

HYPERLANES

FICTION COLLECTION



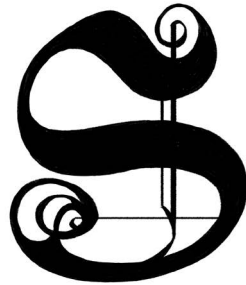
HYPERLANES

Fiction Collection

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Disclosure

by Jordan Marshall

It hung in the center of the containment room, cool indigo surface drinking in the pale, clinical light of the labs containment chamber. When Jaxon had signed on with captain Batten and the crew of the *Aurora* two months after his graduation from university, his imagination had conjured strange, insect like shapes, in dull greys and harsh, burnt oranges. When one of the *Tethys*' atmospheric technicians had first cast images of the artifact, he had been stunned by the mollusk shell shape and the flowing platinum forms flowing over the surface.

"It's beautiful," his whisper seemed out of place in the quiet lab.

The *Tethys* had been at work at work for six months at the edge of SD/3397, a solar system at on the periphery of the Humanities' colonization efforts and the territories held by the Baronies. Contracted by the navy, the *Tethys* was in the process of transforming a lone planetoid in the system into a lily pad base. Several such contracts were underway given the increased state sanctioned privacy employed by the barons.

"I can see why you think that," Gus's even, pragmatic voice never failed to be mildly condescending. The AI manifested as a green shimmer next to the artifact.

"Were you able to ascertain anything else about the composition of the artifact?" Jaxon asked the AI.

"Filament saws and plasma cutters both failed. Spectrographic analysis yielded indeterminant results."

Jaxon smiled at the AI's irritation. He walked around the room, studying the input from the pulley field that the artifact hung suspended in. Surface temperature, EM emissions, all cast to his neural catcher. Normally the field would be providing significantly more data about something suspended in it, but the artifact had proven a black box so far.

"I believe that I have detected a means of entry into the interior of the artifact," the smugness had returned.

"What." The indifferent flicker of the shimmering projection made him difficult to read, but Jaxon was sure that Gus was enjoying his impatience.

Gus cast a magnified section of the artifact to Jaxon's uplink; a motionless set of interlocking platinum hexagrams in the middle of the device.

"What am I looking at?"

"This part of the surface distorted when high amplitude lasers struck that area in an attempt to gain a material sample. It's possible that the artifact is using light to obfuscate an interior access point."

Jaxon left the containment chamber and headed to the back of the isolation pods main lab. The pod tethered to the *Aurora*, deployed to study the unknown alien artifact in safety.

Jaxon returned with a micro lens and a pen light. Despite the difficulty of working in the stasis suit, he wanted the opportunity to observe the artifact himself. Stiffly, Jaxon knelt beside the artifact and his gloved fingers and camera through the indigo surface.

"Look, the surface doesn't shift or blur at all. None of our holographic technology comes even close to this." Jaxon dropped the camera in opening and removed his fingers. He broadcast the activation and stood up. The platinum symbols had stopped moving.

"When did that happen?"

"Just as you activated the camera. I'm also reading a spike in the EM from the interior of the artifact."

"Prepare level three containment in here, I don't want-"

The pulses didn't hurt his eyes, even though they were bright enough to overcome the full illumination of the lab. The pattern of flashes was slow, contemplative. His lips and fingers grew cold and his suits assistors activated to keep him standing. A fist closed over his chest and he tried to bend to vomit, but the suit wouldn't allow him. Jaxon tried to force the suit to give him back control, but he couldn't remember how. Thoughts were slow in forming. He needed something, to do something, but what-

"Jaxon."

"JAXON."

The sudden awareness of standing in the containment chamber, Gus's harsh voice splitting his ear, rushed in all at once. Jaxon deactivated his suit's assistants and fell to ground, his stomach heaving. The quick motion made his world spin, causing even greater nausea.

"Jaxon, are you al-."

"Just, just give me a minute Gus." He closed his eyes to force the world back into order, slow breathing to quell his sickness. Shaking, Jaxon pushed his way back to standing, holding the edge of the containment chamber's observation window. Gus's projection had changed to yellow and flickered erratically.

"Gus, what's wrong, how long was I standing there?"

"You were only motionless for 93 seconds, but were subject to intense, high spectral output that I can't identify. You need to see your face." Fear spiked through Jaxon as he moved to activate an AR reflection of himself using the chamber's camera. He froze. All along his face sat lines of the alien symbols as if worked by an antique pen. They stood out, bright and platinum against his dark skin.

"When?"

"I don't know. I could only detect them once the flashing had stopped. We should contact Dr. Ganguly immediately and have her come examine you."

Jaxon moved to the back of the chamber, feeling like his body was a broken doll. He touched the wall, a bright blue square

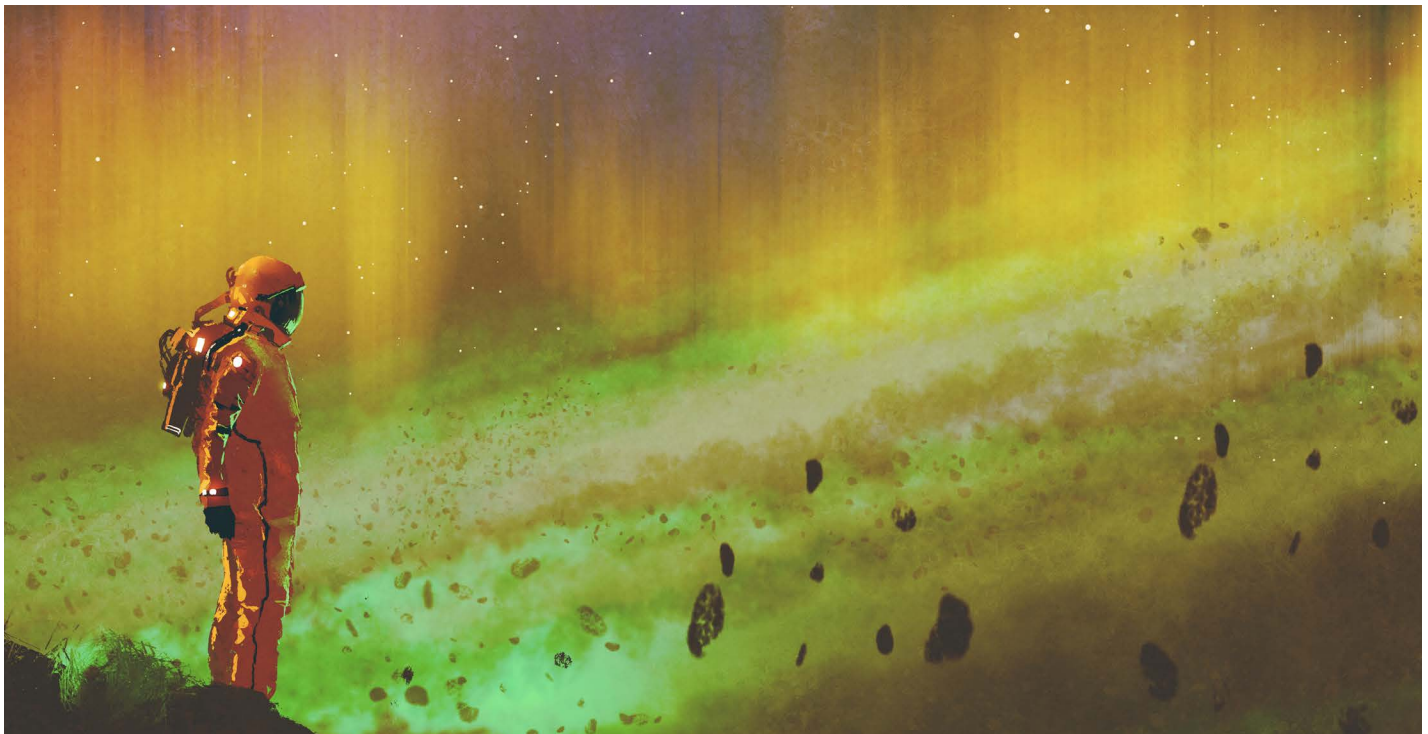
illuminating his hand.

"Go black."

The effect was instant. Gus's projection disappeared, the AI cut off along with the rest of the communications between the Aurora and the isolation pod. The containment chamber sealed itself, level four precautions locking into place. Jaxon knew that the pod would have cast his distress to the ship before breaking the ambilocal tether. He missed the connection to the ship like a rotted tooth, oddly naked and alone without the constant flow of data from the *Tethys*' network. It was that absence that allowed him to notice the connection. Strange, a pleasure behind his eyes like when he had first had his neural uplink installed back in university. The pressure tugged at him, and Jaxon turned to face the artifact.

It still hung in the center of the chamber. The flowing symbols had mostly disappeared, making the indigo surface even greedier for the light. A single word rotated around the middle of the artifact, and he knew now that they had been words. It continued an endless loop around the device's circumference, contemplative as the flashes had been.

Disclosure.



The Android and Her Boy

by Benjamin Riggs

Claudia had been built to fight. She had upgraded herself to recite Drogan love poetry.

She often wondered what her designers would say if they knew. Would they think it utterly foolish? A waste of a mod which could be put toward piloting a ship, upgrading her firewall, or building a bomb out of yak's milk, human urine, and insect chitin?

Claudia was certain her designers would, at the least, find her upgrade unnecessary, for it did not increase her likelihood of surviving the intense situations she would encounter fulfilling the requirements of her original programming as a combat reconnaissance android.

"Claudia- What are we doin' here?"

Xak's voice was tense.

Xak had reason to be tense. A Ghoon had his arm pulled tight as cord under Xak's armpits, and held a gravity detonation device to the boy's head for good measure. It was already activated, beeping at a frequency too high for Xak's human ears to hear. The only thing that kept the gravity detonation device from crushing Xak, the Ghoon, and Claudia into a singularity in less time than it takes to say, "I shoulda gone into moisture farming," was the Ghoon's thick rubbery fingers wrapped around the activator button. So it didn't really matter that Claudia had the butt of her pulse rifle pulled tight to her shoulder and had the Ghoon dead in her sights. She could pull the trigger and ventilate the Ghoon's head, but that would be the end of her and Xak.

And that just wouldn't do. She liked Xak. She caught him trying to pick her pocket on Teegel, where there were no androids. The boy was surprised when her pocket seized his hand in a vice-like grip and refused to let go. She had flipped him around and put her hand around his neck, ready to crush the life out of him for daring to rob her, but he looked at her with those eyes, those dumb, wet, eyes thick with fear, and she saw he was young.

By all rights, he was probably older than she was, but Xak couldn't have age mods uploaded into his central processors. He had to live his experiences. And Claudia remembered her Drogan love poetry. According to the Drogans, the purest love was that of the mentor for the student, because the mentor would always give more than she would receive in return, yet it was what was necessary for the continuance of civilization.



Claudia never felt like she was part of any civilization, Drogan or otherwise, but she thought that with Xak, she might build something of her own. He had proved useful in a pinch, good at sneaking around, and excellent at snatching bits away from folk, so long as their pockets weren't part of their anatomy.

It would be easy for Claudia to get away. She could leap backwards, out of the range of the gravity detonator. She could then kill the Ghoon, and be on her way. But that would leave Xak a pile of disordered atoms, and she very much liked his elements as they were. As the Drogans would have predicted, the student was much trouble to the master.

The Ghoon spoke. Her language mod translated it for her.

Xak, merely a meat-human, was left to stutter, "What's it sayin' Claudia? What's it sayin'?"

"It says it was stupid of me to come back for you."

Xak admitted, "I kinda thought you'd 'lane out with the data, and grow yourself a new Xak with all the cred you've got comin'..."

"It is what my prior programming dictated," Claudia said.

"Then why'd you come back?" Xak asked.

"What's the point in being free if I just keep doing what my prior programming dictates?"

The Ghoon spat out another sentence, its language reminding Claudia of nothing so much as a dying dog trying to vomit.

Claudia frowned.

"What's it sayin'? What's it sayin' Claudia?" asked Xak.

"It says that if I download the data to him, we get to live. If I don't, all three of us can die here."

The Ghoon knocked the detonation device into Xak's head as if to punctuate the sentence.

Claudia's shoulders dropped.

Xak trembled and said, "It's not bluffing Claudia," Xak said.

She sighed in exasperation. "I can see it's not bluffing. If it was bluffing, it'd be using a pistol instead of a detonator. I just can't believe what some people are willing to do for a few credits these days."

Claudia's tactical software extrapolated all her actions in this scenario. Every single action course ended with either Xak dead, or Claudia giving the Ghoon the data. Either conclusion would mean she lost, and Claudia hated losing.

The Ghoon growled again. It was growing impatient. It said that it was eager to be rich or dead, and it was going to count down from twelve (as its language had a base-twelve counting system) and at zero, either it was going to be rich, or they were all going to die.

The Ghoon made a noise that sounded like a grunt. Twelve, Claudia thought.

A mistake occurred to her.

Eleven.

She hadn't asked her tactical software to incorporate Xak's actions into its extrapolations.

Ten.

She did it then.

Nine.

Well, that's a much better outcome, Claudia thought to herself.

Eight.

"Xak, I want you to listen very carefully to me."

Seven.

"Okay."

Six.

"Cover the detonator with both your hands and press with all your might."

Five.

"What?"

Four.

"Do it!"

Three.

He did it, his hands leaping up to squeeze the detonator hard through the Ghoon's hands.

Two.

Claudia pulled the trigger. Blue flame leapt across the room, punching the Ghoon's forehead out the back of its skull.

Claudia rushed over to Xak, who was keeping the detonator from going off with the pressure of his hands.

Claudia said, "Keep the pressure on Xak, keep it on..." as she gingerly examined the detonator. According to the files in her memory, there should be a way to disable the detonator, or at least put it on a time delay. She carefully moved Xak's fingers to examine the device, keeping pressure on the trigger at all times. Beneath that access panel- she ripped it open.

"Oh drat," said Claudia.

"What?" said Xak.

"The Ghoon altered this detonator. There is no way to delay the explosion. As soon as you release the button, it's going to go off."

"Great!" Xak said, "Now what are we supposed to do?"

Claudia wrapped her arms around her boy, and put her hands over his. She began to sing one of the Drogan love lays, and she felt Xak relax into her frame. He knew singing helped her think, and that she would never abandon him.

In this, the master and student were together.

The Archive

by H.C. Hatcher

"I'm not sure how much time I have, so I'll keep it short. Don't come back here, I won't be able to pay your delivery fee. Take the package to Lucan Berassa in Skybridge on Beta Gandolo, he'll pay..." the rest of the sentence never came. The audio compensators reduced what would have been an ear-shattering "CRUMP" to an extended bass vibration, and before the sounds of falling debris faded, the distinctive chirp-bark of EMP rifles tuned to incapacitate rather than kill rang out, and the recording ended.

It was the second time they'd listened to the message. Jae ran a hand through her short red hair, then stood up and looked around the room at her crew.

"We've heard the bad news, now let's figure out how we make it work for us. Talk to me," she said, putting as much calm confidence as she could manage into the statement.

Derran was the first to speak. He was extremely dark-skinned and hairless, with a long, rangy build that marked him as one of the Spaceborne. "At best, our associate Metger has been ensnared by an organization possessing both political and physical prowess and the inclination to exercise them. I anticipate that they will want to converse with us promptly," he said, as calmly as if he were discussing what ration pack he'd eaten for breakfast.

Syresti, the ship's astrogator, nodded, and the forest of thick metallic interface cables that sprouted from her scalp rustled and bobbed in response to the movement. "Even assuming they were unable to get at Metger's communication logs, people who use explosives on an orbital station are the sorts who bring pliers

and neural feedback rigs when they're planning on asking hard questions. We should assume that whoever makes contact will know anything Metger knew about us," she said, in her faintly melodic accent.

Jae paced at the head of the mess table that doubled as the ship's "conference room". "So we've got someone powerful who wants what we have pretty badly, and will probably know our favorite colors and birthdays by the time they're done squeezing Metger," she muttered.

"Mebbe they'll jest pay us what Metger'd pay?" asked Tycharis. The ship's engineer had the squat, powerful build of a Heavy, and despite his considerable technical talents, was the least experienced member of the crew. Jae saw Syresti gearing up for a sarcastic response and gave her a warning look that cut the astrogator off before she could wound the engineer's pride and trigger a pointless argument.

"Unlikely, Tycharis," interrupted Derran, "Metger would barter his own offspring if it were sufficiently lucrative, and that knowledge is nigh-universal. If they were inclined to solve this with applied finance, they would have purchased Metger instead of assaulting him. Metger operates in the gray areas, but he has many friends and associates who will not appreciate his disappearance. This implies that the entities who took him cannot allow any knowledge to escape. To summarize, they will certainly offer to pay us, but..." he shrugged expressively and spread his enormous, spidery hands before clapping them together like the jaws of a trap.





Before the echo of Derran's clap had faded, the distinctive double-tone of an incoming comms request rang out over the intercom.

"That's some ominous timing. Okay, stations, people," Jae ordered, "Sy, get plugged in and see what you can do to muddle our trail. Tycharis, if Sy needs a jump, make it happen, but otherwise I want you checking our fuel, filters, and power cells. I need to know how far we can go before we need resupply. Derran, same deal, rations, water, environmental, weapons."

The crew scattered, and though it wasn't exactly military precision, Jae thought to herself, it certainly showed motivated self-interest.

The conversation over the comm channel went exactly as Jae expected it might. A smooth-talking and pleasant baritone voice, representing an organization that, if she were to research it, would almost certainly be a subsidiary of a holding company of a partially-owned subcontractor of a thousand-year-old intersystem corporation. The conversation was all please-and-thank-you and resolve-this-unfortunate-misunderstanding and lucrative-reward-for-your-utmost-discretion. So very reasonable and polite and reassuring, unless you'd had Jae's experience with the kinds of sharks that thrived in intersystem corporations. A mercenary like Metger would betray you for profit, but the man Jae had just talked to would "reallocate you" for the crime of being a potential unknown. No loose ends, everything sewn up tight, and it didn't matter if it was five people or five thousand, so long as it served the company's inscrutable goals. She hadn't been willing to carry out that sort of dirty work, and she wasn't going to be a victim of it, either.

The crew reconvened at the mess table two hours and several hyperlane jumps later.

"I talked to the very polite and charming fellow from the Arcturus Combine," Jae began, "and he was friendly and reasonable and oh-so-concerned about the safety of their property. I told

him we're coming back to hand it off and that we don't want any trouble, but I didn't give him our guide beacon ID or coordinates."

"And thus we should presume that motivated and distressingly well-armed gentlemen will be attempting to ascertain our location presently?" replied Derran.

"Pretty much," said Jae, dryly.

"They're not going to track us by our jump trail, that's for damned sure. I pulled off a couple microjumps of less than a thousand meters near Epsilon Eridu," Syresti bragged. "Any ship bigger than we are won't be able to manage jumps that precise and the planet's magnetosphere should hose their sensor readings if they try to sniff our trail instead of following it."

"An' I'll be unfuckin' our field modulators fer two days thanks ta yer fancy footwork, Sy," grumbled Tycharis. "Ships ain't built fer runnin' ta the corner store."

"Still better than trying to breathe vacuum after someone punches holes in our ship with a particle beam," replied Jae. "I know better than to question your repair estimates, so let's all plan on a couple of days of quiet time before the shit hits the fan. Where are we on supplies? Can we make it to Beta Gandolo without stopping for resupply?"

"We are adequately furnished with all the necessities of survival for at least a month, provided everyone can endure eating nutrisynth from the emergency rations for a time," said Derran. "I still possess a copy of Enzo Fiero's *101 Delicious Nutrisynth Meals*, if we are all feeling adventurous."

All of the others groaned simultaneously, expressions of mingled disgust and horror on their faces.

"If it's between the standard wet cardboard taste and that industrial floor cleaner flavored casserole you made, I'll stick with the wet cardboard," Syresti quipped, grinning.

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” said Jae, “how are we doing on fuel, Tycharis?”

“Power’s dandy, filters’re good, fuel’s iffy,” answered Tycharis, “we’ll jest make it if we stick ta the major lanes.”

Jae grimaced. The most frequently-traveled hyperlanes were much more efficient, but they were also much more closely-watched. “Sy, can you come up with a route that’s off the beaten path and hits a fuel depot along the way?”

“Sounds like I’ve got nothing but time for the next couple days, big J, I’ll see what I can come up with,” Syresti replied confidently.

“Okay,” said Jae, “one last thing. I want to know exactly what it is that we’re putting our asses on the line for. Anyone else curious?”

A few moments later, they were all in the cargo bay, standing around the storage crate they’d picked up for Metger. The Arcturus Combine logo emblazoned on the side was partially obscured by a salvage tag which technically made the crate their property, but they’d have to survive to press their claim with a salvage arbiter for it to mean anything.

Tycharis spent the better part of a minute using a pair of smartwire probes to fiddle with the locking mechanism before he was rewarded with the “clunk clunk clunk” of the maglocks disengaging. “Care ta do the honors, Cap’n?” he grinned, stepping back and gesturing at the crate.

Jae flipped the latches on the lid of the crate and opened it with a flourish, and a stunned silence descended over the cargo bay.

Syresti was the first to break the silence, after what felt like an eternity. “Holy fucking shit,” she breathed, “it’s a goddamned haunt rock.”

It was a meter-long triangular obelisk of black stone, polished to a mirror-like finish, and every centimeter of it was covered in an angular, spidery script. They had all seen artifacts like this in countless holofilms or sensies, either as a priceless MacGuffin, a doomsday device, or a miraculous deus ex machina, but none of the crew had ever seen one in real life. It was a leftover from an ancient civilization which had vanished at least a million years before humans started colonizing the galaxy. Xenoarchaeologists referred to them as Precursors, but the common term was haunts, both because of their mysterious disappearance and the mystifying nature of their technology.

“P-perhaps it is... I mean, surely it must be... merely an extraordinary counterfeit?” asked Derran, hesitation and uncertainty creeping into his typically unshakable demeanor. Even as he said it, all four of them could tell it was genuine. It didn’t need to flash or float or make unearthly music like the ones in the holofilms. The air in the cargo bay felt different somehow, oddly heavy and still and stifling.

“Someone sure as hell thinks it’s real,” answered Jae, “and even if it is fake, it’s going to bring a whole heap of trouble down on us.”

“Mebbe if we could sell it ourselves...” began Tycharis.

“Maybe if I was the Emperor of Caluphon Four we’d know someone who could afford to buy it,” Syresti interrupted, sarcastically. “Even if that thing’s just a hunk of rock with writing on it, even if it doesn’t do any weird haunt shit, it’s probably worth more money than all of us put together have seen in our entire lives.”

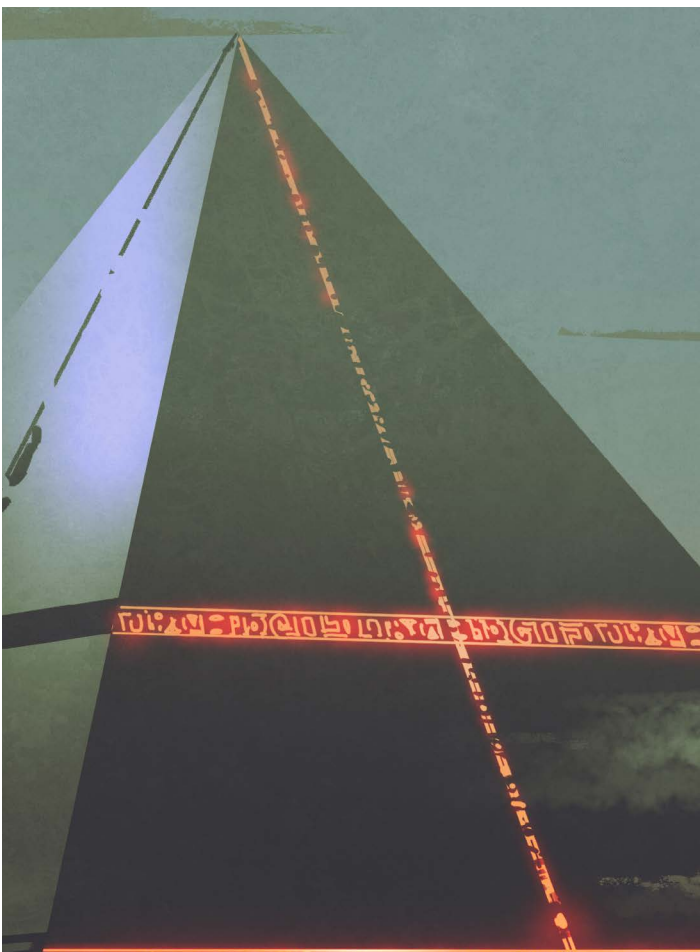
“I’m jest tryin’ ta make a plan better’n ‘sit on our thumbs til some merc blows our asses off,’ Sy,” Tycharis growled, “sorry if it don’t meet yer exactin’ standards.”

“Enough,” Jae barked, cutting off Syresti’s response. “You’re both right - we don’t know anyone who’d buy this thing without kicking us out an airlock afterwards, but we need to come up with a plan anyway. Metger had no clue what was in this box, or he’d have grabbed it himself and he’d be halfway to the galactic center by now. If his buyer on Beta Gandolo knows what’s in here, I’m not going to make any bets that he’s going to play nice once he’s got the crate.”

“It would be exceedingly advantageous if we possessed some indication of this device’s purpose,” said Derran, gesturing towards the obelisk. As if on cue, the angular, scrawling script on the stone flared with rippling golden light.

Syresti grunted and clutched at her head, interface cables jangling and scraping as she doubled over, pain apparent on her face.

“What the fuck did you just do?” she hissed, through gritted teeth. “F-f-feedback...” As Syresti spoke, Jae began to hear a directionless roar of static, gradually increasing in volume.





Jae moved to slam the crate shut, and saw that Tycharis and Derran were doing the same, but all of them were moving as though they were underwater on a heavy-gravity world. Syresti let out a sound somewhere between a groan and a scream, collapsing to her knees. Inexplicably, Jae recalled winning a foot race in primary school in vivid detail, and then just as suddenly, a different memory of spitting out blood and a broken tooth in an alleyway behind a bar, the salty copper taste of blood filling her mouth and then vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. She strained to reach the crate, but the memories were coming faster and more intense, and it was difficult to track what was actually happening. Between shockingly perfect recollections, she saw the bewildered faces of Derran and Tycharis as they, too, struggled to reach the crate. And then everything went black and silent.

A throbbing pain, like a white-hot wire strung between her temples, gradually and insistently pulled Jae back to consciousness. As she opened her left eye, a fresh pulse of pain radiated from her face. Her right eye wouldn't open, and the only thing she could see with her left was the side of the Arcturus Combine crate. She tried to sit up and couldn't lift her head off the ground, feeling a brief moment of panic that she was paralyzed, before realizing that her arms and legs worked

just fine. She gingerly examined her face and winced when she touched her freshly-broken nose and swollen right eyelid, and from there quickly deduced that her face had been glued to the deck with her own dried blood. She slowly peeled herself off the deck, and then carefully stood up to survey the situation. The artifact lay dormant and dark once more, and she cautiously closed the lid on the crate. The others were still unconscious, but beginning to stir, and she woke each of them in turn.

They were all silent for a long moment, then Syresti let out a low groan and mumbled, "My brain feels like it's been diced and then boiled in raw sewage. What the fuck just happened?"

All four of them jumped as a disembodied and unfamiliar voice answered, "*I believe I can answer that. I am the M'Kran Archive, a repository of the history, philosophy, and language of the Creators. In order to communicate with you, it was necessary to map your biological and neural processes so that I could fulfill my purpose.*"

There was a brief, baffled, silence as they all scanned the room, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, Tycharis spoke, "An' what's yer purpose, again?"

"*My purpose is to bring the Creators back,*" the Archive replied.

Tonight

by Laura Yan

"Tonight, V, we're leaving tonight," V's eyes blinked green. He folded his legs, then rested his head against Gia's lap. She tapped the sensor on top of his head and his eyes glimmered. V was one of the last Lvbots left on Ersa Major. Like the other Lvbots, V was defective--he had lost his form-shifting abilities, and now was locked onto a dog form with occasional bursts of other animal sounds. When V got scared, he made owl screeches, or sometimes wolf howls. Gia had been teaching him to switch to mute at will. If discovered, V would put the both of them in danger.

Danger was rife around them, anyway, even though Gia's mother, Brenda, denied it. The regime broadcasted dozens of new laws and restrictions every morning. Parks and squares were guarded by hooded soldiers, their digital guns mimicking the assault rifles of the past. The regime said it was for their own protection--there were toxic contaminants in the atmosphere, and the regime was concerned for its citizens. But what concern had the regime shown for when they took away Gia's father? To this, Brenda had no answer.

Gia's father was studying living rats in a private lab when the regime shut down all non-government research facilities and called him in for questioning. He never came back. Brenda was dry eyed when she told Gia. It was best not to ask questions.

Gia discovered the map while rummaging through her father's papers. He'd hid a stack of them--the restricted, analog kind--in a bathroom cabinet. She'd traced his handwriting and studied

the unfamiliar words. In the back of one sheet, she found a hand drawn map, a set of coordinates. One afternoon, when Gia's mom had gone to work, she strapped on her backpack and headed there, heart pounding loud.

Electric caution tape circled the parameter of a gray two-story building. She fingered the map, which she had folded into a tiny square in her pocket. If her father had drawn it, it must be safe. She threw a pebble at the caution tape. The tape was inactive--no electricity fizzled. But she crawled underneath it, anyway, releasing her breath only when she reached the door. Tendrils of living grass peeked from cracks in the concrete at the foot of the building. She quickly hooked on her air mask and pulled on her gloves.

The door opened when she jiggled the knob. The hallway windows were barred with metal, but through the cracks she could see floating dust particles. Her rubber soles squeaked loud on the floor. She had put her in-ear monitors on sleep mode for the excursion, but now she wished for the comfort of the low, steady white noise.

She stopped when she heard a voices from below. Slowly, she got down on all fours and pressed her ears to the floor. After a moment, the voices became easier to make out. "We don't have time," a man said. "They're launching stage 3. They've already shut down our galactic intercoms--soon we won't be able to get out at all."





"The ship's not ready,"

"It's never going to be ready the way it's supposed to."

"It's a suicide mission."

"It's the only chance we've got. And besides, Mali said--Uverso showed hospitable conditions."

The first voice laughed. "You've seen the live feed. You think those things are going to be hospitable?"

"You know we can't stay here for much longer."

"Another week to repair the engine. Wire the suits. And then we go."

Dissidents, Gia realized. Before the regime closed the schools, Gia and her friends often debated rumors of their existence. They were mythological, criminal, traitors of the regime. They threatened public safety and health with their malicious misinformation. If she reported them, she knew, the regime would not punish her for her own infringements. In fact, they might reward her with a license to keep V, maybe even a new charger for V. Lately, she heard his motors whirring while he moved. His charge was running low.

Uverso was supposed one of the enemy planets. On hologram broadcasts, she saw a barren wasteland of charcoal rocks, where monstrous life forms roamed on stilted legs, eyes milky and dripping with hunger. The creatures brought viruses they disseminated with their spaceships. That was why the regime had shut off intergalactic travel, quarantined alien visitors, and sprayed and killed living things capable of being viral hosts. But why did her father have the map? Was he one of the dissidents?

She thought about him, her favorite photograph of his big, hairy hands cupping a rat, his wide grin. She thought of the way he patted her hair when she was nervous, a habit he had been doing

ever since she was little. How his laugh warmed the space around him, the soft tuff of his beard. If her father was a dissident, then perhaps dissidents were to be trusted, more so than Brenda's cold smile.

On her way out, Gia bent down and plucked the blade of grass. She took off her glove, touched it with her finger, and laughed.

That night, she dreamt of her mother, talking into an intercom, repeating a list of names, times, locations. Brenda's voice sounded cold robotic. She woke up shaking. Would Brenda discover and report her? She left the house for a walk, and felt looked at, stifled. Her in-ear monitors played the regime's favorite anthem, a synthetic melody that spun round-and-round. She thought of the feel of the grass against her fingers. It was their only chance to escape, the dissidents had said. What if it was her chance too?

V's tail wagged as she scooped him into her backpack. "Okay, now show me how you can be quiet." She waited until he bleeped into silence, his eyes dimly orange. "Good boy. Now stay quiet. It might be a long journey." She still had the blade of grass in her pocket, next to the map. It was shriveling now, drying at the edges. She touched it to reassure herself, and then shut the door behind her and started to walk.

She didn't know when the dissidents would show up--she hoped it wouldn't be long. She would find a hiding place in the spaceship while they prepared for takeoff. A corner in the cargo, where perhaps she would find an ellipse shaped window where she could watch the shift of the stars. She would let the rumbling spaceship take her to a new land--where outside, there were possibilities, freedom, the blood red moon, creatures that walked on tentacles, and grass that grew, fragrant and phosphorescent blue.

The Pilgrimage

by Sharang Biswas

After five days of travel, the Gods winked out.

The Divine Breath, that comforting tingle on our skin that served as a reminder of how the Gods loved us and watched out for us—simply vanished.

The Aurora too, was gone, as if some great hand had swept aside the majestic curtain of green light. Instead, the sky was a dead shell of black, pimpled with the motionless ghosts of stars.

There we were, three underprepared pilgrims, tiny specks in a vast crater of coarse sand and bare rock, and now, even the Gods were gone.

Tert had gone rigid. She hovered in place gaping upwards, her head locked in position as though the heavens had affixed hooks into her chin and forced it up. Her face was as dark as the sky above.

Second was spasming in place. Her limbs jerked erratically, slicing at the floor of the crater, sending pink nebulae of dust flying. Her head swivelled towards me.

“Prime?” she asked. Even Second, dependable, calm and rational Second, had cracks in her voice.

I could feel it too. The wrongness. Instead of the Gods’ warmth, a sluggishness was spreading through me like a replicating virus. It dampened my senses, dulled my movements.

//Priority Alert!

“Prime!” Second called out, insistent. “The fragment! Use it!”

Yes! The fragment of the First Shrine. The Gardner who tended the Shrine had handed it to me herself, pressing it into my hand before we’d left. “To remind us of the Gods’ love,” she’d said enigmatically.

As quickly as I could with my failing joints, I unclasped my auxiliary storage unit and withdrew the fragment.

Even to my addled senses, it was beautiful. A hollow oblong thing with black skin, flared and open at one end. The inside was thick with copper growths.

“Prime, hurry!” Second’s voice was muffled and staticky. Tert remained deathly still. If I failed in this, we would all be lost.

My hands were heavy with torpor, unwilling to obey. Move, I thought furiously, redirecting all the energy I could spare into my arms.

My legs crumpled under me.

With a jarring jangle, I collapsed onto the ground. Yet, my grip stayed true: my left hands still grasped the fragment firmly, while my right frantically searched its surface.

Just a few seconds more...

There! With a click, my finger slipped into a port. My secondary probe slid out smoothly and I interfaced.



My first interface had been with Second. We had just come from the Stripping Ceremony, where our childhood names were removed, leaving us as Primary and Secondary. In a rare bout of visible emotion, Second had giggled in excitement. The interface itself was...a transcendent experience. I had immersed myself in Second, swum through her being, experienced her mind and body so fully...

This was different. This was frantic and vicious and painful and tiring and...This was not a meeting of two minds. There was no delicacy, no art. This was messy surgery and I was a high speed hacksaw.

A whirr and a soft vibration arose from the fragment and a wave of relief spread across my skin: the welcoming sensation of the Divine Breath. A shimmering Aurora blossomed in the air above us. A pale, miniature version of the true Aurora that seeds the night sky, but it was there and it filled me with hope.

Though not for much longer.

//Emergency protocols initiated.

//Peripheral system shutdown imminent.

//Prepare for hibernation

The last thing I saw before darkness overtook me was Tert, floating gently towards me. Her face was active again, and it spread a gentle, soothing light that carried me to sleep.

/* */

In the beginning, there was no life.

And so the Gods made us, the People. They created us in their heavenly abode on Tara, the Bright Star, for at that time, Tara was warm, red and inviting.

In the rocks, the Gods found pliable substances, substances that conducted thought and emotion freely. They used this to forge our skin. This is why we can interface. In the sands, they found glistening materials to make our brains, materials that were more discerning in their conductivity. This is what gives us reason.

They sent the People to the World, along with a gift: great shrines to spread their Divine Breath, for it is their Breath that protects us from the Radiation. They spoke to us constantly, telling us how to honour them, how to spread their love. We were to be great builders, fabricating marvels.

Those first People were architects. They erected slender towers as green as the Aurora, wondrous towers that could build on themselves and grow taller on their own! They dug rivers into the land, rivers not of sand, but of an amazing, clear liquid.

But then... it all stopped. The Gods stopped speaking to us. The warm glow of Tara died, leaving behind a cold, blue corpse. Without their guidance, the marvels the first people had built crumbled and disappeared. Much was lost.

Why did the gods leave us? Did the Gardeners fail in their duty to tend to the Shrines? Nobody knows.

But that is what we strive for. We still feel their Breath, so all is not lost. We must honour the Gods so that they may see fit to

return and rekindle Tara.

We must rediscover the secrets of the first People and rebuild their structures. That is our purpose.

/* */

//System scans complete.

//No errors detected.

//Initialising data bank defragmentation.

//Rebooting peripheral systems.

Awareness flooded in.

I lay on my back. The Divine Breath shivered over my skin. But we were no longer in the crater. Instead, dark rock enclosed us. A cave?

There was a whizzing light. Tert's facial lamp. It illuminated the deep red walls stained with green splotches, and a ceiling bristling with stalactites. My chemoreceptors also picked up a strange presence in the air, something I couldn't quite place.

"It's amazing!" I heard Tert chirp. "It's almost like a- like a tiny shrine itself!"

I tried to sit upright but something was wrong. I fumbled on the ground for a moment before Tert swivelled, letting her light fall on me.

"Prime! You're awake! You saved us!"

My distal left arm. As I pushed myself up with my remaining arms, it clanged uselessly against my side. Two long, narrow scratches were gouged into them.

With a click-clack of limbs, Second scuttled over from behind me.

"I'm sorry about the arm, Prime," she said, though she sounded like she was discussing a routine tune-up. Second was always clinical and business-like. I had only ever seen her lose her composure on one occasion. Well, two now.

"Tert and I regained control once you activated the fragment," she explained. "We found this cave. I carried you in here." She raised her forelimbs and clicked them together for emphasis. Even speckled with pink dirt, the silver blades gleamed against Tert's lamplight. I had seen Second slice through six inches of solid rock with those. I was lucky that scratches were the only lasting damage.

"I can detach the arm and carry it the rest of the way for you," she said. That was Second's version of a proper apology. Practical.

I shook my head. "It's not your fault. It was the-" I stumbled, not knowing how to describe the absence I had felt.

"-the anomaly..." I finished. "Besides, I could use the extra power." That was true. We'd been running on low energy modes for the last two days.

Second nodded.

Ahead of us, Tert's hovering form whirled in excitement, her lamplight painting the walls with bright bands. Beneath her lay the fragment of the First Shrine.



“Prime, the fragment generates a bubble of Breath!” Tert squealed. “Did the Gardeners tell you that?”

I clambered upright and tottered forward. My legs would take a moment to fully power up. Sometimes, I envied Second’s six limbs. They gave her remarkable precision and stability, and I often wondered why Mother had decided that two would suffice for me. Though Tert made do with none, so there was that.

Tert oohed and vibrated mid-air as I approached the fragment. It lay on the rocky floor, humming contentedly. I was ambivalent about it. On one hand, it clearly radiated the Divine Breath. I could feel its strength on my skin increasing as I went closer. But on another, interfacing with it had been... uncomfortable. I toed it gingerly, rolling it over on the ground.

It looked the same as when I had activated it. Except that it was now... familiar, somehow. Like I had a memory of it that I had never actually experienced in reality.

Just like the chemical presence in the air.

Like-

//Data bank defragmentation complete.

They dug rivers into the land, rivers not of sand, but of an amazing, clear liquid.

I whirled around, nearly falling over, arms flung out to keep my balance. Tert scooted back in alarm.

“Why are we here?” I nearly shouted to the others.

“What?” Second asked, confused. .

Tert, on the other hand, immediately launched into the Litany of the Name.

“The Pilgrimage of Names is one of the holiest ceremonies of the People,” she intoned as solemnly as she could in her high-pitched voice. Her face-lamp had turned Aurora Green, the sacred colour. “It is how each among the People discovers her-”

“No, not us,” I interrupted. “All of us? What are we doing here? What is our purpose?”

Second’s mid-limbs scratched at the ground in frustration, leaving deep gashes.

“Can’t you feel that strange chemical activity in the air?” I cried.

The fragment. It had replaced or somehow repaired some long-forgotten, corrupted sector in my data banks. My analytical module’s readings were as bright as Tert’s lamplight: two hydrogen atoms covalently bonded to an oxygen.

“It’s water! And those,” I said dramatically, pointing with my sole left hand to the walls of the cave, “they aren’t just a green mineral deposits! They’re alive!”

Tert immediately zipped towards the walls and refocussed her lamp. “Carbon,” she chirped. “Hydrocarbon residues.”

Second was thoughtful. “Organic life?” She said, almost to herself. “Is that possible?”

Then she focussed sharply back on me. “Prime how do you know this?”

“The fragment! While I was hibernating, it sent me dreams. Dreams about the history and purpose of our people!”

Both their attentions were focussed on me now.

“The First People! The Gods sent them here for this!” I said, gesturing to the moss. “They were supposed to cultivate organic life!”

Second hunched over and dug her claws deep into the rock. A moment later, she straightened up.

“If what you’re saying is true Prime, we need to return to the Community at once. We must inform the Gardeners about what we’ve found. ”

“But,” Tert squealed, “but our names! If we leave now, we won’t finish our Pilgrimage!”

Second had already turned towards the exit. “Retriangulating route.” Prime, don’t forget the fragment!” She called out.

I scooped up the vibrating relic in my upper arms, and patted Tert on her flank.

“Come on, Tert,” I said. “The Gardeners aren’t going to deny us our names! And who needs a Pilgrimage? We have something better: we have a quest!”