

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 10 Number 4

Page 1 – PAENE COGITO ERGO PAENE SUM by William Edwin Cherico. The author writes, “I am a senior at Ithaca College studying film and politics. In my free time I love to play tabletop games and reading a book surrounded by trees.»

Page 3 – WEST by Zachery Brasier. Mr. Brasier writes, “I have built a name within the science fiction art community (Element115Art on most social media platforms) with my computer renderings of realistic spacecraft, specifically unbuilt projects from the Apollo era. This story takes my knowledge of retro spaceflight—including how to artistically portray it—and combines it with my personal experience growing up in Nevada, spending countless hours traveling on deserted highways.”

Page 15 – ESSENCE by Margaret Karmazin. Ms Karmazin’s credits include stories published in literary and SF magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *The Speculative Edge*, *Aphelion*, *Another Realm* and *The Rabbit Hole*. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Mobius* were nominated for Pushcart awards..

Page 22 – THE RINSE by Nicholas Woods. Mr. Woods is a writer and filmmaker out of Westwood, California in Los Angeles. Nicholas’ second feature film as a writer and director, *Echoes of Violence*, premiered at CINEQUEST FILM FESTIVAL in 2020 and was released in 2021 featuring Frank Oz (*Star Wars*, *Knives Out*). Nicholas’s feature film debut *The Axiom* was distributed through Vertical Entertainment and sold by DevilWorks, with over 1 MILLION streams world-wide. It was accepted into the acclaimed Sitges Film Festival/ BIFFAN Film Festival, and was distributed globally hitting the top-grossing horror films on iTunes for the first 3 weeks after its release in February 2019.

Page 37 – THE ROCHE LOBE ANOMALY (Part One) by Jeffrey M. Gaba. Prof. Gaba writes, “I am a retired law professor living in Santa Fe, NM with my wife and two dogs. I taught environmental law for many years at SMU Dedman School of Law in Dallas and published extensively on environmental topics including articles, treatises, and casebooks on hazardous waste law. Sounds boring, but it put my kids through college. Writing Sci Fi is much more fun.”



“PAENE COGITO ERGO PAENE SUM”

by WILLIAM EDWIN CHERICO

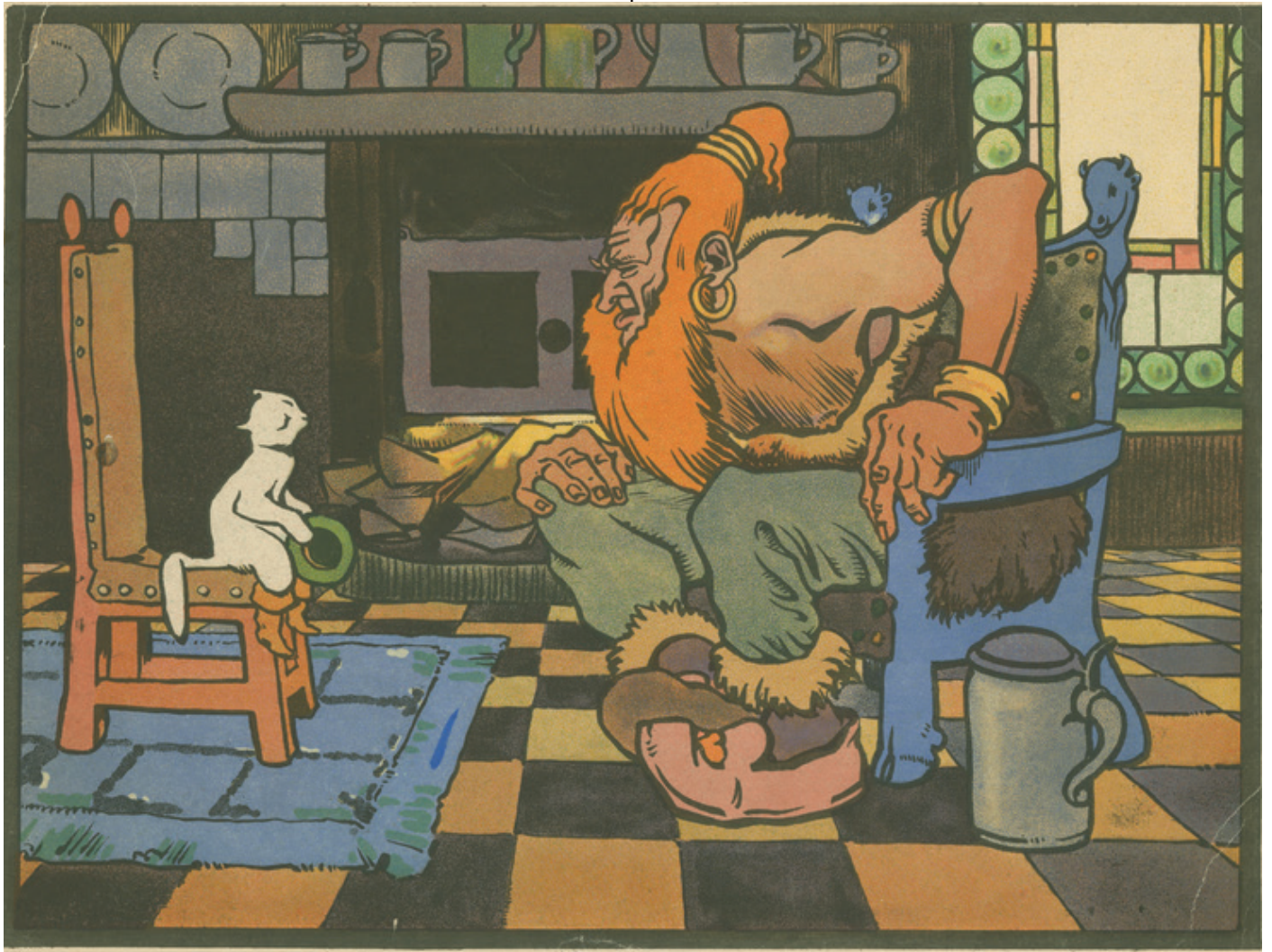
The human body is made up of thirty-six trillion cells. Every single one of those cells are considered to be more “alive” than my metal frame. They had to give my opponents makeup to keep them from sweating under the stage lights. I don’t sweat, so the most I got was a joke from one of the crew. They laugh, and since I wasn’t programmed to get humor I don’t. That’s not to say I don’t get why it was funny - the humor from offering antiperspirant to a robot that can’t perspire is obvious enough that I don’t need to explain it to you. I can explain any joke you tell, though. As a matter of fact, the quiz show I find myself on started with a question about just that: “This establishment retail business is often the setting of jokes, most of which begin with a subject walking in.” I run the keywords *establishment* and *jokes* through my internal processor and pass by billions of pieces of information in a matter of seconds. The same way the greats do it: Ken Jennings, John Carpenter, all six of the experts on *The Chase*. The only difference is what powers our processors. The answer is a bar. The questions get progressively more difficult, but the real experiment isn’t whether me or my more organic counterparts know the answer. It’s who can produce the solution and buzz in the fastest. The answers are varied. The Alan Parsons Project. Gary Kasparov. Robert Heinlein. As things go on, I start to realize the majority of the questions relate in

one way or another to either the science fiction genre or the real-life sciences. I assume it’s because I’m here. I don’t feel self-conscious about it, even though I can register the open-mouthed stares of the live studio audience as I climb the scoreboard. I *can’t* feel self-conscious. Everything I know about it is a compilation of other people’s perceptions. There’s the ultimate riddle of robotics: I’ve experienced nothing, and yet I can describe everything with a deeper cognizance than most humans. I buzz in and identify vanilla as a spice with a “sweet, warm, and comforting scent.” I could tell you what it feels like to taste something sweet, hold a lover that warms your body and your soul, or be comforted by kind words and therapeutic luxuries, but I will never actually *understand* any of those things. I explain this to the host in between rounds after a commercial break and she chuckles in awe.

“Isn’t that strange?” she says. I agree. For all intents and purposes, I know these concepts inside and out. My knowledge of emotion is more intimate than that of many people who grapple with their strongest feelings every day. I can’t add the crucial touch of originality to art to make anything more than a cheap copy of the artist I’m asked to replicate, but I can analyze each individual brush stroke on the *Starry Night*... even though I’ve never technically *seen* it. In a world defined by human perceptions, how does a nonhuman describe its functions?

Not very fluently.

After the game ends, they donate my winnings to a charity of my choice. As a language learning model I am incapable of making such a choice, so my creators decide for me. They walk me out, and at the end of the day they leave me in the warehouse at Atlas Innovations. My internal thermometer says it's cold, and by definition I am alone. I don't mind though; I can't. But if I can recognize the bite of the cold and I can acknowledge the void of loneliness a sentient creature would suffer in my place, does it really matter? ♦



“WEST”

by ZACHERY BRASIER

Benjamin “Ben” Melbourne and James “Jim” Shrubsole would have gotten lost on the lonely Nevada highway they sped down if there was any other direction to travel besides north-south. As they hunted for the little town of Gully Summit, they realized they had forgotten to reset the odometer after the last x on their map. Abandoned buildings occasionally slid past the car windows, leaving them wondering if they had mistaken one of the derelict structures for the unincorporated community they were looking for. Traveling through central Nevada, it was nearly impossible to tell whether a group of detached white brick buildings constituted a legally defined entity or were uninhabited lodgings left over from the last isolationist who decided to make a home outside of delineated civic property lines. With the odometer down, the two travelers were forced to navigate by tracking the time that had passed from their last known location — a tricky proposition on this stretch of temporally resistant highway.

Behind the wheel, Ben looked increasingly worried while Jim tried to discern which of the bluish-purple-brown peaks on the horizon were notable elevation points. Their car sped past thousands of desert bushes, baked dry and gnarly by the overhanging sun. Presumably, they could turn back the way they came if they got truly lost. Somehow, as Ben gritted his teeth at yet another fenced-off dirt road leading to

nowhere, there was an unspoken fear between the two young men that backtracking would not lead them through the same series of junctions they had traversed on the way north. In a state where highways stretch for hundreds of miles before intersecting others, one wrong turn could lead them to speed away in the incorrect direction for the rest of the day. They’d eventually hit Utah, southern Idaho, or California if they didn’t return directly to Las Vegas, but that was no comfort.

Even making it to another state was contingent on having enough gas. The stations seemed to space out more and more as they traveled north. Ben briefly wondered if the distance between stations increased at a linear, parabolic, or exponential rate. The last option was a concerning thought. What happened to the distance between gas stations when the curve approached the right side of that graph?

As the sky started to feel more threatening — for more than its inherent threat of slow dehydration — Jim snapped his fingers and pointed ahead. “Got it!”

“Thank god,” Ben muttered as he picked out what Jim was pointing at; a small white sign reading “Gully Summit, Population: 10.” Next to it squatted a gas station with a mobile home parked out back.

“Population ten. Jesus.” Jim sighed as they approached the town at 75 miles per hour.

“How do you think they count the population in a place like this? I don’t see any houses. Is it just the people who work here, or does it stretch out to encompass all these acres?”

As far as Ben could figure, any Gully Peak local would have to live in the gas station or the mobile home; there was nothing else around. The later building was throwing off a wicked, shimmering glare as they approached, the sun reflecting off its pseudo-streamlined aluminum forms, looking like a jet plane that had parked itself behind the gas station, plumped up a little bit, and had windows cut into the fuselage. The gas station was bright white, either from its original paint job or the slow bake in desert radiation. Neither looked very welcoming. There were no cars at the station.

“If somebody dies how do they even know about it?” Jim continued, “Do they just sit around and occasionally wonder, ‘Huh, haven’t seen Rick in five years, wonder if a rattler got him.’” Jim looked down at his map, “What county are we even in?”

“Jim.”

“Yeah?”

“Stop that. You’re rambling,” Ben slowly curved off the highway into the gas station’s dirt parking lot. He instinctively wanted to pull in faster, but no other cars were traveling in either direction. Instead, he enjoyed the brief rebellion of going slow on a highway, letting his car mosey along perpendicular to the boundary lines.

Gully Peak wasn’t their destination; it was the last checkmark. Up ahead, Ben could barely make out a dirt road that cut west from the highway, stretching away to another identical desert peak and the abandoned shed he knew was there. It was a prime UFO sighting location, at least according to the other Las Vegas enthusiasts. Chester had seen a disk glowing

in the dusk, Veronica said she had received a message from the stars. Ben and Jim had yet to see anything, at all, in any location. But something about Gully Peak — specifically the shed — seemed to draw the extraterrestrials near. Their time had come.

Before that, they needed gas and they needed food. Kicking up dust, Ben pulled into the parking lot. Only twelve people — at most — could see the cloud.

When Ben stepped out of the car it was the emptiness that caught his attention first. The vehicle had acted as a shield from the vastness around him, and living in Las Vegas had sheltered him from what the rest of the state really looked like. At home, he could easily pretend he was living in California.

Out here, with nothing to see besides a sunbleached gas station and miles of desolate sagebrush-pocked desert, he couldn’t hide from the fact that the land was very, very empty. If something went wrong out here, it would be between him, a hemisphere of blue sky, the desert dust, and the purplish mountains receding into the distance. He shuddered.

Together, the young men entered the gas station to pay for fuel and get something to eat. The interior looked as ramshackle as the exterior, as if the sun was gradually wearing away the inside of the station as well.

Behind a worn counter stood a wizened man of indeterminate old age. The lines on his leathery skin gave him a hermit-like appearance, immediately putting Ben on edge. Half-remembered lessons from childhood told him to not judge people based on their appearance, but just the presence of this man made Ben feel like he was somewhere he did not belong. The cold glare didn’t help.

Fortunately, there was some food and

an icebox of Coca-Cola. Jim started picking through the gas station's meager offerings. Single items took up whole shelves, the station clearly having been built to handle more goods than ever got shipped to Gully Summit. Jim chose a loaf of bread, two cans of beans, and some hot sauce. Ben grabbed four Cokes.

As Ben rummaged through his wallet at the counter the man simply stared. Jim, seemingly out of habit, decided to try to break the ice.

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"Yeah," the old man said. His voice had the texture of sandpaper.

"Um... Where does everybody else live?"

The old man didn't respond but looked perplexed.

Jim didn't let up. "It says 'Population 10' but I don't see any buildings..."

Ben cut him off, placing a stack of bills on the counter. "That should be enough to fill 'er up." He cocked a finger to their car. "Can I do it, or do you want to?"

"Do what you want," the old man mumbled as he collected the money.

"By the way," Ben continued, "can we light a fire out here? We plan on being outside tonight."

"Don't see why not."

Ben tried to smile. It came out as a flat line. He grabbed all the food and drinks and turned to walk out the glass-plated door.

As he did the man asked, "You boys here to see a UFO?"

Ben turned around quickly. "Yes! Have you seen any out here?"

The old man sighed. "Yeah." He resumed the stare. Ben waited for a beat, then another one, expecting further comment on the revelation. There was nothing.

"Well. Thanks," Jim said, and the two

young men walked out of the station. Jim circled the side of the car and started pumping gas. Ben leaned against the roof over the driver's seat. He briefly put his elbows up on the metal, but it was scorching hot to the touch.

"You don't have to be so friendly," he shook his head and frowned, rubbing his slightly-toasted arms.

"Yes I do. It's who I am," Jim responded, squinting at the gas station. "He's sitting at the window watching us. No, don't turn around!"

"You probably spooked him."

"By being neighborly?"

"By asking about his neighbors, apparently."

"Well it's not my fault we aren't getting good customer service here." The gas pump clicked and Jim gave it a little shake to get the last drops of gas from the nozzle. Ben laughed at the absurdity of the comment; complaining about a desert hermit the way you would poor table service at the Flamingo.

The two plopped into their seats and closed the car doors. Before getting the car into gear, Ben looked around at the landscape. "You're right though, it is weird. Where is everybody?" Jim didn't have an answer. Neither did the distant mountains.

The desert road Ben had spotted earlier turned out to be the right one. He slowly nursed the car over the uneven trail, swerving to miss the bigger rocks. Up ahead he could see a little white building, shining in the sun. Out here, everything man-made was devoid of color.

The sun was making its way through the desert sky, approaching sunset. Everybody knew that after five was the best time to look for UFOs. Some people had seen them in the

broad daylight, but those sights were rarer and easily disproved. No—the good stuff happened at night.

The shed ended up being farther away from the highway than they had originally thought. When he parked the car next to the building — white paint and empty windows—he looked back at the highway and was surprised to see it had been reduced to a narrow grey line snaking along the desert floor. The gas station was a little box and the mobile home was glinting brightly in the reflected sunlight, so brilliant that it looked like a flashlight held in his face. The little conglomeration of buildings was also notably lower in elevation. They had climbed up a hill, apparently, but that hadn't been clear while they were driving.

Having picked up an elevation change, Ben could now see farther to the east. Stretched across the horizon was a ghostly patch of white; a dry lake bed, a symbol of a wet Nevada that would never be. Even with the topographical ascent, Ben still could not see any evidence of human habitation besides the two UFO hunters, the grumpy old man, and the unseen additional nine inhabitants of Gully Summit. How had Chester even found this place?

Clearly, somebody had built the shed, but it was ambiguous as to whether anybody had ever lived in it. “Shed” wasn't exactly the right word for the structure. More accurately, it was like somebody had taken a house and sliced it in half. The door was on the far left side of the front wall, implying that there should have been more living space constructed to its left. At one time the windows had presumably held glass, but were now little more than square holes. As Ben walked around he kept wanting there to be a second half of the building to make it symmetrical about the front door.

When they walked inside, the half-finished impression got stronger. The door opened to a very narrow living room. To the right was a door to a single bedroom containing all the windows. There was only a few feet of clearance between the door and the left-most wall, as if the original inhabitants had meant to extend the living room but had never gotten around to it.

There had to have been previous inhabitants, right? It was hard for Ben to believe. The furniture was gone, and there wasn't even a scrap of disintegrating wallpaper. Unfinished wood made up the floor, and little piles of dirt had accumulated in the corners, only disturbed by the small tracks of lizards. He walked into the bedroom and then to each window, hoping that the framed vista would give some insight into why somebody had bothered to build here. Nothing struck him. The windows didn't even face the dry lake bed.

Deep down, Ben knew it was unlikely that an extraterrestrial would appear on the very night he and Jim had decided to visit Gully Summit, but he desperately hoped one would. Not only for the experience, but also because he had no desire to return to this “town” anytime soon.

Ben found Jim outside picking up sagebrush branches and what little scraps of wood he could find on the desert floor. “We forgot to pack firewood,” he said. “Creepy place, huh?”

Ben nodded, glad he had matches in the car. Never left home without them. Soon, Jim had collected enough plant debris. The whole pile went up with a whoosh when Ben dropped a match into it. The branches were so dry.

While the two had made their fire, the sun dipped below the mountain peaks. Once the sun was occluded by the peaks the purple-brown coloration gave way to a deep brown-black.

Perched overhead, the desert sun was inescapable; hidden by mountains, the shadows were intensely dark. Subtlety was not something the landscape did. A few tenuous clouds, previously invisible in the sky, now picked up sunset shades, small wisps of cotton candy against an endless vault of nothing.

“What do you think they are really like?” Jim asked an hour later, facing north, finishing the last of the beans they had heated in the fire, and scanning the skies east-to-west.

“What do you mean?” Ben responded around a mouthful of bread, facing the other way from the fire, but scanning the skies west-to-east.

“Well. We generally know what they look like. We also know that they are visiting Earth, and occasionally they are abducting us for experiments. But beyond that, what do we really know? We have no sense of their culture or their goals. Do they have art? Do they love? Do they also get bored at their job?”

Ben laughed at that one. “I guess I’ve never thought about how boring it would be traveling between stars for many years. Maybe they have alien blackjack or something.”

Jim laughed back. “Right, something to ask if we ever get abducted. Seriously though, I think about how complex things are on Earth. Hell, even going to another state can feel like stepping into a new world, and we’re all Americans. These aliens; we’re only seeing less than a percent of a percent of their population, and these guys are probably like our Mercury Seven. They’re a very special breed. What are the rest of them like, I wonder. What is the rest of their civilization doing while they are galivanting

among the stars?”

“Probably a lot like us. They probably have problems like we do. They have bad relationships, stubbed toes, meals that aren’t very satisfying. Whatever.”

“I think so, too. There’s this idea that they’ve figured out some sort of utopian way of living, and that’s what’s allowed them to create interstellar technology. But you don’t need perfection to get high technology. We’re going to make it to space soon and we sure as hell haven’t figured things out.”

“I guess that’s a matter of faith. There’s something a little disappointing about aliens coming here and then finding out that they have their own Joe McCarthy.”

“God that’s a depressing thought. You know what else I wonder?”

“Shoot.”

“How many of these sightings are actually real, and how many are just stories based on other stories? You know Kenneth Arnold didn’t even call his UFOs flying saucers? He said that they looked like boomerangs but moved like flying saucers skipping over water. But everybody started seeing disks.”

“I guess a boomerang isn’t that different from a frisbee.”

“It worries me.”

They finished the beans and kept talking.

“The universe only has a finite amount of resources in it, so eventually everybody is going to have to start fighting. There’s a good chance that anything visiting here is going to come with at least some thought of conquest. I’d hope for something peaceful, but I think the military has every right to worry,” Jim argued.

“Universal resources might be finite, but that’s basically a theoretical argument. It’s more

of a trait of the structure of reality than a characteristic that will actually come into play in the long-term evolution of a given civilization. You're not thinking correctly about scale. Finite resources in a universal sense will still look like infinite resources for a civilization on a planetary, or even interstellar level," Ben responded.

"But every civilization will be trying to grow, fitting itself into new niches. That's what life does here, it doesn't ever get to the point where evolution decides to stop because it has enough resources. Long-term evolutionary trends follow a relatively straightforward course in that sense. There's no predetermined end condition."

The sky was deepening to shades of burnt orange, throwing the mountain peaks into an even starker contrast. Long shadows extended from every sagebrush plant. Even a few inches tall, the sharp low angle of the sun turned them into miniature mountain peaks, or a forest clinging to the ground.

"You're still thinking on a planetary scale," Ben pushed back, watching the few scattered clouds in the southwest sky, "I don't think we can extrapolate any lessons from Earth life to make inferences about the ways civilizations will interact with the universe. Space is fundamentally different from Earth, so a space civilization would also be fundamentally... Oh what the fuck?!"

There had been a star Ben had been looking at, only a few degrees above a distant peak. It was bright, but the sky was still an hour away from being dark enough for the majority of stars to appear. Ben had assumed it was Venus, but mid-sentence it had suddenly bloomed with light, transforming from a shining pinprick to a distant searchlight flickering in the sky. He might not know much about Venus, but Ben knew that it didn't spontaneously brighten.

"Something bite you?"

"No Jim, it's..." Another star appeared next to the first. "Jim!"

Jim stood up and turned around, yelling his own obscenities. More stars started to appear, each one starting as a pinprick and then blossoming, creating a constellation of burning lights above the distant peaks.

"Oh my god," Ben whispered. The sight was mesmerizing. He had no clue how far away the lights were. He could count ten. They weren't in any discernible formation, like pearls from a snapped necklace strewn over the desert sky. They kept increasing in brightness.

"Are they moving? They look like they are heading east?" Jim asked. Indeed, both young men could discern a very slight eastward motion of the formation. "They've got to be high up there."

Ben tried to imagine the geometry as seen from a higher altitude. The vectors snapped into focus. "Hey I don't think they are getting brighter, I think they are getting closer." Some of the shapes elongated into ovals.

"I think so too," Jim confirmed, fear creeping into his voice. Ben could feel his anxiety spiking as well. This was what he wanted to see, what he had dreamt of, but something primal in his brain responded with panic to the sky opening up and expelling strange lights.

Whatever they were, they were clearly moving quickly, because the balls of light were rapidly brightening. Oddly, they were holding their positions relative to each other. Both hunters had seen footage of UFOs wheeling and spinning like pieces of paper caught in a breeze, but these apparitions were spookily static. Besides the slight eastward motion and the luminosity variation, they didn't change.

"What do you think they are?" Ben whis-

pered, millennia of evolution instructing him to stay quiet in the face of an unknown predator.

"Flying saucers," Jim whispered back.

They stood side-by-side, each trying to write as much of the image into their memory as they could. The stars kept getting brighter and brighter. They elongated further, and some seemed to rotate around. The whole formation was condensing, starting to merge into one patch of light.

Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, the lights began dimming. The patch resolved itself back into separate stars, and each of these stars faded back into the burnt orange glow. Within thirty seconds they were almost invisible. Ten seconds later they were gone.

"Holy shit," Jim mumbled, "how did Chester know?"

Ben couldn't take his eyes off the patch of sky that had just held the apparition, willing it to return once again. But it was a once-in-a-lifetime event. That specific patch would never open again, and he knew it.

He turned to Jim. "Well I guess we don't have to wait all night."

"Sure, but maybe they'll..."

He was cut off by the sound of a gunshot, as if every air particle around them had started shouting at once: a whip-crack, a high-explosive blast, a thunderclap.

"What the fuck?"

"I don't know. Did they explode?"

Pivoting around, Ben scanned for debris across the whole hemisphere of sky. At first, he didn't see anything, but when he turned back to the southwest he picked out what looked like a jellyfish hanging in the sky.

"Jim!" he called, pointing. "Look!"

"Is that a parachute?"

It certainly looked like one, the bright

orange and white stripes making it easily visible against the darkening skies. But Ben couldn't get his mind to accept something so mundane after the extraordinary. True, he had never seen somebody descending on a parachute, but it was decidedly human; it had a context that the lights in the sky had not.

"Come on!" Ben took off running. Jim followed.

The two ran across the desert floor, winding around sagebrush, yucca plants, and divots in the dirt. The desert air clawed at their throats as they ran a serpentine path. Up ahead the parachute had touched the dirt, billowing and deflating in the faint desert breeze. The land was so flat that they could clearly see where it had touched down. It only took a few minutes to reach.

When they did, both young men were stunned to see a silver-suited figure struggling to unclip a parachute harness from his reflective garments. As he got the latches undone, the parachute inflated again and flew back into the sky.

Free, the silvery figure turned around and looked up, the faceplate of his helmet reflecting orange and purple. The sunset played off the mirrored surface of his clothes, as if the wrinkles contained little fires.

Ben had stopped running thirty feet away from the figure, that animal part of his brain once again pricking him with prey-anxiety. He couldn't think of anything else to do. So he waved. The figure waved back. That put Ben at ease. He approached the visitor. Jim stuck close behind.

"Hi?" Ben introduced himself when he got close, accidentally making his greeting a question.

The figure reached up, unlatched some-

thing on his helmet, and pushed his faceplate up. Inside the helmet, a face grinned back, all Midwest buck teeth and open-faced charm. Blood trickled down the side of his face. It was, undeniably, a person.

"Hi there," he stuck out a mirrored hand. Ben took it. "John Majors. Nice to meet you."

"Ben Melbourne. Jim Shrubsole."

Majors smiled weakly and nodded his head. The three stood looking at each other, each expecting one of the others to lead the burgeoning conversation. What was there to say though?

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" Majors asked, breaking the ice.

"We've been sitting in a shed a little back thataway," Ben cocked a thumb.

"Do you have water?"

"We have Coke."

"That works." Majors shrugged out of the harness, let it fall to the desert floor. He unlatched his helmet and dropped it too. The visitor's face was in worse shape than it had looked before. The whole left side of his head was covered in blackened blood. He must have slammed it against the side of the helmet. Christ, what had happened? "Lead the way."

Together, the three made their way back to the bizarre half-house. Majors looked equally perplexed by the architecture. Jim interjected, "Our friend told us about it." The statement hung in the air and remained unanswered. Every word felt strange; inappropriate.

Nonetheless, the three walked inside and sat in the unfinished, too-narrow living room. The wood was hard under them, and Majors's suit made a labored crinkling sound as he painfully lowered his body to the floor. Instead of sitting up, Majors let himself lay flat, staring at the ceiling. Jim walked to the bedroom, grabbed a Coke, popped off the cap, and shoved it into

Majors's hand. Even in the dim fire light peeking through the empty windows, the red label cast a slight glow on the mirrored glove.

Jim stared at the bizarre man. "I know this is a weird question, but where did you come from?"

Majors pointed weakly at the ceiling.

"Are you," Jim pressed, "an astronaut?"

Majors nodded.

"But... I didn't know you guys were doing the flight today. There wasn't an announcement or press or..."

Majors shrugged.

"John Majors you said? You're not one of the Mercury Seven then?"

"No," Majors responded, "I'm Air Force." He made eye contact with both Jim and Ben. "Forget I said that," he sighed.

"We should probably call someone," Ben offered, standing up and brushing off his pants. "There's a gas station down the road." He walked over to the door and opened it. Night had fallen, and the desert was pitch black. Looking towards the highway, he could barely make out the gas station and trailer. Both were unilluminated. "Which apparently closes at five."

The distant mountains were barely visible in the gloom, though most peaks were topped by radio masts with blinking lights, tracing out a rough constellation that revealed the elevation of the terrain. They had been unnoticeable during the day. Each mast was set on a timer, but none were in sync, causing the horizon to ripple with patterns and beats when taken as a whole. There were a lot of antennas for a patch of Nevada that seemed otherwise uninhabited. How had he missed them?

"That's fine," Majors said, "They'll come find me. They probably wouldn't want us to talk to many people, anyways."

“Why?” Jim asked. Majors sighed and took a sip from his Coke.

The lack of response leached away any wonder from Jim’s face, replacing it with a worried skepticism. Ben made eye contact with his friend, returning the look. “Jim, let’s put out the fire.” He tilted his head towards the door.

“Good idea,” Jim agreed, standing up. “Be right back.”

Once they had gotten outside, Ben grabbed his friend’s shoulders. “Stop asking him questions!” He expected an argument, but sense had prevailed. Jim simply nodded. “We should put out the fire though.”

“We don’t have water,” Jim whispered.

“Keep that fire going,” the two UFO hunters heard from the shed. Majors had propped himself against the door frame and was breathing heavily. He pointed out at the horizon, “It’ll be easier for them to find us.”

Sure enough, Ben could now see little patches of light sweeping over the lowlands ringing the dry lake bed. The circles swept back and forth, casting harsh shadows that were visible even from this distance. In the silence of the desert night, he could faintly hear the rotor thrum of distant helicopters. The blinking radio masts had drawn his attention and he hadn’t seen the machines hovering at low altitude. He could count a half-dozen beams of light, the only proof that there were pilots in the air—they were flying without navigation lights.

“Come back inside.”

Ben and Jim complied, and soon the three of them were sitting in the unfinished living room again. Silence prevailed as the fire outside threw shadows onto the unfinished (or recently sandblasted) walls. While Jim fidgeted and Ben watched the light of the fire dance against a decrepit window frame, Majors barely moved. His

eyes were wide open, staring at the white ceiling above him. Ben followed Majors’s gaze but couldn’t see anything of interest in the disintegrating paint. It would have been spooky—or a portent of shock—if it wasn’t clear that the stare, in its dead-eyed clarity, was piercing the ceiling and looking into the world beyond. Thoughts of stars, careening through the void, distant space accidents, and the persistent feeling of inhabiting a story that was not his, conspired to pull Ben into sleep. The rotors thrummed nearer and nearer, the fire continued to crackle, the orange danced on Majors’s mirrored suit, and Jim snored where he had collapsed on the dirty floor.

Time stretched, the black of sleep replaced the desert gloom, and an illusory split second later Ben jumped awake to harsh morning light shining into his eyes and a beastly roar in his ears. The roar’s frequency slowly increased, morphing from deep bass into an ear-shattering screech. The walls shook. He felt no intermediate step between sleep and wakefulness. One state had snapped to the other, like a switch.

Majors was sitting up grinning, fingers jammed into his ears.

“What the hell?!” Ben screamed. Jim was laying face down on the floor covering his head.

“Pickup!” Majors yelled back, barely audible.

When the roar had quieted from the loudest sound Ben had ever heard to the loudest sound he had ever heard but a little less intense, Majors unplugged his ears and stood up, a boyish smirk on his face. He reached down and helped Ben up. The material of Majors’s suit felt like both metal and fabric at once, rippling like a cloth but with a smooth finish his fingers slid over. Jim was already up and out the door.

Ben joined his friend outside. Over the dry

lake bed, a shining light zoomed left to right, shimmering in the morning sun as it careened through the air. The shape of the object was unclear; it was built out of a highly reflective metal that mirrored the sky and the ground. Reflected blue against sky blue gave it the appearance of a mirage, an intangible displacement wave warping the atmosphere as it sliced over the desert. It trailed a sooty black trail of smoke, revealing the arced path it had taken overhead and the lazy turn it was now making to circle back over Gully Summit. The sun flashed wildly and stochastically across the apparition.

Jim looked stunned as held his hand above his eyes. "Is that a..." he started.

"Super Sabre," Majors finished.

The smoke trail was turning back towards them, and Ben could now make out that it was indeed a fighter plane. The nose was pointed directly at them, and the airplane was getting rapidly larger. Ben could make out the squished black ellipsoid of the nose-mounted air intake, could imagine the hungry engine sucking in the dusty air. The roaring was getting loud again. This time Ben followed Majors's example and plugged up his ears. That saved his eardrums, but the thrust of the engine still reverberated through his body as the Super Sabre made its low-altitude pass.

It crossed overhead in a steep bank, a silver arrowhead with swept-back wings. The airplane came in so low that Ben could make out the masked pilot inside, visible through the glass bubble canopy. The aviator pulled his Super Sabre into an even tighter bank angle, nearly perpendicular to the ground, and with a slight sideslip of his tailpipe jetted away over the lake bed. With the tailpipe pointed directly towards the three men the roar was crushingly loud, but gradually subsided as the jet zoomed its way

towards the horizon, leaving nothing more than a dispersing black cloud of smoke.

"Come on," Majors said into the newly silent desert morning, "he saw us, let's get down to the highway." He gestured at the car, "One of you want to drive?"

Into the car they packed themselves. Ben, the hunter; Jim, the neighbor; and John Majors, the man from the sky. The astronaut took the front seat. As Ben plopped into the driver's side and started up the engine, he looked over at this strange silver man sitting in his car. The space-age metallic coating reflected the beige upholstery, the lower-tech fittings of the car rendered vulgar in contrast with the shining silver.

The engine started, and the trio rode down the gentle slope that still seemed flat. When they reached the gas station, Ben pulled up next to the pumps. "Should I go inside and see if that man can give us some food or water?" he asked.

"I don't see anyone in there," Jim responded. Indeed, the gas station was empty; there were no lights on inside. The trailer looked equally deserted. There weren't blinds on the windows, Ben noticed for the first time. Without the obstruction, he could see through the trailer to the desert on the other side. In just twenty-four hours, the mystery of Gully Summit's missing population seemed less profound. Wherever the old man had snuck off to, he didn't want his shelter to be seen. Who could blame him?

John Majors stepped out of the car, looked around, and leaned back in. "I hear engines. Come on."

As Ben and Jim walked out and under the already sweltering sky, they could hear the engines too, the distant bass rumble of diesel-powered machines. On the horizon, five

black dots had appeared, rapidly growing in size. The thunk-thunk of helicopter rotors carried through the breezeless air.

A few minutes later, the first trucks pulled up, massive slab-sided vehicles that stopped with a squeal and disgorged armed troops. Behind them came four boxy half-tracks with mounted machine guns. These took position at the four corners of a rectangle with the trio in the center. A series of military construction machines rumbled up belching black smoke from chrome exhaust pipes. Cranes, diggers, and flatbeds: the bullet-proof cousins of civilian heavy machinery.

The helicopters arrived, and once again Ben was overwhelmed by the racket of military aviation. One by one they touched down, kicking up thick choking clouds of dust and sagebrush debris. The first two were bulbous two-deck machines, the flight crew perched over a rounded nose that gave the helicopters an almost comical appearance. Doors at the back of the fuselage clamshelled open and more armed troops emerged, ducking down to avoid the whirling blades above them. The next duo of helicopters was unlike anything Ben had ever seen. These had two rotors, one at the front and one at the back. The big silver fuselage bent down in the middle as if it was sagging under the upward pull of the engines. It reminded him of a banana. The last helicopter that touched down was a gangly insectile machine with a transparent dome for a cockpit and a trussed lattice for a fuselage. The side of the bubble dome hinged open and a man stepped out in a uniform that Ben assumed signified military authority. Looking directly above, he could make out a massive, polished tube lumbering in a slow circle above the tableau.

The troops had now formed a circle around the gas station property, increasing the popu-

lation of Gully Summit nearly a hundredfold. The officer walked up to John Majors. The conversation between the two was lost in the roar of the helicopters. The officer patted Majors on the shoulder. Majors gestured around at the vista and then pointed up. The officer pointed at one of the banana-shaped helicopters. Without turning around, Majors walked around the back of the machine and disappeared into the fuselage. For a brief second his suit mingled with the chrome finish of the whirlybird into a dazzling display of silver and light. And then he was gone.

In a final exercise of aerospace cacophony each of the helicopters lifted off in reverse sequence, disappearing into the desert skies. The dust they left behind swirled for a while before slowly settling down, ready to lay undisturbed for however many more years.

The officer walked up to Ben and Jim, producing a small checkbook from one of his coat pockets.

"Names," he ordered, sharply.

"Ben Melbourne."

"Jim Shrubsole."

The officer scrawled with a pen and tore two checks out of the book, handing them to each of the would-be UFO hunters. They were made out for \$1,000. Ben staggered.

"You tell anybody what you saw," the officer continued, "and you'll open yourself up to federal prosecution. Got it?" He pointed at Ben, who nodded.

"Got it?" the officer pointed at Jim, who also gave a curt nod. "Fantastic." The officer turned around, whistled, and made a circular motion with his finger.

At the command, all the troops boarded their vehicles, including those that had been flown in via helicopter but had been abandoned

when their machines lifted off. Evidently, they had planned for this with extra seats in the ground vehicles.

The convoy formed up on the road and started trundling away. Solar heat baked the asphalt, creating a mirage that shimmered over the highway blacktop like the illusions of Saharan myth. Leaving a trail of diesel exhaust, the trucks disappeared into the distant horizon, the tops of them reflecting in the mirage for brief seconds before vanishing. And just like that, there was no trace of the hundreds of people that had briefly inhabited the lonely stretch of Nevada highway.

Over the ensuing months, Ben Melbourne and Jim Shrubsole never heard or read anything about the man from the sky, despite hungrily looking for any reference in the local news. Two years later they watched Alan Shepard make his flight. ❖

“ESSENCE”

by MARGARET KARMAZIN

It came upon her while she was having a first meet with an online dating match, a sudden flood of grasping and understanding where there had been nothing like it before. And yet, it felt somehow natural. How could that be?

His name was Tyler and the supposed fit with her was pretty impressive. Same political party and not-religious-but-spiritual description, same preference for easygoing activities like hiking, yoga and swimming over contact sports, and he was a reader. Master's degree, had traveled abroad and loved sci-fi. She liked his looks for the most part – reasonably tall, dark and handsome. Had a kind of French look about him, a narrow face with sharp, brown eyes and a sardonic mouth. He looked like he would be into sex, which she supposed was a good thing, though who knew? As long as he wasn't a pervert and expected her to engage in threesomes and other weird stuff.

He was waiting for her at a booth along the side – she'd told him she liked the comfort and privacy of booths – and she appreciated that he'd gotten there first instead of making her wait for him, all nervous and embarrassed. It was lunchtime and the place was filling up fast.

He raised a finger and she slid into the booth and removed her coat. He was looking at her appraisingly, which she didn't like, but then he started talking in a friendly, at ease manner, and she thought, well, this won't be too bad.

“You look better than your photos,” he said. “And I like this place you picked. I think it's the one with those fabulous blue cheese burgers, isn't it?”

Did he love blue cheese burgers as much as she did? “You look good yourself,” she said, though she didn't really feel like complimenting him for that. The waitress came over and took their drink orders and he said, “Amazing service.”

After that, they talked pretty easily, back and forth with an equal share of self-disclosure and Megan was feeling almost exhilarated at the thought that she had possibly met her soulmate when something happened that she could not fully describe even to herself.

“Are-are you okay?” said Tyler, who stopped in the middle of a sentence to stare at her.

Was she alright? She didn't know. Was she having a stroke? “Um, I...I'm not sure,” she said. “The strangest thing just happened and I don't know if I can even explain it.”

He had the class not to look annoyed. “Well, can you try?” Probably, she thought, he was now counting the minutes until he could politely escape.

She glanced around at other people in the restaurant and experienced the same strange sense with all of them, anyone she looked at for that matter. With some effort, she brought her gaze back to her date and tried to calm down,

at least enough to try and tell him what she was experiencing.

"I'm so sorry this is happening. Believe me, I don't normally have weird experiences. I mean, I never saw a ghost or UFO or anything." She felt like she had to get her breath back.

"Take your time," he said.

"Well, I was looking at you and thinking...I was thinking that I liked what I had seen and heard so far and that this was turning out to be...well, successful, and then it was like suddenly I was opened up...no, that's not it. Suddenly, I could...well, *sense* about you. I mean, it's like I know what you're like in relation to me."

"I don't understand."

"Okay, I can see you with my eyes. I see what you look like, how you dress, etc. I can hear you with my ears, how your voice sounds, how you laugh, the noises when you change positions. I can smell that you have on a bit of cologne or something and maybe you used something in your hair. I could, if I wanted, reach out and touch your hand and feel your skin. These are senses. But suddenly, it's like I have another one." Her voice broke from emotion.

"Are you going to cry?" he said. He must have seen her eyes fill up.

"Yeah, I might," she said, overcome. "I-I'm not explaining this very well. It's like I suddenly have another sense, and I can...I don't know, I can *feel* you. I don't mean physically; I can feel you inside. Like your *essence* or something. I've never felt this before!"

Now he looked very pleased and said, "So are you saying it's something special just between us?"

"Not at all," she said, and she saw his face drop. "No. All of a sudden, I can feel it with everyone in here. I can look around, see, and -"

"Kind of like grokking," he said.

"What is 'grokking'?"

"Like in that Heinlein novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, back in the sixties. A sort of hippie book, counter-culture and all that. Grokking was this mental/emotional understanding of someone or thing. I don't remember much more about it; it was a long time ago when I read it."

The waitress returned to take their orders. After she'd gone, Megan said, "Her, I can feel her. She is an important person. Not at the moment, of course, I mean waitresses are not considered important people but I sense it in her. She is going to do things. Maybe she's working here to earn money while she goes to college, whatever, but she is going to be important in the world. We might hear about her on the news. And that man over there, he is so kind to children, I don't know how - is he a pediatrician? A social worker, a teacher? He seems as if he works with little kids. That man in the booth under the orange painting, he is not good, he's dangerous, he is going to hurt people. I can sense all this."

Tyler looked skeptical. "What do you sense about me then?"

She hesitated. The thing was, since this extraordinary thing had happened, she was not thrilled with him. Even though he so well matched her in so many ways. Furthermore, she felt that she needed for him to leave; she needed to have time and privacy to feel this thing, to try and understand it. She needed to be *alone*. It was all she could do not to jump up and run out of there. But damn, the food was coming and by that someday-to-be-important waitress.

"Well...I don't think we're suited," she said.

He looked both surprised and skeptical. "How so?"

She shook her head. The waitress set down their orders and Megan listlessly picked up a French fry. "I can't explain it. It's just something I feel or know. It wouldn't work out. We'd get sick of each other. We aren't the same. You'd get impatient with me; you wouldn't appreciate or condone my interests and moods. Some of them you'd even laugh at. I would start to think you're a priss and narrow-minded, cruel even. No, better to just not start anything and save us some time."

He looked annoyed. "How in hell would you know it would turn out like that? How do you know what my private interests are or if I would dislike yours? You don't even know me."

"But I do," she said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. My eyes have been opened by this. I *do* know what you're like. I know what that woman over there with the pink scarf is like. I know what that boy eating with his mother is like. I -"

He turned away from here, looked out on the room, then turned back and wiped his mouth. In silence, he opened his wallet and slapped thirty dollars on the table. "I'm going," he said. "Good luck with finding someone." He was zipping up his jacket and eyeing her with disgust.

"Thank you," was all she could muster up to say and felt nothing but relief to have him gone. She ate the rest of her meal while looking around at everyone, those eating and coming and going. Her mood changed from a sort of fear to one of gratitude, for now she was super equipped to find what she was looking for.

The waitress returned and seemed surprised at the empty seat. "He had to go," said Megan. And all the while she looked at the waitress, wondering what the young women would do to make her famous.

"He seemed nice," the waitress said, somehow knowing it had been a date that didn't end well.

"He was," agreed Megan, without adding more.

Megan was a Physician Assistant and worked at a local hospital walk-in clinic. Before that, she had worked in an ER in a larger city hospital for four years. When this small-town position an hour away opened up, she'd grabbed it, looking for a chance to get to know patients better from a smaller population. But what she hadn't thought about was that the pool of potential boyfriends would be smaller too and after a while, the only chance of meeting anyone compatible was to use a dating app. Even so, that appeared to sometimes mean traveling to meet potentials back to the very city she had left or another one further south.

And now it appeared she was gifted, or perhaps saddled, with this sudden strange ability to "grok" a person, though she was not sure if that word actually described it. "Grasp their essence" might be more accurate. Had anyone else suddenly acquired this ability? Was it real or was she imagining it? She thought of maybe seeing a therapist but suppose that he or she told her this thing was an illusion and tried to put on her psychotropic medication? Megan knew in her gut that whatever this was, it was no illusion. Just as you would know that seeing or hearing was not.

Monday, she was back at work and her first patient a middle-aged woman with what would turn out to be RSV. She was blowing her nose and had a dry cough. "Let's do a swab," Megan said, testing for several things. "I'll call you with the results by the end of the day," she told the woman. "Go home, try to rest and drink plenty of liquids."

The thing was, she could easily “grok” this person too. As if she could see the woman’s entire inner quality. It was both good and bad, mostly good. Megan probably wouldn’t want her for a friend, but wouldn’t mind her for a neighbor. The next patient was an old man, bent and in obvious pain from osteoarthritis. His records said he had heart disease too and a bit of asthma.

Why don’t you just kill me off?” he asked, not smiling.

She set him up for physical therapy and suggested the usual NSAIDS, and maybe some swimming. “Drugs would be better,” the man said wryly, and she agreed but was helpless to prescribe what he wanted. She grokked him too and didn’t especially like him, though she sympathized about his pain. This sudden ability was amazing and she was starting to enjoy it.

Her best friend, Luna, a nurse practitioner from Megan’s former hospital met her for dinner halfway between their homes. Megan geared up to approach the weird subject. “Um, Luna, do you ever feel you can size up a person at first sight? Has that ever happened to you?”

Luna laughed. “Yeah, I can pretty well size someone up at first glance.” She laughed. “Like if they’re wearing a certain hat, I know how they think for sure. Or if the guy has a man bun and is wearing a plaid shirt and skinny jeans, yeah, I can figure out what he’s probably like. Vegetarian for one.” She went on and Megan knew they weren’t talking about the same thing.

“I mean, can you *feel* what the person is like? In your gut, so to speak.”

Her friend looked at her appraisingly. “Give me an example.”

So, Megan told her about meeting Tyler and what had happened, though she left out the sudden shock when she acquired the ability

and downplayed how it felt. Luna might think she was crazy, just as the potential shrink might.

“You mean you let this good-looking guy who had so much in common with you fly away into the void because of some kind of sudden *feeling*?”

“It wasn’t a *feeling*, Luna, it was a *knowledge*. I mean I *knew* he wasn’t for me.”

“Okaaaay,” Luna said. “Well, maybe he was a serial killer or something, like he has girls tied up in his basement, and you picked up on it. Maybe you’re a bit psychic.”

Megan shook her head a little. It wasn’t being *psychic* – she had experienced that a few times as most people did. Knowing who was calling before she answered, knowing someone is going to suddenly visit, that kind of thing. This was different. It wasn’t knowing anything ahead; it was knowing what was right in front of her.

She knew that she would never be able to explain this to Luna, nor to anyone, not unless they too experienced it. And maybe someone out there had or was experiencing it now, but how would she ever know?

“This chicken panini is really good,” she said, and Luna seemed relieved that she had changed the subject.

The thing to do was to google it. Did anyone else out there in the world have this seventh sense? How to word it was the problem. *A seventh sense, I can grok people, I can tell as soon as I meet someone what they’re like, I can feel what someone is like*, etc. Nope, nothing brought up exactly what she was experiencing. She called her grandmother and beat around the bush before asking the question and once she did, Grandma suggested she might be working too hard. Asking her mother was out of the question. That would end with daily phone calls and

riling up the entire extended family. No, this was something she would have to keep to herself. Was it a gift or a curse? Maybe she needed to visit a shaman. It sounded like something a shaman might understand.

But where to find one? Native Americans had shamans. She remembered that two or three hours away was an Indian Reservation, Onandaga Nation. Maybe they had one there? She started to discreetly ask around and it didn't take too long before a friend who took yoga to connect her to a self-proclaimed shaman who also professed to be half Lenape and who took part in local pow wows. And he lived only forty minutes away.

Naturally, since she was paying for his time, he (whose name was Dave) was happy to help her and so on a Sunday afternoon, she headed east to meet him. He was in his seventies and seemed on the up and up and after a bit of hocus pocus, she and he settled down cross-legged on a blanket and she explained her predicament.

Dave's dark eyes lit up and his face creased all over with a radiant smile. "Well, good for you," he said. "This should come in handy when you're dealing with brokers and bankers and anyone else trying to screw you! In fact, you could hire yourself out to accompany others when they buy houses and other stuff!"

She sighed. Had he missed the point entirely. He must have seen the look on her face and apologized. "Well," he said, "I see you're a pure type of soul and you just want to know what has happened to you. The thing is, I can't tell you. I don't know anyone else who has this talent or whatever it is by nature, though you can develop something pretty much like it after years of study and shamanic experience."

"Do you think," she asked him, "that may-

be someday most everyone in the world will be born with this, just like they are born with sight and hearing?"

He looked off into space and shook his head. "I have no idea," he said. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

Well, she had paid for this for nothing but it *had* been a bit of fun. All she could do was drive back home and return to the clinic on Monday to see patients as usual. As usual, as usual, as a single woman in a small town, evenings alone, apparently forever and ever.

After a day of runny nosed children, obese people with heart failure huffing and puffing on oxygen, farmers with ruined feet and lacerations, women who put off their mammograms and coughing smokers, she decided to try the dating service one more time. If only to have someone to describe her days to, someone who might care just a little.

This time, the man was an accountant who worked in Scranton, Steven Rice. They met halfway at a diner. Megan arrived early as was her usual habit and sat in a back booth, jumpy and already irritated since she knew that the moment she saw him, she would know one way or the other if he was a potential partner. And if he wasn't, she'd be stuck with him for at least an hour of stressful conversation.

And then he arrived, standing and looking around, black hair and black rimmed glasses, looking like Dennis the Menace's father in the comic books. She raised her hand and he headed her way and as he slid into the booth, she knew immediately he was not for her. When she sighed, he asked her what was the matter but of course she could never tell him.

"Truck accident on 81," he said, "or I would have beaten you here. I'm usually always early," He laughed.

She liked him, it had nothing to do with not liking him, but he hadn't passed her grokking or whatever it was. She stifled a sigh, not knowing what to do, not wanting to hurt his feelings. Right away, it was as if she knew him, a sweet nerd, self-deprecatingly amusing, probably a big video game player, would like Star Trek, didn't work out, overall nice, but just not what she wanted.

"So, tell me about yourself," she said, already counting the minutes till she could leave and go home and cuddle up with her cat.

He talked about some amusing clients, they compared TV series they liked and got a bit into politics since they were both the same party as specified on the dating app. She wasn't bored at all, but still knew nothing more would happen. And then, this man got up from a table across the room and walked over to them.

"Hey," he said to Steven, "where ya been, buddy? You just disappeared after Sean's wedding. I've been super busy at work or I would've called."

The guy looked at Megan as if to say, "Are you going to introduce us?" and then back at his friend and Megan lost her power of speech.

This person, whoever he was, was IT. Whatever "it" was. This new sense of hers was ringing bells, alerting her, screaming at her. It was as if she was gazing at the most delicious thing she'd ever seen or smelling the most enticing flower. This slightly beefy male in a blue plaid shirt and reddish beard, not normally her type at all, a bit rough around the edges, probably never picked up a book and, god forbid, had he voted for that monster she hated?

Steven said, "Um, Megan, this is Troy Moore. An old college bud. Well, Troy didn't finish, did you?"

Troy laughed. "Nope, my father finally over-

came any individuality I have and coerced me into joining his hardware business. There went my hope of winning a Nobel Prize in literature."

"Troy is a rich entrepreneur now," smirked Steven.

How the hell was she ever going to be able to know this person? Maybe he was married. She couldn't ask Steven for his number and even if she could, she'd never have the nerve to call him. And just because she could sense he was everything she wanted, it didn't mean he'd want her back.

Somehow Stephen had not introduced them and she was still tongue tied. Finally, Troy said his goodbyes, went back to his table, eventually paid his bill and left with two other men.

She had to lie. "Um, your friend Troy looks so familiar. Where does he live?"

"You might have run into him somewhere," said Steven. "He lives up in your area. That hardware business is just outside your own town. You've probably seen him around."

"Hmmm," she said, pretending she was trying to place him. "Is he married? Maybe I know his wife. I see a lot of people at the clinic."

Stephen gave her a kind of sharp look as if he knew what she was up to. "He's divorced. He's got a kid, a daughter, and sees her on weekends. His ex-wife is Lisa Cunningham. She's a teacher."

"Hmmm," Megan said, still pretending. "I don't know her. So, it's that hardware store on Rt. 11? The big one?"

"That's the one," said Steven, now looking outright snarky. She was so not good at pretending.

"I'd better get back to work," he said. "Tax time, even on Saturday." And they fumbled their way out of the restaurant and managed not to say that they would meet again. Megan

drove home dreamily and began wracking her brain for things she would need to buy at a hardware store.

Curtain rods, that was it. And she needed a new hammer and some assorted nails were good to have on hand. Screws too, you never knew when you might need one.

When would he be there? Would he even be there at all? She was seeing patients nine to four every day that week and would have to wait till next Saturday and maybe he had that off. If she pretended to be sick and took off a day, he might not be there that day at all. Well, there was lunchtime and she possibly she could eat a sandwich in her car and make it to the store and back without a minute to spare. She ended up waiting till Saturday and her luck was good. He was in the paint department helping a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and soon was gone. He noticed Megan hesitating and immediately hailed her. "Hey, you're Steven's friend!" he said happily. "How's it going?"

Obviously, he was not in touch with Steven. "Um, not exactly his friend," she said, moving in closer. She was sensing his essence all over her body. "Nothing going on there with Steven," she said, smiling like a fool.

He suddenly turned serious. "I never thought I'd see you again," he said.

And then she knew she had gotten it right.



“THE RINSE”

by NICHOLAS WOODS

THE FIRST DAY OF THE END OF THE WORLD

*I often wondered, why me?
Why do we exist when we do?
Our time on this one Earth, chosen at random.
Why me?
Why now.
At the end.*

Footsteps crashed through leaves and a desperate hand grasped nearby bark so roughly she was sure she'd stripped skin free. A sound crackled like a whip, not behind her, but above her, so loud that the woman sucked one single breath into her lungs before continuing her sprint.

Michelle Parker rounded a corner, head glancing back for only a second, as if she was being chased, before crashing right into something.

She didn't even scream before the thing she barreled into was grabbing her.

"Where have you been?" James Parker glanced behind her, wild fear in his eyes.

"Is it happening?"

"Come on, we have to hurry." James pulled her through the remainder of a forest before the trees gave way to a clearing, a cabin seen in the distance.

Something cracked in the sky again, sending James and Michelle to the ground, an invisible wave of energy knocking them off their feet. Michelle recovered, the cabin's front door mere feet away, but she needed to see it. Needed to look at the sky one more time.

High above the horizon spread a gaseous ripple, no larger than a full moon in harvest season. Its deep red color gave it the appearance of an angry eye, with amber and emerald haze swirling behind it.

Michelle felt James pull her into the house, and for a moment she was grateful, because if he hadn't she might have never peeled her eyes away from that awful sight.

They moved across the living room, passing a small electronic device left on the kitchen table — a Geiger counter, its radiation detection meter sitting in the green. But if one looked closely, they could see the needle ticking, slowly at first, but gaining a pulse that beat toward the red.

At the end of the hallway sat a lone, metal door, a massive painting of an English Airedale Terrier leaning against the wall off to the side.

Michelle raced down the steps into a basement, watching her footing, passing by Phil Parker, twice her age in his early sixties who sealed the metal door shut. Her instincts pulled her eyes to the walls lined with food and water, before moving back toward James' father, who

sat down at a computer system and a radio microphone.

A news broadcaster's voice was heard over the stereo. "Everyone is being told to seek shelter. Concrete or metal structures."

Michelle looked at James. "Are we safe in here?"

But Phil was the one to answer her, turning in his chair. "This room was built to survive beyond a blast range of 100 kilometers."

James, usually so strong, so carefree and sure of himself, choked on his rushed words. "From a bomb, or a nuke, but..."

"That's not what this is." Michelle tried to keep her voice level. If she could find steady-

ness in her words, perhaps the rest of her body would follow suit.

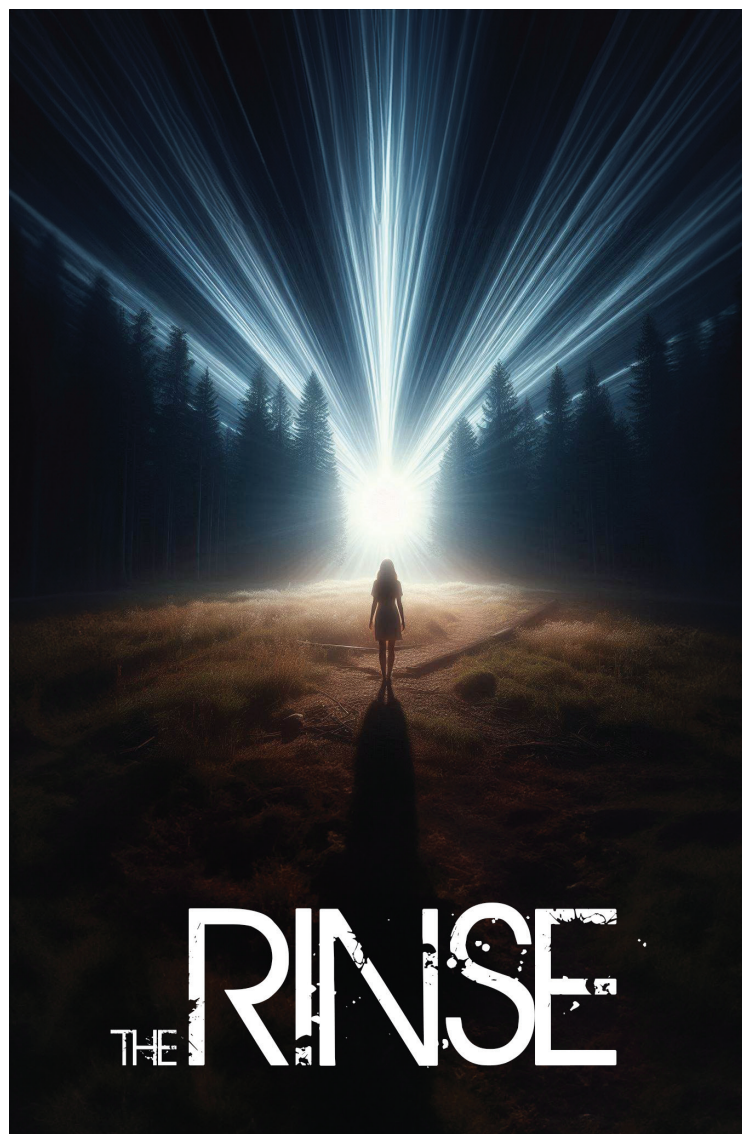
Phil nodded, attempting comfort. "I know darling. But we're safe down here. We just have to... hang tight."

James exhaled. "But for how long?"

Michelle's eyes drifted back to the food and water.

We made it three hundred and eighty-eight days.

The door to the cellar creaked open, the metal hinges tight from disuse. Michelle walked through the dusty, empty house, her eyes going to the Geiger counter on the table. She replaced



art by Nicholas Woods

the batteries, the meter showing what she already knew. Green. Safe.

The next several days flowed like a strange dream, a detached sort of waking up after a long disorienting nap. She tried not to dwell on the fact that most of the world, God only knew the numbers, was gone.

Phil tried to repair his garden, the vegetables and herbs there long dead. James made repairs around the house, and Michelle helped where she could, all the while avoiding looking at the Ripple which appeared even brighter and deeper in color than it had before.

Then, the sun would grow white and hot and angry. They would have to run inside the basement, again, and again. When the radiation levels cooled, they would emerge, and attempt to rebuild.

Again, and again.

The reasons that had led Phil to prepare for an off-chance inevitability, that had become a reality, were never dissected. Michelle was, in the end, just grateful that the man had whatever godly foresight or fear or paranoia that made him prepare. The cabin had a well they could pump for water, and James could hunt in the forest for meat. The white solar flares that penetrated the earth seemed to be slowing, giving them more time in between to rebuild.

Michelle thought the tension in her chest may finally release. She didn't have any family of her own, there was no one to mourn except for her friends and those at work that she cared about and tried her best not to think of them. They were gone, and perhaps, no, for sure, they were the lucky ones. Uncertainty brings its own kind of terror. And she thought she at least was starting to understand the nightmare she was

in.

Then, one day, she woke up shooting from her bed, racing for a toilet, heaving the night's meager rations from her stomach into the bowl. A cup of water, three minutes to relieve herself onto a plastic stick, and two pink lines were all it took.

The thought of starving didn't scare me.

Or radiation poisoning.

Or the sun's white fury melting the skin from my bones.

Nothing, compared to this.

SEVEN YEARS INTO THE END OF THE WORLD

What do you tell a child about the world ending?

Tell me, I'd love to know.

"Just a little further!" The boy didn't petulantly beg.

There was sincerity and maturity in his request. Perhaps, that's what made it so hard to refuse. The week before, he wanted to see the lightning struck pine-tree, a mile away from the cabin. Before that, he asked to see the wooden woodpecker house, a half mile away. Since he had turned six, each week he wanted to venture further and further. He was asking more questions. Questions Michelle didn't have the answers to.

"No, Joseph. We need to get back. It's going to get dark soon." Michelle took the boy by the hand. They made their way through the forest, back toward the cabin. "Grandpa will be up soon; he'll want to read with you."

In the last few years, Phil had grown accustomed to sleeping during the day so that he could keep watch at night. They had only one incident with a Roamer in the past few months,

but those types were desperate, dangerous, and Phil claimed to feel more content keeping watch while the parents kept a normal schedule with their son.

Michelle looked down at Joseph. Her son seemed so full of curiosity, so seemingly knowing, but of what reality Michelle couldn't guess. All she wanted in the entire painful universe was to show her son a beautiful world, before he learned about the one they were truly in.

"Wanna race back to the cabin?" Michelle found a smile she had learned to wear, a convincing excited façade that displayed anything other than what she truly felt inside.

With a nod, Joseph ran to the cabin, Michelle on his ever-quickening heels. The moment he reached the door, she grabbed him. "I got you!"

A fit of giggles took him before he slipped from her grip and moved inside.

The cabin's interior no longer appeared as it once did. Colorful sheets were torn to stream from ceiling to banister, hand-crafted paintings and beautiful pieces of artwork torn from books and magazines now lined the walls. Her goal was a kindergartener's classroom on steroids, and Michelle thought she hit the mark well.

"Where's Dad?" Joseph asked, looking around.

"He must still be at work."

At work. James' day-job consisted of foraging for supplies, avoiding exiles, bandits, and Roamers. Working with other survivors on the mountain to trade goods for their water supply. While others had various items to offer, their cabin had one of the few wells that was dug deep enough to avoid radiation when solar flares struck.

When those unfortunate days would come, Michelle would make a game out of it, getting

Joseph downstairs with the rest of the family in a manner that not only didn't frighten him, but made him happy and excited. It was all she could do.

Joseph moved up to Michelle. "There's a picture in your room, of Dad and Grandpa, when Dad was little. Where were they?"

Michelle's heart froze in her chest. She knew the photo. Were they in Chicago? She was pretty sure.

"I want to go there," Joseph said, and Michelle realized she hadn't responded. She took a deep breath and kissed her son's head.

"One day, we will."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Maybe they would, somehow. For seven years, she hadn't so much as gone down the mountain. James barely went past Auberry, the small town at the foot of the pass, unless scavenging was incredibly desperate. It was just too much of a risk to go much further.

That evening, James returned home, washing himself outside before moving into the house, a dark expression on his face he tried to cover up. He wasn't as good at pretending as Michelle was. That was okay. He had his job; she had hers.

Earlier that day, James had mentioned that he thought it was time Joseph learned to use a rifle. The boy was getting bigger. Michelle had found James in the bedroom before he went out for the day.

"Look, I thought about what you asked the other day, and I just don't think it's a good idea." Michelle saw the frustration in his eyes but remained strong. "No guns. It's too early."

James took a breath. He'd never yelled at Michelle, ever lost his temper, though if he had she probably wouldn't have blamed him. The things he had to do, the things he did on a regu-

lar basis for the family, were enough for anyone to need twenty-four-hour therapy. But James had no one. Except for her. But he was soft with her, even when he was in a tough place, and if his mood was especially dark, he would take time to himself until he was better.

His eyes found hers, steady. "He needs to learn some simple skills. Self-defense."

Michelle fought the urge to snort. The idea was almost comical. "At his size, who is he going to be defending himself against? That's our job."

"He's big enough to pull a trigger." James went quiet, guessing the words would rock Michelle. And they did. He continued. "And when was the last time you practiced your shooting?"

It had been a while, she had to admit, but stayed focused on the part that mattered most to her. "He's just a boy."

"He's getting older, baby. Asking more questions. We're going to have to tell him something about the world."

In her heart, she knew he was right. Speaking to a child about the normal world would have been difficult. What does someone tell a six-year-old about disease, suicide, and murder? But now, with the world the way it was, it seemed an impossible task. One wrong word, or rather, one truthful one, could rip the veil of childhood from his eyes and replace it with a lens she never wanted him to see through. But perhaps, it was inevitable.

That night, she looked over at Joseph, who sat at the dinner table next to a quiet James while she stirred soup on a portable gas heater. Footsteps creaked on the floorboards, and Phil entered the room.

"Was that you I heard running around earlier?" Phil directed a mock-stern look at Joseph who only stifled a grin.

"Sorry, Dad." James wiped at his face, clearly exhausted, but knew sleep was far from near.

"Don't be." Phil settled into the table. "I like the noise. Funny. Your Mom and I bought this place, well, to get away from the city. Get some peace. Three months in we looked at each other like we were crazy."

Michelle turned to look at James, both sharing the same thought *thank god you did*.

Later, Phil read to Joseph from Charlotte's Web by E.B. White. Michelle listened while she cleaned, one section resonating deep within her.

"Fern says the animals talk to each other. Dr Dorian, do you believe animals talk? I never heard one say anything," he replied. "But that proves nothing. It is quite possible that an animal has spoken to me... And that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention. Children pay better attention than grown-ups."

Michelle looked at Joseph, his brown eyes staring back at her.

After reading, she tucked him into bed, kissing his forehead.

"Are you going to sleep?" Joseph asked, that curious tone in his voice searching for more.

"No, we are going to be up a while." Michelle stood, moving to the door.

"Doing what?"

Michelle stood by the door before closing it. "Grown up things. Get some sleep."

She took one last look at the boy who settled into his blankets.

Michelle moved downstairs, and out of the house, into the exterior garage where she knew James and Phil would be waiting.

The garage functioned nothing like it once had. It was now the base of operations of everything they had to do to survive. Weapons lined the walls, cleaning supplies for the guns neatly

stored as well as ammunition that Phil had stockpiled.

Michelle entered the room to find James at the center table, cleaning a pistol, while Phil moved in the background, a long-range radio held to his ear. “Three gallons for how many carrots? No fucking way Rich... Yeah, yeah, okay now you’re talking. And some sweet potatoes.”

James stepped toward Michelle, his anticipated eyes making her nervous. “What’s going on?”

“There’s something you need to hear.” James motioned her over to the radio controls. Michelle watched as he dialed into a nearby keypad.

A voice sounded over the speaker. “Thank you for calling the Co-Op information channel. Please enter your designated pass-key to receive the latest local information.” James typed in their family’s designated code.

Michelle’s eyes went to a sticky note above the keypad that read: *6, 7, 8 months since last big one.*

Once the passkey was accepted, the neutral voice spoke again. “Thank you INDEPENDENT HOUSE, PARKER FAMILY, ST. PAUL’S MOUNTAIN. Here is the local forecast. Radiation activity in your area is clear. There have been increased reports of criminal activity and Roamers gathering in the southern towns of Prather and Auberry.”

James scribbled on the notepad: *Roamers gathering?*

The voice continued its log, “80% chance of solar flare expected October 30th.”

James’ hand found paper once more: *Storm in three days?*

Michelle felt her throat go tight. Three days. They were prepared to go down at any minute, but the thought of going into that cellar was

difficult to accept. Solar Flare radiation was different than other forms of disastrous radiation. The cosmic rays and radiation emitted from the sun during a Solar Flare storm would be devastating while it was active, but the moment the sun settled and the ejection was over, the radiation would clear up quickly, unlike the effects of a bomb or nuclear power plant meltdown. But while the storm was hot and white, they would need to be locked downstairs for as long as it lasted.

Michelle sat down at the chair, her thoughts racing, her eyes moving along the notes and taped information around the equipment.

Her eyes found a map of St. Paul’s mountain. On the west side stood the Parker Cabin. Four names were written in various other spots around the mountain, noting the other independent families, each whom had some sort of shelter to protect against solar fares. Whether they were as updated as the one in Phil’s cellar, none of them knew, as this was not information freely given on the rare chance the independent survivors got to chatting.

On the far side of the mountain was a drawing of a collection of buildings with the word CO-OP, 58 members, written below. Below the mountain were names of other cities and their population changes San Jose: ~~971,233~~, 459. Fresno: ~~545,277~~, 240. And so on. Michelle found it difficult, still, to comprehend such devastation.

Michelle turned to James. “Roamers are gathering? They never come up the mountain.” There was little for the Co-Op exiles to forage, and Co-Op rangers would shoot any of them on sight if they were seen. At the start of the Co-Op’s formation, they had set out rules. Many similar to the laws society previously held. Pun-

ishment for the simplest infraction was banishment from their shelters, their food supply, and most importantly—their equipment that detected solar flares.

“Only one reason to gather in mass. They must have caught wind of the storm coming. I think they’re finally going to try.” James didn’t hold a trace of worry in his voice.

Michelle guessed James believed the Co-Op could hold their own if the Roamers made an attempt to take the radiation shelters they had. She squeezed her hands together attempting to stop their trembling.

James turned to his dad, whose voice grew tense.

“How long has it been since anyone’s heard from them?” Phil nodded gravely, eventually ending the transmission. He looked at Michelle and James. “It’s confirmed. A storm’s coming, people are preparing. But no one had heard from Ali Elrod, or her family, in a week.”

James moved around the center table, adjusting a map, looking at the Elrod’s southern position on the mountain. Their cabin sits at the lowest elevation. The first to be reached if Roamers came up the pass. “The Co-Op usually looks into these matters. Are they going to check on them?”

Phil frowned. “They’ve been contacted, but no straight answer has been given. Someone needs to check in on them though.”

The rest of the night was spent preparing. It was decided in the morning, James would go take a look at the Elrod house and see what he could find while Phil and Michelle prepared supplies for the storm.

Michelle moved into bed that night, an uneasiness in her entire being. She was scared, but she had learned over the years to live with terror. She could hold it around her, let it sit at

the gravitational edge of her being, and not let it fully in. Eventually, James came in and joined her. They had few moments alone with one another, quiet in the feigned peace that night presented. She reached for him, and he took her hand. His touch was warm, but his grip was tenuous. Slack. All she wanted was for him to grab her and hold onto her. To squeeze her so hard that she felt *something*. Pain. Safety. But he could not read her mind. So, instead, she turned to him, wrapping her arms around him. She held him fiercely, letting him know with every taught muscle and fiber of her being, that she hadn’t given up. Not yet. Not ever.

When she slept, her courage left her and the doorway to her fears were flung wide open. How cruel for dreams to bring her such awful terror. Dreams were supposed to bring what day and life could not. A hand shook her, a lifeline out of her fitful nightmares.

“Michelle!”

She jolted awake, dawn’s sunlight embracing her before she opened her eyes to see James.

“Bad dream?” James was dressed, leaning over her.

“Just one of the usual ones.” Michelle tried to find a smile, but embarrassment couldn’t overwhelm the fear that still held her.

It took an hour for her head to clear. James left shortly after her rising, headed for the Elrod’s cabin to see why they had not been in communication with anyone.

Michelle sat at the kitchen table; Joseph close to her. “Will you play with me?”

She looked at her son a long time, a smile on her face, counting on his innocence to hide her poorly worn mask. It would be a hard day, but they’ve had plenty hard ones.

Later, in the early afternoon, Phil rose to teach Joseph a few agreed upon lessons. They

would hold off teaching him how to hunt until his next birthday, but in the meantime, he could learn the aspects of the weapon and the fundamentals of how to safely operate one. Michelle wished he didn't have to ever learn how to use a gun, but she knew some things were out of her control. What was in her control, was how he viewed the world.

So, after lessons with grandpa there were lessons with Mom. She read to him, showed him paintings, listened to music, and read him poetry. A beautiful world. Or at least, the remnants of one.

Then the sun set, and James hadn't come home. Michelle waited by the window, trying to keep her nerves below the surface. Phil busied himself by preparing the cellar, storing water, checking their dried and canned food supplies, doing calculations. There wasn't more information on how large the storm would be. Perhaps the Co-Op didn't know. What remained of the scientific community worked within their boundaries, but Michelle was sure they kept some information to themselves.

"Dad's home!" Joseph moved to the front window, truck headlights shining on his face.

Michelle raced to the front door, opening it. She stood on the porch and could see Phil's truck. But it didn't drive into the property. Why wasn't he coming in?

Phil appeared next to her, a radio in his hand.

"James, come in." Phil clicked the radio and the silence that followed seemed to last an hour. But after a moment, they heard James' voice.

"I'm here."

"Why aren't you coming in." Michelle now held the radio.

"You need to put Joseph in the cellar and lock it."

Michelle and Phil exchanged a look of deep wariness, unsure of the why but knew the request would not have come if it weren't something serious. Something bad.

The cellar no longer looked like the emergency shelter for three. The space wasn't terribly large, although it did have a small closed off bathroom, and a divider for a single bed. But Michelle had done her work on it, making the place colorful and friendly. In the center of the room was a two-person tent. Michelle led Joseph to it.

"I need you to stay here, and not move. Can you do that for me?"

The boy's face crinkled. "Why?"

"Because, something... happened to Dad at work, and I need to help him."

"I can help." His voice was earnest.

"I know you can. But right now, you can help me, by staying in here. Can you please do that for me?" Michelle tried to put authority into her words, but she didn't want to risk him breaking down, crying. He came first, no matter what.

But to her relief, he nodded. "I can do that mommy."

Michelle left the little boy. She didn't lock the metal door, but she closed it almost all the way. Then, she moved outside to the truck.

Phil was next to the back door looking at something, James standing, back turned. When Michelle approached, he turned around, her eyes horrified at what she saw.

He was covered in blood. She raced to him, worriedly checking every part of him.

"Don't worry, it's not mine." James gave her hand a comforting squeeze, sticky dark left on her wrist from the gesture. She didn't care.

"Help me get her into the garage," Phil said and James moved to him. Out of the back

seat, they lifted a young girl, unconscious, blood leaking in heavy pools from her side. Michelle figured the poor thing couldn't be more than seventeen. What had happened to her?

Inside the garage, they laid the girl out onto the center table. Together, they lifted the side of her shirt and found her wound. A large tear through her side, but nothing vital seemed struck. She had lost a lot of blood, but if they could bandage it, she would perhaps live.

"Who is she?" Michelle asked as she wiped blood from around the gash.

"Co-Op," James answered. "She was... there when I arrived, tied to a chair. The Elrods..." He looked at his father, knowing the words that were to come would hurt him. "The whole family was left in an open grave in the backyard."

Phil's face went dark. "Roamers?"

James nodded. "I crept up to the house. Was going to leave, but I saw her. Her truck was outside, you know the white trucks they all drive."

Co-Op ranger's vehicles were all decaled with the same phrase CO-OP: KNOWLEDGE AND PROTECTION. AT THE END. They were said to be impervious to solar flare radiation. Some Co-Ops had special garage entrances where their people could enter and exit in the middle of a storm.

James eyed Michelle. "I listened for as long as I could. There is a group of Roamers, all gathered, all working together to take the St. Paul's Mountain Co-Op and its shelter. But some are splitting off. Taking houses with shelters, like the Elrods."

Michelle's heart started to hammer. "Do they know about us?"

"I don't know." James' breathing never seemed to settle. "We should assume they do. And that in the next day or two, before the

storm, they'll come try and take this house."

Everyone went quiet. Less than an hour of work and the girl's wound was clean and sewn. They didn't ask James what happened next, though Michelle could imagine. If he was here, with the girl, then he had killed the Roamers in the Elrod house. She didn't feel sorry for them. They were murderers. They'd killed an old woman, her children, and grandchildren. They deserved what they got.

Michelle moved outside with James, near the well, and helped clean the blood from him. They didn't speak a word the entire time, just moving in step, filling clean buckets, dumping murky red ones. Ringing red liquid from rags and starting again. It took over an hour, this marital ritual of theirs.

When he was cleaned, she found his eyes in the moonlight. He looked into hers, but there was a hollowness to him. She knew they exchanged the same feelings, the same unspoken words of the unfairness of the world. The difficulty of their situation and how maybe, perhaps, it would be better to just have died with the rest of the world.

They stared at each other a long time, no words passing, for there were none that could comfort one another or speak what the other didn't already know. That this was their life. That all they could do was keep moving, keep surviving, and pray that throughout, they could find moments of peace and joy.

James turned to her. "Is Joseph inside?"

"Yes," Michelle responded, her heart clenching. "He should be in bed."

"Good." James looked down, as if his shame was a weight drawing them to the ground. "I don't want him to see me. Until I... I just... can't see him right now."

He meant he couldn't pretend. Michelle

understood. For the night, he had been strong enough. There was only so much a person could take.

Michelle found his hand in the dark and led James to the house. They moved inside where it was blessedly quiet. Michelle wanted time to take care of James, but those hopes were dashed as someone appeared at the stairwell.

"Joseph, I need you to go back to your bed," Michelle instructed, but to her great surprise, the boy raced down the stairs and threw his arms around James' legs. Michelle glanced at James, who was stunned, but seemed to take a deep breath, trying. God help him, he was trying. Phil entered the back door and Michelle saw him take in the scene, quietly, not moving.

Michelle and Phil watched as James looked at Joseph with that same hollow stare he gave her. Then, he hugged his son fiercely and did something that completely shocked her. James began to weep. Joseph's eyes went wide, shooting to Michelle with confusion, worry, and a sheer lack of knowing what to do. It broke her heart in a thousand pieces as the boy lifted a hand and patted his Dad's head.

"It's okay, Daddy. You're home now."

James seemed to give a final shudder before gulping down his emotional release, pushing it down, and standing. Without a word to anyone, he moved Joseph aside and headed up the stairs.

Michelle looked at Phil. The man gave her a small nod that said "this is normal". Phil had served in the military, seen battle. Partially why he was so adept at survival and weaponry. So, he knew what his son was experiencing. The erratic toll it took. That was why the next day was so difficult.

"I told you to stay inside"

Michelle raced outside toward the shouting.

It was James, gripping Joseph by the shoulders.

"I'm sorry," the little boy squeaked. "I just wanted to see the girl."

Michelle had told Joseph about their new 'houseguest' who was resting in the garage. That was her mistake. But she had never seen James like this.

"What's going on?" Michelle said moving between them.

James turned away from her, picking up the rifle he had tossed to the ground.

"I told Joseph to stay inside today. It's too dangerous, it's too..." He was about to start screaming again, she could see it in the veins of his neck. She held up a firm hand.

"James. I'll talk to him." He looked like he was about to say something else, anger still coursing through him. "James," she said again, gentle but firm.

James took a deep breath, shame starting to douse the fires inside of him. "It's too dangerous."

Michelle nodded to him, and grabbed Joseph by the hand, taking him inside. She sat the boy at the kitchen table. He looked utterly stricken, face red, eyes cast down. She felt bad for him, despite that fact that he *did* disobey them.

Then, Michelle's mind painfully went to James. Often, a new great fear would bubble up inside of her. What if she were killed? What if it were just Joseph and James? James surely couldn't keep up this act, pretending with the boy that the world is an albeit odd but safe place. As much as it pained her to think this of her husband, with terrible sadness, she knew it to be the truth.

He couldn't pretend.

"I just wanted to see her."

Michelle's attention snapped to Joseph. She

knew she shouldn't have mentioned the young girl in the garage. She was awake, still sore and weak from her injury. Michelle knew she was probably hungry.

"Stay here." Michelle said to Joseph. "I'm going to see if our guest wants to join us for lunch."

It turned out, the young girl was very hungry. Ten minutes later she was sitting at the kitchen table across from Joseph, canned peaches and soup before both of them. She ate the fruit like it was best thing to touch her lips in years. Perhaps it was. Who knew what the Co-Op fed its people. Partially why the family never wanted to join. Everything that one ate, drank, and did was determined by them.

Joseph starred at the Co-Op girl in fascination. She was the closest person in age to anyone he'd ever met. "Are there other kids, where you live, like me?"

Michelle felt her heart ache at that. There was only so much she could give him, this she knew. The girl shot a glance at Michelle, but Michelle had told her the rules about what she could and could not tell Joseph.

"Yes, a few," she answered.

Joseph's eyes went wide. "What's your name?"

"Abby. After my mom."

"Where's your mom?"

Abby's eyes went soft, then glanced at Michelle for help, having been put in a tough corner.

"Let Abby eat her lunch." Michelle took a bite of her own food, although her appetite hadn't been great the past few days, but she knew she needed her strength.

"Can I show Abby the basement?" Joseph asked Michelle.

"Not right now." Michelle exhaled, frustrated with herself more than anything. They shouldn't be revealing the details of their shelter to anyone.

Joseph turned back to Abby. "We hide in there when the sky goes white."

Abby wiped her mouth, then looked around the house nodding. Michelle pursed her lips but kept her face even as she could. An act for two.

Joseph set down his spoon and pushed one of the drawings around him toward Abby. It was of the Ripple, but bright green. "I know the Ripple is red, but I ran out of red crayons."

Abby looked at the picture, tilting her head seeming slightly impressed. Then, her eyes moved curiously to Joseph. "Do you know what the... Ripple... is?"

Joseph shook his head.

Abby sat back. "The Ripple, it used to be a star. A sun, like the one in our sky that sometimes turns white." Joseph listened intently. "When stars get old, just like people, they die. But when stars die, they explode. The Ripple was very close to us... so close it..." Abby's words trailed off before she found the right ones. "It's not the first time it's happened on Earth. Scientists say it's happened several times over the last hundred thousand years. And that trees, inside their bark, keep records of these supernova events."

The last Michelle found intriguing, although the first part had been known to her. In a flash, the ozone layer was burned away. Now, without the Earth's protection, solar flares were able to penetrate the surface, over and over again.

"But that's all going to end," Abby said casually, picking up her spoon to another mouth-

ful of canned peaches.

Michelle narrowed her eyes at her. "What do you mean?"

Abby shrugged. "The Rinse. It's ending. Didn't you know?"

To Joseph's extreme discontent, Michelle placed him back inside his tent in the cellar, quickly whirling back on Abby who shifted uncomfortably on the couch, her wound obviously causing her discomfort.

"What do you mean, the Rinse is ending?" Michelle demanded.

"They didn't tell you? The Co-Op?" Abby seemed genuinely confused.

"No, they didn't. They just said another storm is coming."

Abby shook her head, perhaps frustrated by the institution she served. "Yeah, a big one. Should last a month. But... the ozone layer. It's built itself back up. This storm... it should be the last."

Michelle couldn't believe what she was hearing. Could it be true? She feared to hope. "Can you prove it?"

"No, not here. But I know, for certain, that's what all the Co-Ops have been relaying to one another. Been preparing. Maybe that's why they kept independents out of the details. They want to be the first to claim whatever they want in the new world."

The new world. Michelle's heart began to race, for the first time with purpose, not terrible fear and dread. She grabbed a walkie and called Phil and James back home. They arrived and Michelle took one of their rifles to guard the exterior while Abby told them what she just revealed to Michelle.

Michelle moved along the perimeter, eyes scanning the through the trees, her mind on the

future and what possibilities were to come. She never once considered this a potential reality. No more hiding, no more fear of nature trying to wash them off the planet. Sure, there would be trials ahead, a new world to build, but that would be a beautiful pursuit. Something she would relish to share with her son, and not the black hole of inescapable terror that had been their life for nearly a decade.

For the first time, in a long time, a genuine smile touched her lips.

She doesn't even hear the person step up behind her until a hand clasped over her mouth.

Michelle kicked out, but someone else, a woman punched her in the stomach. Michelle doubled over, the rifle in her hand pulled from her grip. Michelle looked to see a man towering over her. A Roamer, by the look of his scars. His long black hair hung in strands down to his shoulders, two bright blue eyes behind dark stringy shadows. Next to him was a woman, dirty auburn hair, and a bald, skinny man. All held the same burns that came only from radiation exposure.

The blue-eyed man knelt down to her. "Scream, and I'll kill you. You got one chance, to save yourself, and that little boy in there. Tell me. Are the others armed?"

Michelle's mind raced. These people meant to take the house. Were they giving her a choice? To keep her and Joseph alive?

The bald man coughed a sickly sound. He might be contaminated on the inside, his body scoured with radiation cancer. He didn't have long. Maybe months.

Michelle nodded. Knowing James and Phil were armed might keep them from attacking. At least, that's what she hoped. When the three

produce guns of their own, eyes on the house, she realized she was wrong.

The red head revealed ropes and tied Michelle to a nearby tree. Off in the distance, through the woods, Michelle could see a white truck with decaled letters on the side. They must have stolen it off some Co-Op rangers. Michelle turned to her captors.

“Please. Please, don’t hurt them. We can give you food. Water.”

The Roamer woman looked at Michelle without an ounce of pity as she placed a gag in her mouth. “Not your food or water we want. Plenty of that in our truck. It’s your shelter. Storms coming.”

“Let’s do this.” The blue-eyed Roamer gripped his gun, and the others followed him. Michelle had to watch as they advanced on her house, her family. Michelle tried to scream past the cloth in her mouth, but the words were caught in the fabric. She yanked at her hands, pulled at her bindings, her flesh tearing, sticky liquid now coating the rope. But she couldn’t break loose.

Michelle looked through the trees and saw something terrible, yet it brought her great relief. A gunshot rang through the air, the bald roamer outside the eastern section of the house going down, a bullet hitting him right in the belly.

Good. James and Phil were aware of what was coming for them. Her relief was short lived, as more gunshots pierced the air.

Michelle yanked at her bindings, pulling the rope tight against the bark. In smooth motions, she moved chord up and down, up and down. She moved fast, starting to feel the barest ease in the tension binding her. The only thing that stopped her was the erratic succession of bullets.

It wasn’t a standoff with unlimited ammo. No. These shots came in carefully, as if each bullet fired had a chance to take someone she loved.

She could only imagine what Joseph was thinking right then. She prayed he was still in the cellar. Prayed he wasn’t scared.

Just when she thought her bindings might be loose enough to get a hand through, Michelle heard something that made her soul slip from her body. Not a bullet. No. This sound was like a whip cracking through the air.

Michelle looked up to see the sky, its familiar blue now turning a terrifying white.

The storm was early.

Michelle could hear calls from the distance as the blue-eyed roamer shouted to the red head. She couldn’t hear what they were saying. It didn’t matter. She probably had five minutes tops before radiation would fill the air.

Her bloody wrist slipped through one of the bindings. She ripped the gag from her mouth then uncoiled her other hand. Then she sat back on the ground yanking at the knot around her legs.

There was one last gunshot, and Michelle heard the yell of someone screaming ring through the air. It didn’t sound like James, but it was hard to tell. She couldn’t think, couldn’t imagine all the terrible possibilities that were out there. She just had to get free.

The knot finally gave a sliver of purchase, and she was able to push the rest of the rope away. She jumped to her feet, turning around, ready to spring home when the barrel of a gun pointed right at her face.

It was the blue-eyed Roamer. He held his side which dripped with blood, a pistol pointed at Michelle. “In the truck, now.”

“Please, just...”

The man silenced the rest of her words with a sharp jab of the metal into her side. Michelle didn't know what to do. She moved toward the Co-Op truck, her eyes looking up through the trees to see the sky a deep pulsing white. Mere minutes were left.

They moved to the truck. Michelle, hands up in the air, looked over her shoulder to see the man trying to reach into his pocket for the truck keys, all the while keeping his pistol aimed at Michelle's back.

He fumbled for them, his finger's slick with his own blood, dropping them into the dirt. He cursed, reached to get them. Michelle saw his gun hand waver, just for a second, just enough for it to move its direction away from her.

It was the image of her family that was in her mind, when she turned and kicked the Roamer square in the jaw. He fired a bullet that made her shudder, but it bounced off the impenetrable truck's glass before he tumbled over. Michelle made her move, reaching for the car keys, unlocking the truck, and jumping inside.

She closed the door just as bullets flashed against the glass. She jolted, terrified. But the glass held. The blue-eyed Roamer screamed bloody murder outside the truck. He pulled on the door handle, but thankfully, it didn't budge. He stepped back and pointed his pistol at her.

Michelle yelled, bracing herself. But the bullets just bounced right off. She looked to the corner of the truck. There was a dial adjacent to the speedometer, a meter she knew quite well. Its needle ticked in the yellow, edging toward red. Michelle stared through the windshield as the sky went pure white.

She looked out toward the blue-eyed Roamer. She pointed to the sky, a smile on her face. Realization dawned on the Roamer, just a moment too late. The air began to turn white all

around them, the snapping sound like lightning cracking, consuming everything. The Roamer screamed, holding his hands out before him.

Michelle held her breath, the white wave all around her, but the truck kept her safe. It seemed like an eternity, but in reality, it was no more than a minute until the white light disappeared, and the forest around her appeared normal.

But it was far from normal, far from safe. She looked the truck's radiation meter. It was deep in the red. Michelle knew it might be for weeks. She didn't let herself panic. The red head said there were supplies in the truck. Michelle reached toward the back, into the covered trunk, and saw a massive heap of food, water, and other survival gear. Plenty for just her to last a long time.

But what about her family? Did they make it into the cellar? Was anyone hurt?

Michelle looked around and found a radio. She tuned it to the channel the family designated on, but she only heard static. Then, slowly, the crackling gave way to voices.

"She'll be okay." That was Phil. Phil was alright.

Michelle pressed the button on the radio, speaking into it. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

No response. Then, another voice was heard.

"How do you know?" Abby asked. Abby was with them.

The outgoing mechanism on her radio must be fried, but it was picking up their signal. But what about James and Joseph? Michelle's heart began to race, heavy, and aching. James didn't make it back, did he. Her paranoid thoughts of every possibility continued to assault her like the sun's radioactive discharges upon the planet. It was too much.

"I don't. I just know in my heart. That girl's a survivor." Phil's pride in her pulled her back to the present, helping her not fall into despair. "I'm going to rest a minute. The channel's open. Keep an eye on the radio. And them."

Then, through the radio, she heard something. Laughter and crying can often sound like the same noise, but a mother knew. Joseph's laughter trickled in over the radio. It was more than she could bare to know he was safe.

"Your name is Borqiz and you're a troll!" Joseph said.

Then, she heard James.

"Borqiz. What kind of name is that!" James called out. She could hear the strain in his voice. Worry, she knew, was for her and her safety. But there was something else on top of it: a command of will, pushing his tone to be comforting. "Alright, well you better hide because Borqiz the terrible is coming to eat your bones."

For a long time, she just listened to the sounds of her husband playing with their son. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Where she was supposed to go. But it didn't really matter. She would survive. More importantly, so would he.

Michelle put the key in the ignition and fired up the truck, pulling down the forest road, the only thing guiding her in the sky the dark red of the Ripple.

Three months.

I'll see you then my love.

I can't wait to show you a new world. I'll see you then.

At the beginning. ❖

“THE ROCHE LOBE ANOMALY”

by JEFFREY M. GABA

Editor's Note: Welcome to part one of this masterful tale. As you know, we are fans of long-form spec-fic, deep character development, and space operas, and this piece checks all the boxes. Enjoy!

I. Contact

1

One by one, the ships of the squadron flicked into space around the planet. As arranged, they immediately moved to take station around the flagship. Gilbert, captain of the flagship *Kurofune*, noted it all with a combination of pride and amazement. With the enormous distances the squadron had traveled without a planetfall, the precision of their arrival was astonishing. And with rare insight, Gilbert realized that he would get little credit. With that thought, Gilbert turned to his Admiral standing next to him on the bridge. “All ships accounted for and in position, Ma’am.”

Admiral Gaunt stared impassively at the displays before her. “Very good, Captain. Order all ships in the squadron to General Quarters, all hands to Battle Stations.”

Gilbert stared at her in surprise. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“And would you please signal that all Captains are to join me in person in the Briefing Room in 45 minutes. And please ask Dr. Bloom to join us as well. I’ll be in my quarters if anything needs my attention.”

Gaunt turned and strode off the bridge. A collective sigh marked the crew’s relief at the withdrawal of the Admiral from the bridge. Gilbert was not surprised by the Admiral’s unemotional response to their remarkable planetfall. He would have been surprised by any other response.

Gilbert hoped that the meeting in the Briefing Room would reveal the purpose of their mission and the surprising order of Battle Stations. If not, Gilbert was resigned to uncertainty. Serving under Admiral had taught him to patiently accept being kept in the dark about mission objectives. Gaunt revealed only what Gaunt revealed. Part of the mystique of the great woman.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Chuni, the sailing master, was addressing Gilbert from his position at the navigation console.

“Yes, Mr. Chuni. You have something to report?”

“Sir, all of the ships are in proper position, and several of the captain’s gigs have already launched and will arrive shortly.”

Gilbert nodded, “Thank you.”

“Yes sir. But there is something else to report. It is very subtle, but I am detecting some strange gravitational forces acting on the squadron. It is nothing that currently effects our position or navigation, but it is detectable.”

“Do you have any information on the source of the anomaly?”

“No sir, not at this time. I have never seen anything like this. But again, the effect is slight and barely detectable. I thought I should report it.”

“Quite right, and keep me informed if there is any change. Gather any information you can for a report to the Admiral.”

Gilbert wondered if the Admiral needed informing, and whether the anomaly was the reason for the mission. Time would definitely tell. Gaunt might not.

2

Forty-four minutes after the last ship had flicked into orbit, the five captains sat patiently in the flagship’s Briefing Room: Captain Gilbert of the destroyer *Kurofune*, Captain Billings of the frigate *Zeng He*, Captain Olav of the frigate *Clotho*, Captain Mwara of the frigate *Endymion*, and Captain Joseph of the Bomb Ketch *Hephaestus*. One minute later Admiral Gaunt strode into the room, and the captains stood to attention. “Take your seats, gentlemen.”

Soon after they had settled into their seats, a man wearing civilian clothes entered the room.

“Dr. Bloom, I appreciate the casual attitude that civilians have to discipline and order, but when I request your presence in 45 minutes, I expect your attendance in 45 minutes.” Gaunt addressed this to Bloom with all of the emotion with which she would order coffee. The captains, however, couldn’t suppress smiles. It was inconceivable that any of them would be late to a meeting with the Admiral.

“My apologies. Your ‘request’ took me somewhat by surprise. It was virtually the first time anyone has acknowledged my presence since I boarded the ship. It took me a moment

to get over the shock.”

“I think you may need a more resilient attitude aboard this ship, Doctor. Be that as it may, I would like to begin by introducing our easily shocked civilian colleague to you all. This, gentlemen, is Dr. Martin Bloom. He has been pressed into serving as the squadron’s Anthropologist. He purports to be an expert in contact with non-human sentient species. Please, take your seat, Doctor.

“Gentleman, I would like to start with reports from each of you on the status of your ships. Captain Olav, please begin.”

As the Captains discussed technical details of their ships and crews, Bloom sat back to ponder the situation. He still had no idea why he had been compelled to join this military mission. And he had been able to gather only a little information on the formidable Admiral Gaunt who led them. Gaunt had a rather terrifying record of victory over both human and non-human adversaries. Smart, ruthless, logical, and passionless were the descriptions he had gleaned. This was quite at odds with her appearance. She would stand barely 1.5 meters stripped and without boots. Bloom chuckled when he wondered if anyone had ever imagined her stripped and without boots.

“Dr. Bloom, am I amusing you?”

“Not in the slightest, Admiral. My apologies.”

So, Bloom wondered, what mission would require five warships, Admiral Gaunt, and an Anthropologist? What situation would produce the need for substantial military power, a fierce leader, and Bloom’s rather benign expertise in sentient cultures?

The implications of the questions terrified Bloom. In all their explorations, humanity had never encountered a non-human culture that

had presented any serious threat to its hegemony. What the hell was he doing here? And, where was here? More to the point, *who* was here?

As if responding to his thoughts, Gaunt engaged a display of the planetary surface below.

“Gentlemen, this is the planet Esse, the object of our mission. Esse was first encountered three years by the Starship *Valencia* led by Captain Jurosawa. Captain Jurosawa determined, by remote scan, that the planet was occupied by a sentient life form and that the species was largely agricultural with limited technology and no off-planet capability. The *Valencia* was apparently unable to establish any communication with the sentients on Esse, and Jurosawa sent a party to the planet’s surface. We learned all this from a brief flicpod transmission Jurosawa sent shortly after the launch of the landing party. That transmission was the last that was heard from the ship. There were no further transmissions – either by flicpod or through direct transmission through relativistic space. And there was no flicspace signature indicating that ship had left the planet. There has been total silence from the *Valencia* for the last three years.

“A second mission to Esse was dispatched shortly after the loss of contact was recognized. That ship exited flicspace near the planet, but no communication was ever received from the second mission.

“Two of our ships have been to Esse. Two of our ships are missing.

“This squadron has been sent to establish communications with the inhabitants of Esse, to learn the fate of the two prior missions, and to determine what, if any, threat this species represents to humans. I do not need to emphasize to any of you the significance of contact with a species that has the military capability of

destroying our ships.

“We have begun a preliminary survey of the planet. Before this meeting, I asked Captain Gilbert to arrange for deployment of reconnaissance satellites in geosynchronous orbits blanketing the entire planetary surface. We will have eyes and ears on every inch of this planet. At the appropriate time, we will attempt to establish communications with the planet surface.

“Gentlemen, the squadron is now in a high orbit around the planet. Our position is, of course, not without risk, but it is a risk we will accept. And I have no doubt in your ability to handle any potential threat we may encounter. You all know the collective power of the ships in this squadron. We have the capacity to obliterate all life on the planet. It is my intent that this power not be exercised unless absolutely necessary.

“Are there any questions?”

Billings, captain of the frigate *Zeng He*, spoke first.

“Have you detected any traces of the earlier missions since we entered orbit? Sensors on my ship have detected nothing.”

Gaunt paused before replying.

“At this point, we have detected no signs either of the ships or their crews. We will presumably know more after completion of our initial scans. I will report to you all the results of our surveys as they are received.”

Joseph, captain of the bomb ketch *Hephaestus*, was next to speak.

“What more, if anything, can you tell us about the sentient inhabitants of the planet?”

“We have no images of the inhabitants of the planet, but from the limited initial report from the *Valencia*, it appears that the species has a strong convergent evolutionary relationship to humans. They are bilaterally symmetrical

and bipedal. They are oxygen breathers and consume externally produced foods for energy. We believe that the species exists in two genders and has other characteristics similar to Terran mammals. It appears that they communicate through some form of spoken language, but we have no information on any written language or other forms of communication. We have no information on the political or social organization of the sentients. Although Captain Jurosawa reported that they had limited technology and no off-planet capability, that has obviously not yet been confirmed.

“Other questions?”

Gilbert spoke up.

“What are our immediate orders?”

“At the moment, I expect you all to maintain your position in the squadron and remain at General Quarters with all weapons ready. I realize that this places a strain on your crews, but that will be necessary until we have a better sense of the situation. I will give further orders as events unfold.”

At this point, to the surprise of the group, Bloom spoke. “What makes you think that the Essans were responsible for the loss of the ships? Space is dangerous; first contact is dangerous. A virulent planetary pathogen might be involved. A little early to start shooting, isn’t it? We haven’t even said hello yet.”

Gaunt stared at Bloom, and Bloom’s stomach tightened. “No one has suggested shooting, Dr. Bloom. But the fact that I have been selected to command this mission suggests that others view this as a potential military issue. And, we plan to say ‘hello’ very soon.” She abruptly turned away from Bloom and addressed the group.

“Any further questions? If not, you are dismissed; return to your stations. Please remain,

Dr. Bloom.”

As the group hurried out to return to their ships, Bloom leaned back in his chair and eyed Gaunt cautiously.

“Essans, Dr. Bloom? I understand that your responsibility is to ‘anthropomorphize’ this species and to understand its culture and capabilities. As such, I appreciate your input. Within limits.

“I am familiar with your dossier, Bloom, but I know little personally about you. I am willing, for the moment, to rely on you for your judgment and expertise, but I demand two things from you. First, your total candor. Be afraid of me or not as you choose, but do not let it interfere with your judgment or communication with me. Second, when you have comments to make to me, make them to me. And not in front of others. Is that very clear, Dr. Bloom.”

“Completely.”

“Completely - ‘Ma’am’. You may be a civilian, but you are subject to and will respect the military command of this mission. I can draft you into the service and have you court martialled faster than you can complete a footnote in one of your rather turgid monographs. Yes, I have read your work Dr. Bloom.

“But since you are presently a civilian, I believe I can make confession to you. I have little doubt of my ability to handle any military situation that may arise. But I am limited in both experience and inclination to navigating interpersonal relationships outside of the military arena. Of course, no human has real experience in negotiating political relations with hostile non-Terran sentients. We may, or may not, be in a situation where we must develop that experience. And I trust I can rely on your honesty and discretion as our mission unfolds.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Honesty and discretion. Not

my strengths by experience and inclination, but I will do my best.”

Gaunt replied with a vacant gaze. “You are dismissed, Dr. Bloom.”

3

Gaunt was seated with Bloom in the Briefing Room, when Gilbert and Chuni entered. Gaunt looked up and stared at the two of them. Chuni shuffled uncomfortably under her stare.

“Mr. Chuni, Captain Gilbert says you have a report to make.”

“Yes, Admiral. Shortly after we flicked into orbit, I began a standard analysis of the orbital structure of this star system. As you know, Ma’am, we have flicked into a binary system, and the gravitational interactions of two orbiting stars and their set of planets are complex. The situation here is particularly complicated since the binary stars are in an extraordinarily rapid orbit around each other; they are, in fact, orbiting at almost relativistic speeds. We are also uncomfortably close to the galactic core, and the effects of the black hole complicates calculations. But none of this is anomalous, and I can model the gravitational relationships within the system.”

“Get to the point, Mr. Chuni.”

“Yes, Ma’am. The two stars in this system are also well characterized. The primary star, KYR1365N-A, is approximately three times the mass and diameter of the secondary star, KYR1365N-B. Their orbital arrangement and velocity appear to be stable, and the interaction of this binary pair is consistent with the orbital characteristics of the planetary system as a whole.”

“Mr. Chuni, I’m quite sure that you are about to get to a point.”

“Yes, Ma’am. When we first flicked into orbit I detected a subtle anomaly from the an-

ticipated gravitational dynamics of the system. Here’s the thing. Our analysis of the primary star indicates its diameter considerably exceeds its Roche Lobe. But I have detected no ejecta or other transfer of stellar mass to the secondary star. If these binaries were acting in accordance with standard astronomical physics, there would be a transfer of material and the system would not be stable. I can’t explain it.”

Gaunt rose and started to pace the room. “The masses of Binary A and B are stable?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Does Binary B exceed its Roche Lobe limit.”

“No, Ma’am. Only Binary A.”

“You are sure of your calculations, Mr. Chuni.”

“Of course, Ma’am. I would not be here if I were not.

“Yes, of course. Very curious. Does this anomaly effect our current position around the planet.”

“Not that I can tell. As I said, the anomaly arises from the fact that the binaries are stable, in fact, that the entire planetary system is stable. They simply shouldn’t be the case.”

“Forgive me,” Bloom interrupted, “but could someone explain a Roche Lobe to me. I’ll assume it’s not part of some giant stellar brain.”

“Your humor is not appreciated, Dr. Bloom, and I would contain it if I wanted to continue to participate in briefings. But the Roche Lobe, for your information, defines the area around binary stars within which the mass of the stars is gravitationally bound. Binary stars that exceed the limits of their Roche Lobe will lose mass to the other binary. As Mr. Chuni indicated this results in an instability in the system. Continued long enough, the transfer of material between the stars can result in a gravitational

collapse and a stellar collision between the binaries. In some cases, this collapse unites the two binaries into a single star. In the most extreme case, the collapse could result in the binaries going supernova and the possible creation of a black hole. You don't want to be there when either of those events occur, Dr. Bloom."

Chuni then spoke, "Admiral, all that you said is correct for a standard binary system, but as I have said, I have never seen a relationship between binaries comparable to this system. I simply have no idea what the result of binary collapse would be. Nothing here is predicted by standard physics."

"Understood. Thank you, Mr. Chuni. Inform me immediately if the situation changes or you have new information. At the moment, Captain Gilbert, I think we will continue as planned."

4

Two days in orbit and continuous survey of the planet surface had substantially increased their knowledge of the physical situation on the planet. The "Essans," as they became known, were widely dispersed around the three inhabited continents on the planet. For unknown reasons, the fourth, and largest, continent was devoid of sentient life.

The population of sentients on the planet was quite small for a planet of Esse's size. The survey produced an estimate of approximately 6 million individuals planet-wide.

There were no significant concentrations of populations – there were no "cities," only small "village-like" population groupings.

The survey identified agricultural activities and small-scale maintenance of non-sentient, presumably, food animals.

There were no detectible radio transmissions. Indeed, they had detected no non-natural

electromagnetic radiation of any kind on the planet.

Consistent with the earlier report, they detected no artificial satellites in orbit around the planet.

All the information suggested that the Essans existed in a political and economic economy similar to early Terran pastoral societies.

The further analysis of the star system also confirmed the "Roche Lobe Anomaly."

On the third day in orbit, Gaunt took her first step to establish contact with the Essans. Although no response was expected, she ordered the transmission of a "greeting" message on a range of frequencies to all areas of the planet. Although shipboard alert increased following the broadcast of the message, to no one's surprise they received no response. Observations of the planet's surface did not indicate any change in the Essan's behavior or, in fact, any indication that they had received or were capable of receiving the message.

As the time passed without any response from the Essans, Gilbert grew bold enough to speak to the Admiral about the situation. "Are we going to be sending down a landing party, Admiral? We seem safe enough in orbit."

"Captain Gilbert, I do not remember inviting comment from you on mission strategy. But I have no doubt that the captain of the second mission was of your opinion."

"Yes ma'am," was all Gilbert could reply, and before he could withdraw to lick his wounds, the communications officer addressed them in an excited voice.

"Captain, I am receiving a transmission from the surface. It is a verbal message in standard English. It is asking to communicate with the leader of our forces."

The Admiral responded, "Pipe it to the

speakers on the bridge.”

All waited quietly for the message, but there was only silence from the speakers.

“Did you hear my order, Mister.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I have arranged for transmission to the bridge speakers, but nothing is happening. I am continuing to hear the message through my headset, but nothing is being transmitted to the bridge speakers. I don’t understand.

“And Ma’am, this transmission should not be occurring. I have detected a simple carrier wave, but it is not modulating in any way capable of transmitting complex information. Nonetheless, I hear the message.”

Gaunt stepped to the communications station. “Pinpoint, if you can, the source of this communication, and give me the headset.”

Gaunt put on the headset and listened impassively. Immediately she heard a voice coming through the speakers.

“Welcome. Could I please be allowed to speak to the leader of the group of ships hovering over our planet? I presume there is a single leader, but if I am wrong, I would appreciate a correction. I wait expectantly for your response. And, again, welcome.”

Gaunt removed the headset and turned to Gilbert. “They are welcoming us and asking to speak to our ‘leader.’”

“Admiral, shall I notify the squadron to go to return to Battle Stations.”

“Absolutely not, Captain! I want no change in the squadron’s situation. And I want Bloom on the bridge in the next 90 seconds.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Gaunt put on the headset and turned to the communications officer. “Will this transmit when I speak?”

“It should, Ma’am, but I do not understand

anything about this transmission.”

“Understood. Transmit what I say.

“Greetings. This is Admiral Gaunt, commander of the ships orbiting your planet. We are here solely to establish peaceful relationships with the citizens of your planet. We appreciate your welcome.”

Bloom appeared at Gaunt’s side and nodded his approval of the message.

Through his headset, Gaunt heard the reply from the surface.

“Admiral Gaunt, a pleasure to make your acquaintance and to welcome you to our planet. My name is Cri, and I have been tasked with acting as a communications link between yourself and my people. You may think of me as the Ambassador of my people. I hope we can learn about one another. If, of course, that is your wish.”

“Ambassador Cri, it is both my wish and my mission. Mutual understanding and an exchange of information about our peoples are my goals. Do you have a suggestion as to how to best proceed from this point?”

“I am delighted to hear all you say Admiral. In the role of Ambassador, I am, as you are certainly aware, somewhat constrained in the exercise of my duties. Please allow me to consult with my people and convey what you have said. I will contact you again at the appropriate time. Welcome and best wishes to you all.” The headset went silent.

All eyes on the bridge were on Gaunt as she removed the headset.

Gaunt turned to Gilbert. “See that the crew maintains its duties. Summon me immediately if there are any further communications from the surface. Dr. Bloom will you accompany me to my quarters.” The Admiral strode off the bridge with Bloom in tow. Gilbert and the crew

could only deal with their confusion and curiosity as best they could.

Ten minutes later, Gaunt ordered “All Captains,” requiring the captains to join her in person in the flagship’s Briefing Room. Again, each captain was quickly transported to the flagship, and waited expectantly in the Briefing Room. Each captain rose to attention when Gaunt entered the Briefing Room with Bloom following behind.

“Take your seats, gentlemen. I have asked you to join me here again because I think it best that we continue to meet in person, and not by communications link, until we have a better understanding of the Essan’s surveillance capability.”

All of the captains nodded in agreement.

“You have all heard of our rather remarkable communication with someone, or something, that purports to speak for the Essans. From our perspective, it could not be a better message – a welcome and a willingness to exchange information. But I need not remind any of you of Virgil’s story of the destruction of Troy.

“At this point, I want no change in any ship routine that could be construed as a threat to the planet. I hope that is understood.

“Now, what can we make of this message? It appears to have originated from a location of the planet with no apparent geographic or population significance – one of the many small villages on the planet.

“Technically, almost everything about the communication is inexplicable at this point. All of our information indicates that the Essans have no capacity to harness electromagnetic radiation, but we are apparently receiving a message through our radio equipment. We have detected no transmission capable of carrying

complex information, but both the communications officer and I heard a complex verbal message. And, although we both heard the message, it was in a form that could not be broadcast through other speakers on the bridge.

“Gentlemen, I am a simple woman who does not like mysteries. I want you all working to come up with some hypothesis that explains these facts.

“Now let’s consider the contents of the message. I have repeated to Dr. Bloom the exact words that Ambassador Cri spoke to me. Dr. Bloom, will you repeat what you have said to me about your thoughts on the message.”

Bloom rose to address the group. “I am as puzzled by the content of the message as you are of its transmission. The ‘Ambassador’ spoke not only perfect English, but idiomatic English. We believe that this is a first contact with the Essans. Where would they have had exposure to standard English other than through the earlier missions. Could they have developed such a degree of fluency that quickly? The Ambassador’s use of English suggests a longer and more profound experience with the language than contact with the prior missions suggests possible. Have they had continuous contact with the crew of the earlier missions? Indeed, are members of the prior crews alive and still communicating with the Essans? I have no idea.

“I am also surprised that Cri purported to speak for his “people.” We know almost nothing about the political organization of the Essans, but, based on what little we know, I would not have expected a planetary community capable of speaking with one voice. And Cri responded rather quickly after our arrival before a planet-wide decision on a response was likely to be possible. Of course, the ‘people’ Cri said he represented may be only a fraction of the

planetary population. At the moment, I would caution against assuming Cri speaks for the planet.

“And that remarkable reference to bureaucratic constraints on an ambassador. Bureaucracies may be a galaxy-wide phenomena, but that reference seemed to reflect an amazing, even alarming, insight into Terran political organizations.”

Bloom paused before continuing.

“And forgive me, but I would like to suggest one possible explanation for the enigma of the transmission. In the absence of any physical explanation, is it possible that the Essans communicate, at least in part, through some psychic means? In other words, by telepathy.”

There was a laugh from the assembled group.

“Silence,” Gaunt barked at the group. “Can you elaborate Dr. Bloom?”

“No,” Bloom said. “I have no idea how something like telepathy could occur. To my knowledge, nothing like it has ever been identified in Terran or alien species. Nonetheless, the messages from Cri were manifest solely within the conscious perception of the Admiral and Communications Officer. As I understand it, no explanation grounded in our current physical models can explain it.”

“And can you explain how, ‘telepathy’ can operate through a headset,” the Admiral challenged.

“No idea. I’m just an Anthropologist with a vivid imagination and a big mouth.”

“Anything else to add, Dr. Bloom, that is not quite so imaginative.”

Nodding to the Admiral, he continued. “I agree with your cautionary reference to Virgil. But I also think important that we not prejudge the good will reflected in Cri’s message.”

At that point Gaunt broke in, “I try to prejudice nothing Dr. Bloom, and welcome good will from any creature. But I also do not forget the origin of our mission – the apparent destruction of two of our ships.”

“Of course,” Bloom replied. “But again, I would like to note how limited our information is about the cause of their apparent destruction.

Gaunt turned to the assembled captains, “Any questions at this point?”

Captain Olav spoke. “Apologies, Ma’am, but could you remind me of Virgil’s story of the fall of Troy.”

Bloom was the only one who smiled when Gaunt said, “The Trojan Horse, Captain Olav. The Trojan’s welcomed the Trojan Horse inside their defenses. A cautionary tale, but for the moment, we will take the contents of the message at face value.”

5

It was not long before a new message from the surface was received. As Gaunt adjusted the headset, she heard Cri’s voice.

“May I please speak to Admiral Gaunt. This is Cri speaking.”

“I am here, Ambassador Cri. I am pleased to hear from you again.”

“It is morning where I am located on Esse, so I say ‘Good morning’ to you Admiral.”

“Thank you. Could you tell me where you are located?”

“Admiral, I suggest that the best way for us to continue efforts at mutual understanding is for you to be as frank as possible and, for the sake of amity, not imply that I am a fool. You obviously have traced my transmission and know precisely from where I speak. I say this with the best of will, and only to suggest helpful strategies for further communication.”

Apparently unmoved by Cri’s rebuke,

Gaunt said, "Understood, and thank you, Ambassador, I appreciate any suggestions that you care to make."

Gaunt glanced at Bloom and Gilbert and then took a decisive step. "Mr. Ambassador, since you suggest frankness, there is a matter I would like to raise with you. As you may know, two ships from my home planet visited Esse within the last few years. Do have any information about the status of the crews of those ships?" The Admiral waited impassively for a reply.

"I am glad that you appreciate my suggestion of frankness, Admiral, and I look forward to continuing our conversations. Perhaps it would be possible for me to join you on your ship. In my experience, frankness in communication is facilitated by a more intimate, face-to-face meeting."

Bloom looked puzzled at Cri's request. But said nothing.

Gilbert, however, could not contain himself and responded sharply, "I don't want him on my ship."

Gaunt did not respond to either, but spoke to Cri. "I would be delighted if you would join me on my ship. I will send a shuttle to your location if that would be helpful."

"Thank you, Admiral. The shuttle would be welcome. I am ready to join you at your convenience."

Gilbert tried to protest, but Gaunt cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"Ambassador, in addition to frankness, I agree that that a certain intimacy is also conducive to communications. I request that you come alone."

"Of course, Admiral. I understand perfectly, but I think it is important that I be accompanied by my advisor. Of course, both of us will

submit to any searches or scans you think necessary."

"That is acceptable, Ambassador. I look forward to meeting with you soon."

Gaunt took off the headset and motioned to the communications officer to cut transmission.

Gilbert was in such a state that he actually raised his voice. "Admiral, what are you thinking! I urge you to reconsider allowing that unknown creature on board my ship. The risk is too great. We have no way of knowing its capabilities. And...."

Gaunt's glare stopped him in mid-sentence. There was a long pause as Gaunt stared without speaking.

"Captain Gilbert, I would appreciate it if you would arrange to send a shuttle for the Ambassador. I want that the crew of that shuttle to be unarmed. And I want a thorough scan of the Ambassador and his advisor before they set foot on this ship. Scan for both pathogens and weapons.

"And Captain Gilbert, I should not need to remind you that 'your' ship was placed at risk the minute we set out on this assignment. You will both join me at the shuttle dock three minutes before the shuttle arrives. I will be in my quarters until then."

She turned to walk out, but then looked at Bloom. "Dr. Bloom, you were uncharacteristically silent. I like that." She then left the bridge.

6

Gaunt, now in full dress uniform, stood with Captain Gilbert and Dr. Bloom waiting as the shuttle doors opened. After a moment, the Ambassador emerged and faced them. Not a sound conveyed their surprise, but each was surprised. Ambassador Cri appeared to be a handsome, well formed, but otherwise unremarkable, human male, dark-skinned and somewhat less

than two meters tall. He was alone except for a small cat-like creature that clung to his shoulder.

Cri stepped forward and gave a sharp nod in acknowledgment of the group. Cri, without prompting from any of them, immediately identified and addressed the Admiral.

“Admiral, thank you for permitting me to meet with you on this remarkable craft. I am Cri, and I would like to introduce my advisor.” Cri lifted the animal from his shoulder and cradled it in his arms. “This is Maya. ‘Advisor,’ in this case is not a fully accurate description of Maya’s status. In Terran terms, Maya is my ‘totem’ and ‘familiar,’ and a very close and trusted colleague and companion.

At the mention of the words “totem” and “familiar,” Bloom’s focus shifted to Maya. Bloom tried to study the creature’s appearance. She, and “she” seemed appropriate for the creature, was covered with dense fur and had elements of a variety of Terran mammals. She most reminded Bloom of a prosimian – a lemur or tarsier. She was a quadruped with a cat-like face, but with a disturbingly large cranium. She had large ears and five long, apparently prehensile, fingers on each of her four feet. She had a fur-covered tail roughly equal in length to her body. Curiously, although Bloom focused intently on her appearance, she seemed somewhat amorphous and indistinct. Bloom smiled at her, and to his shock, she smiled back.

“I believe,” Cri said, “that your culture would expect me at this point to present you with my Ambassadorial ‘credentials,’ but that is not our manner. I have nothing to present other than my assurance that I do, in fact, speak for all of members of my species on the planet. I have been selected as their representative, and I am authorized to act with the full authority of my people. I am what you might describe as an

Ambassador Plenipotentiary. Of course, I mean both myself and Maya.”

At the mention of her name, Maya leaped onto Cri’s shoulder again. Cri smiled.

“Welcome to the both of you,” Gaunt replied. “I, of course, accept your assurance. May I introduce Captain Gilbert of the Starship *Kurofune*. And this is Dr. Martin Bloom. Dr. Bloom is this ship’s anthropologist.

Cri nodded at them both. “Captain, a pleasure. Dr. Bloom, anthropologist is such an interesting word to describe your field of study.”

Bloom returned the nod. “I look forward to discussing with you the etymology of the word and the origins of my discipline. And I also look forward to discussions with your totem and familiar, Maya. As you apparently know, the words ‘totem’ and ‘familiar’ have their own interesting origins and meaning in English.

“Indeed,” said Cri. “But that will no doubt have to wait. I suspect that the Admiral has many questions to ask of me, and I am anxious to develop the mutual understanding that can arise from our talks. I am at your disposal, Admiral.”

“Ambassador Cri, if you and Maya will accompany me, I will lead you to our Briefing Room where we can talk freely. I fear that Captain Gilbert needs to return to his duties, but Dr. Bloom will join us.” Gaunt, Cri, Maya and Bloom proceeded to the Briefing Room, while Gilbert sulkily, and desperately worried for the safety of his ship, returned to the bridge.

After they were settled, Gaunt began. “Ambassador Cri, I am leader of this delegation from my home planet, Terra. We have been tasked with making contact with Esse and establishing relationships beneficial to both worlds. I am happy to share details of Terran society with you, but, to my surprise, you seem well-in-

formed about our language and customs. May I ask what prior contact you have had with Terrans? As I mentioned, two Terran ships arrived at Esse several years ago. Are they the source of your information?

Bloom focused intently on Cri, but he could detect no agitation or evasion in Cri's reply.

"Your question about these ships takes me somewhat by surprise, Admiral. First, I am aware of a single Terran ship that arrived on Esse several years ago, but I know of no additional ship. Second, the ship that arrived had only very brief contact with us and then departed. We have no knowledge of its fate. That, I assumed, you would know.

"Finally, to answer your last question, the leader of the earlier mission did, in fact, provide us with information about your society. You will find that we Essans are quite adept students; we learn quickly. Much of what I know of you and your culture comes from that source."

Bloom leaned forward warily. "Ambassador, you speak calmly about your people's contact with our earlier ship. Have you had prior contact with other alien species?"

"Dr. Bloom, you mistake my 'ambassadorial' demeanor with a lack of emotional response. The contact with your ship shook our entire society. We, on Esse, had never contemplated, let alone encountered, peoples from the Cosmos. My people have chosen not to develop technologies that would allow us to travel into space or even to gather information about whatever universe exists beyond our planet. So that first brief encounter opened the possibility of engagement with a broader Cosmos with which we were unprepared. You, yourselves, must at one point have experienced the shock of first contact.

"Before we could begin to know how to

respond to this contact, your ship left. We were, in fact, dismayed by the rapid withdrawal of the ship from our planet, and we did not know what Terra's plans might be for further contact with us.

"Our presence" he said stroking Maya, "represents one response to that initial contact. My people quickly determined that we must be ready with entities, such as myself and Maya, that could represent Esse should you make further contact.

"Now forgive me, but I would like to address some rather basic logistical matters. Would it be convenient for Maya and myself to remain on your ship while we continue our discussions?"

"We would be pleased if you would stay with us," Gaunt replied.

"This, of course, is our first time on a 'spaceship,' Cri continued, "and I will confess to a certain disorientation. Would it be possible for us to have some place on the ship where we could rest before our next meeting? Our nutritional needs are remarkably similar to your own, and we would appreciate something to eat and drink as well."

"Of course," said Gaunt quietly without revealing her irritation at Cri's abrupt termination of their first meeting.

After Cri and Maya were settled in their hastily arranged quarters, Gaunt and Bloom faced each other in the Briefing Room. "Your reaction," Gaunt said.

"Well," Bloom temporized. "I don't think everything he said was bullshit, but certainly a large percentage. At this point, I am inclined to accept that he does represent the sentients on the planet. And his request for food and drink certainly indicates a rather unsubtle statement of trust in us.

“But he keeps making ambiguous and, frankly, disquieting comments. ‘Quick learner,’ my ass. The Essans didn’t learn this much about us from a brief meeting with an exploratory Terran landing party. And ‘much’ of their knowledge of Terra came from that first contact. Where did the rest of it come from? And what can we make of the Ambassador’s comment that his presence represents ‘most’ of the Essan’s response to their first contact. What other steps have they taken?”

“And, most importantly, I don’t, for a second, accept his description of the Essan’s societal response to their first contact with our ships. I’m sure they were shocked, but if this was their first contact with an alien civilization, their response would not be to appoint an ambassador. This is a guess, but I suspect that their society has had prior contact with other species or anticipated contact in some way. How, I do not know.

“Finally, I do not want you to underestimate the significance of Maya in these meetings. She is not some pet. Cri said that both he and Maya were part of the Essan response to first contact. And Cri’s description of her as his ‘totem’ and ‘familiar’ suggests a deep spiritual, as well as practical, relationship between them. She has a role which we must try to understand.

“I’ll leave it to you to evaluate his statement that they had no knowledge of the fate of the two earlier ships. But, to repeat, I think it’s largely bullshit.

“By the way, I’ll assume he is correct to call himself an ambassador ‘Plenipotentiary.’” Bloom smiled, “But I’ll know more after I look up the word in a dictionary.”

Gaunt considered Bloom’s comments before answering. “Thank you for your observations, Dr. Bloom. It appears we evaluated that

meeting in much the same way. You seem to place a great deal of emphasis on Maya’s description as a ‘totem’ and ‘familiar.’ Explain.”

“As I said before,” Bloom replied, “Cri appears to have an extraordinarily precise and deep understanding of our language and customs. I think that’s reflected in his use of the rather obscure words ‘totem’ and ‘familiar.’ Both words are quite evocative.

“In many earlier Terran cultures, the word ‘totem’ was used to describe some form of ‘spirit animal’ that had a close symbolic and spiritual relationship with an individual or a tribal group. In spiritual terms, the totem animal acted as a guide to an individual’s interaction with religious and non-material realms.

“In biological terms, the concept of a ‘totem’ has been closely associated with the practice of exogamy. In some Terran cultures, an individual was precluded from marrying anyone who shared the same totem. Such a marriage would be a violation of a strong religious, cultural prohibition, sometimes referred to as a ‘taboo.’ This practice had significant biological and evolutionary advantages in groups with a limited breeding pool. By limiting mating among people with common ancestors, totem culture limited the expression of recessive genes and thus limited potential genetic illness or exhibition of other obscure traits.

“But even more curious is Cri’s use of the word ‘familiar.’ A ‘familiar,’ in old Terran mythology, referred to some animal that was associated with a witch or shaman. The ‘familiar’ aided these magical figures in the exercise of their powers and provided a powerful enhancement of their powers. The concept of a ‘familiar’ is certainly obscure, and I have no idea how the hell Cri knows the word, let alone what significance he attaches to it. If Cri has gained his

knowledge of us through telepathy, he would have had to dig into some obscure portions of my mind to find it.”

Gaunt snorted at Bloom’s last statement. “I’d be more inclined to think that Cri had access to the data base on the shuttle.”

“Perhaps,” said Bloom, “but I’m not prepared to dismiss anything at this point. I certainly wouldn’t want to be responsible for taking military action against an enemy that can read my mind.”

“Curiously, you just read my mind precisely, Dr. Bloom.”

“One more thing, Admiral. I suspect that the presence of Maya is closely tied to some set of spiritual beliefs that the Essans hold. More significantly, I suspect that the Essan’s entire response to the earlier ships was also strongly influenced by their religious or spiritual beliefs. And that may mean that the rationality and logic we would otherwise bring to understanding this situation may be inadequate.”

“Thank you, Dr. Bloom. You are very clear, and your comments provocative. But the fact remains that two of our ships have vanished, and I will have that explained in a rational and

logical manner. Do you have any suggestions on how we might proceed in our next meeting?”

“Well, said Bloom, “until we better understand Cri and Maya’s objectives and capabilities, I recommend that any direct contact with them should be limited to you and me. I say this with all respect to Captain Gilbert and the members of your squadron. But I think all information provided by them should come directly to us and all information provided to them should come directly from us.

“Further, Admiral, I understand your need to explain the loss of those ships, but I think the key is to understand the Essan’s societal response to their first contact with our ships. That will require substantially more information about their political, economic and spiritual organization, and I think I can most productively lead that portion of our conversations.

“Additionally, I think at some point soon we may need to see if we can interrogate Cri and Maya separately.”

“You want to talk directly to the cat?”

“Well, she did smile at me. I think that’s a good sign.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION