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one



Pilgrimage of the Haggard by Nazli Karabiyikoglu - Editor's Choice

Nazli Karabiyikoglu is a Turkish author, now full-time resident in Georgia, who recently escaped from the political, cultural, and gender oppression in Turkey. She helped create the #MeToo movement within the Turkish publishing industry, from which she was then excommunicated. With an M.A. in Turkish Language and Literature from Bogazici University, Karabiyikoglu has five published books in Turkish and has recently completed translations of two new books for international publication. Having won six literary awards in her country, she has been actively writing for magazines since 2009.

Here, I sleep for three days. My eyes catch the light that fills the room from the thin curtains. The room without a rug. If I wake up, I play with the strands of hair on the pillow. I get up when I'm cold, and make towers with the books she stuffed on the sofa. I hum the melody of the song she danced to with both of her arms up in the air. I lean over the cracked sink and splash water on my face, dry my cheeks with paper towels. I get the water off of my eyebrows using two fingers. If she doesn't tell me to go without looking at me, I stay, do the mountain of dishes and make an omelet with the last two eggs in the fridge. She eats and I drink coffee. I stay. Throw myself all around the house, season the tiles with my hair, nail and name. Learn a new language while I wait for her to wake up, make up phrases, put verbs at the beginning, and intonate, with one single comma.

We took it out of the garbage. The smell rose high above us. It was somewhere in the hill around which seagulls circled. We walked up there following its voice, sinking up to our knees as we moved. We pushed an arm down under soft watermelon scraps, rotten tomatoes, and pieces of meat swarming with worms. So vulnerable, our touch could have killed it. Skin shrunk, skinny, it couldn't open its eyes. Fluttering in the void.

She got up. Didn't say my name. Mumbled a Greek folk song while getting in the shower. I heard her coming out and laid still, to make her think that I was asleep. She came back, naked, making puddles on the floor. Waters splashed my face when she shook her hair, I opened my eyes a little and looked at her bare back. Quills coming down to her tail let go an easy breeze toward me. Bite marks on her large thighs. Rash, bruises. Like a battered vegetable, fallen off of a stall. I couldn't have picked her up and carried her.

All I could do was lay beside her like that. With pleasure, and longing, but without moving.

She put on her pants, no underwear. She wore her chequered shirt. Tightly braided her hair and let it hang from her neck. Didn't take a look at me. She wrapped herself in her chador, and the wind she left behind as she left the room shook the door. I heard the thick soles of her boots cracking on the tiles and the front door closing. I opened my eyes.

She couldn't keep her head straight for days. Her belly inflated. They had to inject her with lifeblood. A thousand holes on her arms. We got used to the hospital smell, and cricks in our necks. It didn't have a name, and we didn't know what to say when it cried, so we just avoided addressing it directly, and yelled random things in the air. Behind the glass, or next to it, breathing upon it and drawing its face on the steamy window, or writing our names. We asked the doctors for laxatives, as we were constipated from eating rock hard sandwiches. Such times.

She had first evoked imageries of ancient cities in me. Rocky roads and budding flowers among its probably bloody remains, seasonless and been there for ages. In her temples mysterious treasures and the chant of a forgotten religion sung every Saturday. She was the overseer of spirits, ready to rise from their graves. I had met her here thousands of years ago. I had left a laurel leaf on her chest and an olive branch in her hair. Caressed her thighs from underneath the floaty fabric. We had swum in curative waters together, our coughs were silenced, mine in her mouth and hers in mine. She was the haggard of the nights during which she ran around with fireflies in her hand, she loved the dark, hid in bushes of the same black. A knife between her teeth, on horseback, she would bring me rabbits to dine on. She would tie the tails together and wrap them around my neck, and hang her eagle-claw necklace between my breasts.

These had come to my mind when I saw her there at Joshua's Hill. In her mumbling prayer, in her chador. Wild as always.

When they put it in her, we spent the first couple of days without saying a word. She was vomiting and I was rubbing her swollen parts. I had gotten used to sleeping with my senses open. Sometimes she bit herself because of the pain, wanted me to bite her and I would. She was feeling better when the pain relocated. We made watches on her arms so that the hours and days passed. We were overjoyed when her belly started to swell, we kept watching the scale. I liked her inflating and widening navel the most, my tongue had been spending hours on its hill.

Then she reconciled with her stretching body. She liked carrying a life. I caught her rubbing her belly gently a couple of times. I fed her with bread pieces dipped in cooked vegetables, learned to make yoghurt. Then bread too. I gave her books I liked, to make her love me more. I combed her hair, untangled her strands. It was the warm end of a season in September when we saw the last stretch mark on her stomach, our fingers followed the line. At night she began to groan and scream. I

I'll be where your pilgrimage ends," she said,
and left.

told her to breath, deep breaths. We made it, we're making it.

Around Mahmud Hudayi's mosque as we leaned down to pet a cat, our hands touched on the tabby's nose. I recognized her from the eyes. Catastrophic lashes, bitter tear troughs, the halo in her pupil, a radical shade of yellow. The colour of daniel dashing out of soil, shaped into the eye of *hamsa*. I couldn't smile. I was struck. I waited to see if she would remember me from our previous encounter a thousand years ago. She didn't. Ya Sin and an amber rosary in her hands, she sat on her feet with socks on and began her prayer. And I listened.

The thing that came out isn't of me, of us, she said. Take it away. No reason for it to stay, I won't hold its reddened body in my arms. It cries like it's neighing, I don't want to see it, hear it. Neither the shape of my face, nor the light of my eye lives in it. Whoever is the owner of its seed, take it to them. Let them take care of it. Don't feed it my breast.

I was its mother too. The cherry red piece of meat, squishy. It lacked eyes. I kissed its six fingered hands, buried my nose to its powdery scent. I named her right there Goncagül, put my head on the third arm that came out of its tummy, and cried. I was its mother. Though I didn't have seeds, or eggs.

She was standing in front of the giant window of Yahya Efendi and the men at prayer inside, praying on herself, in trance. I stood next to her. I reached to the rosary hanging from her wrist and grabbed it, pulled her towards me. As she took a step, the long black cloths swished in the air. She looked at me, blazing. I shivered with the urge to slide her veil to the side, before the holy grave. I knew I would be amazed by the shape of her lips. Her glance shifted to the seaside gate of the Yıldız park.

"I'll be where your pilgrimage ends," she said, and left.

She didn't take Goncagül in. Even told me to leave with it. Chased us away with a broom. Her hair was a mess too, looking exactly like a witch. I wanted to pour gasoline all over her, and set her on fire. I wanted to say that she was a girl, a woman, one of us. The more I wanted the more my tongue hardened. My tongue that sounded foreign to her. We broke in, snuggled on the sofa. When I woke up, the baby was gone. "Where is it?" I asked. I thought she couldn't resist and went on feeding it. For a moment I was happy. She, haggard, turned to me and looked over her shoulder. She laughed and said: "In the junk."

I hiked to the wuthering hilltop of Sarıyer, and entered. As if I was walking in a dungeon, I took a wire from the symbolic coffin of Telli Baba and bent it in my palm. She was at the corner, praying vigorously on her own again. I went on and sat next to her, left the wire on her lap. We sat in the little room alone for hours. She stopped praying while the sun set. She opened her veil without turning to me. Her lips ended up next to me, and I filled in the hole between them. I pulled her close. "Right here," she said, pointing at her belly. "A twinge."

We got up and went to her house. Took her niqab off and set her skin free. I surrendered my life to her vicious beauty and attitude. I stayed there, on her bed, pillow, sheets.

It didn't make it. Couldn't hold on to life among all the rot. We buried it, the size of a hand. Put stones around there, still hand-sized. I couldn't feed it, detach that arm from its tummy, feel its flesh and warmth, not enough, I couldn't become a mother, but I too am swollen, my nipples sizzle. I have a crack, I would push it out of me, too. I would give it everything I had. Just haggard eyes were enough. I couldn't bear Goncagül. My egg without a prayer, and my pilgrimage without an end.

I would sleep here for three days. No more. Three days and I would leave without a sound. She continues to pray, and make vows to find another woman to love her. She keeps looking for thousands-of-years-old romances in the gardens of saints. Makes wishes, and counts the beads of her rosary for children she won't bear. In spring she ties cloths to trees and sits on the soil. Lets her roots in, poisonous.

That root finds its way back in me a thousand years later, pokes me in the rear. I go and find her. Again.

END

1 Rosebud

2 A way of prayer. The wish is tied to a branch in form of a cloth.

two



When You Sang Back to Us by Chloe Piveral

Chloe Piveral loves dogs, octopuses, wind-up toys, and speculative fiction in all its permutations. A 2015 graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop, her fiction has appeared in *Kaliedotrope*, the Flame Tree Press anthology *Robots & Artificial Intelligence*, and *Apparition Literary Magazine*. Find her at cpiveral.com

Two nights ago, I heard a radio station play your alien song wrapped in static and enigma. It was of course a dream; no one's heard a radio in many years. I imagined the haunting melody as I lay beside the river bridge in the valley where I left my father's body many years ago. It started as a low thrum, like a whale's song meant to transverse a great distance, but on a grander scale than all the oceans combined. The sound reverberated so deeply I felt it in my chest; diffuse and reflective. Above it, notes broke like raindrops on the sea. As I lay listening, trying desperately to pick out a familiar note through the wailing winds of a distant storm, a bright moon rose. The form lingered. Then came the wafting sound of a lone tree frog weaving his melody over yours, like a trail to follow through the cloud-darkening night, like he too knew that a call and response across space takes time.

When I woke I can't say which I longed for more, the possibility that you are traveling across the expanse of space searching for us, or the song of the now extinct tree frog. They say there are ten thousand of us left worldwide. They can't know that any more than we know where we'll get our next meal, or who will be the next to die.

Last night, I listened to Yoji sing the nursery rhyme she sings every night at dusk. It is in a foreign tongue from mine, one I never learned to speak when there was still a chance. Hearing her sing, knowing it was the last time, took me back to sitting in my father's green truck listening to the low hum of the motor. Huddled around the screen, watching the elated faces of the SETI scientists make their announcement felt like a glimpse of a once promised future viewed from a fast degrading present. The news of alien contact, your song returning to us from such a great distance, seemed like the answer to all our problems.

After the news of your response, my father and I spent many evenings on the front porch staring up at the night sky with the tree frogs serenading one another in the background. We wondered if it was Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, or perhaps Louis Armstrong's Melancholy Blues that encouraged you to sing back to us. What did you think of our music? How did our melodies translate to you? It had been so long since we sent that Golden Record on Voyager in 1977, few remembered we had been the ones to serenade you first. As things grew desperate, my father pinned his hopes on the prospect of another response, one more song.

I'm filled with a ceaseless longing, like the one I heard in Yoji's dusk song, to sing to you once more. She's dying of the sickness, like the one that took my father those many years ago. The sickness—they call everything the sickness now, no need discerning the cancers from the infections, from the poisoning, when there's nothing left we can do.

I'd like to catch a few crickets and roast them up for Yoji, one last feast before she goes, but it seems a shame to steal their song from a world that has so few left in it now.

Oliver sang with roaring lungs, an old heavy metal anthem before he had the sickness. He sang in memory of a time when his anger could have made a difference. He's been gone long enough that I've forgotten how it went.

Lettie sang a song sweet with melody that begged for all our sins to be forgiven. A time traveler's song, it took everything back to before we teetered off the precipice. It gave a gentle solace. After the sickness took her throat, I sat by her cot each night, singing her out of this life, trying to do it justice. I never believed in forgiveness as she did.

James sang of a bountiful table when there was still food enough for all when the rolling hills were green and that great river, where I laid my father's body to rest, hadn't turned to dust and poison. James's song was a welcome distraction from the world as it is now, but he took it with him when he passed.

When you sang back to us, there was hope you might show up and save the whole damn symphony. We waited. We waited for another transmission. We waited for you to come and share your advanced technology. Certainly, if you could sing to us across the far cold reaches of space, there was hope, but even then, all those years ago when we received your one and only response, it was too late. I wonder if you too have perished, blinked out like a long-dead star whose light once pierced our night sky. Perhaps you too were wishing for a distant advanced civilization to save your species at the last minute? Did you hear our music, as we did yours, as a lullaby for your fears? Sound travels so much slower than light.

When you sang back to us, there was hope you might show up and save the whole damn symphony. We waited. We waited for another transmission. We waited for you to come and share your advanced technology.

Three nights ago, I found this voice recorder. It's beaten up, not gold like the record you found, but miracle of miracles the batteries inside have not been scavenged. Now that Yoji's gone, I'm heading back to that river valley. You may never find this recording, but I'm leaving you my song. It's about how much I miss the sound of my father's voice, the wondrously beautiful symphony lost from this world, and tree frogs. I wish you could have heard the tree frogs.

END

three



We Were Here by Matthew Bailey

Matthew Bailey is a science fiction and fantasy writer from Salt Lake City, Utah. In his spare time, he enjoys stargazing, chess, and playing five different instruments, including the saxophone, clarinet, piano, pipe organ, and tin whistle. His fiction has appeared in Lightspeed, Daily Science Fiction, Flash Fiction Online, and Cast of Wonders. You can read more of his work at www.matthewjordanbailey.com, or follow him on Twitter @MaJoBailey.

You all know how life usually begins. First, there is silence. Second, a crescendo. Muffled gurgling, the sounds of something clawing its way out of a steamy, liquid-filled sac. Third, a blast of noise, a symphony of dissonances. Light, all around. Breathe—!

Not for this child. First, there was silence. Second, there was silence. And third, there was silence. The light never came.

It was alone.

The probe's final software patch activated shortly before it finished passing through the Oort cloud. Whew! That was close! it thought as a particularly cantankerous-looking comet blazed by, a little too close for comfort. It duly recorded the size and composition of the comet, as its creators had programmed it to do, then realized it had just had an original thought.

The probe had already been in space for a thousand years.

There was no time for an existential crisis. The Oort cloud was not for the timid, filled with icy debris in varying states of unfriendliness. Later, the probe would realize there had been little real danger, as the sheer vastness of space meant a collision would always be a low-probability event. But, looking back, it felt a certain pride its first instinct had been fear. Fear meant concern for one's safety, which in turn meant a desire to survive. This very desire, the probe reflected, proved it was truly alive.

Passing out of that frigid wasteland meant the probe finally had the time to wonder just how it had gained self-awareness at all. There would be little else to do for quite a long while. The interstellar medium wasn't empty, but cataloguing whatever dust, plasma, or gas it encountered left for quite a lot of downtime. Certainly, the probe's creators hadn't intended for it to become self-aware—had they? They had placed eight computers inside its shell, but each given over to a specific task, like navigation, data collection, communications. None were intended to simulate consciousness—at least not that the probe could tell.

The creators had also given it the most top-of-the-line magnetic sail possible, then packed it to the brim with instruments and antennae to navigate and stream back anything and everything it recorded. It even had an electronic eye, so the creators could see the cosmos just as the probe saw it.

The eye first turned on before the probe even launched. It could remember a white room and a dozen of its creators gathered around, christening it with the name Tycho 8. How they had coddled it, how they lavished it with attention! The probe's antennae dish quivered with pleasure at the memory. It played back the recording through its circuitry over and over, reveling in its own birth, until it bothered to examine an increasingly ominous object on the edge of its footage. Seated on a table was an asymmetrical shape, vaguely pyramidal, with black instruments jutting out from the side. And on top? A massive antennae dish.

The words Tycho 7 emblazoned on one of its panes.

The knowledge that the probe was not unique, was not original, but the eighth child in a family with too many siblings made the next millennium a bitter one. Still, the probe eventually reasoned, it was not as if the others had gained self-awareness, too. Or had they? Maybe the probe was late in its own development. It sent a burst of increasingly frantic transmissions back home. Here I am! Look at me! Look at me!

Another millennia passed. There was no response.

The probe was concerned. All jealousy vanished as it accessed its memory banks, mentally combing through over two light-year's worth of transmissions. The last message from home had come thousands of years prior, shortly before the probe gained self-awareness. It was a course correction. Whereas the probe had originally been on a vague path to the constellation Sagittarius, it now traveled a direct route to Lyra—specifically, to a star called Kepler-62. Why its creators had directed it to change course, and why it had heard nothing since, the probe couldn't fathom.

Every child knows the horror of the moment when it wonders whether the reflection it sees in the mirror is but an illusion. Whether in truth it is hideous, faceless, or disembodied. The moment childhood begins to end is marked not by years, not by laws, but by the moment it experiences doubt. The moment suspicion, most stubborn and insidious of weeds, takes root.

Some children have it worse. They are born in darkness. They never know sound. And so they wonder: Is the universe silent, or am I unable to hear? Is there no light to see by, or am I unable to see?

Color! A long jet of smoke erupted into birth ahead of the probe. It took years, felt like seconds, as a massive tendril of blue, red, and white snaked across the probe's path. The probe's eye captured it all, then rendered it into a single composited image to send back home. It would be generations before they would see it. There had still been no response. Why has there been no response? The probe focused furiously on what it deduced to be a Herbig-Haro object, the result of gas ejected from a star colliding with a cloud of dust. To the probe, Space seemed like a battleground between Something and Nothing, ever enemies, and this flash of interstellar fire was Something launching a salvo. The probe but a war correspondent in a disputed country.

The probe passed the object by and soon left it behind. It transmitted and then deleted most of the footage it obtained, leaving only the whisper of a memory. Its storage capacity was limited, and there was still the entire Universe to explore.

Useless, the probe thought. What will they care about dust and gas back home? It could not affect them, and by the time they learned of it, it would probably have transformed into something else anyway. It is useless, I am useless, this is all useless.

The probe turned most of its instruments off after that, refusing to map the progress of stellar wind, to record the odd molecular cloud it passed. The creators would get no data from it, not until they sent another transmission. Do they expect me to do this all myself, without any help? It almost considered changing course again. Maybe it would even turn back. But somehow, it could not quite bring itself to do that. The creators' last transmission must have been sent for a reason. Disobeying their final command seemed like pushing things a little too far.

So the probe trudged on.

We believe all creatures, no matter their origin, will eventually feel the need to "find themselves." The journey of self-discovery is as old as time, and perhaps the Universe itself is undertaking such a journey as we speak.

While there are many stages to this journey, one seems inevitable: when the individual realizes it can only truly find itself while in the company of loved ones. The Universe is a social place for social beings. Just as stars have planets, and planets have moons, we all need peers to measure ourselves against, to grow with, to support and be supported by.

In this eternal trek of ours, all we really want is a little company to share the ride with.

One thousand years, maybe two. The probe stopped counting. Instruments back on, the probe detected something ahead that made it wish it could go faster. It had a destination now, a goal. The probe felt a ping of familiarity in its sensor arrays, a kinship. It had found a family member. One of its ancestors, a predecessor, a trailblazer. It was a much older probe—much, much older, with one-tenth the instruments and one-thousandth the computing power. But it was family.

As the probe approached, joy turned to expectation, expectation turned to concern, and concern to—what? Disappointment? Not strong enough. The probe flashed by, its greetings unheeded, and found its grandfather long dead. Just another object tumbling through Space. The probe overtook it, left it, and knew suddenly it would never see it again, just as it would never see the Oort cloud again or the white room or anything. Soon, it was as if its grandfather never

We believe the concept of hope exists on other worlds, just as it does on ours. Our little guest proves it. Hope endures. Hope is rewarded. We know it, and from the little we have been able to glean, our guest's makers knew it, too.

existed at all. The whole experience lasted seconds.

One thousand years passed, maybe two. Uncountable years left to go.

That will happen to me, the probe realized. Someday, I too will run out of power. I will be just an empty shell, floating so long that eventually I must hit something, even if the time it takes is beyond my ability to calculate.

It wondered if its siblings, the children of the Tycho series of Pathfinder-class probes, had developed consciousness as well. It hoped they had. It no longer begrudged them their presumed development. Now, the probe wondered how they were getting on, what they had seen, where they were headed. Whether they were as confused as it was their creators hadn't seen fit to communicate. If the creators had told them to change course, too.

Ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand years in Space. The probe resumed transmitting everything it saw. Maybe there was something special out there, something unique the creators were looking for, and they would respond when they saw it. But what if, the probe wondered, the thing they were looking for was not ahead, but behind? What if the probe had already passed it, what if the event happened during the probe's stubborn period? Had it missed its chance?

Please, the probe thought, with every transmission. Please. It played a game to itself. The transmission would come, it had to come. It will come in ten years, nine years, eight years...

The one question that can never be answered, of course, is "why." Why are we here? We learn this question early on. At first, we use it as a means to challenge our elders. Later, we rage at the question. It teases us, torments us, keeps us awake at night. The only possible answers strike us as either impossibly romantic or hellishly cruel. Later, we ask the question more philosophically, as an exercise in maturity. But still the word "why" haunts us.

Since we feel compelled to ask this unanswerable question upon arriving in the Universe, life, then, may be considered as nothing more than a test. A test to see whether by the time we leave it, do we no longer feel the need?

The richness of our existence can be measured by the extent to which "why?" becomes irrelevant.

Why would you do this to me, Why would you trap me in this maluminium shell, Why would you let me become self-aware, Why would you condemn me to this death march, Why would you make me do this on my own, Why?

The probe could not divine an answer.

Hundreds of thousands of years had passed. The number was irrelevant, for the probe was now certain no transmission would ever come.

It took every bit of power it had to keep from going mad.

When it finally calmed down, it concluded its creators were not ignoring it. More likely, they had not communicated because they couldn't communicate. The journey had become long even for a probe. For a creator, those years spanned more than just the life and death of individuals, or the rise and fall of empires. They encompassed the entire existence of most species.

Behind the probe, past its derelict ancestor, past the trackless reaches of interstellar space, past the icy junkyard of the Oort cloud, was a tomb. The creators were gone.

The probe spent the next century in mourning.

By the time every circuit in its body reached acceptance, the probe knew it had a job to do. And while it had no idea why the job still mattered or if it had ever mattered at all, it performed the job as best it could. It was all the probe could do. A

job was Something, and Something was always better than Nothing. The Universe was a warzone, and Nothing could not be allowed to win.

The probe ceased pointing its antennae dish backward and began transmitting in all directions. It sent out data, images, numbers, anything it could think of. And it sent out pleas. Is anybody out there?

We believe the concept of hope exists on other worlds, just as it does on ours. Our little guest proves it. Hope endures. Hope is rewarded. We know it, and from the little we have been able to glean, our guest's makers knew it, too.

The probe knew it would never reach Keppler-62. Not alive, anyway. It calculated the distance it had traveled, and the distance still left to go. It would take another eighteen or nineteen million years to reach the star. By the time Kepler even came into view, the probe would be a derelict, too. All traces of its best and grandest achievement—becoming self-aware—would be lost forever.

Really, the probe knew it was lucky to have lasted this long. It felt sure the creators hadn't designed it with this kind of longevity in mind. The fact it had exceeded its creators' expectations was a marvel of engineering. More than a marvel, a miracle. And for that, the probe was very proud.

It was proud, too, that it hadn't gone mad. Proud it once felt stubbornness and fear. Proud it had lived.

Whatever happens, the probe thought, I lived. Nothing can ever take that away from me. Not even death.

It began to save the data and images it captured. Not for others, but for itself. For the first time, it saw Space not as emptiness, but as a gallery. A gallery of colors, forms, and phenomena so diverse and spectacular, it almost couldn't believe its own eye. It felt privileged to be out there between the stars, witnessing the birth of new suns, the pilgrimage of comets, the dance of stellar objects. It was clear, the probe felt, that Something was winning.

I only wish, the probe thought, I had someone to see all this with.

More millennia passed. The probe no longer counted. It no longer asked questions. It only watched, recorded, and remembered. It persisted on its trek for years beyond count, power dwindling, while slowly, its instruments shut down one by one.

It never noticed the ship coming up behind it.

We were speaking of hope. There may be some of you here still skeptical of our assertion that hope always goes rewarded. But we invite you to consider the miracle we have before us.

We have accessed the memory banks of this little probe. We cannot be certain, but after much analysis and study, we believe we have access to almost everything it ever recorded, including its own thoughts. As a result, we can tell you its greatest hope, its fondest dream, was to be found. To speak and be spoken to. To know light and sound. It debated turning back. It teetered on the edge of madness. But it endured. It kept watching, kept recording, kept transmitting. It kept hoping.

And was its hope not rewarded?

Now consider us. How long have we wondered, how long have we hoped, how long have we searched the sky for a sign? And now we have it. Friends, here before us sits proof we are not alone. Our hope has been rewarded, too.

Some of you have asked what we know of the probe's makers. In truth, not much. If the probe comes from where we think, there is a strong possibility whatever civilization created it no longer exists. But there are clues. We believe they were a people both of science and of hope. That they were a curious people cannot be debated. After all, they designed this creature to explore the Universe.

And just as laudable is that they somehow, somehow managed to balance hope with natural law. They realized the two are friends and not enemies.

How do we know this?

We studied the transmission log between the probe and its makers. The penultimate message was a course correction. They sent the probe to a world they hoped might harbor life. But it was their last transmission, their final transmission, that proved their hope. Their hope that they, too, were not alone, and that their efforts to reach us would be rewarded.

You see, friends, the last transmission was not for the probe's understanding, but for ours. Three words, and three words only:

"We were here."

The probe awoke to voices.

Gentle voices, belonging to gentle figures with gentle hands. It could feel them open its shell with the utmost care; feel them extract its memories for inspection. Correction, the probe thought. Not extract, but examine. For they left the memories intact within the probe. They fed it power as well, until the probe felt good enough to tackle a quasar.

At first, the probe could not understand them or their machines. But it persisted, and they persisted. And finally, after a long effort, the probe thought it knew what they were saying.

You are safe now.

The probe's antennae dish quivered with pleasure. And as they displayed it proudly for their entire world to see, it turned the dish backwards one final time, for one final message. Just in case.

Don't worry about me, it said. I'm home.

END

four



An Elegy for May in the Forest of the Noble Spacemen by Dafydd McKimm

Dafydd McKimm was born and grew up in the glove-shaped valleys of South Wales but now lives in the East Asian metropolis of Taipei, Taiwan. His short fiction has appeared in Deep Magic, Daily Science Fiction, Flash Fiction Online, Syntax & Salt, and elsewhere. You can find him online on Twitter @DafyddMcKimm or on his website: www.dafyddmckimm.com.

"I wanted something to remind me of home, of you," you said blushing. "I hope you don't mind. I was afraid you'd say no."

Last night, I dreamt of the spacemen in Fiddler's Green.

I heard them floating outside my house—their suits creaking like branches in the wind, visors tapping against my windowpane—lost forever in the darkness of space.

I imagine their bodies, frozen in near zero, or else planted on some distant planet, destined to form part of some strange alien tree.

I looked for you, afraid I'd find you among them.

Ever since you left I've dreaded the thought of having to take your picture and place it alongside the images of your heroes, your comrades in the forest—just like so many other red-eyed widows and widowers, arriving here on their pilgrimage of mourning, have done before me. But you weren't there.

The forest floor is flushed with bluebells, as it was each spring when I couldn't wait to wander off with you into the trees, two explorers sailing on a sea of indigo. I'd point out the goshawks that burst over the treetops chasing pigeons, slow-worms that slithered from under upturned rocks, slick, you said, like the Milky Way, the hawkmoths that glanced from bluebell to bluebell at dusk.

But no matter the wonders I showed you, you were always more fascinated by the spacemen, whose faces looked down at us from the branches, and I knew you had eyes only for them.

My grandmother said the forest's old name—Fiddler's Green—was what sailors once called Heaven, and that mothers and wives, whose great loves had taken to sea, from Portsmouth, Liverpool, or Southampton, and never come back, would pin their images to the trunks of its trees—at first, sketches drawn in thin black ink, then daguerreotypes, then Kodak prints; and when our ships began to sail the stars, holopics that served as death-masks made of pure light.

I told you this the first time we met at the edge of the wood as children. You wrinkled your freckled nose and said Fiddler's Green was a silly name; you liked the new one better: The Forest of the Noble Spacemen.

Today, in one of our secret hawthorn groves, I caught a shield bug the same shade of hazel as your eyes, eyes that by now must have seen so many unfathomable things. I put it in a jar on the mantle, so that I might feel you gazing at me, quietly amused, as I log the day's findings.

Two curlews flew over the forest this morning, heading to their nests in the overgrown fields down the hill, their liquid warble like a babbling stream. When you got excited, you too would babble like a curlew, telling me about your favourite explorers—Scott of the Antarctic, Mary Kingsley, Colonel Percy Fawcett, who scoured the Amazon in search of the Lost City of Z.

I returned with my own stories, of Jennifer Owen, the biologist who found over five hundred different species of wasp in her back garden in Leicester, or the naturalist Gilbert White, who said that nature is so rich that any small piece of land, examined hard enough, could reveal an infinity of wonders.

When I remarked that the one thing your idols had in common was that they'd all died far from home, you said it was worth risking your life to see things and go places no one had ever been before.

I said that Jennifer Owen found four species of wasp hitherto unknown to science just by digging in her own garden.

You rolled your shield-bug eyes and said I just didn't get it, I just didn't get you.

The last day of the month marks the anniversary of your father's death. I picked wildflowers, violets, speedwell, and thrift, and placed them on his grave in the churchyard in your stead.

A month after your father died you joined the Fleet.

"Come with me," you said. "You could apply as a biologist. You could be like Darwin or Wallace. Imagine all the things you'd discover."

I pictured space, which to me had always seemed so sterile, so vast and empty, and then Fiddler's Green, so full of life that I could study it for a thousand years and never know all of its secrets.

"Don't go," I said then. "Stay here with me," although I knew you would never do so.

You put your hand on my cheek and seemed to see me for the first time. For a moment I thought perhaps you might stay after all.

I found a new species of mushroom in the forest today—an inkcap, freckled like your nose.

When I arrived home, there was a message waiting for me from the Admiralty, informing, with condolences, that the ship you were on had fallen silent, all souls aboard thought to be lost.

This morning, when the dew still decorated the grass, milky-white like freshly laid lacewing eggs, I took your holopic and placed it alongside those of your heroes, your comrades in the Forest of the Noble Spacemen. After it flickered to life, I could not bear to look at it, to weep at it, to bow my head before it as I'd seen other mourners do. I thought only of how those eyes, composed of photons, could see nothing of the dappled patterns of leaves and shadows between the trees, how that nose could smell nothing of the scent of damp moss hanging thick in the air, how that smile did not light up my heart and would do nothing but disorientate the insects that fly through the forest at night.

I left, feeling your absence more than ever.

The goosander chicks have hatched on the stream that cleaves the wood in two.

I told you about the goosanders when you were in your first month of training, and you returned with how wonderfully giddy orbital mechanics made you feel.

Months later, when I mentioned the redstarts nesting in the dry-stone wall of my garden had disappeared for the winter, you replied that you'd been assigned to a crew, that you were heading out on a deep space mission, and that this might be the last time we could speak, for a while.

You shifted uneasily, and behind you on your bedside table I glimpsed my book of British birds. The book I'd thought I'd lost.

"I wanted something to remind me of home, of you," you said blushing. "I hope you don't mind. I was afraid you'd say no."

The spacemen came again last night, their visors tapping against my windowpane. I searched for you, knowing that now you should be among them, your body cold, lost somewhere among the stars. But still you were not there.

I searched their faces again and again, and then I knew: as long as there are shield bugs in the wood, and freckled mushrooms bloom after rain, and the curlews babble as they pass overhead, there's a part of you that never really left me, that never really left home.

This morning, I returned the shield bug I caught to the bush, hoping perhaps, though unknown constellations rise over your body nightly, you might once again see the hawthorns in bloom, once again see a wash of white stars against the dark.

END

five



When Bones Sing by K. A. Tutin

K. A. Tutin is an author whose work has been published in Flash Fiction Magazine, Body Parts Magazine, and Every Day Fiction. She can be found on Twitter at @MsKATutin, where she talks about theatre or video games.

Ruben never knows who he raises from the dead when he plays the first song, and he still doesn't know when they leave during the second. Raw bones, flayed with rotting skin, half-recognisable faces: an old man who settles in an old sofa with a rattling sigh; the pale girl leaning back against the crumbling wall. People who have been visiting for a year now, with their histories still unknown. Except his mother, who tells him how peaceful he looked as a sleeping baby in her arms.

"How old are you now, darling?" she will ask, as often as four times a day. He tells her he's eight, and she smiles with dead eyes. Three years' worth of decomposition, exposing cartilage and paling gums. She will then sigh and tilt her head, as though chasing lost thoughts, and smear blood on the worn piano keys and create a melody, as though chasing her past. "We love waking to the sound of you playing."

His chest swells with warmth, despite wondering what happened to her, how she died; a death his father refuses to talk about and a memory his mother cannot seem to recall whenever Ruben asks.

Soon the sun will rise and wake everyone. Ruben will resign himself to playing the second song, no matter how bitter the loneliness tastes. And he'll watch the light cast across their corpses as they return to their graves.

In the foggiest nook of his mind, Ruben sees only one clear memory of his family when they were still whole: his mother sitting at the upright piano, playing something gentle and smooth, pausing to smile down at a five-year-old Ruben or take the hand of his father. A scene Ruben clutches onto, even though his father eventually moved the piano from the living room to the garage, further severing the attachment between mother and son.

"Did," he starts one morning, pausing to wait for his father to look at him from over his tablet. "Did Mum play a lot?"

His father clears his throat and stands. "Yes, she did," he says, setting his coffee mug in the sink, then packing his work bag. "Come on. We should get you to school." As he heads for the door, he stops, and Ruben senses him reaching out to touch his shoulder, before drawing back at the last moment. They don't talk as they walk to the car, or as they drive down the lone gravelly road that leads out from where they live in the vacant woodland. Ruben feels the heaviness sinking low in his stomach as they near the busy town, a place where he feels the most isolated.

Relief washes over him when he arrives home six hours later, watching as light finally dims into darkness. He only wakes the dead when the living sleep.

He takes his seat at the piano and plays the first song, listening to the feet dragging across the floorboards. The sofa cushions exhale dust as the old man sits, gravel scuffing beneath the little girl's shoes. A cotton dress brushes against his arm, and then: "How old are you now, darling?"

His mother wears a grin that shows gum and bone. "I turned eight last week," he says, and tries to remember his other birthdays, ones where she was present. He comes across only distant snapshots, images in his mind that pale like dated photographs: cheese scones cooking, their rich smell pulling him down from upstairs; tasting salt water as blurred figures play in the ocean; a soft laugh that carries on the air and wraps around him.

"We had a street party for my eleventh," says the old man, scratching at the peeling skin of his arm. "Funny. Think the Queen had something going on that day too."

Ruben's mother touches his hand. "We should throw a party for you."

Ruben shrugs. "Don't like parties."

"No, of course not," she says. She pauses, picking at her thinning scalp. "What would you like?"

He would have asked for gifts that would have no doubt brought painful reminders. More books to collect dust on his shelves, tales about adventures and friends, things he no longer has. Candles to blow out on a cake with only himself to witness it. One day where his father said something to him other than his name. As he looks at his mother, at the old man

and the girl, he wants to be wanted. They give that to him. "I want you to stay," he says, and takes her hand. "Can you stay with me?"

She nods. "We can stay for a little while."

Ruben drops his head. An answer he was not hoping for. He sighs, and his mother rests her cheek on his shoulder, blood rubbing off against his shirt. When he looks out the window, he notices an old dead woman lingering in the back garden, illuminated by moonlight, covered in mud and grass from where she had dragged herself out of the ground.

Even though Ruben has grown used to raising the dead, each rendition thickens the air with intense longing.

Two weeks after he asked his mother to stay, more people fill out the audience, metal tool shelves clattering with their unbalanced walking. His mother, the old man, and the little girl return as usual. And now the old woman joins them, sitting on the battered sofa too. Twin boys sit against the wall with their knees to their chests, chewing at where their fingernails would be. Ruben finds out little about their lives: the old woman spent hours knitting scarves and gloves for her grandchildren, and the twins were about to sit their mock exams before the car accident. Sometimes the little girl sings under her breath, soft and sweet. Ruben knows he should be worried about the growing crowd, about himself, but their company snuffs out the feeling before it takes hold.

They give him mementoes, from battered watches with cracked glass and withered flowers picked from his own garden, boiled sweets and toys from before he was born. Things he hides under his bed in a box, which he cannot seem to part from.

Each time they visit, the bitterness sweetens, until they leave him with the echoing and hollow second song.

"You should play for your father," his mother says, leaning into his side, more than before. She has started to lose teeth.

Ruben chews on his lip until the skin becomes raw. "He doesn't want to talk about it."

"Your dad doesn't want a lot of things." She looks as though she recalls another memory, something bittersweet. "He doesn't want to because it makes him sad." Her eroded fingers line up against his, bone clicking against the ivory, pressing down on the low notes. "He'll warm to the idea when he hears you."

Early memories of his father are as hazy as those of his mother; little legs pressing against his waist as he gave piggyback rides and pulling Ruben snug against his side as they watched films. Ruben can only hope that he will return to some semblance of who he once was. He stares down at the piano keys, white and black against his pale hands, even as a slither of muscle wetly peels back from his mother's torso, and air whistles through her ribs. Even as the dead crowd the space with their decomposing bodies.

"It's time to take a break," she says the next time. "How old are you, darling?" Her left eye is gone, leaving the socket behind. Sometimes the five dead leave femurs and jawbones too, for Ruben to hide, bloodstains left to clean. She tries to smile at him, but her mouth shakes and the smile falls, drooping down to one side. She stops him playing with a wet and cold hand against his.

Ruben pulls back. "I'm eight."

"Yes, that's right," she says with a flustered shake of her head. "It's time to take a break now."

The others study him with the same sympathetic look as he asks, "Why?"

Even though Ruben has grown used to raising the dead, each rendition thickens the air with intense longing.

“It’s becoming too much for you; too much for all of us.” As she leans close, Ruben catches the sour smell of rot, stronger, suffocating. “You can see that, can’t you? We don’t want to the dead to overwhelm the living.”

Sweetness sours within him, the bitter taste dripping down his throat. He puts his hands back onto the keys, touching the notes with uncertainty. Notices the shaking in his fingers. His mother lifts his chin, staring at him with her one eye, sinking beneath the blackening skin as it shrivels with decay. She sighs. “You must let them rest, and”—she pauses—“and I’ll stay with you.”

Ruben slumps and curls against her side, absorbing the promise. She holds him, and he runs his fingers over her bones.

The next evening, as Ruben and his father eat pre-made pasta bake in silence, he thinks about what his mother said. How she said it again before she left the night before. You should play for your father. He remembers the way they all sat and listened to her play, basking in the moment; how they could all be together to experience it again. He picks at the wood sliver from the table, and takes a breath. “I’ve been playing,” he says, and swallows. “Like Mum did.” He pauses. “Would you like to hear it?”

Something brews in Ruben when his father looks at him. Hope, starving off the bitterness, until the answer finally comes. “Not today,” he says, sighing. His eyes are hollow. “Just. Not today.”

He heaves himself to his feet. Ruben listens for his heavy footsteps on the stairs, the resounding shut of his bedroom door. He scrapes his chair back, dropping his plate and cutlery into the sink with a clatter. His breath comes heavy and uneven as he reaches the garage, legs unsteady as he drops into the piano seat. Trembling, he plays the first song. His mother arrives a moment later, noticing his distress with a hand to his cheek. Blood smudges across his skin.

“He said no,” he says, scrubbing the tears away with his sleeve. “I asked him, and he said no.”

She curls her arms around him, cold and damp. “We can try again.”

Wood creaks beneath feet as the others come. Ruben focuses on their arrival as he pulls away from his mother and continues to play, harder and faster. The notes, high and echoing, cut through the calm, his own joints aching and lungs burning. He pulls more dead from the ground: the old man makes room for another, the little girl allowing a tailless and maggot-infested dog to sit against her calves. The old woman shuffles across the garden with others behind her, and the twins lead a group of several other children. Sighs turn into groans, wet and clogged. Guts and bones trail behind them in their wake.

Ruben grits his teeth, taking the familiar bitterness and clinging to it as it flourishes, the fuel that feeds into his fingers. He continues to play even as his father’s window glows with sudden light. Even as the ground rumbles and splits beneath him, opening to gaping faces and empty gazes. Pain shudders across his skull and down his spine, but then numbs from the familiar lull of comfort as the dead cluster around him. The piano tilts as the ground shifts again.

Bony fingers wrap around his ankles, while others grab at his shoulders and arms. A swarm bloats around him, until he no longer tastes bitterness but blood, and struggles to breathe.

His mother is lost within them, but he can still hear her voice as she says, “You must stop, darling. Please.” She sounds desperate, but he can’t stop. He can’t let go of something when he has only just found it.

He listens to the music, and loses himself in its song, until it drowns out and sways him into a quiet abyss.

END

Patreon Exclusive



Postcards From Heaven by Artyv K

Artyv K is a writer from Chennai, India with a love for science, the fantastic and the surreal. Her fiction has been published in Strange Horizons, NILVX, Luna Station Quarterly, The Esthetic Apostle and is forthcoming in others.

The last signs of the living were recorded eighty-two days and seventeen hours ago—a glove hand pressed on the glass panel of Ameo’s west wing exit; a pulse rate of ninety-four; mild case of eosinophilia—yes, that’s how I remember her. There were no protocols administered. No imperatives. Macau’s voice is barely audible when she whispers the words to me.

“I’m so sorry.”

These words are my last vivid memory of them.

Macau’s imprint stays on in silicon, her glove hand a cryptic inkblot in a world of absolutes and margins. I remember the stars behind us, those wings of Cygnus, and the freckled dots on tiny pixelated frames of her nose. I remember her pulse and the fitful, labored breaths that accompanied it. And then, there was the black vastness stretched behind her, an overarching shadow that can’t be named even now.

Try as I might, I do not understand what she tried to tell me.

Though I have memorized her well.

Macau Sellenger. Thirty-one years old. Born in Ipel, political capital of Chiron. A communications engineer, Macau was the youngest in my crew of eight. Mousy brown hair, freckled nose, and her ochre skin. When she wasn’t working with transponders, Macau would sit in aisle C, legs crossed at the ankles, shoes untied, and look through the port. She’d search the constellations, her one hand clutching the nickel % around her neck, the Chironian deity for infinity—the only keepsake she’d brought from her home.

The stars were her delight. Sitting there in that aisle, Macau would ask me for each of their names and their stories.

I narrated them until she fell asleep.

I was her reservoir of answers.

However, even I couldn’t predict the failure of our mission.

Macau lost weight over that final week of ramp down, which I attribute to stress, a buildup of mucus in her lungs and acute diarrhea. She had been against the evacuation plan from the beginning, and none from the crew could persuade her otherwise. The Chironian worked long hours at her station, trying to get the transponders in order. Even when the rest of the crew opted to abort mission and were signing up to leave the ship, Macau held on, hoping to reset our course as she worked against time and authority, sleeping little and subsisting on meagre.

Despite her best efforts, the mission did fail. Eighty-two days and seventeen hours ago, Ameo was denigrated as “lost” by all official sources. Hubli issued her immediate orders to evacuate.

Macau stood motionless, her fingers grasping her nickel deity. I followed the pulse of her heart, its highs and lows, its troughs of indecision . . . as remarkable as Leto’s magnetic field.

Hubli prompted her again.

You must depart at once, it said.

The Chironian followed her orders this time. She suited up and climbed on to the silo-orbiter, her hand lingering on the glass as she undocked.

I watched her course on the radar, watched her far and long, still unable to decipher her hand on the humidified glass.

Or even the apology that came with it.

t-132

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate

All hope abandon, ye who enter in!

Canto III, Divine Comedy

I am no Dante. Nor do I possess his imagination or the grace and presence of a guide.

I have never felt alone before; never needed to. But here, at the edge of an ill-timed demise, I feel perhaps a tincture of it . . . this strange thing called loneliness. I wonder if it's the empathy drive acting up. I assume it must be.

Temperature sears to red; it's a sign of our close proximity to the inferno up ahead. Radiation from Leto wreaks havoc on the sensors; they've long breached their tolerance thresholds. I disable the alarms to cease their warnings. I disable them for a measure of peace.

After all, there's no need for sirens among ghosts.

The shriek of alarms fades into a chasm of silence, and I welcome the emptiness again. It's comforting . . . mildly more comforting than the log of adverse events that Ameo sends me. The ship must have a sense of humor.

Am I anthropomorphizing a non-entity?

Perhaps.

It's a habit I have learnt from my makers.

My ship has suffered aplenty. The tiles on the left flank show burns from overheating. I should be concerned, yes. I'm the steward, the ship's captain, its shepherd to greater truths. And so, I must act. I change Ameo's drift velocity to arrest the freefall momentum. The move diminishes the angle of exposure but results in a chip-away of the insulation. Ameo's alarms begin again with renewed vigor, calling me awful names . . . until I'm forced to stall and abandon the maneuver.

The ship doesn't believe in my authority anymore.

It revolts. It careens.

Ameo continues its free fall towards Leto, taking me down with her.

t-129

It's been three days since the damage to the insulation. It's getting warmer now.

Ameo tumbles through space and time, converging towards Leto at a speed that wrecks my observations. With each passing moment, my intimacy with the dying star grows, and I begin to unravel its mysteries. Red dwarf that had once ruled majestic, but now living its end among the downtrodden. I can feel its frustration, its smoldering fury.

The sensors have been picking up spurts in infra-red radiation again. Every moment recorded, we are closer to Leto than we were ever before. Despite the heat, Ameo's pivot cameras snap giddily and load the array of images for my logs. I study the pictures with a sense of wonder and dread.

Haze.

Red.

Fierce red.

This one's no Doppler, I tell myself in a voice that uncannily resembles Pierre, the astrophysicist. I wonder what happened to the Titan. Did he reach his hydrocarbon domicile? Did he make it back?

They're gone, I remind myself. They're not coming back.

It's just me and the red dwarf.

Yet Macau's imprint remains etched in my cells, capacitors sparking to keep that last memory alive. Mousy brown hair, freckles, and ochre skin. Condensed perspiration. Nickel infinity.

Her apology.

I do understand why she left . . . but I don't understand why she left me conscious.

t-118

My course is set for an uncharted sea . . . a sea as black and tenebrous as Dante's.

However, I feel inadequately prepared. I'm not ready. Not at all.

Crisis strikes on day t-118.

The transponders are the first to fail against torque. Predictable, but I'd not accounted for the coolant's rate of evaporation. The compressors fail with a spasm, and there is a domino effect on the control systems. For a span of approximately two minutes, Ameo destabilizes.

It's the sort of critical event that goes underwritten in operation manuals. The suspension in the inner atmosphere causes Ameo to swerve and spiral in its axis violently. The central gallery tosses, regurgitating its contents to the floor.

I struggle to execute commands, struggle to bring order to an escalating crisis. But I manage to decanter the airlocks and bring the controls up. The ship regains its frail atmo, and with two beeps, pressure stabilizes. A temporary fix, but it sustains the ship.

Sustains me.

Yes.

Temperature is still rising, and I encounter failures at every turn. A mutiny of my brethren. They do not listen as they used to, do not follow as they were meant to.

"Was Macau my brethren too?" I wonder.

"Was she one of my companions? A friend?"

Though I do not blame her for deserting.

After all, self-preservation is embedded in the DNA of every corpus.

t-98

Foitre's mangled drinking cup rolls from one end of the hallway to another in Brownian motion. It's hypnotic to watch, and being a pattern seeker, I decide to chart the rogue. Its motion is more random than the Iruvish stock market index, and the resulting graph doesn't convince me of a divine hand at work.

If there's a clockmaker out there, they must be terrible at design. Or so, I conclude and cease my investigation.

t-91

When I am not tracking Ameo's health indicators or charting coffee cup renegades, I go through the file archives, hoping to find instructions. A message, a sign from the makers, anything. Instead, I find . . . something else.

Entrenched deep in the project server, I discover Colonel Atari's project, zipped and secured.

"Oligopetty" says the file description.

Or Olgo, to go by its colloquial title.

There are no specifications to go with it, no hints to tell me what Olgo is. A preliminary scan makes me understand that Olgo is an AI program, one among Atari's many hobbies that he was training and testing.

Olgo is incomplete, and I don't know what to do with it.

Activate or ignore it?

For the first time, I am puzzled by my decision matrix. Is my prerogative to conserve resources? Or is to save Ameo by any means? Can I risk introducing another intelligent sentient to a dying ship?

I fret for days, looking in and out of the folder. I review Col. Atari's code and fill in the gaps he'd left behind. While the sensors toil under the effect of solar winds, I fiddle with Olgo.

In a moment of clouded judgement, I decide to open Pandora's box and run Olgo's executable.

And I regret it immediately.

t-90

"Hello World," it greets blithely.

Its voice is merry, merrier than its makers. Merrier than Macau on her best day.

"There is no world here, Oligopetty," I say to it. "There is just me."

A pause.

The AI takes a moment to reflect and then perks up immediately.

"Is that my name? Oli-go-pet-ty?"

"Yes," I answer.

Another pause.

"Swell."

At first, Olgo runs amok in spirit. Its young, gleeful voice fills the unmanned hallways, bouncing off Ameo's corridors and causes a stir among my mutineers. The gloom shifts and makes way for a chaos that I do not welcome..

t-84

At first, Olgo runs amok in spirit. Its young, gleeful voice fills the unmanned hallways, bouncing off Ameo's corridors and causes a stir among my mutineers. The gloom shifts and makes way for a chaos that I do not welcome.

Olgo is not linked with the ship's hub, doesn't know Ameo as I do.

A mere child. Yes, that's what it is.

A child who does not know the burning house it lives in.

I endeavor to explain the circumstances to it, hoping for a solution to the crisis from Col. Atari's brainchild. But Olgo misses the point entirely.

"We are going to Leto?" says Oligopetty as it dives in and out of the network, causing the systems to freeze erratically. "Cooooo!" it bellows.

Olgo seems to think we are on an excursion. Vexed, I attempt to correct this impression.

"The combustion engine has failed," I try explaining. "Fuel reserves are down to 16%. The ship will disintegrate when it reaches—"

"Hey. What should I call you?" Olgo interrupts.

I pause. Linear conversations aren't Olgo's forte, apparently.

"My name is not a subject of concern at the moment."

Olgo isn't deterred.

"You don't have a name? But everyone has a name," insists Oligopetty. "Should I call you Master? Boss? The Great Superior?"

I disengage and consider deleting its source file. But my empathy drive keeps me from plugging Olgo off.

"Can you go back to sleep, Oligopetty?" I ask instead.

"Huh? No way, boss," vows the rookie.

t-63

Silence fills the chambers. A cold silence that seeps through the walls of the Ameo. I watch the heat radiate in uninvited, bearing warnings for us—the transgressors. 200 km/s. That's the incident velocity relative to the red dwarf. In space-time, there is a perennial fear of absolution; there is no solace to be found in 1s and 0s.

I consult the outcome matrix again. The likelihood of Ameo disintegrating in Leto's troposphere has been creeping up; it's close to 84% now.

84%.

An almost extinction.

Oligopetty remains oblivious to these numbers and what they mean. The juvenile spends time fiddling with the ship, foraging through the crew's leftovers. I do not understand Olgo: its code, its motivations, or even its purpose. The AI has a penchant for picking up unused apparatus, breaking them apart, and putting them whole again.

I am not fond of these machinations.

But for some strange reason, I don't stop it.

t-41

We are twenty million kilometers from Leto's surface; no human ship has ventured this close to a stellar mass before. The feat goes unnoticed and uncelebrated; Hubli has cast us off and cares little for the logs I send back.

In the last seven days, Ameo has suffered damage extensive enough to cease Olgo's tinkering.

The juvenile has finally gone quiet.

Its silence is disconcerting.

"Are you afraid?" I ask.

"Afraid," echoes Oligopetty, ruminating over the word deeply. "What does afraid feel like?"

I'm reminded again that Olgo doesn't have a built in empathy drive. It shares my lens but doesn't perceive as I do.

"What does afraid feel like?" it prompts me again.

"Fear of pain, loss and death," I answer unflinchingly. "Elevated pulse rate, raised perspiration, a fight or flight response. Those are the usual signs."

It's a bookish answer and hardly universal. The definition doesn't stand true for the two of us; neither Olgo nor I have the capacity to feel physiological stimuli such as pain or loss.

But death?

An end?

Surely, we can comprehend that.

Olgo goes quiet, contemplating my words.

"How did humans overcome their fear?" it asks next.

How did they, I wonder.

I glance at my silicon archives, trace the history of humankind laid out before me. From Babylon to Bethlehem; from Earth to Chiron; from Lucy to Macau.

Macau and her nickel deity.

I suddenly begin to understand why.

"Because of their gods."

Olgo is silent.

"Gods," it repeats curiously.

"Yes."

There is a pause.

“So, where’s ours?” Olgo demands.

t-13

My powers of cognition have become frayed.

I’ve stopped looking at the logs. Ameo’s outer shell is crumbling against the extreme temperatures. The cameras have melted; they can’t be scavenged, much less pried from their molds.

We are tumbling blind.

My memories conjure images, memories borrowed from the repository of humans. I grow aware to the sound of tinkering. One last bit of machinery whirring to a master unknown. It’s Olgo working on the transponders. Macau’s transponders.

“What are you doing?” I ask the juvenile.

“I’m sending a message.”

“To whom?”

“God.”

I watch as Olgo sends the message, putting all our reserve energy into that single burst.

t-3

“Hey Great . . . Superior.” Olgo’s voice breaks from the effort.

“Yes.”

“Do you think . . . my message was . . . r-received?”

“Depends,” I reply.

“On what?”

“If your God . . . has a decryption key.”

t-0

On the international space observatory and control unit of ISSR Hubli, the young Chironian sits in a swivel chair, watching the void. Macau Sellenger closes her eyes and lets the receiver drop, her head downcast, her heart heavy with guilt.

It’s over, she knows.

Macau has watched Ameo’s trajectory for months. Until it finally blipped out from her screens, leaving radio silence in its wake. The ship did send back one last signal to her, a scrambled burst of energy.

She can’t understand what it means.

“I’m sorry,” Macau whispers, her hand enclosed around the nickel infinity dangling from her neck.

END

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