



The title of this group of short stories is called 'The Far Reaches'. It is made up of five short stories: The first is the Dimensional Gateway. A group of aliens find themselves on a hostile planet. They have to build a dimensional gateway to escape the hostiles. Then there is even more excitement as a young human girl befriends an alien called Ryemouria. A very interesting alien. Speaking of being friendly, would you like to have a T-rex as a friend? A group of three explorers crash during an acid driving storm with strange animals roaming about. Then, it's the Bounty Hunter; you really wouldn't want to cross paths with her! Oooh, there is a terrifying ordeal by colonists on a new planet. Almost horror like. Finally, they travelled a long way to another galaxy only to find something unexplainable.

Have a read and enjoy yourselves.

The Far Reaches

By Phil Smith



THE FAR REACHES

The Far Reaches

1. DIMENSIONAL GATEWAY

A sharp wind blew at the torches that stood alight on the wooden fortress. Farrell looked out over the moat, recognizable by the light of the planet's single crescent moon. He nervously flicked his eyes about for any movement. Attacks had recently become more organized. The attackers came out of the darkness casting their stone spears with such effort toward those who stood guard. "Another few weeks and hopefully we will be gone from this wretched world," Farrell said aloud while straining to see through the blackness. They had been cast astray and stripped of everything, even their clothing in the middle of a snow storm. The planet was partially covered in ice. The extreme gravity of the world took them ages to get used to. That had been fifteen years ago. There were sixty of them but that had now dwindled to fifteen surviving members. With their bare hands they had erected the transmitter using what raw materials that were available. If it would now only work. The torch fire fluttered again with a strong gust of wind, temporarily distracting him from his thoughts. Another sound, heard off to his right, made him turn.

Welford approached along the rampart. "Any sign of activity?" he kept his voice high enough to be heard above the constant interaction of the wind and fire.

"None, that I can detect," Farrell replied in slightly lowered voice, indicating that he was in no mood for jovial conversation. He turned his gaze back over the wooden wall and the low lit plains that surrounded their guarded compound. "Will the transmitter work?" Farrell then asked without turning back toward Welford.

"The gods only know. We have yet to find a way to balance the tuning between the two types of stones; the Blues and the inner Sarens," Welford replied.

"But, we are close."

"We've been close before. We keep trying. What other choice do we have? It's less than three weeks until this system's star approaches its maximum light. If we have everything tuned and finished, then we will know. You're relieved. Go and sleep," Welford told him.

Farrell didn't sleep, tossing ideas over in his mind, wondering how much longer they would last if the transmitter failed to work. Light eventually came. A clouded sky hid the early morning sun's rays. Rain and sunshine always happened with equal amounts on this backward

place. There was never enough sun and always too much cold rain. Everyone rose including Farrell. Little was ever said for all knew their routines. Farrell's people were not talkative people. Prolonged idle conversations were not a trademark of their culture. They were a people of routine. There were those who gathered what food that could be gathered or traded with the same savages that would attack and kill during the nights. Most of the group worked the large stone blocks that now stood within the protected wooden walls of their compound.

Farrell had been working on the deepening of the moat at a spot where an earthen bridge had been. The first thing the alien castaways had done was to construct a stone road leading off to a nearby river. This was the avenue they had used to bring the stones from the nearby hill quarry. In order to transmit over the required distance, the outer rim of the transmitter needed thirty stones weighing some fifty tons each. They were placed within two metres of each other to form a complete circle. These were then capped with stones half the weight. The inner horse shoe circle was positioned to catch the star's longest day and thus provide the strongest amount of energy waves. The last saren stone, the heel, had taken them nearly six months to transport to the sight. Protecting it and themselves from the attacking savages had almost proved their demise. The inner circle of blue stones was the first to be set up. Originally sixty had been placed, one for each member of the group but as those members were killed off, the blues had to be reapportioned and realigned. These were shaped to give off a required frequency using the individual's weight and height as a standard. Each stone in the megalithic transmitter had been brought down the river and rolled along the avenue across the bridge into the compound. The bridge was no longer required now and with the attacks on the increase, it was decided to dig it out. Farrell was now standing knee deep in the moat, using a wooden shovel to pry mud away from the bottom.

"Well, aren't you a pretty sight," Evelyn said as she stood on top of the inner bank. Mud was smeared about his face and hair.

Farrell smiled up at her. "Off shopping?" he said nodding his head toward the basket in her hands.

"I'll see what our friends have to trade today," she answered entering the moat.

"Be careful, won't you? You know how they are, one moment friendly and the next, they're throwing something at you," he said taking on a serious look.

"Don't worry, I'm always careful," she said stepping out onto the far bank, "and besides

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they've never attacked during the day light."

The savages backed up as Evelyn approached, about twelve of them all together. They were ever so strange looking. They were miniature humans compared to Evelyn but the planet's gravity had forced them to develop strength wise. Uncured animal skins draped about them for warmth. The smell was intolerable. But Evelyn couldn't see the usual fruits and vegetables they often came with.

Farrell pushed his wood shovel down into the murky water and brought out another scoop of mud. Standing a moment at rest, he heard Evelyn scream. It only took a second for Farrell to leap out of the water up over the bank. Evelyn stood in a circle of ten or so savages all at a height just above her knees. Blood could be seen on her face. Even though small, their muscular bodies were apparent. Two of the savages already lay at Evelyn's feet. Another then ran toward her thrusting a large stone tipped spear up into her side. She grabbed it and the savage at the same time. Crushing the man's throat, she dropped him and pulled the spear out. Blood gushed. Farrell came running up as Evelyn fell to the ground. Farrell grabbed two of the men, his hand grasping their arms, flinging them nearly five meters through the air. He hit the heads of two others crushing them on impact. One lifted a stone axe preparing to throw it, but Farrell threw him aside also. The others had then decided that they had had enough and ran. He bent down and held Evelyn's head in his arm.

Welford, leading two others had arrived on the scene by that time.

"She's alive," he looked up at the others, "but only just," Farrell said to them.

"They have never attacked in the daylight before," Welford said, the sadness for Evelyn obvious in his face.

"Their tactics are changing," another replied.

Back at the wooden fortress, Evelyn was being looked after by one of the others who fortunately had received some medical training before being set adrift upon this world.

"Will she live?" Farrell asked Welford the next day.

"The healer says that she will live but she had lost a lot of blood," Welford replied.

"What will happen if she's unable to stand atop of the blue stone in two weeks time?"

Farrell questioned again.

"She will stand," Welford answered, "She has to."

Each night there after as the winds blew against the fires that lit the top of the fortress, there came attacks, some less coordinated than others. Those who stood guard made sure that

none entered the compound. Farrell had fought off three such attackers by himself. No one dared leave any portion of the wall undefended. It was taking more and more of the fifteen to protect the compound. With each daybreak, the savages only retreated now to the far side of the moat. Their numbers increased after each night of warring. Crude tents dotted the plain all around the fortress. The group was no longer able to leave the safety of the compound. The savages threw their spears and axes across the moat whenever they ventured outside the gates.

Days passed, the tuning of the stones continued. The attackers continued to mass beyond the moat, now numbering into hundreds. Their attacks were now more prolonged even lasting the whole of the night. It required everyone's effort to fight off the warring savages night after night. There had been no more deaths or even injuries but some had come close. Evelyn was even up and moving around. Lack of sleep and food wore on everyone nerves, however, they quietly went about what was required of them knowing one way or the other, the end was in sight.

That night, the rain beat down upon the individuals atop of the fortress ramparts. Evenly spaced along the walls, they received a reprieve from the attackers. What little food was left was shared amongst them. Evelyn brought a hot drink for each, giving them what little warmth they could get from the chilly night.

"How are you feeling?" Farrell asked as Evelyn handed him a cup.

"I'm fine," she answered. "I hope the weather clears. Tomorrow, we leave," she forced a smile on her wet face and then continued down the rampart to the next person.

"Tomorrow we leave," Farrell replied as she passed by. Or we die, he thought to himself. Whichever, he was tired. He had been tired for the past fifteen years. "Yes, tomorrow, we leave," he said aloud to himself and then turned to cast his watchful eyes out through the rainy darkness.

After several more hours the rains had stopped, a fog quickly rose about the place hiding even the huge stone transmitter itself. Light now come but the fog still held onto what little darkness that was left.

"Ok, everyone. Get to your places on top of the blue stones," Welford called out to everyone from within the compound.

They slowly descended down into the compound, each approaching a particular blue stone that formed a circle around the horseshoe part of the transmitter. It was difficult for some

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to crawl on top the wet stones as their strength was nearly gone. Farrell helped Evelyn to reach her position and then he climbed on top of his. Each person stood upright in the thick fog unable to see anything. But slowly the light increased, as did the fog decrease, until it cleared all together. The sun broke forth shining down upon the stone monument. A slight hum could now be heard about the place increasing in strength, moment by precious moment. Everyone lifted their hands with a smile on their faces. At last they thought, we are going home.

But, loud cries and screams could also be heard from outside the fortress. The savages, not seeing the guards, had decided to attack even though it was daylight. They started to come over the top of the walls.

“Do not move from your position,” Welford yelled out.

The hum was very evident now, increasing in strength.

The attackers once breaching the wall stood silent on the rampart unable to understand what was happening.

A spear was then thrown toward Farrell but he was able to deflect it with his hand.

Another spear was thrown and another and another but then the hum become deafening stopping those on the ramparts making them wonder where the sound was coming from.

Then a bright light formed within the horseshoe reaching out to those standing on the blue stones gathering ever in intensity. Those standing on the blue stones began to slightly fade before the attackers very eyes. The hum continued to grow now in ear-piercing pain.

The attackers were holding their hands to their ears, some jumped back over the wall and ran.

Then a thickness of light gathered itself and shot up from the circle of stones heading off into space.

The sharp wind blew across the Salisbury plains. Storm clouds were building. “There would be rain,” somebody said as they snapped a picture. Another tourist posed in front of the horseshoe positioned stones, herself holding a post card with a picture of the same and the word, ‘Stonehenge’ written above it.

The End

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2. MOTHER RYEMOURIA

By

Phil Smith

When I first laid eyes on the creature, I knew it was unusually different. It was right after that distant thunderous roar overhead. Only later would I realize just how unusual the creature was. It was certainly different physically than anything I had ever laid eyes on. Yes, it was on an exceptionally hot day when it walked right out of the dry sandy wastelands. The creature bent down and started drinking from the spring right in front of my own home. It was such a surprise. Any other animal would have had enough instinct to know the danger in that. Lucky for it that I had just finished gorging myself on a delectable fat and juicy rhinosaurotherwise it would have been history.

And what if the creature had stumbled onto any of my neighbors island lairs, well, let's just say that some of my neighbors eat first and ask questions later. Oh, they're hospitable enough. Sometimes we do meet and reminisce over the weather, about visitors that ramble through once in a while and talk about our gardens, which are always a source of conversation and pride

But I've gotten off the subject a bit here. Another strange thing about the creature, its body stood upright with appendages hanging one from each side and it walked on two other appendages. I had never seen the like before. It was so small and skinny. If it hadn't been for a thin material covering its body, its bones could have easily been seen. A definite lack of food had caused this but how? There was an abundance of fruit and grasses for everything to feed on, especially in my island oasis. I certainly pride myself on my gardening. It all has to do with supporting the ecology you know. Well, I thought at first it must have gotten lost in the sandy wastelands. That does happen from time to time but no, this creature proved active enough, especially after having my web cast over it. The creature was considerably cunning as it worked itself loose from the bonds I had thrown around it. The great rhinosauro wouldn't have been able to do that. But after all that, the most unusual thing about the creature was the noise it made. Most of the animals I trapped would squeal for a while but then they tire themselves out. The larger ones I sedate. But this creature had water even coming out of its eyes and I thought I heard individual sounds coming from its month. As if an animal can talk! I dared not mention

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this to any of my neighbors. However, these verbalizations were what really got me interested in studying the creature. And it wasn't so unusual to study the local animals, why some members of our society gave their lives in studying what went on in our world, committing the knowledge to memory and passing it down to their young who in turn added to that knowledge. Many of these would pass through the island oases sharing the knowledge in return for food. It was very educational, especially for our own youth. Deary me, I'm side tracked again. So, anyway, I decided to study this creature and if anything else, it would give me a bit of entertainment. My young would not hatch for another two moons and eating that rhinosauro would do me for at least until then.

In that it imitated cleverness, I decided to start caring for the creature, to consider its needs which aren't just food and water. I gave it a very mild sedative to inhibit it from running away. Oh, It really didn't like me doing that but after all, would I like it if one of my neighbors tried to hold me down opening its maw and proceeded to inject me with something? Of course the creature wouldn't like it. It was terrified. After the sedative took effect, I released it from the web and starting a training program teaching it to stay within a certain distance of my home. I didn't know whether this would work at first but to my surprise after about an hour of herding it back to the spring it seems to understand that it should stay. Mind you I could move at lightening speeds compared to it and wasn't really sure whether the sedative was now necessary. I kept it fed. It seemed to enjoy fruits of different kinds but it wouldn't touch the grasses I brought except to use it to sleep on. Every night the creature would lie down and sleep until first light. It ate all the time. If it wasn't eating it was making noises through its month.

It ever surprised me by its actions. One time it positioned itself on a rock facing me. No animal had ever done that before. It then started with the individual sounds slowly articulating each one. I put them to memory hoping to share my finding with others later on.

The creature's sounds went something like this, "Hello, I'm Marrium and I can't believe I'm sitting here, talking to one of the largest and hairiest spiders I've ever seen. Since you've shown signs of intelligence by keeping me alive, I hope you can understand what I'm saying. My escape pod crashed landed on this desert planet of yours. I have no other place to go. I really don't care if you kill me. Just as long I don't suffer. I've run away from a fate much worse than death. You see, my parents sold me in marriage to some old goon in the Sirius sector. Not only is he old but he has three other wives. I would have been nothing but a slave. You see, my world is so caught up in their religious ways and girls like me are in bondage to it. We are

supposed to be living in an enlightened galaxy; at least I thought that until I was informed that I would be the fourth wife of some old goat. They had no right to do that. Allah be merciful, what am I going to do?.”

The creature stopped its noises, lowered its head into the ends of its appendages and started to create water in its eyes again. It did this for some time and then started the noises again.

“They’ll probably come looking for me but I won’t let them find me. You see, I had to escape. Please understand me. Please.”

It was then that the creature did the most profound thing. It pointed the end of its side appendage and made a precise sound. It then pointed toward me. It did this several times. Did this animal have a name? I was beside myself, to find a creature of such intelligence.

Here’s what it said, “Marrium,” pointing at itself. And then again “Marrium.”

It was then that I looked around making sure that none of my neighbors would think me crazy, talking to an animal, that is. It took every effort to form my mouth and to expel the proper amount of air but I just managed to say, “Maaariium.” I was quite proud of myself. But then the creature went quite mad. It started to jump around, baring its teeth at me. I thought I would have to sedate it again but finally it calmed down. It took its seat back on the rock and then repeated the word and pointed toward me and waited. Okay, I decided, what would it hurt to tell it my name not that it would understand. It was a simple enough name and I was very proud of my family lineage. I gave it a try, “Ryemouriya.”

“Ryemouriyaa,” the creature repeated.

I was deflated. I was actually talking to an animal.

As days turned into weeks, I learned its talk and it learned some of mine. I also learned that the creature was a female like me. My memory was much better than the creature’s and once I heard the word, I retained it.

One day right after she finished eating her fruits, we had our first real conversation, “Marrium, What is your age? Are you young? Middle aged? Or old?”

“I’m fifteen years of age. That makes me almost of age. Girls from my world leave their homes between fifteen to eighteen, we get married and start having babies,” she answered. “My father is sixty years old and my mother is forty.”

“You can be a mother. I have been a mother all my life. I will have babies soon,” but I

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didn't tell the creature that as soon as the young hatched they would immediately devour her for they would be so hungry. I felt sad for the young creature. It was obviously lost. And this world of hers she spoke about was confusing. I didn't know there were other worlds and still wasn't sure if the creature was confused over it.

The next day was exceedingly hot so I retired to my den leaving the Marrium at the spring.

Shortly after I heard her scream, "Ryemouriiyaa!"

On opening my door, Marrium ran past. She stood behind me resting her hands slightly on one of my legs. In the door stood, Gymouious, a distant neighbor. "What are you about Gymouious on such a hot day?" I asked.

"Well, I heard that you had caught a strange animal. Well, honestly, I haven't eaten in nearly four moons and wondered whether you wanted to share it with me," she finished off.

"This one is actually a pet of mine and it isn't available," I replied knowing that she wouldn't understand.

"But it's only an animal," Gymouious said bewildered.

"I'm not a animal. My name is Marrium," it yelled to Gymouious.

"Well, I never. A talking animal," Gymouious exclaimed.

"I said I wasn't an animal. I'm a human being," the girl spoke again.

"Gymousious, I'm been studying this particular creature," I whispered so Marrium couldn't hear me. "Later on, perhaps," I lifted a leg and gently touched Gymousious indicating that I'd talk with her some other time.

"Of course," Gymousious turned and hurried off toward her home.

"Oh thank you, Mother Ryemouriiyaa," Marrium still wasn't able to pronounce my name correctly but she put both her top appendages around my head and hugged me. It was all I could do to stop myself from eating her there and then. If she hadn't have called me Mother Ryemouriiyaa, I probably would have. For that would be my name to all my hatchlings. What was I to do with the creature? It was acting as if it was my child.

That night, Marrium slept in my den. I was awake most of the time fiddling around with the hatchlings. They would come soon. This girl would not live much longer yet I really didn't want to feed it to my young. One thing I had come to believe, and that she was from a place far from here. She was no ordinary animal, that was for sure. I must talk to her now.

I gently pushed against her body with my front leg, "Wake up Marrium, we must talk. It's

important.”

“What? Can’t it wait until tomorrow morning?” she turned over.

“You may not be alive tomorrow morning?” I said loudly.

“What do you mean, Mother Ryemouriiyaa?” she held herself up off the grasses and looked at me.

“I mean, my young are about to hatch.”

“Great,” she bared her teeth.

I learned that this was a sign of goodness and happiness. “Marrium,” I continued, “ my young will be hungry. They will consider you as food. There will be too many of them to stop. You must return to your own home or your pod, now. I will come with you and protect you as best I can.”

“I could return to the pod and try the radio,” she replied.

“Let’s go. We must hurry,” I said. ‘I’ll lead the way.’ I headed off but then heard Marrium yell.

“Wait Mother Ryemouriiyaa, I can’t run as fast as you.”

“Okay, crawl up on top of me,” I instructed her.

Marrium pulled herself up onto my legs and settled herself at the back of my thorax.

“Now hold on,” I said hoping that none of the neighbors would see me for the light of the moon was bright. I could just hear the gossip now. This made me run even faster. We were out of my island oases and into the dry wastelands in no time. After fifteen minutes we were out of sight of neighboring oases. I just hoped nobody saw me. “You still there, Marrium?”

“I’m okay. I think the pod is further that way,” she pointed her appendage.

“Okay, here we go again,” and I took off. Upon climbing a large sand dune, I saw an object off in the distance and headed for it.

Soon Marrium yelled out, “I see the pod.”

Minutes later we were at the pod. “Climb in it girl and see if you can use this radio thing you spoke about.” Marrium did as I had instructed. I waited and waited, I wanted to make sure that she would be okay. I couldn’t just leave it here for she would need food and water.

Finally she came up out of the door, “Oh Mother Ryemouriiyaa, there’s an Orion supply ship close and they’re coming to get me.

“Will you still have to marry the goat?” I asked very concerned.

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Climbing down off the pod, Marrium now stood beside me, “No, the Orion sector is governed by a different set of laws. I’ll be free to go to school, even university and choose the person I want to marry. Thank you so much Mother Ryemouriiyaa, She put her appendages around my head and hugged. “I love you,” the girl finished off.

A roaring sound was approaching from the sky. I looked up at the human girl and said, “You take care of yourself Marrium.” Strangely enough I felt sad and then my eyes began to create the water like Marrium had so often done. I turned and quickly scurried off only turning back once to consider the strange creature that I had come to think of as one of my own

“Mother Ryemouriya, tell the story again. It’s such a nice story.”

“No, it’s time for you to go out and play. Off you go children.”

3. A BEAST OF A FRIEND



‘The systems aren't responding sir,’ his co-pilot responded.

High frequency bells clamored throughout the cockpit.

‘The engines have now shut down, Commander.’

Hearing the co-pilot, I said, ‘We'll glide in then.’ But I wasn't sure I had as much hope as I pretended. Even if we did live through the landing, I had no idea of what waited for us below. Atmospheric and manual controls were about the only things working. Our path placed us just above the clouds that covered the quasi continent-island below.

If manual controls continued to work, we might yet have a chance.

‘Engineer, have you tried ancillary computers again?’

‘Yes sir, several times, Commander, still no response.’

If we survived, the squadron would find us, if that communication got through to them.

As we entered the cloud canopy, more alarms started up. Rain pelted the ship as putrid smells seeped into the cabin over everyone and everything. Electrical fires flared out from under several panels. Things were not looking good.

‘Environmental systems have gone off line, Commander,’ said the co-pilot, somewhat fearful. He knew we were now at death's door. ‘Help the engineer put out those fires,’ I ordered, hoping that would keep his mind off other worries.

The acidic fumes and smoke inside added to the rain outside and created an almost other world-ness feeling. A cold shiver ran through my body.

We hit. Consoles came off the bulkheads; windows all but shattered. The impact threw the two crewmen out of their seats. Reaching out to check the engineer's pulse, I knew he was dead. That was the last I remembered.

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I dreamed of beasts long since dead with their long hungry gaping jaws and needle like teeth only a hand length from my face. Also of putrid acid smells mixed with Sulphur fumes that floated like a mist over an early morning ground.

I awoke from the dream in fright, trying to clear my mind and my eyes. The Putrid smells of Sulphur and acid burned my nostrils and lungs, sending me into a fit of coughing.

As my eyes opened, my heart sank! No more than three meters from my face, stood a beast. Its jaws extended around like an oversized alligator. Its teeth were like large sewing needles. Saliva drooled from the creatures mouth. The eyes slowly blinked at me. The terror that ran through my soul was fear incarnate. I couldn't move. The hideous face just stared. Perhaps it was considering its prey just as a cat considers a mouse or bird.

Fright and indecision tore at my nerves. The word 'fight' raced through my mind, jarring me out of a paralyzed state. I grabbed a fist sized rock and threw it. The beast only blinked as the rock rolled off its head. Throwing another large stone, I hit it between the eyes. Again, the thing only blinked as if it was a fly that landed on it. It looked hard at me and then amazingly turned and just walked away. At that point, I passed out again.

Coming to, I was in one piece, and alive! I wondered why the beast had left me alone. I wondered also about my ship and co-pilot. As the storm continued to rage outside there were intermittent flashes of lightning and thunder. During the flashes I could see the walls of the cave clearly. Perhaps fifty or so meters ahead was its entrance. I could just make out a greyness between the flashes. The mist decreased the further in you were. Taking a deep breath sent me into another fit of coughing.

Managing to get up, I moved toward the back of the cave hoping to breathe a little easier. The air, indeed became fresher even sweeter. When I rounded a small bend, a bubbling pool of clear water came into view. The air around the pool gave me a sense of euphoria. Tasting the water, it was as fresh as it smelled.

A groan came from the back of the cave. As I looked harder I saw the outline of my co-pilot moving.

'Slowly', I said as he tried to get up.

'Where are we? What happened to the ship?'

‘All in good time, Lieutenant. First, let's get you over to the pool. You'll feel better if you take a couple of deep breaths of air and drink some water.’

The Lieutenant began to feel better immediately. Color returned to his face.

‘Here's the story, Lieutenant. We're now in some kind of large cave. The storm that we slammed into on the way down is still raging outside. Another thing, Edwards is dead.” I paused. The sadness showed in his eyes. I knew their families had a lot to do with each other. “We do have shelter and water here, and lots of fresh air. But we also have a friend somewhere outside. Some kind of an animal. I think this cave may be its lair.’

‘What is this stuff, Commander? I'm getting a high just by sitting here,’ the Lieutenant said, slowly, as if not able to take our situation all in.

‘It seems to me like it's oxygen coming right out of the ground.’

I told the co-pilot about the run in with the beast. Also the fact that I had no idea of how we got into the cave. I told him of the deadly mist that got thicker towards the entrance.

‘We need to work out a way to get out of this place before our friend comes looking for us.’ I said.

‘There doesn't seem to be much choice sir, except for the front door.’

That sounded far too easy but it was indeed the only way. “Well, let's try it then. Tear a piece of cloth off your undershirt and soak it in the water. That'll help us to breathe a little better.’

We headed for the opening. Breathing as we expected became difficult. There seemed to be no let up from the storm. The mist grew thicker nearer the entrance. We were now standing only about four or five meters from the cave's mouth. Our throats and lungs were burning like fire.

‘There's no sign of that animal, I coughed out. Let's get out of here and find the ship before it returns.” As we headed out, a sound came from somewhere above.

The Lieutenant was the first to see the dark shadow descending upon us. “Watch out, commander,’ yelling, he pushed me back against the cave wall. The beast's landing shook the

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ground earthquake like. I heard the Lieutenant screaming and could only imagine what was happening to him. I ran straight on, stumbling and falling across him. I felt the hot sulfuric stink on the back of my neck. Turning, the beast's breath and drool hit me square in the face. It nudged me with its nose and then roared an eardrum piercing noise.

At that point I grabbed the Lieutenant and dragged him backwards, knowing all too well, we had only seconds before it came for us. Seconds then turned into minutes and we were at the back of the cave again. I armed myself with stones and waited.

'Why didn't it come after us, sir?'

'I don't really know. Perhaps it wasn't hungry.'

'I've never seen anything so scary in all my years with the military. Those teeth grinning at you the way they were,' the Lieutenant spoke softly. 'It was so ugly.'

There was a silence between the two of us for a few seconds. We contemplated our situation. I was tired. I just wanted to lie down and go to sleep but that wasn't possible at the moment.

'I'm afraid I lost it back there, Commander.'

'I felt the same way when I first saw those teeth. It's unnerving. Forget it. We've got to get out of here, and the sooner the better.'

'Hopefully the squadron is looking for us right at this moment, sir.'

'I hope so,' for I knew if they weren't, we were in deep trouble. We would need food fairly soon. One of us had to get away. If we both stayed, instead of needing food, we would be food.

'Okay Lieutenant, one of us needs to get out of here and we need to do it now. I'll distract the animal while you make a run for it, then I'll follow if I can.'

'But Commander! 'Once outside, try to find the ship. There should be some rations aboard. Don't wait for me and don't come back. Is that understood, Lieutenant?'

'Yes sir,' he said reluctantly.

'Let's do it, then.' I said making the first move.

During the last half hour the storm had abated somewhat. The mist wasn't as great as it had been. Between the coughing and burning sensation, I yelled so the beast could hear me. I didn't have long to wait. It landed on the floor of the cave with a thunder like shake. I could now see the shadow of the thing standing in front of me. Running directly at it, I yelled, hoping it would keep its attention on me long enough for the Lieutenant to get away. I saw the beast towering above me and it saw me. It looked around from one side of the cave to the other, perhaps sensing what was happening. I had now moved up under the animal, shouting and waving my arms. It was then that I heard the Lieutenant screaming. The animal realized what had happened. Letting out a tremendous roar, it hit me with its head and knocked me against the wall. I saw the Lieutenant stagger back falling face down on the cave's floor, smoke rising from his body. The beast hit me again with its head throwing me backwards. Picking myself up, I ran back into the darkness.

What happened to the Lieutenant? I felt confused and defeated. I was at a loss to understand anything anymore. I drifted off to asleep.

I dreamed again. It was the beast looking sadly at me and then at Lieutenant Ross's body feeling sorry for me. The beast seemed to have had tears in its eyes as though I was saving the Lieutenant but I only killed him instead.

'Commander? Wake up sir.'

I heard the question as if from a far distance.

'Commander?'

Opening my eyes, I saw two marines and a medic. "You found us.'

'Only you Commander. There's a body at what's left of the ship and a body at the entrance. The acid rain has eaten away most everything though. It's amazing that you're alive. We landed right after the acid rains had stopped.'

'What about that animal up above the cave entrance?'

'Nothing is there, commander, we've checked the whole of the cave out. We did notice a few walking around further down the valley. Are you able to move? We need to leave before it begins to rain again.'

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We left the planet in route back to the squadron. Leaving the hulk of my ship and my two crewmen. Perhaps leaving also a strange friend, who may have saved my life.

The End

4. THE BOUNTY HUNTER

Thinking about the possible fortune Kainite could collect in bounty, she slowly approached the planet. After following all the rumours, news clippings and information which she had to buy, there could be no other place. It was off the beaten track but close enough for anyone running. Even though the world was poor and completely undeveloped, it would present itself as a perfect hiding place. It had local police, although understaffed, and an interplanetary connection. There weren't any of the fancy communication links which were common on other worlds either. The million plus population was scattered over the entire planet, made up of remote towns and villages, some accessible only by local air transport which wasn't all that poriferous. The town of Grace with 50,000 inhabitants, she laughed at the name, held the only space port and customs office.

"Jack, what's the arrival time looking like?" she asked the computer as she was filing her nails.

"Ten hundred hours, Kainite. Will I be landing this time?" the computer answered.

"No, you stay in orbit. I'll take the speeder instead."

"Of course, always be prepared," the onboard computer injected.

"Exactly, Jack. So we have five hours before arrival. How will I ever be ready in time? My hair's a mess and just look at my nails." Kainite said holding her hands out in front of her. "Let me know the moment we arrive." At that she headed off.

"Yes ma'am, I'll see to it," Jack replied even though Kainite had already left.

After clearing customs control, she identified herself as a Bounty Hunter which allowed some privileges such as weapons and also a certain amount of authority. She did her duty by checking into the police, a requirement, which also informed the local spies of her presence. Sometimes, the criminal spy network worked to her advantage. She was hoping it would this time. Checking into a recommended hotel, she made sure her make up and hair was in place.

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From there she paid a visit to a well-known bar. Well known in the sense that certain people sometimes were seen there.

Well, as usual, Kainite's appearance was immaculate. Though she dressed the part, her clothes were clean and wrinkle free. Her hair was in place and make up just right. This attracted the man to come over and sat opposite her. Wrapping her hand around a glass and the other around an object in her lap, she waited for him to speak.

"Come here often?" the man asked trying to think of the best lead-in.

"Well," she hesitated, "actually, no. This is the first time I've been here, and you?" I shouldn't be too curious, thinking to herself, even though she had already recognized the person from a poster she had seen.

"Yeah, quite a bit, not much else to do around here," he said, lifting the glass to his mouth. The liquid dripped down the sides onto his face. Kainite's stomach turned as he wiped the wetness off his cheeks. He smiled a toothless grin on an unshaven face. She thought that his appearance blended quite well with the smell and dirtiness of the bar. "So what's a pretty lady like you do for entertainment?" Again the glass moved to his lips.

Having enough of the masquerade she decided to let it out, "Oh, I'm a bounty hunter."

He choked, spraying drink and spit over Kainite's face. She sat still knowing that every move now counted.

He looked at her worriedly then laughed aloud, "you'll never get out of here you know?" The same toothless grin appeared.

Kainite brought the object from her lap to the top of the table, her hand firmly grasp it.

The man's grin turned back into the worried look he had shown not seconds before. His eyes made a sweeping glance around the place. As he rose from the seat, Kainite tossed the object over to the centre of the floor. Fire works like irrupted into an explosion of smoke. Minutes passed and there was silence. She hadn't moved except for pulling a cloth from her sleeve and putting it over her face.

Changing before collecting the bounty owed her, she decided to mix a blue and white business suit wearing platforms. This made her look extremely tall and very business like. Adding a bit more make than she previously had worn, she entered the station with her bounty in tow. Actually he was shackled. Everyone stopped suddenly and starred at the twosome. One dressed in rags, the other in jewels. She gave the end of the chain over to one officer standing nearby. She then placed the wanted poster before a man at the counter.

Quickly gathering himself, he looked at the form, "everything's in order," then punched a keypad on the desk. "That's two thousand denarii to your account," passing the pen over for her to receipt the transfer. "That's quick work, how long have you been at this?" He asked taking back the signed paper.

"Long enough," she said not wanting to enter into a conversation. Information usually ended up costing her she thought to herself. "Why you ask?"

"It's a dangerous line of work."

Is he trying to say something, she imagined and then added, "For a lady, you mean?"

The official didn't respond at that.

"By the way," she continued, "is the data still up to date on this person?" shoving the crinkled paper in front of his eyes.

"Wait a second," the official shuffled other papers about, "Oh yeah, he's still on the wanted list. You think he's here?" he asks a bit too curiously.

"Is he still worth ten thousand danarii?" Kainite avoided the question.

"That's right, ten thousand it is," he said.

She turned and headed out before there were any other inquiries. Needing more information, she returned to the bar. The moment she entered, all heads turned.

"Hey, we don't want any more of you in here. We've got your story, bounty hunter," the person serving drinks yelled.

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Another said with a venomous snarl, "You are crazy to come back here."

"No trouble this time, just need some information." Kanite smiled laying five hundred cash denarii on the table. Causally she slipped her hand back into her pocket.

"Thiis Laady iis iindeeed craazee," a not so humanoid being sang out, "shee thiinks thaath shee iis leeaviing heere aaliive."

"Oh, I don't think there's be any problem there," Kainite pulled out an atom detonator. She smiled again at everyone. They knew in horror what the device could do. "Now you shouldn't make any unnecessary moves right at this particular moment," she said while scrapping up the money with her other hand.

"If anyone is interested in this?" waving the money about, "I'll be at the Café Locale at seven tonight." She pocketed the money, and then pulled out a picture. "This is the person," throwing it on the floor. "Oh yes," she paused, "I'll be in an evening dress. Come wearing a white tie." She backed out of the place. Several heads appeared at the window but she held the detonator clearly for all to see. No one dared do anything.

Kainite drove around for a while before returning the rental car. Afterwards she caught a taxi to her hotel. She had taken a big chance in going back to that bar but hoped that her display would attract the attention she was looking for. It was also just luck for her to run into another bounty the first time. She was sure that the 500 denarii would be tempting for someone.

So later Kainite entered the Café Locale, a place recommended to her as having a high standard of dress. She wore a long white evening gown clinging slightly to her body with high cut collars and long sleeves. A red shawl draped over her shoulder and was tied at the waist.

A live band played traditional instruments adding to the quaintness of the atmosphere. Two heavy mountain like humanoids stood on each side of the entrance way. Both wore lose grabs hiding unpleasant features beneath. Kainite actually began to relax somewhat as she was escorted to her table. The band began a slow waltz; her eyes closing to enjoy the solitude of the moment.

"Interesting that someone so brave can relax so easily," a man dressed in a white dinner jacket stood before her.

"Being prepared is the key to bravery," she said, slowly opening her eyes to the person.

"Or to foolishness!" the man paused, "I understand you're buying information about a certain person?" he allowed himself to take the chair opposite her.

"Yes, that's correct," she answered.

"Well, I'm not selling but giving."

"Generous of you." She said with a question mark on her face.

"He's still on the planet. You'll find him in a small village; the directions are written here." He tossed a piece of paper on the table before her.

Nothing was free, she thought, but she wasn't about to entertain anyone either.

"You're wondering why?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," she said.

"You've got spunk, it'll be interesting to see what you can do," he said smiling. "All the best." He then got up and walked away.

"Do you have a name?" she asked raising her voice to be heard.

"Oh, you can call me, Mr. Smith," he continued toward the door.

Well, that's certainly original, she thought about the whole situation.

Kanite then motioned for the waiter. "I'd like to order now please," she smiled her lovely smile.

Three days later she found herself on the other side of the world in a mountain top village. The air transport landed at the bottom of the cliff. A well worn paved path worked its way up the side of the mountain face some two hundred metres above. After two hours of climbing she entered the old city gates. A view over dry lifeless mountains was beautiful nevertheless. It was late, the heat of the day had peaked. Narrow streets permeated the city as people walked about the car-less avenues. Shadows grew into darkness where minutes earlier

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light of the sun had been. She sought out the village entre. The written note instructed her to one of the towns Inn's.

Aware of cast looks, Kainite now walked through the confines of a dark but trafficked passageway. She was a stranger and those around knew it. Dressed in a jungle suit with tramping boots, she prodded along through the dusty laden cobble stones.

"I'm looking for the 'Planet's Inn & Bar'", asking a not so human hawker with wears layed out before him.

Eyeing her and others who begrudgingly pushed their way past, the being pointed an inch long-clawed finger toward a break in the wall some distance away. Kainite hurried but before getting too far, the hawker issued a low but audible shrill. Turning, she saw the hawker with hand upturned rubbing two fingers together; the interstellar sign for money. Kainite tossed a very low denomination coin in the general direction without brothering to see where it went. Another sound immolated from the hawker's direction but she continued her evenly stepped pace.

The 'street' was a broader avenue, more so than the one she had just left. A further survey registered a misty smoke with a sewage smell added to a less travelled area. Several shops lined the edge, too dark to make out the types of wears being sold. Conscious of raping eyes glaring from the shadows she tried to act as if she knew what she was doing. Kainite thought that she had been in worst places but wasn't quite sure anymore. She began to feel the presence of fear or was she experiencing her feelings she wondered? It was then that Kainite froze seeing a person she'd been tracking the last several months entering a well-lit door. The dirt-crusted sign over the door read 'Planet's Inn & Bar'. She only just stopped herself from springing into a wild canter.

Three grizzly looking beings walked out of the bar and headed up the passage way toward her. Two were at least three heads taller while the third was about her size. The leader had hair pulled back out of its eyes and the second and smaller third reminded her of great walking hairy rugs. For some unthinkable reason, she mentally named the first creature, 'Woolly Two Eyes', the second large one, 'Woolly No Eyes'. She deserved a second of imagination, having found the person she'd been tracking.

Passing the three, Woolly No Eyes gave her a push from behind. She lost her balance and stumbled, immediately reprimanding herself for being caught unaware.

"Why did you get in my way?" Woolly No Eyes growled from a mouth somewhere located near the top of its body.

"I didn't see you," she replied hoping that would be an acceptable answer somewhere in-between losing face and pacifying the thing.

"How could she see you with those tiny eyes?" Woolly Two Eyes said.

There was a growl of laughter from the other two. She didn't have time for this. Her bounty was not more than ten metres ahead and these three behemoths were getting in the way.

"Look, I'm just going for a drink, that's all" she said still hoping that this was a chance happening.

"That's just too bad," Woolly No Eyes said grabbing her left wrist.

Smacking her right arm against her body, a stun stick popped out from under her sleeve. She rammed it deep into the gut of Woolly No Eyes saying, "and this is just too bad also." The creature flew backwards into a group of now watching onlookers. Jumping up, she headed directly for the door of the 'Planet's Inn & Bar'. But only after three steps, a force hit her from behind. The growl of Woolly Two Eyes was loud in her ears as he sunk his teeth into her back. She gritted her teeth against the pain barely keeping herself from screaming. Quickly Looking up at the open door, her prey smiled at her.

Kainite flipped over and jabbed the stun stick into Woolly Two Eyes throwing him out of the way. She could feel the blood seep through her clothes. The other two hairy beings decided then to join in. As her left arm went against her side, a small slug repeater went into her hand. She fired into the chests of the two on comers. Both melted to the ground in fits of coughs and gagging. But just for good measure, she shot a slug into Woolly Two Eyes even though he hadn't yet recovered from the effects of the stun stick. She didn't really want to make any more mistakes.

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Others had gathered around the window and door of the 'Planets Bar and Inn'. Kainite now dashed for it. Beings cleared the way as she made a round of the bar. "Where is he?" She yelled more upset with herself than at any one in particular.

"Where's who, lady?" A bar tender asked.

Kainite held the wanted poster out for all to see.

"Never seen him before," one human said a bit too smartly.

Kainite released a volley of slugs into the crowd where the voice had been. A score of coughing and gagging started up. "Now, where did he go?" She then pulled out the atom detonator and popped the lid's activation switch.

Beings then dived through the windows and door. They hit the ground running. Once a atom detonator had been activated, it could only be stopped by the person who activated it.

"Now, this is the last time. Where is he?"

"He left through the back way just after you got the upper on those three," the bar tender indicated with his chin toward the hairy ones outside, who were only now beginning to recover from their ordeal.

"I want answers," she raised her voice significantly but then with a grin, added, "the timer is set for five minutes. No need of running, you'll never make it."

"The guy's been hanging around for the last couple of days. He's been chatting up those three that jumped you." Kainite just stared. "Look, I'm the bar tender and I know more than anyone else. Now, shut that detonator off, please," his voice trembled.

"Kainite grabbed the detonator and headed back out into the narrow street. Her three adversaries had just rounded a corner. The rest of the place, deserted; Obviously word of her little toy had travelled fast. She scanned the whole of the area before her, not wanting to get caught again. Rounding the corner, Kainite entered the narrow street where she had first met the hawk. The street was clearing fast, beings were moving away as rapidly as they could. She followed the narrow avenue in the direction that she thought her hairy friends had taken. Shop doors were being shut up. She had entered an open spice market where covers had been hastily

thrown over bags of pungent smells. Kainite would have loved to stroll about the place taking her time to look closely at its rarity. Seeing a stall keeper covering up items she lightly touched his shoulder, "Have you seen three hairy beings come through?"

The keeper jerked away, "You had better get out of here, there's a she-devil at the Planet's Inn that got an atom detonator."

Kainite gave the keeper that special smile of hers and said, "I really need to know where those three carpets went."

A dawning of surprise struck the keeper's face, he hesitated only but a second, then raised his hand indicating the direction.

"Thanks," Kainite showed her sweet lady smile, turned and proceeded up the narrow confines. The street was draped with cloth haphazardly covering wares as the warning continued to spread out from the bar. After only minutes she saw them standing in an open area.

"Hello boys or whatever you are," Kainite said loud enough to get their attention.

Woolly Two Eyes stared at her, "if it isn't the she devil with the little eyes." The two others laughed but stopped as soon as the gun popped out of her sleeve. She shot Woolly No Eyes and the little one without even thinking twice.

There was a strain in the pupils of Woolly Two Eyes, now waiting for Kainite's next move.

"OK, fur ball, let's hear it," Kainite said pointing the slug gun toward him. "Come on, speak up, I've lost a bounty because of you."

"Not quite, Bounty Hunter." Kainite felt the barrel of a gun on her temple. "Keep those arms of yours perfectly still." He paused for effect. "Take the stick and slug gun," indicating to Woolly Two Eyes with a sideways movement of his head.

Kainite recognized the voice. "Mr. Smith I believe," she said as Woolly Two Eyes disarmed her. "Where do you come into all of this?" she couldn't help herself from asking.

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"Well, Bounty Hunter, for all the good it's going to do you, I kind of get paid to protect certain individuals from people like you. But you're better than most I do admit. You've taken quite a few by surprise and you've cost me by taking in one of my paying clients."

"So this was just to get me away from the main centre of action?" Kainite said.

"Out of sight, out of mind, as the old earth saying goes," the man answered. He reached into Kainite pocket and pulled out the detonator. "You scared everybody out of their minds with this little toy," the man said admiring the detonator in his hands. "Would you really have killed yourself?" He waited for an answer but then decided otherwise, "Well, never mind answering Miss Bounty Hunter, this will be your undoing anyway."

"Tie her hands and take her to the car."

Woolly No Eyes and the small one had revived enough to make it difficult for her to walk along the paths of the narrow streets. Then on arriving at the car, she was thrown into the back. While she was being seated, another person jumped in the front with the others.

"Well, look at this." Kainite said.

Receiving a shove from Woolly No Eyes, "be quite she devil or I might be tempted to end your life now."

"Why did I have to come along?" The person spoke to Smith obviously irritated.

"You pay me for protection, I just want you to see that I'm providing protection," Smith answered in a firm voice.

They left with Woolly Two Eyes driving. The car was a combination air/petrol, able to traverse rocky terrain. They followed a dry river bed leading out of the village. After an hour they pulled up. Woolly No Eyes opened the door, throwing Kainite onto the ground. Smith then took the atom detonator and set the timer, grinning down at Kainite. "There, now, in twenty minutes, the whole of this place will go up, including you along with it. Of course the officials will say that you blew yourself up by being fool enough to have one of these things. They are quite dangerous you know," he said chastising. "This time tomorrow my associates and I will be celebrating your demise over a cozy little dinner at your favourite café as a jester of good will for my clients."

Smith placed the detonator down on the ground. She received one last kick from the small one before they headed back to the village.

She sat there in total darkness, sore from all the kicks she had received and feeling just a bit out of sorts. Her hair was thrown about and her make up was a mess. Oh for a bath, she thought. In gathering strength, she brought her arms under and up in front of her. Then felt around for the detonator. She pushed her finger into one of its holes forcing an antenna out. "Jack, can you hear me?" she held the detonator up to her mouth.

"Yes, Kainite, I hear you," the ship's computer responded.

"How long will it take you to reach me?"

"Fifteen minutes," Jack answered.

"Well, make it sooner, I really need a bath. My hair is all undone and my make up is in a terrible state. I've never felt so dirty."

"Yes madam, I'm on my way."

The ship landed beside Kainite shortly after. She told Jack what had transpired over the last couple of days.

"So you used the atom detonator bluff again? Some day, Kainite, that's going to get you into trouble," the computer warned.

"Well, this time, it saved me."

"What now?" Jack asked.

"Well, first of all, they'll be waiting for an explosion. So you had better arrange something!"

The ship lifted and minutes later, an explosion came about that no doubt the village would even hear.

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In the car, well away from the effects of it, Mr. Smith turned to the others saying, "you see, one bounty hunter taken care of."

Everyone laughed.

Back in orbit Kainite was having her hair done. She had finished soaking in an hour long bath. She had a complete manicure and make up after some much needed rest. Thinking of whether or not to wear her red ball dress she began changing. The dress was really an eye opener, split up both sides and down the back. She thought it would be just the thing for her little meeting!

Her arrival at the space port was right on time. Only twenty minutes remained before the meeting started at the Café Royale. She wanted to make it as difficult as possible for any would be spy to get a warning off. The ship landed after having received permission from space port control. Technically she had already cleared customs so she made an exit out a side gate. Jack would handle any communications with the control tower. Kainite waved a taxi down, "the Café Royale please."

"Sure," the driver said. "It's the best entertainment place on the whole planet, special showings almost every night."

"Yes, I know," she smiled at the taxi driver.

Arriving, Kainite stepped out. She instructed Jack to arrange back up the moment she arrived at the café. Wrapping her hand around a gas cylinder, a secondary precaution, she entered the café. She took the place in with one sweep of her eyes. A group of ten, including her Mr. Smith, were seated at a table. Woolly Two Eyes was seated at the far end plus other humans and non humans as well.

"A toast gentlemen," Smith with a smile on his face held his glass up, "to the bounty hunter."

"To the bounty hunter," they toasted in unison.

"Why, that's so kind of you," Kainite said. Walking around to face them, she kept a healthy distance with everyone in sight.

"You said that you'd got rid of her," one of the humans said angrily.

Smith's countenance had recovered just enough to speak, "You're good Miss Bounty Hunter but you made a mistake by coming back into my café, he started to move."

"No, No, No!" Kainite waved her finger exposing the gas cylinder in her hand. Smith settled back down. A squad of police officers, her backup, then walked through the door came toward her.

"What's going on?" The official said.

"Officer, this women's entered my café threatening us with a gas cylinder." Smith took the advantage.

"Kainite pulled out her ID, "I'm a licensed bounty hunter and you'll find a picture that matches everyone seated at this table, including this man," she indicated Mr. Smith and then smiled her lovely smile.

"OK, that's forty thousand denarii," the officer handed her the pen to acknowledge the transfer. The whole department stood watching the proceedings, awed by the bounty hunter and the money that was just transferred into her account. The town was in an uproar. There were even reports of ships unexpectedly leaving the planet. Kainite stood smiling a deep lovely orange smile. Then, as an afterthought, "Officer? Do you have a mirror? I think I've smudged my new orange lipstick."

The End

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5. THE EASTERN SEA

"It won't answer the helm, A'raara." G'ri said in a confused voice.

"Increase the aft engine to maximum and try pulling up." A'raara commanded.

"Still, no response." G'ri said trying to pull the balloon out of its downward spiral.

Below, lay the Great Eastern Sea, swamp ridden and unexplored. A blanket of mist and fog that stretched as far as the eye could see.

"All hands," A'raara spoke quickly over the communications system, "dump everything that's not bolted down."

"Does that include the supplies?" E'reere, the balloon's freight master, called from the cargo hole.

"Everything, I said! Now quickly! There's no time for questions," she blurted out, annoyed not at the question but the lack of time they had left.

The sea loomed closer, its whirring mist, a seeming invitation for the containers, machines and gear now plummeting down into it.

A'raara picked up the radio, "Settlement, this is Jaafar One. Do you read me, T'ri? T'ri, come in!"

She desperately wanted to contact T'ri, the settlement supply master and friend.

He needs to know the trouble we're in, she thought, and there's not much time left. They would possibly survive the crash, but not the life forms that were said to dwell there.

"It's responding." G'ri replied with a sound of relief in his voice.

The balloon sluggishly came out of its spiral dive but was still heading down into the mist.

"Listen, everyone, keep throwing things out, even unbolt it, if you can. Just get it out!" she told the crew over the system's com.

Entering the mist, Jaafar One finally leveled off. The lack of visibility brought on an unnerving silence. The fog muffled the sound of the engines. They were moving along like a sailing ship on the ocean. The smell of sulphur and rot entered the cabin. An occasional sound of brush rubbed against the underside of the carriage.

"I see movement." A lookout yelled out.

"What kind of movement?" was A'raara's reply.

"I'm not sure yet, visibility's too poor," the lookout's answer.

Then, something hit the under carriage knocking everyone off their feet and making the balloon rise.

"We're going up," said G'ri from the helm's station.

Above the mist, there was a sigh of relief from in the cabin. The Balloon continued to gain altitude.

"Let's go home." A'raara said to no one in particular.

"We dumped everything over the Eastern Sea," A'raara said definitively, "had no other choice. We were caught in some kind of freak down draft. And that's a place I didn't want to take a holiday in."

A'raara was their best balloonist. She had been doing the monthly freight run nearly two years now. That run meant crossing part of the Eastern Sea, a large unexplored swampy area of the world. Home of some mighty nasty life forms. They had never had any incidents until now, T'ri thought to himself, and it had to be now of all times!

"We need some of those supplies." T'ri said his eyes meeting A'raara's for what seemed to be an eternity.

"What about another run?" she asked as if that was the only answer.

"That would take too long." T'ri replied.

"But you can't just enter that swamp for the sake of a few supplies," A'raara argued not really understanding what he was getting at.

"We won't be entering for the sake of a few supplies but for the energy charge the settlement desperately needs. Yesterday, our energy charge failed. We have twenty four hours before our back up ends," T'ri said, a bit irritated.

T'ri was good at his job and she well knew if there was any other way, he would have thought of it already. She had come to admire him and the way he worked. He was a quiet person, although a bit too reserved. She sometimes wished he would take a bit more notice in. There hadn't been enough time to be more than friends.

"When do we leave?" She ask resolutely, knowing there was nothing else to be said.

The sea consisted of a low, living, jungled marsh, covered by a constantly whirling mist. Visibility was down to less than fifty or so metres. Trees and bushes bent, split and cracked as a five tone symmetrical foot came down grinding it into the layer of rotted undergrowth. Spider,

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as it was often referred to, with it's four legs moved at a steady pace seeking out the firmer solids to place these symmetrical iron feet. On top of this Mechanized Jungle Terrain Rover were crew quarters enough for two.

An intense sudden squeal broke the moody atmosphere slightly rocking the vehicle. A head rose out of the shallow water not far from where Spider put one of it's feet down. The scream increased in agony and the head then came up and crashed against the cabin that sat on top of the iron legs. Both A'raara and T'ri jumped back in fright as a black yellowish liquid smeared itself across the viewers screen.

"I really don't like this place." A'raara said in a lowered voice.

"Know what you mean," T'ri agreed, "the sooner we find that charge and get out of here, the better. There are literally hundreds of undocumented life forms in this place. Luckily they prefer this rather than higher ground."

"What was that thing?" A'raara wondered aloud. She continued looking out over the misty landscape often catching a glimpse of movement either in the shallow waters or under growth. The sounds of Spider's hydraulics and rhythm in the movement of it's legs, would be enough to encourage anything to scurry out of it's way.

"Penny for your thoughts?" T'ri broke the silence of the moment.

"Oh, nothing, really. Being out here makes me realise what a sheltered life we live away from all the wilds of this world. We come to tame and conquer but really it's the machines that do all the taming."

She wouldn't say that she also enjoyed being in his presence. This was perhaps the longest time they had been around each since she started work at the settlement. He had never made any advancement except for friendly chats.

"I Think this is the closest I want to come to this sort of thing and even this is a bit too much for me." replied T'ri.

"You should try to get some sleep. We'll be arriving after another hour." He said after a few seconds.

"Maybe I will," she turned and headed back toward the personnel cabin. "Give me a call if anything interesting pops up." She laughed switching the light on.

"Will do just that," came T'ri's response.

The light went out behind him and quietness reigned. Evening was almost upon them. T'ri thought about turning the flood light on but decided to wait. Once turned on, it would only

increase the difficulty of seeing through the mist and undergrowth. Spider continued its onward march, its movement made the mist whirl about that much more. Sounds of cluck, cluck, cluck as the vehicle relentlessly paced through the greyness.

An hour passed and Spider came to a halt.

"OK! We're here!" T'ri yelled back to where A'raara was sleeping.

There was a rustle of noise and A'raara walked up looking as if she was hung over. "I went sound a sleep." She said running her fingers through her hair. "Won't me to take the watch?"

"No, I'm good for a couple more hours. Who knows, we might get lucky, find the energy charge right off and head home," he said with a smile on his face. "I'll just switch the flood lights on."

Both, saw a sudden scramble for cover from several denizens.

"Look at that." A'raara pointed to a mound. A snake like sludge was on top of what looked like a supply canister.

T'ri moved Spider chose to the object in question. "Yeah, you're right. The thing has dissolved nearly all of it."

"Uh! Nasty looking! It uses some kind of acid to melt through the metal. I hope there aren't too many of those fellows around or we can kiss our energy charge good bye." A'raara said matter of factly.

"I'll start the search pattern in this area first. The stuff must have attracted these things." T'ri said keying in the pattern coordinates to Spider's computer system.

Every step brought on a reaction from one of the many creatures. It was hard to walk without stepping on something. Screams and movements increased as Spider continued the search.

"They don't seem to be as afraid of us now." A'raara said as one life form reared itself up on four bony legs. The height was level with the view screen. T'ri stopped Spider wondering what the creature was doing. Its face came within metres. It then reared its head back and smashed it against the top forcing the hydraulics to release, temporarily absorbing the shock. Spider's underside went down to the undergrowth where another creature wrapped its many arms around Spider's legs.

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"Was that a coordinated attack? I think we've underestimated our swamp buddies." A'raara said jokingly but with obvious concern on her face.

"I've never seen nor even heard of anything like this before. Let's see if we can shake this guy loose." T'ri instructed Spider to jerk up and down. The life form had wrapped its tentacles too tightly in the legs hydraulics.

"Look, you take the controls. I'll go topside and try frying some of the creatures arms off with the rifle." T'ri instructed her.

A'raara pulled T'ri up short, "I really don't like the idea of you going out there. Let's just contact the settlement and have them send a balloon for us."

"That would take days, and besides, I'm not that happy to stay attached to this fellow that long." He replied grabbing his assault belt and rifle.

A'raara was frightened but T'ri's confidence in the situation made her hold back further objections. She heard the top hatch open. T'ri started firing and the creature's legs started waving and jerking about.

"The air's really foul out here." T'ri said over his comm unit.

"Cut the story telling, do the job and get back in here," A'raara replied a bit too sharply.

"Raise Spider up and down now." T'ri instructed A'raara over the comm.

As Spider moved, A'raara saw T'ri tumble over the front of the view screen, yelling: "Get out of here, A'raara, now!"

But instead, she grabbed her own assault belt and rifle, and headed for the hatch. A putrefied rotten smell took her breath away. A'raara was over the front of Spider in no time. T'ri was gone. Creatures slithered about as she began frying everything within ten metres. Looking around she saw a creature dragging T'ri toward a pool of water. A'raara fired its head to pulp. Another denizen rose out of the water and quickly stuffed the dead creature into its mouth and then it headed toward T'ri's body. She fired again and the creature turned probably thinking that it shouldn't be overly greedy!

A'raara dragged T'ri back toward Spider at the same time trying to ward off the different beauties by shooting continually.

Back in the cabin, she hit the activation switch just to get Spider moving. Spider obeyed and began walking through the water, bog, jungle and multitude of life forms now covering the area.

A'raara put T'ri into a berth and doctored him up the best she could. There didn't seem to be much wrong except a few bruises and lacerations. "That was one stupid trick you pulled," A'raara spoke aloud her thoughts to the unconscious T'ri.

"That was one stupid trick you did!" A'raara jerked around seeing a smile on his face. "You should have left me."

"Yeah, right! Like I really would have. You mean a little more than that to me or haven't you noticed?" She said tucking his blanket in.

"I'm noticing now." T'ri said perhaps really seeing her for the first time since they'd met.

"So, what do we do now?" A'raara was a little afraid to ask. She really wanted just to turn around and go back to the settlement where her living quarters were and get away from all the smells.

"The settlement only has another twelve or so hours of power left. But at the same time we aren't really prepared for what we're up against out there, are we?" He left off with the question.

"We'll be in trouble if these beauties gang up on us again," was her only answer.

T'ri jumped out of the berth, landing on his two feet which immediately gave out from under him.

"And what are you doing?" A'raara said grabbing him before falling onto the deck.

"Getting up!" He replied, again smiling at her.

T'ri staggered over to the cockpit and sat down. It was still dark out. Spider's flood lights provided what visibility there was. The mist was still thick as was the numerous life forms. Spider continued to be mildly rocked ever so often by some of the larger creatures but otherwise went on its preset search pattern.

A'raara moved up beside T'ri staring out over the fearful setting, hoping to see something of the remains she had thrown out of the balloon just the day before. "There!" She pointed to a small rise where several canisters lay.

"I see it," replied T'ri and instructed Spider to approach slowly. One was completely melted while several others were intact. "We might as well take these. May be the only things we can return with. A'raara used Spider's arm to pick the Canister's up and placed them into side holders. T'ri returned Spider to it's search mode.

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"There it is! It's the energy charge." T'ri grew excited but that immediately died down as they both looked upon one of the largest yet seen nasty. "Would you look at that thing?" T'ri said staring.

"I'd rather not," exclaimed A'raara.

The creature at first resembled a crab with an exoskeletal body and two clawed pinchers. It also had additional appendages they could only guess to be its legs.

"It hasn't moved yet, maybe it's asleep." A'raara continued after a few seconds.

"Let's see if we can get close enough and you use the external arm to get the energy charge."

Spider slowly repositioned itself near the object. They were in place.

A'raara grabbed the energy charge in the arm's pincher. "There, it's firmly in place." A'raara said.

The creature then rose up on its appendages. T'ri had already started backing Spider away instructing it to return to the settlement. The crab wrapped one of its legs around Spider's leg but Spider continued walking and dragging the Crab in its wake. The Crab wrapped another one of its appendages around another of Spider's legs. But Spider continued its pace. The Crab creature used its pinchers to clip one of the hydraulics on Spider's legs, bringing it to a stand still.

"Take the controls!" T'ri then used Spider's external arm and rammed it through the Crab's shell, killing it.

"The leg still won't move, T'ri." A'raara said working the controls.

"Drop the foot. Spider can walk on three legs." T'ri instructed her.

They moved out of The Eastern Sea just after mid day, happy to have it behind them and arrived at the settlement just before dusk.

T'ri and A'raara both sat holding a hot drink, looked at each other and then just laughed! Happy to be alive. Happy to be back at the settlement.

"You know A'raara, I'd like to spend more time with you, that is, if you would like." T'ri said with a look of concern on his face.

"I think I would like that also, T'ri." A'raara said as she bent over and kissed .

The End

6. I WAS, I AM, I WILL BE

The moon was as alive as the world it revolved around was dead. A rich oxygen atmosphere hung just above its surface. The satellite worked on a twenty eight hour rotation period, fourteen hours of daylight and fourteen hours of night. But its dead parent which had already been nicknamed Grey, frequently caused a partial eclipse giving additional hours of darkness during the day and light during the night.

Hundreds of specialist and support people had traveled the distant space to reach the Greater Magellan Clouds, a trip that took them nearly a year to complete. Back home the find had sent shock waves throughout the galaxy. Everybody who was anybody wanted to participate in the 'dig'.

Jaisana was the only teenager to accompany the archaeologist. Most of them were older singles or had chosen to leave their children behind. Her father was important enough and had insisted that his daughter come with him.

Jaisana thought it was great. Her year in space had been studious. She tried to learn everything she could to prepare for the dig. She now gazed about the compound, people were erecting their prefab homes, sorting through baggage, loading and unloading supplies. She was finally here. I'll be glad when my own prefab is finished she thought to herself. Living out of a tent was getting very tedious, but then again, it was all part of the adventure. The camp had been set up on a rise just overlooking the ruins. In its day a striving and innovative populace lived in the mega-tropolis with its sky scrapers, homes, office blocks; an ultra modern city with all the conveniences.

Even after several weeks of living on the moon Jaisana found it difficult to get used to the 28-hour rotation period. Adding the several hours of twilight plus the light of Grey at night, it really never left enough hours of darkness. She never got enough sleep. However, when Grey caused an eclipse which was every other day, most people took advantage of it knocking off for a couple of hours to rest. Grey stood there larger than a beach ball with an obvious movement down toward the east. The moon itself was prolific with plant life. A mixture of exotic Earth

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types, plus never seen before flowers, shrubs and trees. Insects were abundant but as of then no sign of animal life had been encountered. A grass-covered stone street led down into the maze of weather worn gray dilapidated structures. Jaisana could easily imagine mighty towers soaring up above the atmosphere into space itself. She was excited about everything that went on. She could even imagine a transportation system in place of raised stone track ways that led out from the city to various outlying areas. But the greyness of the ruins and its contrast with the moon's abundant green brought Jaisana back from her imaginative adventure.

Mysteries abounded here she knew. Out of the entire Milky Way Galaxy, this moon held the only evidence of previous life. And she was here to see those mysteries come to life.

"Jaisana?" Her father called from a supply heap of personal items that had just been off loaded. "Come help sort through these personal effects, will you?" Her father was the famous Dr. John Crisp, a specialist in linguistics and anthropology. He and his daughter had become very close ever since her mother's death. This was the reason why her dad insisted that Jaisana accompany him. He could not bring himself to leave her behind.

Jaisana ran over to where her dad stood. "You can start on this side," John pointed toward a mound of suitcases. "Our names should be written somewhere on them."

"Dad, do you think we could go for a walk into the city this afternoon?" Jaisana asked excitedly.

"I don't think that would be allowed but I'm scheduled for some planning meetings this afternoon anyway. There's a group taking a low fly over the city. Why not ask if they would take you along?"

"Okay, we've got the following people signed up: Dr. Robert Shields, Dr. Bob Herring, Jerry Miles, Dr. Mary E. Sanders, Ashley Waterford, Dr. Ryan Blake, Susan Kemp, Dr. Sheila McDonnell, Dr. Ahmed Hussain and Jaisana Crisp. The pilot paused after every name to match up the name with the face. Where's Jaisana Crisp?" The pilot asked looking around.

"I'm here," Jaisana ran up to the group gasping.

"Okay then, everybody in." The pilot stood by the entrance anxious to keep to whatever schedule he was on. The Tripper, a small atmospheric craft, was limited to ten passengers only. The pilot positioned himself upfront in its nose.

"Everybody buckled in?" the pilot lifted the Tripper off not waiting for an answer.

As they circled the city, Jaisana listened to different theories being put forward to explain the mysteries of the place. Sheila McDonnell, one of the expedition's many archeologists sat across from her explaining the layout of the city. Jaisana marvelled at the planned streets they passed, crisscrossing each other creating various sized city blocks. It would have been dull anywhere else, except this was an alien city, the first of its kind.

Halfway through the flight, the Tripper shuddered causing a momentary lapse in conversation. Jaisana kept her eyes looking down onto the grey ruins. They had just passed a saucer shaped building that looked very much like a stadium. It was the only complete building of its kind. The Tripper shuddered once again.

"Look folks," said the pilot over the intercom, "I'm having some trouble with a back guidance flap. It's nothing to be worried about. I'll just put the Tripper down in an open area and have a look." The shudder continued to increase as the craft landed in an open area. "Okay people, this is an un-scheduled stop. You can get out and stretch your legs but don't wander off too far. This should only take a few minutes," the pilot announced.

Everyone was ecstatic, this was certainly an unscheduled and not altogether proper procedure. Just going off tramping through the ruins of an unexplored and unmapped dig was a bit of a no-no. Everyone headed off in a different direction. Jaisana headed directly toward the stadium she had seen from the air.

It was only a few minutes walk. She saw that the saucer part was supported by large stone columns interestingly carved out of solid rock. An opening walkway led down into the structure. It was in surprisingly good condition compared with everything else. She turned her head back towards the Tripper wondering whether she should go any further. But then Jaisana heard something from down the passage way. Proceeding down the ramp she was led into an

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open theatre area. A combination of stone encased machinery and plain stone lined the walls of the theatre. A small column occupied the centre of the room with a half red globe attached to the top of it. Jaisana walked casually over to the column and tried to look into it. Immediately upon touching it a voice spoke.

"*I was, I am, I will be*, offer protection to you who touches me. Beware of *We Were, We Are, We Will Be*." The chill rendering voice rang out from nowhere but yet from everywhere.

"Who are you?" Jaisana couldn't think of anything else to say.

"*I was, I am, I will be*, a protector of the living; mourner of the dead."

By this time Jaisana was beginning to get a bit freaked out but curiosity got the best of her. One more question she thought. "What happened to the people of this city?" Jaisana would have the answer to the mystery first.

"They were destroyed by *We Were, We Are, We Will Be*." The machine like voice answered cryptically.

"Couldn't you protect them?" Jaisana knew that she was over her head but continued anyway. The chance may never come again.

"I am one, they are many. Beware of *We Were, We Are, We Will Be*." The voice continued with its cryptic answer. As their powers increase my power decreases."

Time had passed, she would already be late returning to the Tripper. "Where are those you speak about, *we were, we are, we will be*?"

"They will make themselves known to your kind." The answer came.

"What should I do?" Jaisana was beginning to get scared.

"You are under my protection but my strength is limited," the machine voice said.

Jaisana ran back to the Tripper with her sense of adventure and excitement greatly deflated. There was a buzz of excitement from others around her. The excursion around the

dead city continued and the Tripper landed safely back at the camp. She hardly noticed any of it as her mind was so taken up with the strangeness that surrounded the entity, *I was, I am, I will be*.

She slept uneasily that night. She couldn't get over the sense of doom she now felt. Late into the night, she finally drifted off to sleep.

The sun had been up for hours when the girl turned over in her bed. Immediately awake, she shot up out of bed hoping it had all been a dream. "Dad?" There was no reply. Slipping into her shorts and light cotton blouse, she hurried off out the door. Relieved to see people going about their business, she called again. "Dad?"

"Over here, Jaisana," the answer came from behind some crates.

Without giving anything away, she wanted to ask if there had been any strange occurrences about the camp. But Jaisana decided to make it sound less obvious, "Dad, has anything unusual happened this morning?"

Her dad was in the middle of a conversation but stopped briefly. "No, you haven't missed anything exciting Jaisana," he said misinterpreting her question.

"Okay," Jaisana pondered. "Catch up with you later." Still absorbed with her previous day's mystery she walked slowly about the camp. Pausing for only a minute, she cast her eyes over the greyness of the city ruins below, no longer holding the fascination they once held.

"Hey! Did you hear about the Tripper that crashed this morning?" someone near her asked another.

Jaisana immediately homed into what was being said. People had been injured. They dispatched another Tripper to find out what happened. Jaisana went straight for the communications prefab. Quite a few stood around, whispering. Then she heard the radio.

"Camp Center this is Tripper Two. Two people are dead, the pilot and one of the passengers. A few are injured."

"Any idea what happened?" Ron, the camp director asked.

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"Well, the Tripper was hit by something. The whole of the front is smashed in."

Jaisana didn't think for one minute that this was just any accident. I've got to get back to the building again, she decided, and ask a few more questions from that being.

"Jaisana?" His father called from behind.

"Yes Dad."

"What happened to the Tripper?" he asked sounding worried.

"The pilot of Tripper Two thinks that Tripper One hit something." Jaisana replied not really believing it. "The pilot and one of the passengers are dead plus some people are injured."

"Which passenger?" Her father asked.

"It was Gruman, I think." Jaisana said.

"Oh yes, he was a specialist in artifacts," her father replied.

Jaisana left early the next morning not wanting to be seen by any of the others. She took nothing along except for a flask of water. It wasn't long until she found herself deep inside the ruins. For a moment she forgot her anxiety as she noticed how dangerous the structures looked. Supports were weather worn and had broken loose in many places. Some had already fallen in onto themselves while others seemed an oddity as it was such a massive modern city. She thought of the ancient Roman roads she had once read about in history. Grass, shrubs and trees had grown up between the stones adding to the strange beauty of the place.

Jaisana knew the general direction of the building she wanted. It would take an hour or so to reach it. The way was getting rather rough. Scrambling over, around and underneath collapsed stones and rubble she couldn't help but think about the people that once walked these streets. What were they like? Did they go about their business, live their lives working, eating and shopping, like any other ordinary person would, she wondered? She now ventured through what was surely an over grown park. Jaisana assumed that the people must have been quite large. She saw massive stone seats scattered about the place. Crossing another cluttered street, she found herself back amongst the city itself. It was then that she spotted the building she was searching for off in the distance.

It was another quarter of an hour before she reached the saucer structure. Jaisana approached the entrance but somehow it didn't look right. She was sure it was the same building. She entered making her way to the main theater. It wasn't the same. There were more columns than the one she remembered. On top of the columns were the half globes but they were colored green. She thought back to her previous encounter with the entity and remembered it was after she had walked over to the column and touched it that the voice spoke. As before she walked over to the nearest column and laid her hand on top.

"It has been far too long," the slow speech of the automated voice spoke. "For ten millenniums *We Were, We Are, We Will Be* have slept, but now you have come to give us life again, you poor creatures."

Jaisana slowly backed up not really understanding the change in the sound of the voice. "Where is the other? *I Was, I Am, I Will Be.*"

"He is no concern to you little one, for you are now mine." A dark figure from the shadows slowly emerged encumbered as if carrying a great weight.

Jaisana had to adjust her eyes to make sure that she was seeing correctly. The steps of the figure were paced, planned, and precise with a hint of sluggishness. At every advance a mini quake would follow stirring dust and debris about the room. Jaisana stood mesmerized watching the form continue its premeditated advance. Every protracted move, however intense, showed a slight reduction in effort to complete. Details could be seen around the entity. It was total blackness, defined only against the room's background. Jaisana looked back to the exit behind him.

"There is no place to go, little one. Wait and it will be over quickly. Soon *We Were, We Are, We Will Be* will be stronger than ever. *I Was, I Am, I Will be* will be unable to stand against us.

As the darkness closed in on her the quake like shaking increased. "What are you?" Jaisana yelled out hoping that there would be some kind of reasoning behind this.

"*We Were, We Are, We Will Be,*" the entity answered.

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“But I only see one of you.” Jaisana yelled again. The mobility of the dark form had noticeably increased. Jaisana finally coming to her senses, turned and ran out of the building.

“There is no escape little one.” Jaisana heard the voice from behind.

Jaisana didn't have to look back, for she not only heard but felt the pile driver steps approach and, slowly gain momentum. As the Earth shook, pieces fell from various buildings. She was at least four kilometers from the compound. With every second that passed, the pounding increased in strength and speed. Jaisana then tripped on a piece of stone in the street. She quickly recovered and started to run again but something was wrong. Her eyes widened as she saw the dark shape now standing in front of her. No, this couldn't be, she thought. The quake like steps still approached from behind.

Jaisana heard a thunder like voice. “*I Was, I Am, I Will Be*, the protector of those whom I choose.

“You have come too late,” Jaisana heard the threatening entity's voice behind her. It was then that the dark threat flung itself toward her.

At the same time Jaisana saw the figure before her leap. Without turning Jaisana started running again. A clap of thunder reverberated around the area, lightning cackled. Jaisana never turned but instead ran that much faster. After what seemed like hours, out of breath, she stopped. Neither of the dark figures were behind her. She was too tired to think but knew that although she hadn't gotten any answers, possibly she had some clues.

She knew for certain that there were dangerous secrets inside the dead city, and they were a threat to every person on the expedition. But how could she make that known.

The next day, having explained everything to her dad that happened, she sat waiting to hear his response.

"I'm finding this difficult to believe Jaisana. I don't know what to think. I know you're not one for telling tales but this is something else. I can't do anything until we actually have some proof." John said.

"But Dad, you have to tell them. I'm sure that the thing would have killed me." Jaisana said trying to convince him of the seriousness of the situation.

"I just don't know what to think Jaisana. It may make us look like alarmist," her father answered.

Jaisana felt there was a reason to be alarmed. "The next time that thing comes it may be for everybody." She tried one more time with her dad.

Jaisana wandered about the camp that afternoon. Her father said that he would think about the situation. She was no longer excited about the things that were going on. People were busy as usual, nothing seemed out of the ordinary but that didn't make her any less afraid. Time had passed and the sun was about to go down. She saw her father approach.

"Jaisana, I've given it some thought. Let's go and talk to Ron."

Great, Jaisana thought, maybe something can be done now.

Jaisana explained again what had happened. Ron and her father listened patiently asking several questions along the way.

"Jaisana, are you sure that this isn't some kind of nightmare you've had?" Ron replied.

"Ron, the girl doesn't tell tales." John said still feeling doubtful about the whole thing himself.

Facing John, Ron said, "Look, just think about it. Spreading this sort of stuff around the camp could destroy everything we've worked for. We've come a long way. The whole galaxy is waiting to find out what we've found." Ron then looked out of the window thinking what to do next. Turning back toward them he said, "Okay, I have a suggestion; first thing tomorrow, you and several others go to this place and find out what's going on. Now go to bed, it's late, we all need some sleep."

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That night Jaisana dreamed about the dark entity. It chased her throughout the dead city. But this time people were screaming. The pile driver steps were so real. She shot up in bed, a crash was heard in the distance. This was no dream.

"Jaisana?" Her dad opened the door. "Something's happening outside." She jumped up and ran with her dad. There was chaos everywhere. Prefabs were being destroyed before their eyes. People were running from an unseen danger. There were screams with people being lifted up into the air and crushed. The Earth shook from a battery of cannon fire all about them, but no explosions were seen. "Run for the trees," someone yelled. People headed off into the bush and under growth. The ground continued shaking, making it difficult to stand. Jaisana listened to the destructive sounds for minutes on end until they slowly moved off into the distant dead city.

After what seemed like hours her dad said, "I think it's safe now."

Later that morning at least fifty people had been counted dead with as many injured. Everything in the camp that could be destroyed was destroyed. People walked about dazed as the cleanup began. Medical attention was being given by those that could help. Bodies were lined up on the ground with sheets covering them. Jaisana was in a daze, often crying. She felt that this was only the beginning of their troubles. Both Trippers were destroyed and the Atmospheric Landers were heavily damaged.

Later when some normality returned to the camp, Jaisana repeated her previous experiences at length to Ron and other leaders.

"Let's go and see this place." Ron said. "John, I believe it would be good if the girl came along. She's already made contact with this *I was, I Am, I Will Be*."

John then turned to his daughter. "What about it Jaisana? Are you up to this?"

"I think we should actually leave this planet." Jaisana said surprising everyone, then she started to cry.

Not sure how to answer, her Dad replied, "Honey, the Landers are out of action. They're being repaired but that will take some time. So we can't return to the ship right now. Ron's right, we just can't wait and let these beings destroy us. We need your help to find out what's going on out there." Her father tried to explain but wasn't sure how far to push.

“Okay Dad.” She said trying to act brave.

The sun had just risen as Ron led the group into the main street that headed into the city. The ten was made up of various volunteers. Sheila McDonnell and Susan Kemp, one of the service personnel, were included. Both had taken the fly-over of the city with Jaisana several days before. Of course, there were Ron and her father. The others she only knew vaguely.

They could feel the heat on their backs as they walked down the street. Grey was high in the sky. The trail was well stamped out by their previous night’s visitor. After a half an hour or so they came upon the circular burnt area where both of the entities had fought over Jaisana. A crater gouged the center of the road. Burnt scorched grass and foliage surrounded the pit.

“Whatever discharged this kind of energy had a powerful source to draw from,” Ron said wondering what sort of beings they were up against.

Looking about, Jaisana replied, “Maybe they destroyed themselves.”

A bit of wishful thinking, I’m afraid, her dad thought to himself but really didn’t want to voice the opinion.

Once down in the city, newly fallen structures could be distinguished from the more weathered stuff. Ron called a rest at a main intersection within the city.

Sheila bent down inspecting something in the street. “Ron,” she called, “look at this.” Several of the others also joined her. “These are old footsteps,” she pointed to dirt filled tracks on the street. “They’re everywhere.”

Ron looked about the street and then around the ruined city. “Okay, let’s move out.” He said loudly. “Now, look alive, people. Watch for any movement.”

“Dad?” Jaisana asked. “I didn’t hear what Sheila was saying?”

“Look at that,” his father pointed, “and that, and that one there.” John continued to show Jaisana the dozens of tracks. “They are old tracks filled in with dirt and sand. They’re everywhere.”

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“What does it mean?” Jaisana asked.

“It can mean a lot. Perhaps there are others about. Or perhaps those things played some part in the destruction of this city.” John answered.

They were well into the journey. Sheila continued to study the street while others kept a sharp lookout. It wasn’t long until they reached the building. Jaisana made sure this time that it was the correct entrance.

“Okay, let’s find out what’s inside.” Ron led the way. Electrical devices ran in and out of the stone walls. Pieces of light debris lay about on the floor where dust had long settled on it.

Seeing the column with a half red globe Jaisana walked over before her dad could stop her and put her hand on it.

Immediately, “*I was, I am, I will be.* You are under my protection. Beware of *We Were, We Are, We Will Be,*” proclaimed the voice.

Recovering from the fright, Ron glanced around to see where the voice had come from. “Why were we attacked?” he finally said.

“They were created for such,” the answer came.

“Then what were you created for?” Ron asked angrily.

“To protect,” the entity answered.

“Why didn’t you protect us last night? Fifty of my people died.” Ron’s anger increased.

“The girl is under my protection. She was in no danger,” came the stern reply.

“Can all of us be under your protection?” Ron probed knowing that anger wouldn’t get them anywhere.

“They are stronger, I am one. They are many. I can only protect the girl.” The voice replied sadly.

“Why do they exist?” John took up the questioning.

"They were, they are, they will always be. Like me, they were made from the elements of the world we circle. Those elements existed from the beginning of time. They exist to destroy," the strange reply came again.

Frustrated at the lack of direct answers, John tried another question. "Why are they different from you?"

"I was the first. My existence was brought together in order to protect the ones who made me. This is my nature as I protected the mother world when I surrounded her. But instead of creating others like me, *We Were*, *We Are*, *We Will Be* were brought into existence. Their creation destroyed the mother world. Out of destruction came destruction. This is their nature."

"You said that the others kill the people of this city." Jaisana interrupted. "How were they killed?"

"This is getting us nowhere." Ron interrupted. "It's not making any sense."

"I don't know," John replied. "There is a story forming here. This being acts like a computer but it's obviously a living entity with some kind of pre creation memory. It refers to the elements it was created from and knew of its existence then. It must have been part of Grey's atmosphere and when the others were created, it must have destroyed the entire world. An experiment that perhaps went wrong. Both names imply eternity." John's look of concern registered with everyone.

"But why would the inhabitants of this world need to create something so powerful?"

"That, we don't know." John said.

"Little one, *We Were*, *We Are*, *We Will Be* uses the energy of the living to extend their life." I Was, I Am, I Will Be finally answered Jaisana's question.

Ron resumed the questioning. "How many of the others are there, exactly?"

"When they awake they will be fifteen. But it will take less than that to destroy you," the answer came.

THE FAR REACHES

“Can we stop the others from awakening?” Ron continued his questioning.

There was now a longer pause. Seconds led into minutes. “Ask again, Ron,” John said. “Perhaps it didn’t understand the question.”

“I understand.” The answer came. “You must destroy this building and then you must leave this planet.”

Without further questioning Ron raised the phone to his mouth. “Camp Centre, are you there?”

“Reading you loud and clear,” the reply came.

“Is the Atmosphere Lander repaired?” Ron spoke into the mike as he looked around at the others.

“Almost.”

“Load it full of explosives and destroy this building that we’re in as soon as possible. Is that understood?” Ron put through the order.

“Understood,” the operator replied sharply.

“Let’s head back to camp,” Ron said looking up to everyone.

They had no sooner left the building when quake like tremors were felt again. Two black figures came around the building. Both moved with distinctive joint like movements. No distinguishing marks separated the two entities. Their dark blackness was like that of *I Was, I Am, I Will Be*, deep and empty.

Ron and the group froze waiting for the next move.

“You are mine,” a voice spoke out.

“Why do you want us?” Ron yelled his question trying to buy time.

“*We Were, We Are, We Will Be* need you,” the being said.

“And we need to run,” Jaisana said nervously.

“She’s right,” Ron said. “Let’s go.”

The team proceeded as fast as they possibly could through the dirt, rubble and shrubs that monopolized the street.

The beings followed at an even pace, but Jaisana knew that soon the beings would gain on them. Pieces of rubble cascaded down off the surrounding structures barely missing the running people. It was then they saw the Atmosphere Lander fly over.

“Hurry!” Ron yelled out. The multiple pile driver effects continued to bear down gaining distance.

The explosion they heard shook the ground knocking the group off their feet. The two entities spoke in unison, “*We Were, We Are, We Will Be*” with what seemed to be a laugh that emulated from them as they continued their thunderous movements.

Another dark figure appeared before them. “*I Was, I Am*, protector of those I choose. I have chosen all of them.”

“They will be your last to protect.” The two entities again spoke in unison.

The blackness of the single entity looked down at Jaisana. “Leave this world, little one. Never return. I have warned you.”

They hurried on. The thundering and lightning continued for days afterwards as the entities battled each other. Quakes shook the area to different intensities. Structure after structure could be seen toppling to the ground throughout the city. The last of the ill-fated expedition were taken back to the ship. Jaisana watched the moon recede as the ship pulled out of orbit. She saw the outline of the dark entity appear at the edge of the atmosphere to watch them leave.

The End