sam. "All external Decagon security drones are offline and adrift."

"Sam, what about inside the tube? What's the status of the Dec guards, sentry, and tac mops?"

"All unavailable," said the AI. "No contact with security or maintenance, and all scans for life signs are negative. Only three containment units were unauthorized breach. Lothgurian, Xoidian, and Symbiote Colony."

Besides the inseparable Symbiote Colony, no inmates shared a cell. In fact, most cells were empty before the ISRS went dark. Now Mo worried that all of them were.

"Keep moving," said Mo. "Stay sharp."

"What about Krieg?" asked Rondo.

"I'm fine, Alpha Rex," the voice said over the intercom. "Just waiting for you to join me."

"How did you get on this channel? Did you release the others? Did you shut down the entire International Satellite Ring System?"

"All will be explained once you arrive. I trust you remember the way."

Rondo approached Mo and squeezed his arm three times. Mo understood. The two men approached the rest of their teammates and gave them the same non-verbal signal.

"Kreig, where are the other inmates?"

Silence was the only answer.

"What now, Alpha? We walking into this trap?" asked Muller.

"Affirmative," Mo said.

"This isn't wise," said Nyguenson. "We're being herded. Those turrets don't miss. It wasn't luck that we all escaped."

"Speak for yourself," said Salvatore.

Mo turned and addressed his team. "If any of these prisoners escape, we will be at ground zero for an intergalactic war. Now deep in this labyrinth is the creature, Kreig, we believe is responsible for our current situation. Let's find it and persuade it to stop."

"Think it took out all the Dec guards?" asked Blakke. Besides the automated security, twenty elite Space Marines took shifts around the clock guarding the Decagon Wheel cell blocks. Mohamed and the other Space Marines all wanted to be selected for Decagon duty. It was the highest honor in the corps, other than Decagon Rex.

"Affirmative," said Mo.

The marines proceeded down the nano-diamond tube. They found there was less debris in the passageway as they reached Guardhouse Ten.

"Any update on our Lothgurian escapee?"

"Scent trail detected," said Sam. "Ammonia and the musk of a Lothgurian. Scanning. Path detected. Signs of prehensile whisker prints along the corridor towards the cell block."

"Towards?" Garcia asked.

"Affirmative."

"They can't last long outside of their tanks," said Rondo. "It went back to gulp piss water."

Mo motioned and the Space Marines ascended the metal grating staircase. Each level of Decagon had a guardhouse that watched the corridor. The Walking Doom sentry drones patrolled the hallways at irregular times, their heavy footsteps could be felt a cell block away. Tactical dry mops also monitored the corridors while they cleaned the surfaces. Other than that, there was seldom any movement within the cell blocks at any given time.

"This isn't right," said Nyguenson. "We're just waiting to be the punchline of a bad joke."

"Shut it, Gunther," said Rondo.

"Keep moving, both of you," said Mo. "Sam, confirm which rack is Kreig's."

"Block 10, cell 19," answered Sam. "Warning! There is a large heat signature in its cell."

"Let's hustle."

Alerts went off in the marines' helmets. Each cell block had a guardhouse with a fortified sniper's nest at the entry, and their pan-optics bullseyed three targets moving within the one ahead of them. What they found was an empty Dec guard tac suit floating above the sniper's nest. Beside it drifted an empty helmet and a sniper rifle. Ahead of them in the corridor, the floor's tactical dry mop had lost its maglev tread and slowly ricocheted between the walls. However, the drone sentries at the far end of the corridor remained affixed to their charging stations. Technically, the ambulatory sentries' presence onboard the ISRS violated the agreement of nations, they were variants of walking military drones and possessed massive firepower that could critically damage the International Satellite Ring System. However, due to the security risk of the occupants of the Decagon Wheel, the battlefield drones' presence on the skyrings was not advertised and overlooked by the United Nations.

"Sam, identify the suit," said Mo. But he didn't need her verification. He already knew who it was. "Verify this was a Symbiote kill."

"That uniform was assigned to Captain Bruce Forester. Analysis confirms the state of the uniform is consistent with a Symbiote Colony attack."

"How?" asked Garcia. "Is the suit defective? What about the other Dec guards?"

"Let's find out," said Mo. "Garcia, you're with me. The rest of you stay alert. Watch for slime and sand."

Garcia did a manual exam of the floating suit. He checked the seals and helmet's integrity. Sam confirmed what Garcia's eyes told him.

"The suit is in perfect working order," said Garcia. "No blood, no entry points. He must have taken it off for some reason."

"Any idea why?"

"I know who to ask," said Rondo

Mo nodded and he signaled for the team to follow him. They made their way up the staircase to cell block 10. Rondo peered around the corner and confirmed one door was open. Slowly, the marines made their way down the corridor. The cell block walls had a smooth, iridescent indigo sheen; they were composed of a tungsten and rhenium alloy base combined with a classified third element making it the strongest and most heat resistant metal known to mankind. It also was a poor conductor, and blocked electrical current and radio transmissions.

"Schrödinger's cat," said Mo. They needed to visually check each cell to see if it was occupied and if so, were the occupants alive or dead.

There were no surprises until they arrived at the Lothgurian cell. The 'hairy catfish with legs', as Rondo called it, was back in the ammonia tank and it looked miserable.

"Maybe it drank too much," Blakke suggested.

"Good," said Garcia. "I hope the bloodsucker chokes on it."

"Target is back in the cell," said Mo. "We'll investigate the bearded catfish later. Close the door and let's move on."

Kreig's cell was at the end of the hall. The marines returned to their formation, continuing to check the porthole of each cell as they passed and confirming that the cell doors were secure. Finally, they reached their target.

Mo opened the porthole to their objective's cell. Kreig almost looked like a Caucasian middle school boy with a bad haircut. Almost. What was unnerving about Kreig is that its facial features were unnervingly symmetrical and it seldom blinked or took a breath. It wore its loose orange prison uniform and floated barefoot and cross legged in the middle of its cell, before it was a sparking oxygen candle spinning clockwise. The candle was the source of the tremendous heat signature.

"We're here, Kreig," Mo said into his transmitter to see if it would work with the cellblock receiver. "Turn on the lights."

"You think I want to be in here playing spin the candle by myself?" said the prisoner through the functioning intercom. "C'mon Alpha Rex. You know I've got better things to watch than this spinning candle."

Mo knew that Kreig was fascinated by human broadcasts. On a couple of occasions, Mo and Rondo had been selected to escort Kreig to an interrogation room when the Dec got a new occupant. A couple centuries ago, when Kreig was captured, it agreed to be a translator and share its knowledge of other species. Kreig's assistance was invaluable. However, for its cooperation, it was given a high-security prison cell deep beneath New Mexico. All it asked for was a television and a radio. The alien had been addicted to human broadcast programming ever since.

"You love it so much, why did you cut the lights?" asked Mo.

Kreig held up its smooth hands, shrugged, smiled, and said, "I missed you guys."

"You going to tell us, or do I have to spark it out of you?" Rondo asked and removed his stun baton from his pack.

"I thought you were enjoying your stay," said Mo.

"Oh, I love quarantine. And I don't mind being your inhuman guinea pig. Say, are the other prisoners dead, yet?"

"Never mind that. What is your plan?"

"I'm celebrating and I need you here to say goodbye. This is my going away party. I'm going to blow out the candle and make a wish."

"Step away from the door!" Mo ordered his team.

Kreig blew on the spinning oxygen candle and all of the Space Marine's pan-optics went dead. In fact, all of their suits' other amplified senses vanished along with the slight hum of their life support systems. They were deaf and blind and would soon suffocate. But through their soft mag soles, the soldiers could feel the vibrations in the floor. Heavy,

thudding footsteps. The Walking Doom sentries were back online and coming towards them.

Find the Author

 [Amazon | Peter J. Gilbertson](#)

 [X | @PeteJGilbertson](#)



We Are Stardust

by Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

Commander Nyoka gasped when her capsule opened. Around her, hissing airlocks signaled the awakening of her crew. Nyoka grabbed the sides of her pod and hoisted herself out. The subsystems designed to maintain muscle mass couldn't hold a candle to good, old-fashioned exercise, but they were a hell of a lot better than waking up from 45 years of atrophy.

"DAISy, give me a report." Nyoka said. A large screen blinked on to display the status of the vessel and the awakening crew.

A pleasant voice replied, "The crew is healthy. Everything is working properly, Commander. How was your rest?"

"Damn it, DAISy, you know I hate being under. Calling it 'rest' won't help. Rivera, are you awake yet?"

"Yes, ma'am. Up and feeling fine." Rivera sat on the floor stretching her legs and back. "I don't understand why you hate being under so much."

A man climbing from a pod said, "I'm with Commander. It's unnatural. There's no telling what could have happened while you were out." His legs wobbled beneath him, but he began to dress in his uniform.

"You've been awake less than a minute, and already you're kissing Nyoka's ass?" A fourth crewmember clambered out of a capsule labeled *Lt. Massoud*. She, too, began a repertoire of stretches.

"Massoud, I need you to go through DAISy's scans of the planet; mark anything that looks promising. Hughes, make sure the drones brought back enough samples. Run whatever we have through the full gamut. Rivera, stick with me, we're headed to the bridge. I'm ready to see this rock with my own eyes."

Nyoka strode through the glistening corridors. Walking calmed her nerves. The doors to the bridge slid apart with a soft *whir*. A world of chrome stood before her, and she entered it without hesitation. After sitting in her chair, she pulled in a lungful of air and held it. She released it when her chest tingled. "DAISy, open the blast shields and activate the radiation filters."

"It would be my pleasure, Commander."

Two metallic clunks sounded off before the steady buzz of unseen mechanisms filled the bridge. As the gap between each half-shield grew, a brilliant light shone through the solar screen. The light took on a greenish hue from the radiation filters. Commander Nyoka looked out at the dwarf star, her eyes squinting. A jagged round silhouette moved across the field of light.

"Oh my god," Rivera whispered.

"Welcome to Petram II, Private Rivera."

Commander Nyoka double-checked all the readouts from the planetary scans. While she did pay special attention to the bits Lieutenant Massoud brought to the forefront, she could never bring herself to completely trust someone else's analysis. Whenever she tried, something nagged her mind until she inevitably went through all the data for herself anyway.

"You're sure these oxygen levels are correct?" Nyoka asked.

Massoud rolled her eyes, "Yes. Why do I even go through the scans if you're going to second guess me at every point?"

"They seem a little high to me." Nyoka replied, ignoring Massoud's question.

"It's definitely higher concentrations than Earth, but it's within the parameters. Why are you even looking at the atmospheric readings? They're all in the right ranges. Did you see the level of speciation in plant life? It's incredible."

Nyoka flicked her wrist a few times and the display screens slid away from her, replaced by subsequent pages. She bit the inside of her cheek as she read Massoud's note. "You think it's because of the atmosphere?"

"My best guess is the high concentrations of carbon dioxide make it easier for plants to thrive, but... the levels of sunlight are so much lower. It's confusing for sure."

"And what do you make of the samples we have?"

Massoud looked at Hughes. Nyoka could tell neither was sure who she expected to answer. She looked up at Hughes.

"Uh, that's the other thing that's very strange. The plants aren't wild like they should be."

"What do you mean?"

"Like... The fruit is too... fruity." Nyoka's face must have conveyed her confusion, because Hughes began to explain himself. "I mean, it's too fleshy. The seeds are mostly small, and the sugar content is way higher than we would have expected. It's like they're..."

"Delicious?" Rivera offered.

"Domesticated," Hughes finished.

That night, Nyoka couldn't sleep. *Technically, it isn't night*, she reminded herself, as she lay awake in the dark cabin. The small planet rotated much faster than Earth, and was orbiting a much smaller star. She chuckled to herself as she thought of Rivera's nickname for it: Earth Junior.

In nearly every measurable way, Petram II seemed ideal for human settlement, but Nyoka wondered what, if any, long term effects there might be from the shorter day-night cycles and solar years. Would her descendants still strive to maintain 24-hour schedules when there was no astronomical reason to? Would they adopt an entirely new calendar or shoehorn earth's onto this new little world?

However, these were only the questions Nyoka used to avoid the one actually keeping her awake.

Domesticated. Despite her efforts, the word kept creeping into her thoughts, a persistent leak in an otherwise impenetrable dam. *Domesticated?* She imagined the word as a tiny acrobat spinning about a bar, somehow gaining inexplicable speed. She felt that if she could stop the acrobat's spinning—slow it down, subject it to the forces of friction that it would experience if it existed outside her mind—she could begin to theorize and hypothesize. But she couldn't. And it kept spinning.

Eventually, she rose from her bed and instructed DAISy to begin her morning routine. Artificial light replaced the artificial dark. It was refracted and re-focused through various lenses to trick the brain into seeing warm sunbeams and a Rayleigh-scattered sky.

Nyoka lost count as she ground out her push-ups, pull-ups, and squats. The acrobat accelerated still. *Domesticated*.

Official protocol dictated that Rivera and Massoud would be the first to visit the surface, and Nyoka hated it.

The shuttle dwindled to a tiny pinprick of glinting starlight before bursting into a reddish stream of fire.

Rivera to ESS Exodus, do you copy?

"We copy, Rivera. How're things?"

Atmospheric entry is going smoothly. We're leveling out. No signs of civilization. Nothing unexpected. It's just a massive, indigo, wonderland.

"Copy that, Rivera. Keep us posted."

Nyoka would have given anything to be on that first shuttle. *Anything except my command post*.

Hughes offered a sympathetic smile. "Cheer up, Commander. We'll have our turn."

Nyoka rushed back to the communications console.

"Say again for ESS Exodus. Repeat, say again for ESS Exodus." Hughes' voice was higher-pitched than Nyoka had ever heard it before.

No response.

"Exodus to ground team, do you copy?"

No response.

"Come in ground team."

The silence tore holes in them both. It stretched from fear to agony.

"Ground team, come in," Hughes repeated the command limply.

Sorry! Sorry Exodus! We read you loud and clear. We are OK. Repeat, we are Oscar Kilo. Rivera stopped talking, but the transmission didn't cut out. Nyoka could hear... something—voices?—in the background. High pitched, babbling sounds. Then Massoud laughing.

Apologies Exodus. This is Massoud on ground team. Rivera is preoccupied. You're not going to believe this. There are people here.

Nyoka couldn't slow her heart rate nor control her breathing. The tiny acrobat's speed became unmanageable and it careened off the bar, launching into orbit. Nyoka was walk-jogging to the docking bay where Massoud and Rivera had recently offboarded.

Both women were smiling, laughing. *Do they not understand the problem?* They looked like teenagers unloading a bus that had arrived home from summer camp.

"Rivera, Massoud, I need an immediate debrief."

"Of course, Commander," Massoud said without turning to face her superior. "I need to get these recordings into—"

"You need to obey direct orders." Nyoka strode from the bay without looking back. Echoing footsteps in the glimmering hallway told her they chose to follow. In the distorted reflection overhead, Nyoka could see the two exchanging looks and shrugs.

As soon as they entered the command office, Nyoka rounded on them.

"Explain yourselves immediately." She squeezed the words roughly through teeth clenched shut.

Rivera opened her mouth, about to speak, but Massoud lifted her hand, silencing her. "This hardly concerns Private Rivera. Everything she did was done on my watch; with my approval."

Nyoka's face fell deadly calm, a smooth mask of composure. "Rivera, you are dismissed."

The younger woman looked sick, but saluted and made her exit. Massoud didn't turn to watch her leave, opting instead to meet Nyoka's unflinching gaze. For a moment that stretched out awkwardly, the small office was filled with the silence of a hidden predator. Nyoka refused to fill the void, refused to repeat herself. She waited for Massoud's explanation, and she would wait till Petram II's young, red star burned itself out, if she had to.

"They aren't dangerous," Massoud broke first.

"You can't know that. Your choice to interact with an alien species was beyond reckless."

"We didn't choose to interact with them. They came out of nowhere. If they had intended to harm us, they would have had ample opportunity. They're... Primitive..." Massoud hesitated and made a face like the word was sour in her mouth. "... simple. No clothing, no tools that we saw. Highly curious. Shockingly gentle. Kind even."

Nyoka tried to keep her face stony and unreadable, but she could not hide her bafflement. "They are an alien species about which we know nothing."

"All the more reason for us to interact with them and learn from them!"

Nyoka abandoned all efforts to stay calm, "How arrogant do you have to be to think you can possibly draw any conclusions about their behavior? They evolved on a planet trillions of kilometers from Earth—"

"In an environment that so closely matches Earth we came to try it out for ourselves!"

"Do you even hear yourself?! They are an alien species!"

"We're the aliens here!"

The words hung dangerously in the air, a mist or fog through which Nyoka couldn't see. "We are pioneering a path forward for humanity."

Massoud's temper subsided. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "What if that path is set to barrel over the only other intelligent life discovered in the universe? That's not what we signed up for and you know it."

Nyoka furrowed her brow. "I know." Her anger had dissipated as well. "You're dismissed." The words came out soft as a fluttering of moth wings.

Massoud turned to leave, but hesitated. "If my actions on-world jeopardized our safety... I don't think they did but... you're right that I can't know for sure. I'm sorry, Commander."

"Apology accepted. Tell Rivera I want to see that footage."

Rivera and Massoud huddled around Nyoka and Hughes as they watched the footage from the ground expedition, anxious to share their incredible discovery.

Nyoka held her breath when the creatures came into frame. Massoud was correct, they had come out of nowhere. Rivera and Massoud trudged through the jungle, thick with deep purple foliage and bulbous fruits in dozens of colors. Then, without warning, Rivera spun on her heels to face... a face. Two eyes, a nose with two nostrils, a narrow mouth with white teeth, and presumably ears beneath a shock of dark hair. The camera jerked a bit and soon was being held at an odd angle extremely close to the too-human face. Off screen, Rivera's shout of fright quickly evolved into laughter.

"Their hands were strong, but so delicate. It actually tickled," she explained.

Then, on the video, the camera dropped to the ground. From that less-than ideal vantage point, the five Petrans (as Nyoka decided to call them) could sort of be seen grasping, twisting, turning, examining Rivera and Massoud.

Massoud asked repeatedly in the recording if Rivera were seeing the same thing. Neither could believe what was happening. Neither seemed shaken to their core by it though, Nyoka noticed. Bewildered, sure, but not afraid. Not wary. Rivera extricated herself from the hands of her kindly captors and rushed over to the camera, picking it up and remounting it on her shoulder. Then her first call to the Exodus occurred.

"There are people down here!" She said into her radio. Her words were a rush of excitement, easily mistaken for fear in a moment of unclarity. As soon as she finished, the device was snatched from her by a Petran, who darted away to show the now squawking box to his compatriots.

Nyoka felt her cheeks warm with embarrassment as she heard Hughes' desperate calls and remembered her own frantic thoughts. *It's not foolish to worry about your crew*, she reminded herself.

Eventually, Rivera retrieved the comm from the creatures and gave the all-clear, but soon they had lifted her off her feet and spun her in a playful circle. That's when Massoud managed to snag the comm. All Nyoka could see was the drastic mismatch in physical size and strength.

The video cut out, starting up again after the ground crew had time to set up a drone to hold the camera. The remaining footage showed the two humans trying to communicate with a growing crowd of Petrans. Wild gestures and over-exaggerated gesticulations ensued until Rivera and Massoud were convinced the natives understood their intention to leave, but also to return again.

The screen went dark. Each crew member sat still, stewing in thought.

The crew sat around the table the next morning, their food waiting before them mostly untouched. Hughes spoke first. "We aren't alone." Obvious, but somehow still profound.

"We certainly aren't," Rivera replied.

"No one was supposed to live here. We sent probes ahead of us. Messages. It was supposed to be a lucky little rock waiting for us." Clearly, Hughes was thinking aloud. "We were so preoccupied with butting up against an advanced race, we never considered what we'd do against... them."

"They are so *new*." Massoud began voicing her own thoughts, hardly paying any attention to Hughes.

"So new," Rivera agreed.

"We can help them. We have tech that took our species hundreds of thousands of years to discover and invent. Imagine where we'd be if we'd had that since our infancy," Massoud said.

"I wonder how many there are in total. How many did you count?" Hughes asked.

"At one point we counted 50," Rivera answered. "We didn't see any children though."

"Makes sense; they'd keep them safely away from a possible threat," Hughes said.

"Of course, that's assuming their offspring are small in stature like those of earth," Rivera said.

"An assumption, true; but surely, it's a safe one, right? Even asexual reproduction would leave two smaller copies of the original organism. Unless... Do you think those *were* the offspring?" Hughes shook his head as he mused.

Rivera shrugged. "I suppose it's possible, but not likely. Their sex organs seemed developed and secondary sex characteristics were present. But then again, they seemed so naive and trusting."

"How many times have humans wondered what it would be like if a benevolent alien race came to help us thrive?" Massoud continued as if no one else were speaking. "That could be us! We could be their ancient legends, but... but true!"

"If we initiate the colony protocols, we'd crowd them off their own planet," said Hughes. "We can't settle—"

"Where else can we go?!" Nyoka finally spoke. "This was a one-way trip. You all knew that when you signed on. There are 275,000 humans on board this ship. They entrusted their survival to *us*. Are we supposed to leave them in stasis forever? Do you expect me to order a cast-off back into the void with no plan and no destination?"

"So, what do we do?" Rivera, the most junior member of the expedition, both in age and rank, looked at the other three.

For a long time, no one ventured to speak. Soon, all three of her crew members were looking at Nyoka, eyes pleading for guidance. Nyoka sighed. "Step one: figure out how to effectively communicate."

Before the shuttle touched down, a ring of Petrans had formed around the clearing. As Nyoka stepped onto the alien world, she could not shake the lightness she felt. Beyond the weaker gravity of a less massive planet, standing on the bluish grass surrounded by indigo leaves, something in Nyoka lifted. She was unreligious, but was tempted to describe the feeling as a burden lifted off of her soul. Had Massoud and Rivera experienced the same? Did Hughes feel it too?

"Wow," Hughes said as he disembarked behind her. "I can't believe we're here."

Soon, the Petrans had closed in around them. Nyoka wanted to be on guard, she wanted to be wary and make sure they couldn't box her in ... But at the same time, she now understood Massoud's judgment call.

Somehow, Nyoka was unable to feel at risk. Something about standing there felt right. As though all her life, every decision, the prudent and the foolish, had all been leading her to this exact moment. To doubt the perfection of the moment would have taken herculean effort. She didn't have it in her. Nyoka, who was distrustful by nature, found herself wanting to trust the goodness of this new species and new planet.

The crowd began to chatter and hum with the spoken words of an unknown language. Orange hands began to direct the two humans away from their ship. Their strength was insurmountable, but they did not use it harshly. Little by little, the Commander and Hughes were carried away by the sea of giants. Nyoka began to laugh. She didn't mean to and had trouble stopping it. Hughes joined in, and the Petrans as well.

From deep in her subconscious mind, the rational part of her brain which had been silenced by Petram II raised one last question. *Will I still laugh if they begin to hurt me?*

The undulating waves of Petran hands finally stopped when Hughes and Nyoka had been ushered into a grove of trees. The sun had begun to descend in the sky, but Nyoka reminded herself how short days would be here. DAISy assured her they had landed less than an hour ago.

Around them, Petrans, including children, gathered in what Nyoka assumed must be family units. A male, a female, and a few offspring. Nyoka scanned the area and saw dozens, maybe even a hundred, of such units.

From her right, a female Petran approached. The crowd grew quiet, waiting to hear what she would say. As she began to speak, Nyoka tried to breathe more shallowly, more silently, somehow feeling that if she were quiet enough, she'd be able to hear and understand the alien language. Of course, she still could not.

Then, the towering... woman—Nyoka hesitated to let herself think of them as women and men, but found she couldn't help categorizing Petrans in ways her brain could make

sense of—the woman crouched down into a squatting position and lowered her head. Nyoka shook her head, smiling; unsure, but not uneasy.

The Petran stood. She smiled, touched her nose, then her chin, then her nose again, and raised her voice to address the crowd. They responded with a joyful shout, before a number of Petrans brought forth a huge variety of fruits, which they lay before Nyoka and Hughes. They waited to see how the two humans would react.

Hughes eventually made a move. He lifted an oblong green fruit that resembled a papaya and took a bite. Beneath the green skin, bright pink flesh leaked bright pink juice, which streamed down Hughes' chin as he ate. Nyoka shrugged and picked out her own.

Rivera had been right all along. The fruit was delicious.

"Why adopt such a vulnerable position if it was supposed to show dominance?" Massoud said after the footage of Nyoka and Hughes's expedition had concluded.

Rivera nodded in agreement. "I can feel in my bones that they aren't dangerous." Then, as if she could feel Nyoka's doubt, "I know it's not scientific, Commander. I just... I don't know how else to say it. They don't want to hurt us. I don't even think they have weapons, much less hunt."

Nyoka hated to admit it, but now that she'd spent time on-world, she agreed. The Petrans were large and strong, but everything about them seemed gentle and non-violent. It was the least human thing about them.

As they spoke, a green notification light illuminated the corner of the display. "DAISy, you have a language analysis update?"

"Yes, Commander. Their spoken language is 53% similar to human languages. It is predominantly verbal, with 12 vowel-like phonemes and 35 consonant-like phonemes identified so far.

"However, I have identified a significant somatic element to the language; certain gestures and postures alter the meanings of otherwise identical or nearly identical sound-phrases. I created an algorithm to detect and categorize somatic components to help me quickly determine their meanings as they relate to verbal components. Would you like additional information, Commander?"

"No, thank you. Let me know when you are able to translate messages."

"With confidence levels set to 99.4% and an interval of half a percentage point, I should be able to translate messages in approximately 3,300 hours."

"In the meantime," Nyoka said, "There will be no more return trips. We can't jeopardize the mission with bad communication."

Rivera seemed the most disappointed by the news, but none were thrilled by the order.

"I don't like it any more than you do," Massoud had said, "But the Commander is right. Until we can reliably communicate with the Petrans, it's too risky to traipse about down. We can't botch this."

After their third week away, Hughes noticed that the clearing where they had been landing the shuttle was now lined with stones. Two nights later, Rivera noticed the stones had been painted with a phosphorescent pigment.

"They're guiding us back," she said. A tremor of melancholy shook her voice.

"For all we know, it could be a warning to stay away," Nyoka said without conviction.

The look Rivera shot in response stung Nyoka, but she absorbed it without breaking her stoic stare. She wanted to apologize. She wanted to further explain. She wanted to mitigate the damage to Rivera's view of her. But the words of her old commander played on loop in her head: *Never apologize when making the right call is unpopular.*

Her grandfather had a similar saying, one that functioned as a useful corollary: *An apology without a remedy is a tragedy.*

Manufactured daylight slowly filled her cabin as Nyoka's wake-up sequences initiated. She stretched, yawned, and stood, wiping sleep from her eyes. A small panel slid back revealing a freshly laundered towel, which she grabbed on her way to the washroom.

As she showered, she heard the other crew members starting their routines. Waiting for DAISy to finish analyzing the Petran language had left ample room for them to develop daily habits. They slipped into the comfortable numbness of familiar patterns even while standing at the boundary line of fantastic discovery.

Hughes' heavy, slapping footfalls echoed off the white tiles, and soon Nyoka heard his characteristic sigh when he first stepped into the hot water. Then came Massoud, whose initial arrival was less noticeable—she practically tiptoed to the shower—but whose presence couldn't be missed: she liked to stand just outside the shower and methodically crack the first knuckle of each finger while the stall filled with steam. Next up, Rivera, who always entered the bathroom whistling the same tune.

Nyoka once asked her about it. "It's an old song. My great-grandmother used to sing it to my grandmother, who sang it to my father, who sang it to me. But it's *much* older than that."

The commander waited for the melody to ring out. Her brain, expecting the music, kept hearing the first few notes.

But the whistling never came.

"Excuse me, Commander," DAISy's soft voice interrupted Nyoka's musing. "Private Rivera has taken a personal excursion pod to the surface."

"Well, someone should go after her!" Hughes sounded exasperated.

"No," Nyoka said after a lengthy pause. "No, the order stands. Until we can communicate, we can't risk extracting her. She's stubborn, and wouldn't come willingly. There are too many things that could go wrong."

"So... we just wait up here for 12 more weeks and hope Rivera survives?"

Massoud let out a sigh like a gouged tired. "Rivera is capable. The planet seems safe enough, and the pod has a first aid kit and radio. It's not like she can't call for help or come back if she gets into trouble."

"And if she gets us in trouble? What then?" Hughes pressed.

"Then we hope their language has a way to say 'We apologize for the rashness of our youngest member. Her actions are not representative of the goals we have for human-Petran relations.'"

"And that they are a forgiving people," Nyoka added.

DAISy's voice, programmed to sound unobtrusive even when she had to intrude, filled the recreation room. "Attention crew: a new message has been received."

Nyoka dropped from the pullup bar; Massoud tossed her table tennis paddle as a heater from Hughes flew past. The primary display lit up; the lights automatically dimmed for optimal viewing.

Rivera stood next to the stolen excursion pod wearing nothing but a look of unashamed surety. "Hello, this is Amelia Rivera, formerly of earth, recording a message for the crew of the ESS Exodus. The people you call Petrans have asked me to extend an invitation to you to join us for a celebration."

"She figured out how to communicate with them?!" Hughes said with impressed incredulity.

Nyoka hushed him with a glare so they could hear the recorded message.

"I have explained to them the nature and purpose of our arrival, and they wish to welcome you to their home. The People have a great desire to learn from you and hear stories of your home. Your arrival on the surface will be expected the morning of the second Petran day after you receive this transmission, approximately 30 hours from now. Although I can imagine you are quite angry with me, I hope you will accept this invitation. I also have a strong desire to speak with you. I have learned so much. I have so many answers. Answers to questions I didn't even know to ask." Then, something shifted as she signed off; a sliver of *Private Rivera* flashed on screen in place of *Amelia, formerly of earth*. "I miss you guys. Franklin, Sophia... even you Commander. Please come."

Despite spending the next full Petran day debating, the remaining crew of the Exodus eventually reached the decision unanimously. They would accept the invitation and all

three journey to the surface of Petram II, official protocol be damned.

To be safe, though, Nyoka put the entire Exodus on full lockdown as they loaded into the shuttle. The night before she'd had a nightmare that Rivera slipped back to the ship while they were gone and jettisoned the entire population into space. She awoke weeping, and it took her a long time to convince herself that it hadn't been real.

None of them spoke as they descended back to the seeming utopia. As the airlock seal broke and the door slid open, the delicious Petran air flooded the cabin. Nyoka's stress melted away. Her spirit ascended once more.

"Did you ever find any reason why it feels so right to be here?" Massoud asked her.

Nyoka shook her head. Here on the surface, in the midst of this bliss, trying to explain it away risked desecrating something wonderful.

Rivera, still naked, stood in the clearing a few meters from the tree line. She waved, and the Petrans with her waved too. Then she smiled, laughed, and beckoned them to her.

While they traveled, the leader of the Petrans, the woman Nyoka had met on her first excursion, spoke rapidly. Though the sound was strange, it was no stranger than hearing any non-native tongue spoken quickly. But as she spoke, her hands flashed in small movements, subtle twists and flicks of the wrist. Her shoulders moved in ways that didn't look quite natural and certainly weren't part of her stride. Occasionally she would half-raise an arm or quickly squat down low before shooting back up again. Trying to imagine learning such a language made Nyoka's head spin. As a girl, she'd struggled to rub her belly while patting her head.

"Multitasking," she had told her crew when they were training, "Is an ineffectual buffoon's excuse for doing many things poorly in a short amount of time."

She'd always preferred approaching problems methodically. So far, every dilemma she'd faced could be broken into steps and completed in order. But a form of communication like this... this extravagantly choreographed dance colliding with intricate sign language and audible vocalizations... How could anyone focus on so many parts at once?

And yet, Rivera was. After the first break in the Petran woman's speaking, Rivera turned to Nyoka and began to translate.

The Petrans watched intently as Massoud dug a small hole in the dirt. She took a fruit, split it open, and passed around the flesh. Then, she dug out a seed and showed it to the onlookers. They began to frown. She knelt beside her hole, but before she could place the seed within, the Petrans rushed forward and took the seed away from her. They laughed the way a parent might laugh after preventing a baby from touching an open flame.

"It's not possible," Rivera repeated herself. "They won't allow it."

Massoud's jaw clenched, her hands balled into fists, but the frustration dissipated quickly. It always did on the surface. "I'm confused then. They want to learn from us, but they won't actually do any of the things we try to teach them to do? What is the point of us working with them?"

"You're thinking about it wrong." Hughes began to explain. "You have to let go of the idea of superior or inferior. They have no concept of better or worse. Everything just is. They don't see themselves as needing our help. They don't see themselves as needing better tech. They have no interest in it"

"No, that's not it either," Rivera corrected him. "They *are* interested in how we fly, in how we traveled the heavens; they aren't against any of that, or indifferent to it. You're right that they don't see things in terms of *better* or *worse*, and they don't see themselves as *needing* our help or our tech, but they are certainly interested in it.

"More than once they asked me if they could visit our home. At first, they meant the Exodus, but when I explained it was only a vessel we used to travel from our home, they wanted me to take them to earth. It took me nearly two days to figure out how to explain to them that earth isn't habitable anymore.

"They don't have any words for death, decay, destruction, war, anything like that. They've got no concept of it. Nothing like that's ever happened here, according to them. I can't even figure out for sure how long they live or what they do with their dead, because they get confused and start to laugh and joke when I try to ask about their age. The closest thing to an answer I could get was that they are newer than the trees and the beasts."

"Riv... Amelia, please get to the point. Why won't they let me teach them basic agricultural strategies?" Massoud asked.

"It's the one thing they were told never to do. They can't plant seeds. It's forbidden."

"Told? By who? And if they don't plant how the hell did they end up with so many domesticated fruits?" A hint of exasperation climbed into Hughes' voice, but it floated away on the breeze.

"I... I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out. I think it's a religious thing. They won't let you plant seeds."

Nyoka leaned against a large, mossy rock and ate red berries that were large and chewy, with a thick skin that had the texture of citrus rind, but none of the bitterness. When she'd first tried one, the Petrans gave her the most quizzical look she'd ever seen as she tried to peel it. Now she knew the skin was edible and a great source of protein.

"I know you might not ever be able to forgive me." Rivera approached and leaned next to her. "And I know it must drive you crazy that I haven't apologized."

Not as crazy as knowing now you never will, Nyoka thought. What she said was, "I mostly wish I could understand why."

"Even if I tell you, I don't think you'll understand."

"Tell me anyway."

"All my life I've felt like there was something missing. I've always felt like there was something more to reality. That if I could only find it, everything would click."

"Everyone feels that way. It's part of being *human*." Nyoka emphasized the word to complete the thought without saying it: *And you are still human*.

"What if it's just part of being lost?"

Nyoka didn't respond, so Rivera continued. "For the first time in my life I feel like everything *has* clicked. I feel like I'm *not* lost in the universe. This place feels more like home than Earth ever did."

The unspoken subtext sent a pang of sadness and regret through Nyoka. *These aliens feel more like family than my crew ever did*.

"So, you're completely set on this course of action. You're not Private Rivera anymore." Nyoka's words came out as statements, though she meant them as questions.

"Not anymore, no. We both knew I'd eventually be on a different crew, right? It's not the leadership role you envisioned but..." Rivera trailed off when the lump rose into her throat.

Nyoka said nothing more, for there was nothing more to say.

The two of them stood there for a long while, listening to the familiar drone of unfamiliar creatures hiding in the grass.

Eventually, Massoud gave up her efforts to teach the Petrans to farm. Hughes began spending more time on the surface, eventually only returning to the Exodus to sleep, and that only because Nyoka had insisted on it.

The next thing I know, he'll be strutting around naked down there as well. Nyoka could feel control of the mission slipping away from her. Soon, both Massoud and Hughes had begun to use the Petran language. Neither took to it as Rivera had, but they became conversational soon enough.

What happens if they, too, decide they have no ties to humanity or earth? What do I do with over a quarter-million people if I can't ensure a steady food supply?

A notification flashed on Nyoka's HUD, bringing her back from the verge of a restless sleep. It read: AUDIO-VISUAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM COMPLETE.

DAISy projected a cyan-colored hologram of a genderless humanoid which danced and shook in a near perfect replication of the physical component of Petran. Meanwhile, the verbal portion of the message was playing through speakers cleverly hidden within the body of the projector. At the end of the message, the Petran woman smiled and began to respond.

DAISy translated the response: "Your people are welcome here; our fruit will be your fruit, and our children will live among your children."

"That's it?" Nyoka asked when DAISy stopped speaking. "Does that mean she'll allow us to begin planting?"

The holographic body began to move again, and DAISy conveyed the clarifying question.

"No, it cannot be. The seeds will fall where they may, and the fruit that grows will nourish all."

"But there are more of us than you realize," Nyoka said. "DAISy, double check that she understands the true number of people we have with us. Try to make her understand that there are thousands and thousands of us. Does she understand the magnitude of hundreds of thousands?"

"Commander, she is only repeating what she said. 'The seeds will fall where they may, and the fruit that grows will nourish all.'"

Commander Nyoka sat in her high-backed chair on the bridge, communicating with Breath, the apparent leader of the Petrans, remotely. Nyoka was convinced that meeting in person was folly. She needed to negotiate shrewdly and communicate clearly, neither of which she could do while under the influence of whatever Petram II did to her and her crew.

Nyoka let out a frustrated sigh. Whenever she tried to discuss quantities or measurable amounts, communication began to break down. DAISy, despite her incredible developments and the processing power she'd devoted to making communication possible, simply couldn't make the Petrans think in numbers.

"How many of you are there?"

"Enough of us."

"How much fruit do the various trees produce?"

"Enough for all."

"Is your population growing?"

"Our grandchildren have children, and theirs have children with children."

"At what rate do you have children?"

"When the time is right, they too, will have children of their own."

And so it went, talking in circles.

"DAISy, call the Lieutenant. I have an idea."

Breath looked up and around, a wild, wide-eyed look. Like a ravenous dog afraid to start eating, she took it in meekly. Her shoulders slumped some, and despite her stature, she appeared small, as if the chrome-bright world of human technology shrank her.

Nyoka took a bit of grim satisfaction at feeling like her point was finally understood.

"We are many. I worry that your home won't sustain all of us." Nyoka spoke and DAISy's hologram translated. "We need to plan for the future of my people and your people. The only way to ensure we can all thrive is to use land efficiently, plant seeds, and store surpluses."

Breath did not respond at first. She continued to gape at the rows and rows of stasis chambers nestled together like honeycomb cells.

Nyoka made use of the silence, explaining that in each slept a human who awaited a chance to begin a new life. She summoned a few to wipe away the frost and allow Breath to peer inside at the peaceful faces.

"Only you can help us."

When the Petran did speak, her whisper struggled to reach Nyoka, and her movements lacked enthusiasm. "May your seeds fall where we guide them, so that your people may find home with us."

Nyoka handed the seed to Breath, who knelt in the dirt. She placed the seed in a small hole and covered it with more soil. She patted it down. She held her breath.

Whatever consequences she braced herself for didn't seem to come. She smiled and stood.

Rivera burst into the clearing, shouting, "No! What are you doing?!" In her haste, she didn't think to translate. Rivera's eyes burned with betrayal, but she wasn't looking at Breath. "I told you they wouldn't plant seeds. How could you do this to them?"

"Do what?" Nyoka, at first merely baffled at the accusation, felt her cheeks warm as anger welled up in response. "I didn't do anything. Breath and I came to an agreement."

"Without my input. You went behind my back. You tricked them into helping you."

Breath looked confused and hurt as the two women shouted.

"You relinquished the privilege of providing input into my decisions, for one thing; and for another, I wasn't aware Breath had given you any kind of authority over her people. In fact, from where I've been sitting, it doesn't seem they have hierarchical structures. I seem to recall that 'they don't see things in terms of better and worse, superior or inferior.' Why would Breath be subordinate to you?"

"You could upset the entire balance of their ecosystem. Of their society. Their entire system of belief is based around a single command that you coerced her into breaking! They don't need more because they don't expect it. What do you think will happen when we teach to count and hoard and compare?"

Nyoka rolled her eyes at the melodrama. "I didn't coerce anyone. I found a way to express our needs in a way Breath could see and understand. I won't feel bad for helping them overcome a silly superstition, and I certainly won't feel guilty over making a way for *our* species to survive."

Hughes and Massoud rushed into the clearing, each anxious to learn the reason for the commotion. They stood frozen, looking back and forth. Rivera and Nyoka looked as though they were about to come to blows.

Breath stepped forward, hands held out, symbolically keeping the two women apart. "Amelia, all is well."

Both Nyoka and Rivera faced Breath, shocked to silence by her use of earth language. The words tumbled from her mouth without much grace, but as she continued, her confidence grew and the foreign tongue flowed more freely. She had been practicing in secret, it seemed.

"Your First One showed me the seeds of your people. I did not understand that seeds could bear such life. We will plant your seeds."

Rivera's wonderment spoiled into incredulity. "You told her the stasis pods were seeds?!"

Nyoka shook her head, freshly bewildered. "What? No. I showed her the stasis pods to help her see our numbers, so that—"

"To intimidate her? Did you threaten to take the planet by force?"

Massoud interjected, "No! We wanted her to see the magnitude of the food burden so she'd know why—"

"You preyed on their compassion. You obligated them to violate their own consciences to benefit an invasive species."

"Rivera, no! Are you listening to yourself? You sound delusional." Nyoka regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, but was too angry to say so.

"That's not what I meant." Massoud tried to salvage things. "Look, Amelia, this isn't a conspiracy to harm the Petrans."

Rivera took a deep breath and set her jaw. She started to speak, but did not finish, instead turning away from Nyoka. Breath wrapped a large arm around her and escorted her back towards the Petran settlement.

An inhuman scream rang out from beyond the trees, in the direction of the setting sun.

The orange-ish hue of Petran skin made the scene hard for Nyoka to decipher at first; the blood didn't contrast as strongly as it would have against the various shades of human flesh.

In the forest, a crumpled Petran man bled out on the ground, his face crushed. A second Petran stood horrified looking at his own hands smeared with the thickening crimson gore. At his feet, a drone bore violent red streaks.

Breath rushed over to hold the body and began to weep the deep, sobbing tears of a grief-stricken mother. Rivera, kneeling beside her, holding her, began to whisper something Nyoka could neither hear nor understand.

"What happened?" Nyoka asked.

Rivera glanced up and shook her head. "I told you it would upset the balance of their society."

Rivera's voice pulled Breath out of her mournful stupor. She turned to see Nyoka and rage filled her eyes. Slipping out of Rivera's embrace, she rose, towering over Nyoka, and

shrieked. Breath threw herself on Nyoka, her large fingers grasping at the commander's throat.

Nyoka tried to force open the iron claws and kicked wildly to make Breath release her, but she had the smell of blood in her nostrils.

Rivera launched herself onto Breath's back, shouting, "Stop! Don't do this! Please stop!" Breath shrugged and forced her elbow back, throwing Rivera off. She crashed against a tree and fell to the ground in a heap.

The dark black fathoms of empty space crept into the edges of Nyoka's eyesight. At the end of the tunnel was no light; only the furious, almost-human face of her assailant.

A quick, hissing hum preceded a sizzle. The smell of seared flesh wafted up from the delicate hole in Breath's forehead. She fell limply to the forest floor.

Hughes dropped the weapon and sat heavily.

Nyoka coughed up a bit of blood and sucked in air. Oxygen re-awakened her brain. She rose and stumbled to Rivera.

Her head had twisted to an unnatural angle, but she was awake. Her breath came in short gasps. Unswallowed saliva bubbled out as she spoke, "Do you remember the song my father taught me?"

Nyoka nodded, the motion shaking loose the tears which clung to her eyelids. They fell onto Rivera's skin and glistened like stars.

"Sing it?"

Nyoka swallowed hard, sniffled, and wiped her eyes. She took a deep breath and began to sing, "*I came upon a child of God, he was walking along the road; And I asked him 'Where are you going?' And this he told me...*"

Find the Author

 [OneWheelOneil.com](https://www.OneWheelOneil.com)

 [X | @OneWheelOneil](https://twitter.com/X_OneWheelOneil)



Serial

Shadow of the Black Tower

by Jason H. Abbott

“Before I speak my tale, my queen, you must know this: That long before the rise of Aeola began our Age and kingdoms spread across the world — before the empire of Mnar and the doom of fabled Sarnath, before the oceans drank the gleaming cities, and indeed long before the first stone of Atlantis was laid — there were strange aeons bereft of men. That beneath a mantle of stars of which our ignorance is a blessing, there once strode great old ones and elder things within now nameless cities...”

—Scythea, Chronicler of Agamenaë



Chapter Seven: The Path

Skalos put his foot on the last rib of the buttress, his back and limbs aching from the ascent. All were weary after a furlong's length climbed bent on hands and knees. And the scribe traversed the harsh angle of the stairless trek with the added burden of his carrying yoke.

He watched as Korr pulled himself up and onto the level apex they'd reached, leaving him alone on the alien rampway. One hand braced his pole and its affixed, swaying coils of rope over his shoulder. His free arm gripped the stone masonry above. He strained to crest and flop his body past its edge, but the muscled Borean bent down and hoisted him the rest of the way.

"Don't fall, Runt," he said.

Plopped atop black schist tile, Skalos caught his breath. "Thank you."

The barbarian lowered his own heavy bundle onto the walkway next to where he'd laid him. "I didn't want the ropes to drop with you."

Unlike their climb up, the top of the buttress was flat aside from cracks and pitting from age. But like the ramp, it was bereft of any wall or railing to prevent a misstep and plummet to sure death. Gradual structural tapering narrowed the apex to a width of twenty feet from a base of about twice that on the ground. Their last steps to reach the black tower would be along a straight, elevated path to a doorless, arched portal, perhaps another furlong away.

Tetree stretched where she stood, hands on her lower back. "I sense no wards ahead. We will continue after a few minutes' rest."

Korr flexed his thick neck and shoulders with a stretch of his own, and the noise of the waterfalls rumbled a hundred yards below them. After a grunt of relief, he scrutinized the curved side of the spire, now blotting out most of the view of the crater behind it. "There

are no walkways to the other entrances up here. If we can't enter, we'll need to climb down and scale up to another one."

"Let's hope not," she said, gazing out in the opposite direction, to the vista of the river and the island of the tower between its forks. "Midday waits for no one. I wish to be claiming the treasure at that opportune time."

"We won't attain that without luck and haste, and if those are not with us?" the warrior asked.

"Midnight, but the dangers will be far greater."

The witch scanned the ruined courtyard they had passed through from their high vantage. She turned away after only a moment, addressing Skalos as Addala helped him to his feet. "Do not look to the way we came: What you glimpsed of the mandala before almost broke you, seeing it whole from up here will be your end."

"I'll abide your advice," he said, standing. "I decided the same as we climbed."

"About all that," Korr said. "What you spoke about back there, Söyt. Were you saying the runt's a wizard, or he could be?"

Hands between the scholar and the slave, still intertwined, clasped tighter as the question hung in the air.

Tetree's intense stare fell on Skalos, as did the unsettling focus accompanying her use of magic. It lingered and held.

"I will say, could be," she said, prior to a laugh. "If he desired it. Perhaps, if he hardened his mind and soul with years of training, but I doubt the strength of his metal to withstand the strains of it."

"It's fortunate I harbor no desire to learn sorcery, then," the scribe said.

"Oh, but there's the rub," she said. "You'd already stumbled onto the path before your lucid moment an hour ago."

"You're the only practitioner of magic I've ever met, and you have taught me nothing."

"No, and I never will. To almost all Sycoraxians, a man practicing the Craft of Creation is an abomination. Something to be killed outright. Be grateful the heretical liberalities contributing to my exile extend far enough to tolerate your potential."

Korr turned his attention to the growing conversation he'd started. "Could you teach him something minor? Something quick? Anything to make him more useful." He cupped his hands as if rubbing a small sphere. "Little fireballs?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. Could you train him in swordsmanship during the time it will take us to walk to that doorway?"

The scribe spoke up as the barbarian grumbled over the witch's rebuke. "That's fine. I have never dabbled in the arcane, nor do I care to start."

"Oh, come now, Skalos," she said, spotting Addala's continued handholding with him. "A man of your expansive reading? Do you expect me to believe a curious scholar and librarian of Agamenaë, even a prodigy who hasn't reached his thirtieth year, never opened an eldritch tome from a forbidden shelf of apocrypha?"

He found no response, and the witch nodded. "Nameless, do let him go. He's up now and on his own feet."

"I have read lore," he said as her touch left him, "but never attempted to practice it."

"Which is evident," Tetree said. "You're no sorcerer, you're as untrained as a neophyte can be. Yet you do have the waking awareness of the dream that is the world. Few have it. Some are awakened later in life, but it's apparent in most from childhood. It can run in families or peoples, like the daughters of Sycorax. Lucidity is a gift, but not a prize won by choice. Tell me, how many languages do you speak?"

He hesitated; face puzzled before speaking. "What does—"

"Answer me. What is the breadth of your polyglotism?"

He thought another moment. "Depending on how you define fluency, several dozen."

"I've seen you encounter tongues unknown to you and be pidgining them in hours. Become confidently conversant in days. That's an impressive feat, be you a savant or not. You've had such formidable skills since boyhood, right?"

"Yes. You already knew as much from my reputation when you came to recruit me."

"True, but let me indulge," she said, motioning Addala to stand beside her with a point. "How many languages can you read?"

"About the same as I can speak."

"Quite spectacular, given those include dead tongues, some with no living speakers. Atlantean, Mnaric, and of course, you, *you*, have seemingly decoded the lost language of the Elders. All the greater, you perhaps can articulate its speech. Both achievements that have eluded erudite sages from antiquity until now. Furthermore, you performed this miraculity, while traveling wastelands with only ramshackle notes to aid you."

"I have, a particular talent."

"Precisely," she smiled. "I would call it, magical."

"It's not divination," Skalos said. "I am applying what I know with my thoughts and—"

"Perception?" she said, cutting him short. "I'm not accusing you of duplicity. Uncanny abilities are often signs of aptitude in those without knowledge of, or training in, the Craft of Creation. Minor, self-taught arcana honed by intuitive desire to subtly alter the weave of the world."

He recoiled a step as she finished her statement.

"I suspected this was the case with you for several months now," she said. "A useful, untrained expression of your lucidness and devotion to words. Your translation of the Elder's language removed any doubts. Your reaction to the mandala is evidence enough of prowess beyond what little potential you've unlocked thus far."

"What if I don't want this?" he asked. "You already doubt I have the strength for a wizard's life."

"Again, that's the rub," she said, eyes tightening. "You've been on the path since childhood. You just didn't realize it or encounter anyone or anything to broaden your vision. Now you know, and that alone won't help you. You see dangers no longer hidden, and they see you."

His face became haggard. "You called this a gift. It sounds like a curse to me."

She turned away. "It's both."

"What do I do?"

"Whatever you have to," she said, looking at the tower, "but you'll need to find teachers other than I. Come, Nameless, we've dawdled here long enough."

The women walked away, hooded Addala showing Skalos her concerned face before turning. As the scribe pondered what he'd been told with a troubled brow, Korr strode over beside him and started to retrieve his huge coil of rope.

He paused, rising to hunch at eye level with the shorter man after confirming Tetree was out of earshot.

"Learn to throw fireballs," he said, again cupping his hands as if rubbing a small sphere. "Decidedly handy."

The Borean scooped up his bundle. The Agamenaean sighed, draping arms over the carrying pole on his shoulders.

"You could improve your station," Korr said, glimpsing back to Skalos, who kept pace a step behind. "Fortunes are built upon wizardry. If you weren't trading your share of the treasure for a slave unworthy of it, you'd already be walking away with that."

He trained his gaze on Addala. "I'm buying her freedom, not her. Her choices thereafter are her own."

"Fine," the warrior said, "but you're still giving up too much for a woman. With wealth, a smart woman will marry you for free. Should you only want wenches, they're but a few coins a night."

"You appear to be satisfied with only one woman."

His laugh rolled, restrained but deep. "A night with Tetree is more satisfying than one with a dozen women. I know the comparison. But you have a point, and I'll relent. I'm as guilty as you for staking my fortune upon the fate of one woman."

"You are honorable. Thank you."

"I'll tell you this as you're so committed: She'll at least come to you unspoiled. Tetree confirmed it with inspection amid the slavers in Azeir before affixing her collar and removing her name. Getting a woman, not a girl, in such condition was important and expensive. She's kept Nameless untouched since, as you know quite well."

Skalos turned his head to Korr, silent for a moment as he read the Borean's stern but casual face looking forward and not at him. The scribe took a dry-mouthed swallow and spoke. "Did she say why it was important?"

"Something about the stars," he said. "It's often been about the stars and the elders as we've hunted the tower. Beyond that, she tells me little of magic. She says I have no mind for it."

"I see."

"Söyt mentioned she's comely under the black sack of a robe she slapped on her, too. She did that to block arising lustful eyes and complications. So, you could have that to enjoy as well, you runty dog."

The women reached the doorless arch at the end of the walkway and surveyed the gaping portal as the men arrived behind them. Halted at the threshold, they peered inside. Within, shadows reigned over a cavernous chamber of austere stonework, details hard to discern with eyes still accustomed to the brightness of day. A crooked shaft of dusty light broke the gloom of the spacious circular room filtering down from above.

Lesser sources of illumination and contrast in the darkness came from sparse slits and other doorless exits upon the curved outer wall. Skalos matched these to the shutterless windows of the structure, and the arches atop other buttress ramps, with a quick glance at the exterior.

"Again, I sense no wards," Tetree said, hovering her hand over the entrance without touching it.

Korr kneeled and examined the tiles under a doorway broad enough for them to pass through all four abreast. "The floor's stones are solid. No pressure plates or trip cord traps."

A turn of the scribe's head spied Addala looking up to the tip of the arch, and he assessed it as well. It was more than twice her height above them.

"The elders must have been giants," he said.

Hands running on the carved stone sides of the portal, Korr touched discolored rectangular depressions in the masonry. "There's a pattern of these on each side."

Attention drawn, the scholar scrutinized the indentations. "Holes for hinges, I think. Stained from metal long rusted away to nothing along with a double door."

The barbarian dipped a shallow nod and rose as the other man peered again to the top of the twelve-foot arch. Near its keystone, a lone patch of weedy growth dangled rooted into a crack in the stonework. About to turn away, he squinted, observing the gentle sway of a vine ending in a closed bud, despite the lack of a breeze.

"Shall we enter?" Korr asked Tetree.

Skalos crouched, slipping the carrying yoke off his shoulders before grabbing a fragment of schist masonry between two fingers. "Wait."

The others looked on as he stood and tossed the small rock into the bunched vegetation, and the plant's squamous tendrils slapped the wall and reared, reacting to the impact. As the thrown shard clattered back onto the floor, the vines twisted in unison to point at the Agamenaean. The buds on their tips unfurled in rapid flicks, creating a bouquet of five-pointed, blood red to pale yellow flowers.

Gruesome at the heart of each star-shaped bloom was a nearly human eye, blinking as petals contracted and splayed.

"Mother of Mithra!" Skalos said, stepping back and almost tripping over his discarded pole. Beside him, Korr drew his sword before Tetree stayed his arm with a touch.

"It's harmless," she said.

He lowered the blade. "Kronn's eyes! Are you sure?"

"What is it?" the scholar asked, unable to look away from the surreal mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque observing them.

"In Sycorax, we call these *meog*," she answered. "Quite benign. Well, they are poison if you eat them."

Skalos bumped into Addala, and her hands gripped him. Together they gaped at the thing uprooting itself, then its hitching and crawling to ascend the wall.

"They are both flora and fauna," Tetree said, the creature keeping all its eyes on them as it scooched away.

"Are they like watchdogs?" Korr asked, sheathing his weapon. "Guards?"

"What purpose do rosebushes serve?" she said. "A *meog* is no more useful. In my days as a lady-in-waiting at the Witch Queen's court, one of my duties was to tend her garden. It had several. Their crawling roots catch and drag detritus, and cleaning the paths after them was a true annoyance."

He shook his head and entered the tower. "Let's go."

Tetree regarded the swaying thing before following him. "They're found in places once favored by the Elders. I'm surprised we haven't encountered them together yet."

Left alone, Addala gave Skalos' hand a squeeze.

"Nameless, come along."

Tugged by the leash of sorcery, her body lurched away. Teeth clenched; she gripped the collar, walking backwards. He read her silent lips as they moved:

You were always magical to me.

Forced to turn, she caught sight of his nod and lightened expression as she passed into the tower.

Now abandoned, Skalos squatted down to collect his pole. He hesitated short of grabbing it. Instead, standing again, he faced the undulating meog as it kept inching itself away.

"Li... ock," he whispered to himself, approximating the Elder's speech. "Master's flower. Perhaps *me-og* is a corruption of that root."

Thumb tapping his chin, he peered at the thing and found it no longer moving away. Its eyes wavered, then blinked at him in unison.

"Li-ock," he repeated.

It began to inch its way back down.

Skalos drew in a breath, shocked, then spoke again. "St-eck."

The meog stopped.

"Li-ock, dee," he said, curling his fingers into a beckon. Again, it started a descent towards him.

One hand rubbed away a tremble in his other. "It responds to its name. It stops and comes at the command of the Elder's words. Does it obey them through some glint of intellect or instinct? Perhaps the language itself holds a power?"

He unclasped now steady hands. "Or is the origin from within myself? A step further down the path that could destroy me."

"Oh, come on, Runt!" Korr shouted unseen. "Are you having a bout of cowardice out there?"

He turned away from the approaching meog and redonned his carrying yoke.

"We're going to need all the rope you've got!"

Face heavy with thought, he stepped toward the entrance. Almost under its arch, he saw the vegetative creature reach its original spot near the keystone, then continue to follow him.

"Li-ock, st-eck," he said, stopping to raise an open palm.

Obedient as before, it clamped its rootlimbs back into the crack, and peered down with tendrilled pupils in cephalopodic motion.

"My apologies for the rock. I hope I didn't hurt you."

Skalos slipped into the shadows beyond the portal. Alone with only the sound of the waterfalls for company, the meog settled and turned away its vines. Blood red to pale yellow petals folded, closing over multitudinous eyes.

Find the Author

 JasonH.Abbott.com



[Blue Boar Press](#) | [Jason H. Abbott](#)



SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

Andrew L. Hodges

for their work

Growing Boy

About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly e-Zine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. [Submissions](#) for the next issue open the moment the [current issue](#) publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Saturday of the month.

Next Issue Prompt

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Theme:
Stars

Submission Deadline Saturday, May 18th, 2024

