

THE RESCUER

(A Science-Fiction Novella by Firsid Barsa)



Prologue: The Colonists

Stranded.

It's been two years now. Where the heck is the rescue ship?

“You are still reacting to something from the past. Stay focused on the present.”

“Huh?” She looked up, startled. It was like Bestboy was reading her thoughts as she sat on the sofa next to him and Gaffer, wrapped up in blankets for warmth, staring out the porthole of the captain’s lounge.

“Sorry, nothing. Just reading my horoscope in *WebVideoGamer.Guide*.” Bestboy, his prematurely balding head illuminated by the glow from the lantern, held up a two-year-old hardcopy of the popular magazine. “What’s your sign, T.D.?”

Bestboy, a self-defined “King of the Nerds”, was famous among his colleagues for his magazine collection and for his esoteric knowledge of vidgames, shows and movies, especially old ones from his favorite century, the 20th.

T.D. smiled weakly. “Gemini. Not that those particular constellations matter out here.” She gestured at the porthole framing the rugged horizon of the planet’s surface and, above that, bands of stars so dense they could be mistaken for thick clouds streaking across the night sky.

“ ‘Romance blooms in unlikely garden,’ “ he read her horoscope.

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“I might start to believe in astrology if it predicted something specific like, ‘you’ll find yourself stranded on a distant planet, living inside a damaged ship with no plumbing or electricity....’ “

“We may not have plumbing,” Gaffer corrected her, “but we do have a bit of juice.” The elderly electrician pointed to the oblong-shaped battery that powered their lantern.

“So what?” Bestboy grumbled. “What does it give us besides dim lighting?”

Gaffer grinned slyly. “Well, yesterday I did manage to rig up an adapter so we could hook it up to a vidplayer. In case you wanna watch movies tonight?”

“You got a vidplayer working?” T.D. asked, astonished that Gaffer hadn’t mentioned this before. But then, nobody paid much attention any more when Gaffer spent his days tinkering with what was left of the vid production studio.

“Sure! Wanna see?”

“Of course.” T.D. stood up. “You coming too, Bestboy?”

As the two men followed her out of the captain’s lounge, T.D. was unaware of their furtive glances at her *derriere*. Twenty-two years old, lean but curvy, athletic, blonde, she often elicited the admiration of the male sex.

She startled and whirled around when Bestboy shouted, “Did you see that?”

“What?”

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“Cockroach.” She peered up where he was pointing, but didn’t see anything. “Gone now. Slithered down a crack. I’m seeing them all the time. Or maybe I’m just nuts.”

“That goes without saying,” snickered Gaffer. “But you’re not wrong about the roaches. I’ve seen ‘em too. They’re everywhere.”

“They weren’t supposed to be here,” complained T.D. “We never brought their DNA.”

“They must have snuck aboard,” agreed Bestboy. “Bastards.”

On their way to the production studio the trio had to pass through what was left of the ship’s science section, ground zero of the catastrophe two years ago. T.D. averted her eyes from the horrendous gashes and burn marks in the bulkheads, still dotted with old blood stains. By pure chance, she had not been inside the ship at the time of the explosion. Otherwise....

It was chilly inside the studio. T.D. eased into her usual pink chair, with a regretful glance at the non-functioning warp-link which, at one time, had pulsed with life, transmitting fullband video and audio signals almost instantaneously to the Company’s main studio on Mars. “Hey, Gaffer,” she inquired hopefully, “any chance you could get the warp-link working on battery?”

“Nope,” was his laconic reply, as he connected his homemade adapter -- it looked like a sheet of cardboard crawling with tangled wires -- to the battery, and the battery to the vidplayer. Instantly the vidplayer panel lit up and hummed.

T.D. pried open a plastic container and extracted a shiny disc, all that was left of the thousands of hours of footage they had shot

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here on the planet. Everything else had mysteriously disappeared after the explosion. The label on the disc read “Blooper Reel”.

“Good morning, colonists. I hope you slept well.” Photogenic Phileas, tanned and smarmy, smirking into the camera lens. “I’m your host, Phileas Noreaster.” Behind Noreaster loomed The Mountain. The Company’s climate engineers had created a perfect alpine ski resort: crisply cold, but not too cold; light, fluffy snow falls every other day. Lumbering snowcat robots did the rest, maintaining immaculately groomed trails for the casual skiers; freestyle parks for the kids. T.D. spotted her favorite trail, “Twistor”, a moguls course. But she could not make out the ship itself perched above the trail, near what was eventually supposed to become the summit lodge.

It was ironic, she mused, that global warming, after decades of horrendous destruction, had finally led to its own solution: the science of climate control. And even more ironic that the solution was applied first to the cosmos – to the creation of luxury homes and resort colonies for the rich – and lastly to Mother Earth herself, where the billions of poor were forced to live in squalid slums without air-conditioning or even running water.

Noreaster paced near the future site of the resort’s base lodge and restaurant. Here it was kept a constant 16 degrees Centigrade, so he wore loose stylish trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. “Let’s quickly review the rules,” he beamed at the camera. “Your challenge as a group over the next viewing season is to make this

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planet habitable, self-sustaining, and able to accommodate tourists. You'll win points for accomplishing individual and group projects. Your exploits will be beamed to viewers on Earth, and also converted to vidgames. At the end of the season the colonist with the most votes wins the grand prize: five million units of vidgame stock. Ten runners up will be offered guaranteed employment opportunities at the resort."

The contestants cheered confidently, as the camera panned to capture their reactions.

"To begin this week's challenge, we're going to build a lake and surrounding ecosystem at the base of this mountain. Now, this planet has no native life forms, so we had to bring our own. Using our DNA database, you'll grow some microorganisms and perform some basic terraforming chores: planting gardens, releasing insects and worms into the soil, lots of worms. I hope none of you are squeamish about handling worms!"

"Worm yourself!" T.D. spoke aloud to the image in the monitor.

She'd had to fight Phileas off during the voyage through warped space. In retrospect, how foolish could she be, to invite him into her cabin: a good-looking guy, used to all the women swarming around him – no wonder he assumed she was coming on to him! But it was genuine innocence on her part: the cabins were small, the production crew were used to hanging out in each other's rooms, just like a college dorm.

Normally the on-air talent would keep their distance from drones like her, who functioned on the less glamorous side of the camera lens. So she'd been surprised, and a little flattered, when Phileas had struck up a conversation with her in the mess hall.

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She'd even commented about the "on-camera/off-camera" caste divide.

"Actually," he'd remarked, "I'm not really considered talent at all. I'm more of a writer-producer type. I'm just doing this gig as a favor to Sinjun. We used to be skiing buddies. He'd already hired a host for the show, but the host quit at the last minute, Sinjun was stuck, and he asked me to fill in. I wouldn't have agreed, but he enticed me with the skiing. Speaking of which, I heard a rumor that you used to be a junior moguls champion. I'd love to hear all about that. If you like, we could mosey on back to your cabin..."

He'd seemed like a nice person, even if he was considerably older than her – she guessed he was in his late thirties. They'd moseyed on back to her cabin. How foolish could she possibly be! It wasn't long before he'd made his move and tried to kiss her.

"Sorry," she'd objected angrily, "but I'm not allowed to fraternize with the host of the show. Even if you are just a last-minute replacement." When he'd persisted, she had punched him in his trim, tanned gut. Once his lungs started working again, he'd croaked, "You are one strong girl! Must be the moguls..."

She warned him firmly: "I would not have sex with you even if we were the last two humans left in the galaxy and everyone was counting on us to start a new race. Got it?"

"Okay, I get the hint. Exit stage left. Here I go."

Footage of colonists terraforming the base lodge area. Embryonic beginnings of The Lake. The theory was, even folks who didn't care for winter sports could come to Colonist Planet to hike and fish year round.

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Occasionally a glimpse of one of the numerous, but anonymous, Company men and women who labored behind the scenes. Viewers were led to believe that the amateur contestants accomplished everything on their own. What they didn't know was that every week shuttles came and went, bringing or taking away professional scientists and engineers. In fact, some of these folks had been living on the planet for years now, and had created everything from a breathable atmosphere to the various pleasant sub-climates.

According to the rules of the game the contestants were only allowed to eat what they themselves had created. After just a few episodes some were looking quite sickly. For product placement purposes, the girls were asked to wear tight jeans and T-shirts of certain brands. Tiny, waif-like Annie, the unemployed singer, was losing more body weight every week. On the disc, T.D. heard Phileas in a heated discussion with the show's director: "Christ, if we don't send anorexic Annie home soon, or at least feed her a steak or something, we're going to have a corpse on our hands!"

"Who cares?" the director shot back. "Sinjun made sure all the cast were fully insured. Besides, she's popular with the viewers just the way she is. Polls show they wanna see a budding romance between her and Gerald, that good-looking contractor from Mexico."

"Is Anorexic Annie still alive?" Bestboy asked curiously, his eyes glued to the vidscreen.

T.D. shook her head. "She died a long time ago."

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Medium shot of Phileas again, handsome in fake-safari khaki. Usually glib, uncharacteristically flubbing his first two takes. “Another one for the blooper reel,” he chuckled. “Hey, T.D.!” He winked at her unseen presence.

T.D. tried to remember that day of shooting. Where had she been working? Her usual spot was right here in this studio, sitting in this very chair, at the director’s right hand.

Oh yes, now she remembered, a couple of times she’d had to fill in for an ailing production assistant or floor manager, that’s probably why she was working outdoors that day. Yes, there she was on the vidscreen, wearing headphones – her hair much shorter back then. Noreaster’s voice: “That’s T.D. you’re looking at now. A champion skier, too. Quite a beauty, don’t you agree? What kind of name is T.D., anyway?” the annoying host teased her.

“It stands for Technical Director.” She saw herself blushing with aggravation. “On remote shoots we all call each other by our titles.”

“Technical Director! That’s an impressive title.”

“The title’s more impressive than the job. Mostly I just push buttons.”

“Oh, you’re the one who switches the camera feeds when we hear the director say, ‘Cut to Camera Three,’ or something like that.”

“Correct. And if I may ask,” she made a feeble, defensive attempt at sarcasm, “what kind of name is *Phileas*?”

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The camera panned back to capture the full force of the host's Shirley Temple-like dimples beaming in her direction. "My mom named me after the hero of Around the World in Eighty Days. Jules Verne?"

"Let's go, people!" the director's weary voice interrupted their banter.

Instantly the host's face was all business. He took a moment to compose himself. Sunlight framed his dark hair, rendering an incongruous halo effect. "Good morning, colonists. For this week's challenge, we'll be genetically altering our plants to produce more fruits and seeds, thus enabling us to increase our food rations...."

"Look, that's where we're sitting now!" Bestboy pointed to the monitor. On the screen, Phileas was lounging in T.D.'s pink chair, the late director hovering over his shoulder.

A sharp, crackly voice from the warp-link: "Phileas, old buddy, you gotta understand what's happening back here, what with the war and stock market collapse and all.... You heard that the ski resort financing fell through, right? So all we got left is the virtual game stocks, and they rise and fall purely on the ratings of the show itself. Well, let me tell you, my friend, ratings took a nosedive after last week's dismal episode. No one wants to watch people breeding plants. Thus, it's time to spice up the show."

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“Spice it up? I can do that, Sinjun. I’ll have the girl colonists wear tiny bikinis and splash around in the lake. Maybe a mud fight....”

“Sounds good. Make it so. But it’s not enough. I’ll tell you what: now that we don’t need the mountain any more for skiing, let’s get out the dynamite and blow the whole fucker up. The male demographic loves big explosions. Yeah, yeah, I want to see your cute colonists blasting away in next week’s episode... maybe do that in bikinis too.”

“Blow up the mountain? Are you crazy? I can’t risk my people getting hurt....”

“*Your* people?” crackled Sinjun’s voice sarcastically. “Why do you worry about those cattle when I’m leveraged all the way up to my toupee? My investors spent the equivalent of a small planet’s GNP on our policy with Lloyd’s. The way things are looking now, we’d probably make *more* money if the talent all croaked so we could collect the insurance. Ha ha! Goodbye, pal!”

Click.

The director laughed and clapped Phileas on the shoulder. “Lighten up, buddy, he’s only joking. No one’s gonna get hurt on *my* show, not even the worms.... Speaking of which, where’s my worm wrangler? I need to talk to him about--” He suddenly looked up and into the lens. “Hey, who turned that camera on?”

“It’s for the blooper reel,” Phileas explained. “We’ll show it during the summer hiatus. The fans can’t get enough of that stuff.”

“What fans?” grumbled the director. “You heard the man.”

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The next scene on the blooper reel opened with a shot of the tent city, sprawled around the shores of the ever-expanding lake. As colonists busied themselves setting up rudimentary machinery, Phileas, crisp and well-groomed, strolled among them, speaking into the camera lens: "... In an earlier episode you'll recall that we planted these pine trees from genetically-engineered seeds. That's why they grew up so fast – wow, just look at 'em! Now, according to the rules of the game, we're only allowed to use battery-powered saws, like this one here. Before we start cutting the trees, we're going to issue each of the colonists their own personal battery, so stand in line, folks..." The scene dragged on, with Phileas handing out the familiar-looking oblong devices to the colonists. T.D. remembered that the life-saving batteries, along with much other needed equipment, had arrived by Company shuttle just a few days prior to the explosion.

After that, the final scene on the blooper disc, before it dissolved into static, revealed three contestants gingerly examining the Company-issued dynamite. "Remember, guys," the voice of someone, probably a Company engineer, was heard to say, "never take the dynamite out of the approved area."

T.D. switched off the battery and stood up. "I think it's time I paid someone a visit." As her colleagues watched curiously she opened the equipment closet and fished around for what she needed: sleeping bag, backpack, a pair of boots, a couple of ski poles.... And a pair of red and silver Graviton 150's....

"You're not going down *there*?" Gaffer asked her, his voice showing concern.

"Just for a day or two."

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“But...” Bestboy offered nervously, “those people don’t like us. They never come up to visit us any more.”

“That’s only because the gondola stopped working, and they don’t like to waste calories on the hike.”

“Just as well for us,” Gaffer commented grimly. “It’s kept them from charging up here and taking what few rations we have left.”

“We’ve always been willing to share,” T.D. countered, staring blankly at her two friends.

“It isn’t just that,” said Bestboy. “It’s like we’ve become two separate tribes: We’re the summit-dwellers who live in the ship; and they’re the base-dwellers who live in tents. Just like that old Doctor Who episode where he meets Leela and they’ve reverted to savagery and—“

“Just promise me one thing,” Gaffer interrupted, “don’t tell those folks that there’s only the three of us left. They have to think that there’s more of us. Otherwise...”

“You can’t fight gravity, kid.”

She could hear the words of her first coach, once a Moguls champion himself, later the grizzled trainer of young talent.

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Long after she had perfected her technique, she sometimes held back, she would lose her confidence. Even though she knew Coach would never send her down a run she couldn't handle.

"You can't fight gravity," he would chide the serious-faced little girl, whenever she started to balk at a dip too low, or a jump too high. "Gravity isn't the enemy, kid. Gravity is your friend. Just keep your hips forward, stay over your feet, and you'll be fine."

"Gravity is my friend," she whispered to herself, as she took a deep breath and plunged down the dark run.

Following the tracks of the now-abandoned gondola lift, she half-skied, half-skidded down the upper slopes. Without the snowcat grooming, the trails had gotten dilapidated and bumpy. However, even without artificial maintenance, the climate that had been set up still worked, more or less. That is, there was plenty of snow, but it didn't always go to the right place. T.D. almost took a fatal tumble when she caught an edge on a bare patch, but she managed to recover just in time, sailing over a ledge, somehow twisting herself back into position, landing miraculously on both feet, on the trail below.

Once she was on Twistor, she was starting to feel pumped. Her knees bobbed up and down as if on springs, in rhythm with the natural moguls. Her adrenaline was pumping at full throttle. Then it was hard going again, on the lower slopes. She was glad when she finally reached the base lodge. Stripping off her boots and storing her equipment, she headed on foot for the lake.

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As the two moons rose over Tent City, the colonists came straggling out of their tents to see T.D. Some of them were ragged, almost naked. A woman murmured, "It's her. One of the ship people." T.D. heard a baby wailing inside one of the tents.

She hid her uneasiness by making eye contact, smiling. Not everyone returned her greeting. It had been several months since she had last ventured down here.

Like every tribe, the base-dwellers had their leader, whose yellow tent stood right at the end of a long row of similar tents, not far from the shore of the gleaming lake.

"Phileas!" she called into the flap. "It's me. T.D."

"Come on in," was the quick reply.

The inside of his tent was lit by a battery-powered lantern. Phileas Noreaster sat cross-legged, buddha-like on his reed mat. When she kneeled down beside him he smiled at her with his familiar dimples. But his face was gaunt, and there was a patch over the empty socket of his right eye. By chance, Phileas had been inside the ship at the moment of the explosion. His injuries had been serious, but he had survived, and had eventually left the shelter of the ship to join the colonists in Tent City.

"Good to see you, T.D." His voice was weak and raspy. "Don't tell me you hiked all the way down here in the dark? My goodness, you could have fallen and...."

"I skied most of the way," she reassured him.

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“You ship people hardly visit us anymore. How many of you are left?”

Remembering Gaffer’s warning, she hesitated for a second. “Oh, a dozen or so,” she lied. “Mostly ship’s crew, you know, those are the strongest, toughest guys, they went through astronaut training. And me, Bestboy and Gaffer, from the video production side. Grip died a couple of weeks ago.” For some reason she couldn’t stop herself from mentioning Grip; they were still in mourning for him.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m sorry too. We should stay in touch and help each other more. Is there anything you need from us? Blankets?”

He shook his head. “All we really need is food, and I know you guys don’t have much either. We still eat a lot of worms, but some of the colonists are starting to get good at fishing and hunting. It’s a lot harder than you think!” He touched her hand. “Pretty sad, isn’t it? That no one’s come for us? What’s your theory?”

Her eyes went hard. “My theory?” She told him about the blooper reel. “My theory is that the Company dynamited their own ship for the insurance money!”

The host’s face grew pale. After pondering a moment, he remarked: “I did find it suspicious that all the engineers left the planet just a couple of days before the explosion. Still, I can’t believe even Sinjun would do something that evil. And even assuming he did, assuming the lying bastard told the viewers that everyone was killed, wouldn’t Lloyd’s still send insurance adjusters and a salvage ship back?” His voice cracked. He looked

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for all the world like a lost little boy whose mother had abandoned him at the mall. Wishing to offer comfort, she leaned over and hugged him.

Phileas hugged her back. A long hug. Then the hug turned into a kiss.

When she finally pulled away, he was grinning, some of his old jauntiness back. “Well, anyway, if I did have to be stranded somewhere, I guess I’d rather be stranded here with you.”

“Likewise,” she whispered, savoring the unexpected emotions of empathy and affection for a fellow human being. In watching the outtakes, she had seen how Phileas cared about the colonists; she was starting to feel that she might have misjudged him in the past. And damn it, she was lonely, she needed comfort too. The words came pouring out of her: “Phileas, the hardest part for me is worrying about my folks. They probably think I’m dead. They hated me dropping out of school to take this job, and they disapproved of gaming. I told them, well, it wasn’t like it was a videogame, because it was real people. Just a rationalization, I guess. I secretly dreamed of being a producer, and I saw this as the chance of a lifetime, the ultimate truck shoot. Plus I’d get to ski every day of the year! So now I’m stuck here, instead of staying in college, majoring in English lit, and making my parents happy.”

Phileas kissed her hand. “English Literature? Perfect! Wasn’t it Shakespeare who said all life is a game?”

“No, actually he said it was a stage.” She grinned, stroking his dark, tangled hair.

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“Maybe it’s both. That’s why people love these reality shows. Maybe... even real life is a game, with the gods placing us in absurd situations and watching how we react.”

Their lips met again and he pulled her closer.....

“Hey,” he whispered a moment later, “kill the light, will you?”

Their lips still locked, T.D. reached out with one hand to grope for the lantern. She couldn’t find the power button, so she switched off the entire battery instead.

Thousands of light-years away, inside a studio carved into a mountain in the harsh Martian outback, one of a bank of three dozen vidscreens suddenly went blank.

“Goddamn! Cut to Camera Three! Quick quick! Damn.... But still.... Wow!” The short chubby man pumped his fists in the air, while his army of assistants broke out in wild applause. “About fucking time! And to think they weren’t gonna renew me for a fourth season. But now, with this great new storyline—“

“Hold on, Sinjun.” His Technical Director, a petite redhead, grabbed his arm to interrupt his tirade. “The numbers are just coming in over the wire.”

Sinjun’s eyes greedily scanned the display. “Oh yeah! Our ratings just went sky-high when those two smooched, everybody’s downloading us.” He leaned back. “We haven’t had numbers this

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big since the episode when we introduced ‘the twist’. Gang, I feel vindicated! The young male demographic was clamoring to see more of the T.D. character, but I kept telling my boss we can’t control where those clowns put the hidden cameras. Too bad we had to hide them in the batteries, the morons keep breaking them. But it’s the best my engineers could come up with.”

“I think they work pretty good,” Sinjun’s sound technician pointed out, “especially when you consider that they’re wireless!”

“You’re right, Audioboy. Fortunately for us Noreaster always keeps one inside his tent, or we’d never have gotten that shot. I particularly loved that bit about life being a game, you can’t even script stuff that good! By the way, you owe me ten units, you bet me she’d fall for the Bestboy character.”

“I know,” Audioboy admitted glumly, his eye never wavering from the switching board, where wavy parabolas denoted the various sounds and conversations transmitted from Colonist Planet. “And before that, I bet you they’d all be dead of starvation by now.”

“No way! They still got plenty of worms to eat!” Sinjun leaned forward and directed the redhead: “Fade to Camera fourteen. I wanna see how that nice young Russian couple is doing, the ones that had the baby in last week’s episode.”

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PART I: THE SNIPER



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Scene 1: The New Matriarch.

[Sister speaks:]

Our world is gone, and our Mother is dead.

All the families, the great clans, the nations – all gone.

“Mother...” I whisper to her lifeless form. “Mother, please wake up?”

From her: Darkness. Stony silence.

My sisters: Some dying slowly. I feel their agony as pale violet wavelets.

“Quick! They are coming again!” That is my sister, Mglá. Her thoughts are bright yellow with panic.

Other voices chime in, voices of my sisters, cousins, companions and soldiers. Voices of the Kith: “Please. You are our Mother now. You must save us.”

I suffer, I am weak from the blast and scouring. But I realize: It is true. I am next in line of succession. My Mother is dead. As I take stock I sense that only two of my sisters are still alive: Mglá and Tma. Now I am their Mother. I must save the remnant of my people from final extermination.

Mglá again: “The Hurry!” Her crystalline veins throb in quick, but even, pulses. “*They* are returning, in *Their* mighty Timeships.”

I shed tendrils of dust; which connect to Mother’s lifeless body. Her last thoughts, like a powdery cloud, float into my mind,

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each thought a swirl of magnetic pulses. Mother's final commands.

“We must do that which Mother herself failed to do,” I communicate to Mglá and Tma. “I am creating a Balanced State. Brace yourselves...”

Mglá sighs.

And then we are gone. Vanished.

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Scene 2: The Harsh Law Of The Timestream.

[The Mountain speaks:]

Here is a story for you:

Once upon a time there was a race of beings. A wise and ancient race called the *binti*, who would appear to those who didn't know them, as mere stones.

Each *binti* individual begins her life as a crystalline egg, no bigger than a grain of sand tumbling along the ground. Once she reaches maturity, the *binti* individual becomes immobile, as if frozen. Yet she communicates constantly with her sisters and daughters. The *binti* communicate in two ways that are known to us: They transmit messages by disseminating dust particles, intelligent dandruff. And they reflect waves of light and other electro-magnetic energy, by manipulating the crystalline matrices within their own bodies. We believe that this is also the method whereby they control their vast network of computing machines, also constructed from stone and crystal.

At a certain time in her life's cycle, the mature *binti* moves again: She must roll back to the very place where she herself was hatched – in order to hatch her own young. In doing so, she reiterates a much earlier stage in *binti* evolution, when they are believed to have been mobile, organic beings.

In time, the *binti* colonies had formed a stony web across the entire land surface of their planet, which they called *Sarduwe*. A planet in a sea of planets. A galaxy in a swarm of galaxies. A universe in an ocean of universes.

This planet *Sarduwe* is orbited by two moons and consists

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mostly of water, having one large continent, a much smaller land mass, and several scattered islands. In addition to the *binti*, *Sarduwe* was inhabited by legions of other lifeforms, some organic, some inorganic. The *binti* signed contracts with these other species. They used them as couriers, as tools, as hired helpers – but never as slaves.

On the great continent, the *binti* constructed a civilization based upon their idea of order and justice. The *binti* were brilliant mathematicians and physicists. They understood space travel, yet, being sluggish by nature, chose not to venture off their own world, preferring instead to cultivate perfect, jewel-like lives for each member of their race.

The *binti* obsession with perfection proved to be their downfall. It brought them to the attention of my masters.

Many eons ago, my masters, also great scientists, discovered the secret of the “balanced state”. Using this technology, they were able to create pocket universes, in which Time may stand still, or even flow backwards.

My masters thus conquered the quantum indeterminacy which dooms lesser races to life in a universe where Time may only travel in one direction: where youth and vigor must give way to decrepitude; and beauty to decay.

At the quantum level, the behavior of every particle is a function of effects not just from its Past, but also from its Future. Past and Future are held in eternal balance, in a state of order and predictability.

And yet, at the macro level, due to the malevolent influence of Gravity, this balance is disrupted, Time is born, and the brutal

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statistics of Time's Arrow assume control over matter and energy and, hence, of all living beings.

Fortunately, my masters discovered the secret to restoring quantum harmony, even at the macro level. They classified this knowledge as a vital military secret, never to be shared with any other race.

Until the brilliant *binti* began to figure it out....

After the *binti* had worked out the quantum mathematics of creating a Balanced State, the *binti* matriarch authorized a risky Time experiment. Why? To correct a past mistake:

Once upon a Time, there had been an evil Matriarch. Every *binti* child knew that she was evil because she had come to power by murdering her own mother, while emitting strange, bright oranges pulses. A scheme was hatched to travel back in time and execute this evil ancestress while still a tiny egg. This act would remove the blot from an otherwise perfect *binti* history.

This experiment was never carried out.

Instead, the *binti* drew down upon themselves the wrath of another wise and ancient race, whose true name may not be pronounced. A race denoted by their enemies as "the self-designated Guardians of the Timestream". Or, "Guardians", for short. I know them as my masters.

The Guardians dispatched a powerful fleet to *Sarduwe*. All lifeforms were wiped out, the innocent along with the guilty. Such is the harsh law of the Timestream. The *binti* were exterminated. All but for one family, the Royal Kith, who were able to hide, temporarily, in their planet's cooling core, nurtured by a crystalline

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field of indestructible computing machines.

When the Guardians learned that there had been survivors, they dispatched their fleet again. Such is the harsh law of the Timestream.

The fleet arrived and found nothing. An empty core. A planet scoured of all life. The rocks – were just rocks. The sand – was just sand. The *binti* had – vanished.

And yet.... The Guardians were convinced that there had been survivors. They dispatched Temporal Specialists forward and backward in Time, to no avail. One Specialist believed he had caught a very faint trace of the fugitives; yet this trace led nowhere.

The Council of Scientists pronounced the unthinkable: “We believe that the *binti* survivors have created their own Balanced State, a pocket universe, in which to hide from our wrath. Therein they live, and cower, within their celestial spiderhole.”

The Guardians dispatched a Sniper to *Sarduwe*.

The Sniper is a special soldier, originally from a race conquered and enslaved by the Guardians, now partially incorporating Guardian genetic material; large in size, very powerful, obedient to his masters, having no family or friends, no needs of his own, trained to accomplish one single kill, and then, himself, to die.

The mission of this Sniper was to dwell, in normal time, on the *binti* home planet, and to watch for traces of the surviving fugitives.

Wherever they dwelled now, they could not forever resist the

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lure of their home. A powerful instinct would pull them back, to breed, to hatch their young. Sooner or later, the Sniper knew, the renegades would show themselves again, in normal Time.

They would poke their heads out of their spiderhole. And in that moment, the Sniper would exterminate them. For the good of the universe and the integrity of the Timestream.

Like any good hunter, the Sniper assumed the form of his prey.

I am that Sniper, and here I stand, in the shape of a Mountain, watching, always watching.

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Scene 3: The Love Of A Mountain.

[The Mountain speaks:]

Time feels strange.

It feels strange to loom here, century after century, millennium after millennium, watching the solar disk rise and set, feeling the air become cold, then warm, then cold again, in season.

It gives me an inkling what it must feel like to be a mortal being.

Yes, I know all about mortals. I have seen creatures that are to me as an ant would be to them, crawling beneath their feet; barely worthy of notice. Oh yes, they might watch for a moment, peering down at the tiny scurrying being, wondering whither he rushed with such a busy air. So I too glanced down with amusement one day as their silver vessel, no bigger than a toy, blew in from the sky and settled on my summit. Tiny beings who called themselves “humans” scurried out of the vessel and swarmed everywhere, on me, then down in my valley, building, creating, chattering in their primitive language.

I understood enough to grasp that they had come here, to *Sarduwe*, which they called Colonist Planet, to this world which my race had made lifeless, to create life and to build a new world for themselves. They had brought with them the genetic seeds of a multitude of beings which they called “plants” and “animals”, all related to themselves, all constructed of carbon, all formed from the stuff of a rudimentary four-symbol alphabet. Clever as these humans appeared to be, even able to navigate between the stars, they posed no threat to me, to my race, nor to the Timestream; thus, I left them alone.

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The humans called me “Mountain”, they unleashed their life codes upon me. Soon my broad slopes were green with their cousins: grass and trees. Their worms burrowed within me and generated fertile soil for their flowers, who made me beautiful with color. Their four-legged friends – creatures they called “horses”, “cows”, “dogs”, “cats”, and others, frolicked in the meadows the humans had created at my base. Scaly water creatures called “fishes” swam in my newborn rivulets. These clever humans could even manipulate climate: soon my head and flanks whitened from mounds of frozen water.

I tried to ignore them. And yet.... There was one among them.... One they referred to as a “woman” because she was capable of gestating more of their kind. Each morning, as *Sarduwe’s* sun blazed out upon my slopes, this female biped emerged from their silver vessel and snapped a pair of long artificial appendages onto the bottoms of her own, organic limbs. She then glided down the frosty trails of my steepest pathways, twisting and leaping as she went. When she reached that part of me that had no frozen water, she would unsnap her appendages and ambulate back up me. But first she would kneel down on me, and she would exclaim, “I love you, my beautiful Mountain!”

In all of my timeless, interminable existence, no being, mortal or immortal, had ever cared for me. She loved me.

She loved *me*. A Sniper incapable of love, even for his own kind.

She spoke to me often, and it was by listening to her speech and analyzing its components that I learned their strange language.

“Dear Mountain,” she crooned to me one day, lying upon me, flat on her back, gazing up at *Sarduwe’s* early-morning sun. “I

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hope you don't mind me coming out here every morning and ripping up moguls on you. Back on my world we're not allowed to any more, you know, what with all the environmental laws. And I understand that, I totally do. I mean, it's our own fault that we wiped out most of the animal and plant species, and that isn't right. We have to preserve what's left. But still, I missed it so much ... I missed the speed and the feeling of power... and that was why I came here. That's why we all came halfway across the galaxy. You see, Mountain, our Company's going to build a huge resort right here on you, and people will pay big money to come here and have fun. I'm sure you won't mind us taking over your planet, since no one else is living here. Besides, we're not taking any life *away* from you, no, sir, we're bringing it *to* you!"

I felt an odd displeasure when the clever humans finished building their pulley system, on which they could ride up and down me in a little cart on a wire. No longer did my new friend have to hike back up me on foot. Less time for me to spend alone with her. One day as she snapped off her appendages and prepared to hop into the little cart at my base, I whispered to her: "Glide down again, little one."

She cocked her head, as if she heard me. But no, my speech was to her as the rustling of the breeze in the conifers which the humans had planted along the tracks of their pulley.

My friend rode up my side with another human, a male. I watched them, and I saw them emerge from the cart, once on my summit, and I heard the male exclaim, "Well, back to the salt mines?" Which I didn't understand, as there was no mine in me, salt or otherwise.

The girl hesitated, replied: "You go, Grip. I need one more run. I love this Mountain so much!"

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“Come on, T.D. We’ll be late for work. We have to set up for the big dynamite scene.”

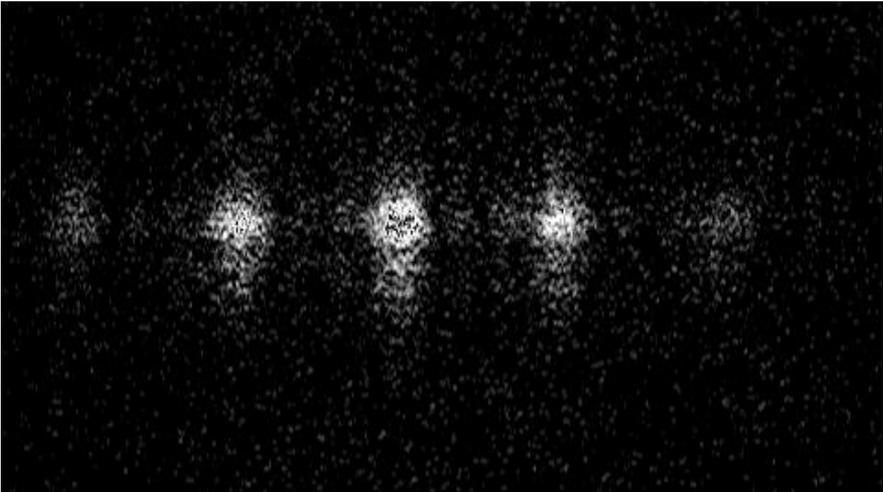
“Cover for me? Please? Just one more run.”

One more run....

It was during that last run, while she was gliding down me again, that her human friends set off a powerful explosion on my summit, injuring me not in the slightest, but killing many of their own kind, and damaging their ship beyond repair.

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PART II: IDEMPOTENT



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Scene 1: Hiding In Plain Sight.

[Mother speaks:]

Darkness and Terror.

The mysterious Guardians of Time destroyed everything we had, everything we loved.

All that is left to us: this bubble, this miniverse, into which we few escaped. We, who live like criminals cowering in this hole, can never atone for the agony of our people.

We fear: Is there a Sniper standing above us, waiting, waiting?

We need to return to our birthplace to hatch our young... We risk a peek; we poke our heads up for just one moment....

A mistake. A Sniper is there. He senses us ... we sense him. He has transformed himself into a mighty Mountain. He roars with rage!

In a moment of panic and brilliance, my sister Tma, now our Chief Scientist, transports our pocket universe into the bowels of this very Mountain, who is the Sniper himself. A crack within a crevice within a rock: Here we are safe from detection, for that which shields the Sniper from Time's Arrow now shields us from him. Our little universe is accepted into his body, like one of his own cells. Within his form we float ... free ... and yet imprisoned. But for how long? And what will happen to our race if we cannot hatch our young?

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Scene 2: The Sniper Shrugged.

[Mother speaks:]

In the normal universe, no more Time has passed than it would take an inanimate boulder plunging from the top of the Mountain to land in the lake below. In that amount of Time we peered out from our miniverse, were sensed by the Sniper, ducked back in, transported ourselves into the bowels of the Sniper and ... what followed from that....

Sensing our presence, finding us, losing us, his concentration breaking for just a moment, the Sniper shrugged. And in that fatal shrug, he doomed his unwary passengers. Yes, there were others crawling upon him, we later learned. Semi-intelligent beings composed of water, carbon, and lipids. We came to learn that they designate themselves “humans”, from their ancient word “gwumis”, meaning the soil of their native planet. They are made of earth and soil. Like us. But much more fragile.

First rocks falling. Then sheets of frozen water. Then boulders. Within minutes the silver ship is gone, and all within it, buried alive. We hear the humans cry out in agony. Their voices are carried as waves of sound reverberating through the rocks and soil of the normal universe.

My soldiers hasten to carry out my commands. There are two survivors: we pluck them out of their silver vessel and transport them into our miniverse within the rocky tomb of the Sniper’s belly. In doing so, we risk detection, but in the end all is well: the Sniper is quiet again, wrapped up in his own dark thoughts.

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Scene 3: Transported.

[Tma Speaks:]

The human survivors are frightened, they do not know what happened, or why they are now entombed with us in our Balanced State.

In the normal universe it would have taken me some Time to learn their language. But since Time does not exist here, I knew it already, since I would have learned it in the Future.

The humans, on the other hand, still struggle with my language, but only because their minds are more primitive than mine. So, I speak to them very simply, as one would speak to an egg.

The one they call Gaffer is curious how beings such as ourselves could have transported him so quickly from one place to another.

“Many generations ago,” I explain to him, “before our ancestors chose to become immobile, they learned how to convert the particles of ordinary matter into their twins. These twin particles, once one switches off their electrical charge, may pass through one another without repulsion, as easily as your limbs can pass through air. Hence, these particles may be moved to any location we desire, and there re-converted back into ordinary matter.”

“Just like the transporter in those old Star Trek vids,” Bestboy offers helpfully.

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Gaffer snorts dismissively, but even he cannot deny that he is now here with us, that he is alive and not crushed inside his doomed ship.

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Scene 4: A Mountain's Remorse.

[The Mountain Speaks:]

In the weeks that followed the explosion, all their machines died off one by one, yet, strangely, the new climate they had created for me continued to function.

For two full cycles of seasons, I did not see my friend again, and I feared that she had perished.

And then one day, to my unutterable joy, I saw her again. Miraculously, she was gliding down me again on her artificial appendages.

I tried to communicate with her: “Little one! Wait! Where are you going?”

But she did not hear me.

She was out of my sight for several revolutions of *Sarduwe* around its own axis.

I missed her. Yet I was happy that she was not up there on my summit at the time of the second accident.

I say “accident”, but this second one was my fault. I never intended....

For one moment I lost my concentration.... A blip in the Timestream indicated the *binti*, popping their heads up from their miniverse, like gophers from their hidey-hole. In that moment I shrugged my massive shoulders as I focused my weapon on my prey ... and in an instant a hail of boulders dislodged from me and

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rained down upon the humans' already-damaged vessel. All within it were buried alive within my bowels.

A moment later, in normal Time, and the blip was gone.

A false alarm, perhaps?

I saw no *binti*. The Timestream was clear.

But in my carelessness I had wiped out this nest of stranded humans; just as one of them might accidentally kick over a dying anthill.

After that, after one day had followed one night, and then another day, I saw my little friend again.

She had climbed up me, on foot, all the way back to my summit, accompanied by a male.

I saw that he tried to comfort her, as she screamed, tearing at the soil with her bare hands.

Something unbearable moved within me.

Was it the dull gnawing of jealousy? Was it the knife-life pain of remorse?

Or was it just the itching of unseen beings? Tiny beings, scurrying beings, burrowing beings. I felt them within me; they were not the little worms, whom I liked, but something else entirely. Tiny black bugs. Evil creatures of malign need, that had dwelled within the humans' vessel, hiding in cracks and infecting everything they touched. Caught up in my avalanche, they were now within *me*, infesting *me*.

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I tried to ignore them, as I gazed at my little friend. She was sitting with the male, on the spot where their vessel had once lain, now buried within me under tons of rocks. She was making strange keening sounds, and water was dripping from her beautiful optical devices.

I saw the male embrace her with his two forelimbs. I wished that I too might embrace her.

There was one thing I could have done for her: Rewind Time, return her friends to her.

But that was not permitted by the Guardians. Such is the harsh law of the Timestream.

The male finally spoke: “Come on, love. There’s nothing we can do here. Let’s go back to Tent City.”

“But Phileas—“

“We’ll return, T.D., I swear it. We’ll bring a bunch of strong guys and some shovels. Come.”

Holding hands, they descended my flanks.

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Scene 5: Double Slit.

[Mgla speaks:]

The humans are slowly adapting to their new life. Mother has signed contracts with them: they are eager to work. The one they call Bestboy has used his limbs and tools to prepare a special chamber for my next project, code-named “Sentinel”. The one they call Gaffer has helped me rig up the equipment that I need. Sentinel’s purpose is to monitor *Sarduwe’s* surface and spy on the Sniper, within whose body we are now trapped.

“This reminds me of my first shop class, back when I was a kid,” Gaffer reminisces, as he positions the screen that he has created for me according to Tma’s design. The screen is composed of a special photo-sensitive crystal lattice. “Way back when. Our very first assignment was to build a screen much like this and shoot photons at it.”

“What was the point of such an endeavor?” I ask him.

“Oh, you know. Just repeating a classic experiment from centuries ago. The one where you blast the screen with a photon beam, but the light has to travel through a little wall to get there. A wall with two little windows cut into it. So the photons travel through both windows at the same time and draw a little picture on the screen behind the wall.”

“A picture?”

“Well, not exactly a picture. Just lighter and darker stripes, showing how the two light waves either augmented or cancelled each other out.”

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“I understand.”

“Then the teacher had us repeat the experiment, but this time we just shot one photon at a time. And we sat and watched the same damned picture drawing itself, one dot at a time. So each photon still interfered with itself, even though it wasn’t a wave any more. Never could figure that one out.”

“At the level of the individual photon,” I explain to him, “Past and Future are not connected in a linear fashion. The end result of your experiment was the pattern of interference drawn on the screen. That result works backward to create the Past that it needs to come into existence.”

“Huh?”

“For example, I believe that in the Future my race survives and even flourishes. That Future is affecting what we will do here today, you and I.”

First Gaffer projects the contents of my chamber, including myself, onto a mirror-image chamber, in which charge is anti-charge, particles become anti-particles, and Time is reversed. We call this chamber the “template”.

Next we miniaturize the template to the size of a molecule, and from this mold we produce millions of tiny copies, which we encase in flexible shells. Each seed is large enough so that all the information of my original chamber is preserved, by increasing the number of spins and angles of the component matter; but each still small enough to have a wavelength and be free of the effect of Gravity. For, where there is Gravity there cannot be Timelessness. And I intend for these spores to last for a very long Time.

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I explain to Gaffer that these spores will be transported onto the surface of our planet, and then scattered randomly about the area of the Mountain. Then I myself, the miniature copies of me, within the spores, will be my own eyes and ears watching the Sniper in normal Time.

“Er, well, how will you communicate with yourself?” he asks me.

“The same photo-sensitive screen which you used to project my image onto the template. With just a few modifications, it can also serve as my monitor.”

“Hmm... okay... I don't really get that, but ... okay, how are you going to get these little thingies up there onto the surface?”

Here he has me stumped. I have not yet figured that out. But I have an idea....

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Scene 6: The Bite.

[The Mountain speaks:]

I saw my little friend one last time. True to her word, she had returned with the other surviving humans. They carried tools, with which they dug holes into my bowels, seeking their lost comrades.

After one long day devoted to this futile task, I watched her collapse with exhaustion, lying on me, weeping again, and there was nothing I could do to help, or to comfort her. The annoying male, whom she had apparently chosen to be her mate, remained with her. They embraced one another. Their voices lilted with sorrow.

And then she screamed in pain and leaped to her feet. “Holy shit! Ouch!”

“What is it, T.D.? What is it?”

“Something bit me – uh, there it is, that green bug. What the hell is that thing?”

“Looks like a cockroach. Only green...”

The male attempted to squash the bug, but it skittered away.

The grief I had caused my little friend I could not bear any more. So I closed my mental eyes and slept for twenty thousand orbits around *Sarduwe*'s sun.

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Scene 7: Messengers Between Worlds.

[Mother speaks:]

I am Mother. Upon me rests all the responsibility of saving our *binti* race, as well as our human allies, from final extermination.

Along with the humans, we have adopted their parasites, six-legged creatures, who had taken up residence in their vessel. The humans call these creatures “cockroaches” and despise them. But we have found them to be useful: They are so small and agile that they are capable of slipping back and forth between the normal universe and our own place of exile.

Thus, these creatures have proved to be the perfect messengers for taking our spores and carrying them up onto the Mountain. Each insect can carry within its mandible one spore, completely safe from detection by the Sniper. The insects were instructed to regurgitate the spores onto the ground. But some of the creatures became aggressive and disobeyed.

There was one unexpected consequence:

Whenever a cockroach bites a human, I find myself, or rather a copy of myself, cascading and plunging through that human’s bloodstream and into their cellular structures, that which they call “DNA”.

The first time was frightening; the second time exhilarating.

The third time it happened, our late Mother withdrew her approval of project Sentinel. Mother became concerned about the

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aggression of the cockroaches and the effect on human genetics. Our *binti* laws prohibit genetic tampering with other species.

Unfortunately, Mother then grew ill unexpectedly and died. No doubt as a delayed result of the scouring which the Guardians inflicted on us.

Leaving me, Mglá, next in line of succession.

But I am no longer Mglá. I have re-named myself Idempotent: “She who creates Herself anew every Time”.

I am Mother.

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Scene 8: Sentinel.

[Gaffer speaks:]

These rock ladies spook me every time! I'll just be sitting there working, minding my own business; and then, all of a sudden, one of them is standing there right next to me.

Turns out, they don't really move. Best I can figure out, they just shuffle reality around until it comes to *them*.

Anyhow, I stopped thinking about that too much and just accepted it; and I also stopped wondering how it was I could sit there and have a conversation with someone who doesn't have a mouth or ears. Well, I guess I do most of the talking; and they just, I dunno, vibrate or something; but I understand them pretty good, and it all works out somehow. I gotta hand it to them, they really know their electronics, and I have to respect that.

Well, I finally got this monitor-thing working. I call it my "crystal ball", and you'll see why in a second, after I explain what happened.

So I'm sitting there tinkering with it, as usual, and all of a sudden it starts working. Just like watching a vidscreen: I see a lovely green meadow, grass, flowers, the whole nine yards. I see the blue sky, fringed with trees. It's all so beautiful I just want to cry, and I'd give anything to be out there in the open air!

As if by magic, the rock-lady, she calls herself Mother, she's standing there next to me.

"The receiver started working," I tell her, pointing to the image that is being transmitted, apparently by one of her spores.

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As we watch the transmission, an unseen director cuts from one camera feed to another: Now we are indoors. Inside some kind of workshop, and we see a group of men cutting out a length of wire; and it's—

“Holy mackerel!”

It takes me a moment to realize what I am looking at. I am looking at myself!

“Is that you?” Rock-lady asks, and I swear I can even hear surprise in her “voice”.

“Yeah, it's me. With my team from the ship. Yeah, that's Grip standing over there. But Grip isn't alive any more. How the hell...”

“We are seeing images from the Past,” Rock-lady concludes.

“But the spores are up there right now...”

“To the spores there is no ‘now’. Like the Sniper himself, they exist in the normal universe, yet outside of Time. This experiment has worked out much better than I thought: it has given us a window into both Past and Future of our beloved planet. You have performed brilliantly, my son. Now that we are receiving this data, I can have my sister Tma analyze it and correlate the quantum probabilities of our survival...”

The image switches again, but I can't tell what we're looking at: the screen has gone all red and murky. Then there's a rushing sensation, as if we were plunging down a water-slide.

BARSA/Rescuer

“Please switch it off now,” orders Rock-lady, and I obey. There is something strange in her voice – I mean, she doesn’t have a voice per se, but – well, I am literally getting a weird vibe from her!

So I quickly turn the knob, and the screen goes completely black.

Except for a tiny white dot at the very top right, where a single pixel must have blown out.

BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 9: The Ring of Succession.

[Mother speaks:]

From our human guests we have learned that their species comes in two varieties: males and females. This peculiar distinction forces them to breed by recombining their genetic material.

Within their cellular stuff there is a primitive ring-like strand which they call “mitochondrial DNA”. Whenever a cockroach, through his bite, injects my chamber into a human body, the chamber makes a beeline for this ring; it breaks it open; inserts itself; re-closes the ring. As the humans would say, like adding a charm to a charm bracelet.

Now here is the crucial difference between human males and females: The male, while able to inherit his mother’s mitochondrial DNA, cannot pass it on to his own offspring. Whatever of his mother’s ring-DNA may have leaked into his vital fluids, it is attacked and destroyed, as a foreign substance, by antibodies within the womb of his mate, when he injects his seed into the female. Thus, my chamber, with me inside it, dies with him, after the short lifespan allotted to each man.

In the female, on the other hand, the genetic ring of mitochondrial DNA persists intact and is passed along to her daughters generation after generation. Hence, the copies of my chamber are secured only through the female line of succession.

Why then do I bother with the males at all? Why do I allow my cockroach soldiers to inject my chamber into them, when it is doomed to die with them?

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Because I have discovered another crucial differences between the sexes.

In the female, as I transverse her bloodstream en route to her mitochondrial DNA, she feels and senses nothing beyond, perhaps, the initial pain of the insect's bite.

But the male.... The male allows me to set up a feedback loop.

Within that brief Time as I float through his bloodstream, the male opens his mind to me; he sees me; or, rather, he sees what he devoutly wishes to see, be it angels, giants, dragons or gods. I am able to assume the form he desires; and in that form I communicate with him, I instruct him, I predict the Future. And then I am gone....

But a feedback loop has been created between the desired Future and the Past that is required to fulfill it.

While I am thus communicating with the human males, my sister Tma is gathering and collating all the data that is gleaned from Sentinel's spores. I have concealed from her only the fact that some of my cockroach scouts are infecting human DNA. She would not approve of that, even though I believe it is necessary for our ultimate survival.

BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 9: Humans On The March.

[The Mountain speaks:]

I think I moved several times in my sleep.... It must have been the unbearable itching of the green bugs.

A poor excuse for a Sniper I am!

I moved several times in my sleep ... but I always returned to my same resting place. Until this time....

When I finally awoke, like a drunken sleepwalker, I found myself far, very far, from my original location. *[Author's note: The Sniper's awakening coincides, in normal Time, with the first scene of The Janissary: The Peasant War, i.e., the start of the Vlorat invasion and the Remish military campaign against the Vlassites. Visit my website www.TheJanissaryBook.com for more information.]*

I loomed above a great lake ... but it was a different lake. I was farther north ... the air was chiller....

As for the humans....

When I fell asleep, they were no more than a couple of hundred souls, starving and on the verge of extinction. But now, twenty thousand cycles later....

They were everywhere.

Hardly any meter of land anywhere on the Great Continent has not been cultivated by their plows or settled by their wooden, thatch, and brick cottages. Their carriages, drawn by muscular horses, roam the continent on a vast network of paved roads.

BARSA/Rescuer

These humans even traverse the seas in great sailing vessels. Only the air above is mostly free of them, as they have not yet re-mastered the art of flight. But that will soon change: I see them already launching their first attempts, in the form of giant balloons driven by overheated air.

I look around me, at first in awe of their accomplishments. And then with disgust, as I see that they have been slaying one another, the whole time I was asleep. For every settled hut and pretty garden plot, there is a burned out village, with corpses strewn about. For every farmer and busy fisherman, tending to his family, there is a soldier slaying his fellow man with rifle or bayonet. I awake to a continent at war.

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PART III: TWIN WORLDS



BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 1: Quanta.

[Tma speaks:]

In great excitement I report my latest findings: “Mother, there is a human girl ... I have named her Quanta. She has not yet been hatched, but Sentinel has shown me her shadow.”

“What is so important about this one human child? Indeed, there are millions of these beings living on the surface above us...”

“According to Sentinel, there is a 95% probability that this girl will slay the Sniper. Thus, she will be our Rescuer. Furthermore, I find that this female has an unmatched pedigree. Quanta descends from one of the first matriarchs of the human colony – the one whom they called ‘T.D.’”

“Ah, yes,” Mother muses. “I am familiar with the story of this matriarch. In the language of the humans, her name, ‘Technical Director’, denotes an individual of extraordinary qualifications, perhaps even a Chief Scientist such as yourself.”

I beam with delight at Mother’s praise.

“Tma, my daughter, please continue to collect and analyze the data from Sentinel.”

“Mother, there is one problem. Our assistant, Gaffer, is threatening to shut down Sentinel. He claims that the monitor is damaged, so many of the pixels have burnt out that he can no longer read it.”

Alarmed, Mother disappears and hastens to Gaffer’s workshop.

BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 2: The Forerunner.

[Mother speaks:]

For twenty thousand cycles of our beautiful Sun in normal Time, I have been injecting myself into the bloodstream of the humans. I have appeared to thousands of the males, instructed them, forced them to worship me.

Many females have also been impregnated by me, I live on in their DNA, passed on from mother to daughter.

In several cases I was injected into a female who already bore a copy of my chamber; but the newer copy simply destroyed the old. It seemed that two copies of me cannot co-exist within the same DNA.

Until now. Until Quanta....

The way has been prepared. I now know who sires Quanta. I have been keeping watch over this male since his birth. In Sentinel's ever-clouding crystal screen I have glimpsed into his future, and I have seen that he, and he alone, of all the human males on the planet, is destined to pass my chamber on in his seed. The mitochondrial DNA which he inherited from his mother will leak into his seed, and thence into the womb of his mate. But, marvelously, it will not be attacked and dissolved by *her* antibodies; instead, it will be accepted into her egg along with his seed. But I see that this miracle shall happen only if his mate is one particular female. Her DNA is highly compatible with his. I have been watching her closely. She is a descendant of the "T.D." matriarch, thus she also bears one copy of my chamber within her mitochondrial DNA.

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When these two humans shall unite to merge their genetic material, these two, and only these two, shall conceive a special child: Quanta, our Rescuer. Quanta shall inherit *both* copies of my chamber intact, forming a magical genetic ring within the cells of her body. This ring will imbue her with some property, as yet unknown to me, that shall enable her to destroy the Sniper.

I await her Nativity with great joy and expectation....

But there are many hurdles to cross. Sentinel shows me that before his final awakening, the Sniper shall walk in his sleep, he shall relocate farther north, taking us with him, where the climate may be too cold for our cockroach scouts to survive.

And there is something even more troublesome: As Quanta's hatching time approaches and Tma incessantly computes the probabilities of her birth, these probabilities plunge exponentially. It seems that, of all the possible scenarios, only *One Future* gives us our Rescuer. There are too many variables: The child must be conceived on a certain day, at a certain hour, in a certain location... otherwise all is for naught.

Quanta's father is a soldier, in an era of constant warfare. In most of the Futures he dies a cruel death on the battlefield, long before he is able to sire my Chosen One. Now his unit is stationed far away. How am I to communicate with him, draw him to the place where he must be to sire our Rescuer?

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Scene 3: Magnificat.

[Mother speaks:]

In the darkness of our twilight, while the Kith and soldiers lie hibernating, I choose my special scout. Or rather, he chooses me: He volunteers. I insert a copy of my chamber into his mandibles.

Bearing this precious burden, my gallant six-legged knight must undertake an arduous journey, far from his Mountain home, to another part of the Great Continent. He must travel far, to the north, and to the east, where his survival is uncertain....

Never before had a cockroach ventured on its own tiny legs, for such a great distance. His journey took many lunar cycles.

He caught a ride, when he could, on the backs of horses, even men.

Rivers and lakes were a problem, as he could not swim. There were days when he had to wait patiently, hungry and cold, for the opportunity to scurry on board a canoe or boat.

It was important to avoid detection: lurking in crevices.

There were several close calls, when an angry human espied him, chased him, tried to stomp him flat.

But my valiant scout persevered. By the time he arrived at the place where my soldier was bivouacking, he was barely alive; and the chamber he carried within him was already starting to decay. His venom sac was almost empty when he finally dragged himself onto the soldier's face and bit him weakly on the lobe of his ear. Instantly my scout died and crumbled into green dust.

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So weak was the bite, my Rescuer's Sire barely felt it. Thus I, greatly weakened, within my copy of a fading world, churning sluggishly through his bloodstream, had to exert myself to the extreme to capture his attention:

“Why do you hesitate, my son?” I scream at him. “Should you not be lying instead with her with whom you will recombine your DNA and produce my Quanta? She, blessed Mother of The Rescuer, awaits your seed. Within her, just as within you, floats my chamber, handed down for 20,000 cycles from your ancestress.”

My soldier blinked dully, unable or unwilling to comprehend me.

“You drunkard, why do you not heed me, your goddess, whom you have worshipped since you were a tiny egg? Go quickly to her. You know of whom I speak. If you go now, and lie with her tonight, before the smaller moon sets, then you will surely have freed me from my captivity inside this rock. Go, and go quickly!”

My soldier arose, more alert now.

“I warn you, my son, the female will not willingly bear your child. Sentinel's screen has shown me that she will seek to destroy the hatchling within her womb by drinking a poison, concocted by the apothecary. But fear not: I have prepared for this Future as well. Already, many lunar cycles ago, I dispatched a human male on a long journey, in the darkness of night to sprinkle salt on the apothecary's herbal garden. Thus the poison, when she drinks it, will have no effect on either herself or her hatchling.

“Why do you still hesitate? Go now! Go to meet your Destiny!”

BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 3: Two Wise Men.

[Tma speaks:]

As my mind sheds tendrils of dust into the habitat we have created for the humans, Bestboy senses my presence, yet continues to communicate into a device. His communication consists of modulating sound waves, using his throat, lips, and tongue to form meaningful patterns that constitute one of the human dialects:

“Tell your son he may not ride the horse tomorrow; otherwise he shall fall off and he will be seriously injured. Heed my words, for I speak on behalf of the Great Oracle!”

Bestboy turns to greet me with a stiff smile. When I was analyzing the humans’ languages, I discovered that the name “Bestboy” is an honorific, denoting one who is superior among the males of his colony.

“Forgive me, Tma,” I detect his thoughts as pulses of sound waves. “I was busy doing my Statue thing.”

Project Oracle was actually Bestboy’s idea. Once he learned that we could partially see into the Future, he was motivated by a desire to help his fellow humans. And also, possibly, by his loneliness for his own kind.

Bestboy regularly records his communications onto slivers of wood or stone. Our cockroach scouts instantaneously deliver these messages to the surface and store them inside anthropomorphic statues. The human tribes who dwell nearby worship these idols.

“It’s kind of funny,” Bestboy remarks. “One of my favorite old movies was about this fake wizard who hides in a booth and

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speaks through an image. One day the heroine's little dog runs into the booth, pulls back the curtain with his teeth, and exposes him for the fraud he is, and all he can say is, 'Pay no attention to that little man behind the curtain!'"

"You are no fraud," I reassure him. "By helping your fellow humans, you bring the day closer when our two species shall live together in harmony on the surface."

"All I want," he muses, "is to be able to go home again. Home to Earth. But that can never happen. Too much Time has passed".

"My dear boy, I seek you because I need your help. I need to know if your friend Gaffer is lying to me..."

"Gaf? No way! He's the most honest guy I know. Why? What's the problem?"

"He built some equipment for us ... a monitor, which he says is now too smudged to be usable. I have brought this to Mother's attention, but she ignores me, and Gaffer claims he cannot fix the screen."

"Look, Gaf's the best there is. If he says it can't be fixed, it can't be fixed."

"Then we are doomed. Everything depends on this."

Bestboy senses my desperation. "Well, I could take a look at it, I guess. Why don't we go talk to Gaf and see what's up?"

A blink of a human eye; and Gaffer is there with us, along with the damaged screen.

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Gaffer shrugs apologetically. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. Like I explained to your boss, I’ve tried everything. I even built a brand new screen from scratch; and as soon as I built it, the exact same pattern of pixels appeared.”

He switches the monitor on again, then frowns. “It gets worse every time I look.”

The Sentinel monitor is now completely covered with a pattern of brighter and darker dots.

Gaffer mutters a curse and struggles with a knob.

I look closer.

The pattern draws a picture.... Then the picture changes subtly... and again. The image appears to move, as if animated. It tells a story.

“Woo!” Bestboy exclaims. “It’s like a vidgame!” Then even he recognizes what he is seeing.

The animation sears itself into my soul: I see my sister Mglā stealthily approaching our Mother as she hibernates. Mglā is *moving*, she is rolling along the floor, slowly at first, then faster... She collides with Mother.... Mother shatters. Mother dies.

Mother was murdered!

Grief overwhelms me, then hardens my heart.

I summon the soldiers of the Kith.

For the first Time ever in *binti* history, a ruling matriarch is to be arrested by her own Kith. How far we have fallen....

BARSA/Rescuer

Scene 4: The Nativity.

[Mgla speaks:]

They come for me.

They, accompanied by their disloyal human minions, come to seize me, they intend to arrest a ruling matriarch!

The Sentinel monitor issues a high-pitched shriek, like the sound of a human female giving birth. It hums and vibrates.... The screen shatters -- at the very moment, in Normal Time, that The Rescuer is born from human flesh.

“She is here!” I exult. “She is born!”

There is blessed quiet ... and the soft music of my triumphant laughter.

“Why did you do it?” my sister Tma whispers. “Why did you murder our Mother?”

“I had no choice. She ordered me to stop tampering with the humans.”

“Tampering? What have you done?”

I explain how I have been injecting myself into human DNA.

“You should not have done that!” Tma cries in horror.

“Sister, did you never desire to create copies of yourself?”

“No. Never.”

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“And what do you call your overwhelming desire to spawn and hatch your young?”

“That’s different.”

“Perhaps. But I myself will never spawn. The Guardians’ scouring has left me barren!”

Tma gasps.

“Tma, you are our Mother now, I cede all my power to you. But you must not confine me, nor should you prevent me from communicating with the humans. Together we must watch over our Quanta and ensure her survival. She is our only hope for defeating the Sniper.”

“You think to make a pact with me?”

“Yes, for the sake of our race. Know this: In Sentinel’s cloudy screen I discovered a probabilistic dissonance between the era in which Quanta is born, and the Time of our Rescue. The fruit would have ripened too quickly to be consumed. Therefore it was necessary that her lifespan be increased and her youthfulness and vigor maintained. Therefore Quanta bears two copies of myself within her genes, and this has imparted to her a kind of Balanced State within her own body. She will not age or decay, as the other humans do.”

“What must we do to find her?” Tma grudgingly concedes.

“We do not find her. She comes to us.”

And I explain to Tma, and to our human friends, how our story ends.

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Scene 5: A World Within.

[The Mountain speaks:]

I awake to a continent at war. I awake, and I watch for my prey.

As the years go by in Normal Time, I sense that something has changed. The little creatures still infest me, but they do not itch nearly as much. I feel them stirring restlessly sometimes, as if waiting for something to happen.

Moreover, I sense an absence in the Timestream: my masters have left it. Where they have gone, I do not know, but their presence no longer haunts this physical universe. I am glad that they are gone; but my mission remains.

Drowsy and confused, I look out onto my world one day, and I see HER. It is she. My little one. My life's true love. A female human, tall and graceful. Her light hair flows freely around her shoulders. Her optical orbs are blue and full of merriment. She wears a golden ring in her lovely ear. She glides on wooden boards, gracefully glides down my flanks, accompanied by two male companions. It is she. No, that is impossible. I study her ... there can be no doubt. It is she.

I call out to her: "Little one! Can you hear me?"

Do I imagine it, or does she bend her head down, as if trying to listen.

"Little one! Have you returned to me?"

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She pulls up in a spray of frozen water. Her companions also stop. I hear her speaking to them, and her dialect is very different from what it was, so many millenia ago, but her voice is the same, and I feel myself melting at the sound of it.

I quickly learn her dialect. She is explaining to her friends that this excursion is a special treat, meant to commemorate her birthday, but contingent on their good behavior. Very few humans are allowed on my slopes, because I am something they call a “national monument”.

Melting....

Am I literally melting?

I feel a rushing within me; my bowels open, and all the green insects leave my body and flow out onto my mountainous flanks, skidding ungainly on my icy surface.

I hear their clicking and chattering voices, they are calling out to one another: “It is she! She is the one!”

My young girl sees them too, as they swarm towards her, a repulsive army of millions. She is a brave child, she does not scream, but she gasps and recoils in revulsion.

The three humans plunge downhill, seeking escape from the green minions.

But the creatures are faster than light itself: they catch up to the humans like a mighty green avalanche.

The humans slip and fall. They tumble down my flanks. They are doomed.

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My heart; my cold non-existent heart; my heart overflows with love and determination: I WILL SAVE HER!

But how? I am immobile. I have but a single weapon, that which I have sworn to use against the *binti*.

My precious weapon – loaded for a single purpose, a single shot, a single kill. If I should waste it against these vermin, then the *binti* will live.

That is unthinkable. Moreover, once I discharge my weapon, then I myself will cease to exist. Because I *am* the weapon. The fate of a Sniper is that he gets only one shot.

In my moment of hesitation, I hear my friend call out in despair: “Help me!”

She calls again. Am I imagining it, or does she whisper to me: “Please, my Mountain, please help me!”

It is done. There is no more hesitation. Love wins out over fear and even duty. I direct my weapon against the little green beasts. I vaporize them into dust. Then I see, through blurring vision, my girl. She and her companions lie sprawled in the snow. A moment later, and they pick themselves up from my flanks, bruised and limping. But alive.

And soon my death throes begin. The last thing I wish is to cause my friend more distress, but I cannot help the tremors that shake my flanks. She and her companions clutch one another in panic. One of the males yells, “Avalanche!”

More horror: Something else is bursting out from within me. More of the green creatures? No.... Something else....

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The *binti*....

They were within me all along.... They roll out of a gap in the Timestream, a gap concealed within my own dying body. They roll, a dozen smooth stones, they roll down from my glacier, further down, further, further ... and, right there, in front of the gasping humans, they begin to spawn their young.

A silvery dust cloud rises up and swirls around my little friend. She holds her hands out, as if accepting a beneficial rainpour. She speaks: "It's them! It's them!"

I watch her, and I smile inside, and I grow cold, as Death approaches.

Soon I will be a simple Mountain, no longer a Sniper. "Good-bye!" I whisper. Now I leave this planet to the *binti* and to the humans. May they live in peace together.

My last gift to my friend is the gift of wisdom, which I impart to her as a rustling breeze:

"I am wise now, little one, wiser than all my masters put together. For I have found the enemies they could not find. My enemies concealed themselves in a place much vaster than Time itself. And I, for all my watchfulness, was not able to find them until I learned to love."

THE END