

Spaceships

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Morning, afternoon, and evening no longer existed, at least as far as Kel was concerned, despite just waking up from a long meditation. He awoke as always: floating in the darkness of space, among spaceships, a huge junkyard of them in orbit around one of the yellow-white stars of a binary system. Beyond lay nothing but empty space, and the distant stars of the galaxy, pinpoints of light sprinkled all around like—like—

Kel's Memory took a moment to locate the desired metaphor. *Ah, yes. Like dots of confectioner's sugar.* Such an ancient image. Humanity's ability to leach the necessary energy for life out of the quantum foam of the vacuum had rendered such things as sugar irrelevant, but perhaps Kel would recreate some, just for the experience. After all, Kel had retreated to this isolated system countless millennia ago, solely for the purpose of glorying in the ancient.

Another consciousness impinged upon his own, startling Kel into intense curiosity. He accessed his Memory again in order to calculate how long it had been, and with a shock discovered that no one had ever visited him in the long time he had been here. His last real interaction with others, as opposed to interactions drawn and replayed from his Memory, had been before he had chosen to isolate himself from the rest of Humanity.

The thought, *Fancy that*, came unbidden to Kel's mind. Surprise came next, surprise at the idea that another member of his race would actually be approaching. By longstanding agreement, the individual members of Humanity, as well as the group members, had agreed to give each other all the room desired, in both the Universe and in personal space. Nothing he could derive from his Memory led Kel to believe that this could be otherwise.

Unless, of course, things had changed, and his Memory was unable to project such a change, leaving it to Kel.

Could the other consciousness be coming to—dare Kel hope—engage him in confrontation?

The consciousness was approaching the edge of what Kel considered to be his space, a volume consisting of a sphere about a light-year in radius. He could not allow it to get any closer without challenge, or he would be admitting that he did not consider his space—and what it contained—to be his own.

Do you have a name? Kel projected, and the visitor stopped dead in space.

Yes, replied the other. *Ria. I have come to discuss—*

Not now, Kel interrupted. *I would rather do this in person.*

Echoes of confusion reverberated from the visitor. *In person?*

Yes.

Now Kel felt shock from the visitor, who replied, *I don't understand.*

Kel felt exasperated; if he had been in a material body, he would have sighed.

You have come this far to converse with me. Therefore, whatever you may wish to discuss is of more importance to you than it is to me. If you wish to come further, it will be on my terms.

But—

If you will not agree to my terms, then I must conclude that you wish to come no further; and our conversation is at an end.

For a long, unmeasured time, there was silence from the visitor, and had the consciousness not been so obviously hovering at the edge of Kel's space, he would have assumed that it had gone away rather than into meditation. Finally, the visitor projected assent to Kel's terms, but with a question.

I have not done this in eons. What sort of material body would you prefer I adopt?

This would be a good test. Please yourself.

In that case, replied the visitor, *I shall appear as I once was.*

Kel's estimation of the approaching visitor went up a slight amount. Someone who remembered their original material form . . . this was someone Kel could understand.

I shall do the same, he replied.

The process of manipulating energy into matter, in order to recreate his own original shell for his consciousness, was a simple one. First, Kel accessed his Memory for his schematics, filed as genotype and phenotype. Then he pulled matter out of the vacuum energy and formed the vessel. He felt a pang as he studied the body, but he could not identify why.

One final thing was needed before the process would be complete. Kel created a bubble of oxygen and nitrogen gas, so as to keep the breathing reflex from causing the material vessel to die before he was finished using it. Having done so, he dove inside.

He blinked his eyes, cracked his jaw, and waved his arms around. He licked his teeth, which tasted metallic, and strained his ears, hearing nothing. Suddenly his body began shivering. The surrounding gases felt—what was it?—cold, that was the sensation—so he sped up their molecular vibrations until the body stopped shivering and floated in comfort.

How odd, to perceive the Universe in such a limited way! So few wavelengths of light, so few frequencies of sound . . . a momentary panic gripped him, a fear that he would be unable to leave the vessel behind, and would be trapped within it forever. He felt as if he was falling, faster and faster, his heart beating more, his respiration rate increasing—and then he remembered his meditations, and the panic subsided, as suddenly as it had come.

He closed his eyes and waited.

After a time, the visitor's presence impinged upon Kel's consciousness. He opened his eyes and scanned the volume of space around him.

Finally he spotted a figure, no larger than a point of light, flying towards him slowly but dexterously. As the visitor got closer, Kel discovered that the visitor's body differed from his in a few major aspects. By an interesting coincidence, they represented the two polar opposites that Humanity's individuals once tended towards.

Kel was male; the visitor was female.

He felt an irrational desire to abandon his body, or cover it up, and he accessed his Memory to understand why. When he came across the notion that nudity had been considered a private thing in many cultures, he understood. His own culture must have been one of those. Fortunately, with understanding came dismissal of his concerns. He dispensed with his desire to cover himself, and instead enjoyed the sight of another person flying in a straight path towards him.

She came in on a course that took her below his feet, and circled once around, studying Kel. Kel returned her gaze. Her vessel, if it truly was her original body, was an aesthetically pleasing one to Kel. She wore her lightly colored hair long and flowing, and a bluish tint was evident in her eyes.

Twice more she circled around, and then finally, she swooped in from below, settling herself so that their faces were level. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment, and then Kel spoke.

"Your name?" he asked. It felt unreal, the squeezing of air from his lungs through his throat in order to create sounds.

"As I told you before, I am called Ria." "I was merely repeating the traditional greeting ritual. As for me, I am Kel." "Yes, I know," she said, smiling.

Ria fell silent for a long time, which Kel found surprisingly unbearable. For someone to come all this way and not talk felt disturbing. Finally, he asked, "Why are you here?"

Ria held her head still, but her eyes looked all around. "Why do you suppose I am here?"

"I do not wish to play games."

She looked back at Kel. "What else do you have to do with your eternity?"

"Answer the question," Kel said, and then his Memory suggested he add a word he had forgotten to his request. "Please."

Ria nodded, with a solemn look on her face. "I did not believe it to be so. But it is."

"What is?"

"All this." Ria swept her arm around in a complete circle, then another and another, until her fingers had traced out a whole sphere. "You really have spaceships here."

"Yes." Kel pondered a moment, looking around in all directions. His collection was indeed magnificent. Countless silver and gold spaceships reflected light from the two stars, shining in all their glory. It had been a long time since he thought about how this collection would look to another.

"Is that what brings you here?" he asked Ria.

She nodded. "That is what brings me here. An interest in your spaceships."

Kel studied her more closely, with his mind instead of his eyes. She seemed to have only one voice among her thoughts, but just in case—"Are you an individual, or a group?"

"I am but one," she said, looking off into the distance above his shoulder.

Kel turned around to follow her gaze; she was staring at one of the larger vessels, a giant spoked wheel, the first of the second wave of generation ships. He looked back at her face, and although he had not

read one in a long time, he thought he could understand what it was saying.

She adored his collection.

Kel came to a decision, and for the first time, made an offer to a fellow Human being which he had never thought he would. "Would you like to see them?"

Ria smiled. "That is why I have come."

Kel had not really studied his collection in some time, and he could no longer enjoy it with fresh eyes, so he felt strongly tempted to invade Ria's consciousness and experience from her perspective directly. But she had not extended such an invitation, and etiquette would not allow him to initiate the request. Instead, he satisfied himself with experiencing it vicariously, by watching her reactions and attempting to mimic the feelings within.

They started with the shuttles.

"These are short-range craft," Kel said, "designed only to stay within one planetary system. Notice how most of them are rounded on top, but flat on the bottom, so they can function easily in both vacuum and atmosphere."

Maintaining a physical existence had its limits, as Kel and Ria had to fly in all different directions to examine shuttle after shuttle. But it had its advantages as well; Kel noticed that being in a body allowed him a greater appreciation of the difference in scale between a ship and a Human.

"What are those?" Ria asked, pointing in a direction opposite the two stars of the binary system.

"Ah," Kel said, and they flew towards the ships indicated. "Those are the ships designed for travel within a solar system. Over here I have placed the smaller exploratory vessels, and over there are the colonization ships."

Ria glanced briefly at the smaller vessels, then flew over to the colonization ships. Most were of the same design—huge cubes with access hatches ranging from a meter wide to the size of the shuttles scattered around its surface.

"Could these land?" Ria asked.

"No, of course not," Kel replied. "These ships were designed to transport an entire colony from one planet to another. They would be constructed in orbit around one planet, loaded from the ground, and then unloaded once in orbit around the second planet. Then they'd be piloted back for more colonists and supplies."

"It seems too time-consuming, so wasteful."

Kel smiled. "If you can, remember what life was like back then."

"What do those markings mean?" she asked, pointing.

"They are the ship's names. Access your Memory and you can read them."

She nodded, and after a moment she began reading aloud, moving her head from side to side to make out the markings. "Pioneer—Voyager—Apollo—Challenger—Discovery—"

Kel interrupted her recital. "The names have a fascinating history in their own right. Many were used over and over again."

"But that would defeat the uniqueness of the ships," Ria protested.

Kel had nothing to say to that. Instead, he flew away from Ria in a direction he arbitrarily considered upwards, as it was away from the geometric center of his collection. He sped past the long-range ships, the ones outfitted with hyperdrives, and jump drives, and wormhole generators, and space warpers, and all the myriad engines Humanity had devised merely to get their meat to the stars.

He looked back once, verifying that Ria was following him. He felt no wind as he flew; his bubble of gases flew with him.

He came to a stop near a huge metal engine, glistening with an oil sheen and covered with indentations and pockmarks.

"That one," he said, "makes me dizzy when I think of it."

Ria studied it. "It's too small to be a ship."

Kel nodded. "It's not. It's a bubble engine. It was used to carry whole cities into space."

Ria's eyes widened. "Is it—"

"Yes. The precursor to our manipulation abilities. The engine that rendered all this, and itself, obsolete." He paused. "We can turn it on, if you like. It is still functional."

"I see no need to do that," she said, once more looking all around. "After all, there is nothing it can do that we cannot."

Kel felt disappointed that Ria did not want to see the bubble engine in action, but the disappointment faded when she said, "May I ask you about certain other ships?"

"Certainly," he replied.

"Tell me about that one," she said, teleporting the two of them next to a round, saucer-shaped craft, with circular portholes evenly spaced around the rim. Undergoing physical teleportation disoriented Kel for a moment, but he quickly recovered and examined the ship. Then he laughed. "That one was a joke."

"A—joke?" It appeared to take Ria a moment to grasp the concept. "A spaceship was a joke?"

"Yes. It is meant to mimic the ships that aliens supposedly visited Earth in, before the days of spaceflight. The term was flying saucer."

Ria nodded, then asked, "What is that one?" She pointed at a craft at the edge of their sight. Kel craned his neck to examine it: a long cylinder, which tapered at one end, and at the other end had four fins evenly spaced around the edge.

He laughed. "That's a classic design, but it never flew. It's not really astrodynamic."

"Then why do you have it?"

"I keep it here as a reminder." He paused, not sure if he wanted to ask the next question. "Now, tell me why these were of interest."

"I see them prominently in your mind. They have some significance to you."

They are my favorites, Kel thought to himself. The violation of his personal thoughts upset him. He wondered why Ria had bothered.

"Tell me," Kel asked, "what is the Universe like in this time?" Perhaps Humanity now considered her behavior acceptable.

Ria's face displayed puzzlement. "The Universe is isotropic and homogeneous," she said. "It is like it has always been."

Kel sighed, an affectation of being in a body. "I meant Humanity. What is Humanity like in this time?"

"You do not know?"

"I turned my back on the race a very long time ago. You are the first one I have communicated with since that time."

"Oh." She paused. "Humanity is as it has always been, I presume, ever since we became what we are."

"There is still respect?"

Again she paused. "Yes."

Then why did you violate my individuality? Kel thought, but chose not to ask that particular question out loud. Instead, he asked, "Respect for all things?"

Ria looked away momentarily, then faced him again, smiling. "The spaceships are beautiful. I would like to—what is the concept?—acquire them from you?"

Kel was taken aback by the non sequitur, both for the change in subject and for its forwardness.

"Acquire?" he asked. "What do you mean by that?" He knew the word, but did not understand what she wanted.

Ria closed her eyes, presumably accessing her Memory. "Purchase. Buy." These words were unfamiliar, and they echoed in Kel's mind. He accessed his Memory for meaning. It reminded him of concepts such as money and capitalism, and a time when Humanity engaged in things called trade and commerce.

"Buy?" he finally asked. "You make no sense. Why? What is there to trade?"

She seemed to ignore his question. "These are unique. Truly so."

"You can construct your own."

She shook her head. "It would not be the same. Would you accept my constructs, even if I engineered them to be exact down to their strings?"

Kel nodded. "I understand your point.

But I do not understand your desire." "Is it not the same as yours? To—to *own* these ships?"

"That was never my desire. If you wish to own them, you may share them with me." He pondered for a moment. "Besides, what can one person possibly offer another? What could you offer me that I could not create myself?"

"I can offer you fame," she replied. Kel swallowed hard; this was the last thing he was expecting to hear. "Fame?" A long time ago, Kel had craved it, but he had finally learned to reject it. After all, with literally trillions of consciousnesses in the universe, no one could ever come to fame.

"You are the Kel of whom I have heard, are you not?"

"You have heard of me before? And yet you offer fame? I am surprised that anyone would have mentioned me. What have you heard?"

Ria stared into his eyes. "You are not mentioned frequently, but there is a reference in one of the group Memories. A legend. It says that you disappeared long ago, to tend to spaceships."

"You should not trust everything you access from a group Memory."

"I knew you would say that. The legend also says you rejected all Bondings offered to you."

Kel did not need to access his Memory to recall that. "Perhaps some things can be trusted. But you are still not answering my question. Why do you want my spaceships?"

"Because I value them as you do."

Kel shook his head. "You cannot lie to me, even in this form."

She sighed. "I wish to destroy them." "What?"

"Kel, these are the last remnants of what we once were. They are old, outmoded, useless. Their matter would be better served if transformed into energy. It is time to put them to an end."

He stared at her for what seemed like an hour. "You are a fool," he finally said.

She shook her head and waved her arms all around. "The Universe has moved beyond you, Kel. Humanity has moved beyond you. Spaceships are unnecessary, irrelevant. Why do you persist in this irrationality?"

"You are not who I thought you were."

"No, I'm not," she agreed. "But you are everything I expected."

"You may not have my collection. Now go," he said, pointing off into space.

"Please let me explain."

The word "please" reached him. "I will hear your explanation."

She bit her lip and nodded. "I lied before, when I said I was an individual." "What do you mean?"

"Once, I was part of a group. I am no longer."

Kel shuddered in horror; *strange*, he thought, *how the body remembers its reactions*. Kel had rejected the sacrifice of his individuality to a group, and here before him floated someone who had apparently embraced it eagerly. "The loneliness must be unbearable," he said in attempted sympathy. "I can only imagine."

She glared at him. "No, you cannot. Don't even try."

He nodded, and she continued. "I have been offered a chance to Bond again, if only I eliminated the last

vestiges of what we once were."

Suddenly Kel understood. "The spaceships."

She nodded. "The spaceships. No group would Bond with me unless I could demonstrate that I would not demand my individuality back a second time. But if I am willing to do this—"

"And are you?"

She looked away. "I am. It is the only way I can become Human again." To Kel, the idea that Ria would only consider herself Human if part of a group was monstrous. "It is not the only way."

"What?"

"I offer you another choice, another way to be Human." *The only way to be Human.*

"Which is?"

"Stay with me. Learn the value of being only two, and not many."

She stared at him with a puzzled look on her face. "Are you offering me a Bonding?"

As before, when contemplating Bondings, a chill of horror permeated Kel's body. It echoed with the memory of the many times he had rejected Bondings.

"I cannot offer a Bonding, Ria. But I can offer a bonding, in the old way." For a moment, it looked as if Ria was shocked, and she seemed on the verge of flying away. But then she smiled, and closed the short distance between their bodies.

"Show me," she said.

Kel began slowly, taking Ria's surprisingly warm body in his arms. She tilted her head, and Kel placed his lips upon her mouth, which tasted sweet.

As they held each other, Kel accessed his Memory, to be sure he knew what came next. The irony of needing to do so in order to complete the bonding irked him, but he had little choice. He had not needed to know this in so long that there had never been a reason to keep the physical movements at the forefront of his consciousness.

He felt regret at the same time their bodies came together in the rhythm that he had not remembered, or needed to, for far too long. Kel could feel pleasure anytime he wanted, of course; but to surrender oneself temporarily to another in the most ancient dance of all had a joy all its own. Kel and Ria moved together, over and over. Finally, he felt an explosion of pleasure—and again—and again

And then he realized that the two of them were not the only things exploding.

He pushed her away and gazed around at his ships, which were silently blowing apart in the vacuum of space.

The ones further away looked like tiny supernovas, blazing away before finally dissipating. The closer ones glowed briefly and brightly as their matter instantaneously became energy.

Kel realized suddenly that Ria had been tricking him, and he raised his hand and slapped her across the

face. "How dare you!"

Ria massaged her jaw, and stared back at him blankly "I dare because I must."

He spat at her. "You had no interest in bonding. You merely wanted to distract me. So you could complete your task."

"It was the only way, Kel. Now I will be acceptable for the Bonding."

He clenched his fists, frustrated at the uselessness of the anger which choked him. "Do you know what you have done to me?" He hoped to see tears in her eyes, a head bowed in shame—any sign of remorse. He wanted her to apologize, to feel humiliated, and to see the error of her ways.

Ria merely floated there, a faraway look in her eyes. "What does it matter?" she asked. "If you wish, you can recreate the exact same forms, down to their strings."

"You know that they would not be the same."

"Yes, they would. They would merely not be the same to you."

Kel pointed at her. "Then why did you not create your own copies, and destroy those instead of mine?" When she didn't answer, he continued, "It matters to the Bonding members, doesn't it? It had to be the real, original ships, or it would not count. Even as all of you reject the old ways, you acknowledge their power."

She shook her head. "The old ways do not work anymore, Kel. I have moved beyond them. All of Humanity has, except for you." She gestured at their two bodies. "These bodies are inefficient. You are clinging to an irrelevant past." "We must value the past—"

She interrupted him with a thought. *Why?*

He had never questioned it before; and so for a moment he had no answer to give her. When one came to him, he deliberately spoke aloud, and not through thoughts. "We just must. If we forget the past, if we abandon our roots, we forget who we are."

She stared sadly into his eyes. *Kel, you lost that battle eons ago. Humanity lives in the now. As—as must I.*

Her body spasmed, and suddenly Kel knew that she no longer inhabited it. He looked into the empty vessel's eyes, which stared back without recognition. He looked more deeply, and thought he saw the glistening of unfinished tears in her eyes.

More likely, he was just fooling himself.

"Farewell, Ria." He captured the image of her body into his Memory, and with a thought transformed her vessel of matter back into energy.

With only slight hesitation, Kel destroyed his own body as well. He did not want to feel the tears that might otherwise form in his own eyes. After destroying his body, he returned to the center of his graveyard, the better to study the full extent of the damage to his spaceships.

His next step was obvious. Painstakingly, Kel accessed his Memory, and with his thoughts, began reconstructing his collection of spaceships. He noticed that, rather than destroying all his ships completely, Ria had left a few pieces of matter scattered about from each one. Perhaps, Kel mused, he

had reached her on some level after all.