

The Visitor.

By Sean F Stevens.

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THE VISITOR

In an almost cupboard sized apartment, somewhere within the massive sphere of concrete and steel that was known incorrectly and rather boringly as the "Domed City" an alarm woke a very tired man from a very good sleep.

He stirred, extricating himself from his tangled bedclothes and glared at a small electronic eye in the wall opposite him.

"Don't you think I deserve to sleep occasionally?" he remarked sarcastically.

"Alert at Galactic Central", replied his room computer from a small speaker set just below the electronic eye "moving stellar object at gridpoint E18 delta on viewpoint 5".

Not quite awake the man replied:

"That's out near Saturn, right?"

"Yes", said his computer, never one for over exerting its speech circuits.

The man was now out of bed and quickly dressing.

"Do the guys at Galactic Central have any idea what this object is?" he asked, referring to the astronomical computers of the cities solitary observatory that were his only workmates.

With its as usual calm tones the computer replied,
"They think it is a space ship."

At this point the man wished that he could be as calm as his silicon based partner was, multiple emotions ranging from excitement to stark fear crashed together in his mind like Hydrogen atoms in a fusion reactor. After a moment he collected himself and thought it through; In the millions of years of human history this is the only time an extraterrestrial species had entered the Solar system (as far as he knew) it was obvious after thinking about it that this sort of thing was bound to occur sooner or later.

Less than ten minutes later the man was in his work cubical, rapidly checking the printouts of the nights measurements.

As Astronomer Royal to the City Council, a pre-catastrophe title that was mostly just impressive sounding gibberish as no one was quite sure what a "Royal" was, unless it perhaps meant "singular" or "only" for the man was the only astronomer in the city and therefore the only astronomer on Earth. The man's one true item of prestige was that he was one of the very few citizens that had access to the external sensors of Domed City. They were only directed out into space and could focus inward no closer than the orbit of the moon but this was still more than most people had access to in a lifetime, for the other sensors were the sole responsibility of the cities Inner Council, only they were allowed to monitor the wasteland outside the city walls, patiently waiting for the day when life would finally return to the world and the citizens could once again walk into the open air.

"I'm impressed guys." The man remarked "as usual I can't find fault with your data, except that I notice you haven't given me a figure on the velocity on the object itself?"

The nearest computer replied, it was an older model: a stately tower of glowing glass, subatomic circuits sparking in their magnetic containment fields as it prepared to speak.

"The object is on a direct course for Earth and is progressing at velocities far greater than our software was designed to measure." It said in its customary emotionless tones "It is suspected to be travelling under controlled, powered flight and though it's velocity is extremely high it is just as rapidly decelerating, it is projected that the object could arrive within Earth's current vicinity in approximately 24 hours time".

The man leaned back in his chair, his face calm and thoughtful. He shook his head grimly, for as much as he didn't like bureaucrats his options were limited and the facts were too big for him to take any action on his own.

With a sudden movement he stood and turned to the computer.
"I better report this to the Council", he said.

The silence within the Council chamber was complete and all pervading, a short time earlier, the Astronomer Royal had made his presentation to a special session of the Inner Council and had just this moment left the chamber.

The High Councillor of the Domed City sat back in his elaborate high-backed chair, he exhaled raggedly and looked around at the seven faces turned towards him, the members of the Inner Council radiated with the nervousness that he himself felt all too clearly and raw fear had become a tangible entity within the room.

For unknown to the Astronomer Royal, another conclusion had been reached, though not yet verbalised by anyone it was nonetheless in the minds of all present.
It was a far more logical conclusion than an alien visitation, but one that he could never have suspected with the limited data at his disposal.
It was an old story that vibrated like a bell of doom in their brains and it had preyed upon the fearful minds of the Inner Council for as long as they had been privy to the truth.

The High Councillor stood, leaning on his lectern for support. he drew breath and spoke, but not in the calm, measured tones that he was usually famous for, now his voice was high pitched and quavery: the voice of an old and frightened man.

"Fellow members of the Inner Council" he began "You have heard the report of the Astronomer Royal and you have learned his conclusions in regard to the matter, is there anyone amongst you that believes his summation to have merit?"

As one, the members of the Inner Council shook their heads in a definite expression to the negative.

The High Councillor sighed and bowed his head.

"Then are you of agreement with me, in the belief that the long absent members

of Earth's ancient space colonies are returning to reclaim their mother planet?"

This time all nodded, and their quiet, fearful murmurs began to fill the room for the first time since the Astronomer Royal had left.

The High Councillor raised his hand, silencing their growing hubbub.

"Then it falls to us - my unfortunate comrades - to decide on what action to take when they arrive" and at this he lowered himself back into his chair, feeling tired and emotionally spent. "This is the task our ancestors have set for us, ladies and gentlemen, what shall we do?"

"What can we do?" one of the other councillors remarked. "Our technology has progressed only slowly with our limited resources and small workforce, the colonists could have access to technology beyond our wildest dreams and weapons of which we could have no defence against!"

"They could be peaceful," another councillor proposed, speaking slow and uncertainly "They may leave us in peace."

"But we can't be certain of that." The High Councillor replied "and you are forgetting that the biggest threat they pose is by their very presence."

The other councillors paused in their growing discussion; their faces blanched anew at the implication of the High Councillors words.

"We, like our predecessors, have taught the citizens that there is no life except on Earth." The High Councillor declared "and that on Earth no life can exist but within our city; keeping the populace within the boundaries that we have set has been the only way to maintain control."

"And to maintain our positions of absolute authority." Added one of the more pragmatic councillors.

Frowning at the interruption the High Councillor continued: "Should the returning colonists have any contact with us at all the citizens shall realise that the most basic tenets on which we have built our society are a lie." And at this he paused, sweeping the room with a gaze that was both grim and fearful. "What do you think their reaction will be if these truths that we have taught them for generations are proven false?"

No one answered his question, the conclusions to be had were all too obvious. Out of the many grim outcomes that they could envisage, the loss of their authority was the most optimistic of the possibilities that could result from any contact. The most probable reaction of the people was likely to be far, far worse.

The Seventh District Councillor stood and faced the gathering, next to the High Councillor himself she was perhaps the most powerful member of the Inner Council and was certainly his equal (if not his superior) in intelligence. It was rumoured that she was likely to be the next High Councillor and there were dark hints that she was unwilling to wait for the present one to reach the end of his tenure naturally and had been planning "other methods" of accelerating her rise to the top. But at this moment in time any steel in her character had turned to butter and she appeared as fearful as the rest of them, her voice as she addressed her peers was unusually quiet and subdued.

"In the meantime, Honourable members of the Inner Council." She began. "I am of the opinion that we have a more pressing matter to deal with."

"And that is?" Enquired the Fourth District Councillor with a tinge of incredulity.

The Seventh District Councillor turned to face him and a hint of a grim smile flickered on her lips, even in these grim times she couldn't avoid garnering some pleasure from her colleagues lack of foresight.

"Our present problem is the Astronomer Royal." She replied. "Before we deal with any possible contact with the colonists, we already have the very definite threat that he shall tell other members of the populace that there is life outside the city!"

The High Councillor shook his head.

"That is not a concern Councillor." He declared. "I have had the Astronomer Royal waiting in the outer chamber in anticipation of such a threat being posed by his knowledge and have already decided upon an appropriate solution."

He pressed a tiny, recessed button on the arm of his chair and waited a moment.

>From a door opposite to the one from which the Astronomer Royal exited, emerged the First Assistant Councillor, like the High Councillor she wore a two-piece suit of unisex style in a grey synthetic material with shiny black shoes, the drab uniform of the Imperial Council. Taking no notice of the other Councillors she walked to his desk and stood at his right hand side, waiting.

"You sent for me sire?" she asked in a voice that implied a suave yet reasonable character but in truth was only a part of her well constructed social façade, a very thin veneer of congeniality that hid a true nature that was as cold and impersonal as ice.

The High Councillor turned to her. "You understand our current situation?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes Sire, your office monitor clearly picked up every discussion within the chamber."

There was uproar. All the Councillors began shouting at once, outraged that the High Councillor would so callously reveal that he had been monitoring them.

He turned to face them calmly. "You surprise me Councillors." And he smiled venomously at their discomfiture despite their situation. "Are you all trying to say that if it was you in my place you wouldn't do precisely the same?"

And at this remark an embarrassed silence returned to the chamber. But more than a few of the Councillors (the Seventh District Councillor not the least) were fuming quietly in indignation, if only because they had contemplated the very same duplicity and didn't like to think that the High Councillor had thought of it first.

The High Councillor turned back to the First Assistant. "Have the Astronomer Royal placed under arrest for the charge of Political Insurgency." He ordered. "Have him placed in security binders and taken under armed guard directly to the Chamber of Justice, his trial shall be in one hours time."

The First Assistant nodded without a flicker of surprise at the High Councillors ruthlessness. "Shall I have a firing squad briefed and ready,

Sire?"

The High Councillor shook his head slowly, a faint smile on his face. "No, I have something else in mind." He replied.

The High Chamber of Justice for the City was also the Main Council Chamber. It was on the floor directly below the Inner Councils private chamber and the High Councillors offices. Even though the city was contained within a huge sphere ten thousand kilometres wide, space was a finite commodity with no room for expansion and every square centimetre had to be fully utilized, and this was no exception. The chamber was carefully designed with its multiple purposes in mind and meetings were carefully scheduled so as to not overlap each other.

This was doubly important, as the members of the High Judiciary just happened to also be Inner Council members. Three of them were now seated at the high bench, The High Councillor himself sat in the centre and was flanked upon his left by the Seventh District Councillor and upon his right by the Councillor for the Third District, the old and brutally pragmatic politician who had interrupted the High Councillor in their earlier deliberations.

They sat quietly, garbed in their red and black judgement uniforms, their faces a mask of questionable impartiality.

The trial had been in session for less than an hour but was already coming to a close, the charges had been stated and "evidence" (in this case a rebel dictum in the prisoners handwriting) had been examined and cross examined by the council experts (who had themselves forged it) and was declared to be genuine.

The accused meanwhile, was quiet; not in shock or surprise but because in an effort to make certain that he would make no potentially dangerous outbursts that might make it into the court records he had been drugged senseless, in an afterthought his mouth had also been taped shut. To stop him slipping from the chair metal clamps around his wrists, ankles and midriff held him fast.

Friends of the accused came forward one by one and testified that the man had been heard that day to be making statements in keeping with those of a die hard revolutionary and traitor and that they had notified the Shadow Police, who had then arrested him, the fact that many of the witnesses had the bearing of Shadow Police members themselves and may or may not have ever met the accused before was conveniently ignored.

The lies flowed freely and easily from all sides, getting increasingly more damning and strident as the show-trial progressed. By comparison to what the Inner Council members could lose if the truth were revealed ... what value had the life of just one man?

Thoughts similar to this were running through the mind of the High Councillor (in his guise as Chief Judge) as he stood to make the judgement that was now well and truly inevitable.

He stood, gazed around the room full of expectant faces and spoke the words he had decided upon before the trial had even begun.

"In the face of such overwhelming evidence both in material and of the accused character I can find no other judgement but guilty in my soul," he paused looking at the accused who was coming to and decided to skip the rhetoric and

pass sentence. "Let this man be taken to the external airlock and sent into permanent exile in the wastelands of The Outside."

There was a collective gasp of utter shock in the courtroom; the High Councillor paused in satisfaction, glad that his judgement was having the required effect on his audience. The accused, now partially conscious, was staring at the High Councillor in confused shock, still dulled by the drugs but horrified at what was happening to him.

The High Councillor then continued. "Give him a vehicle and a months supply of nutrition concentrates after which time he must fend for himself, this judgement is to be carried out immediately." the High Councillor then turned to a pair of brutish Cyborg Guards waiting near the door. "Take the accused to the airlock, you will find everything ready when you arrive there."

The Cyborg Guards swiftly unclamped the accused (leaving the gag in place) and dragged him away.

The High Councillor watched their figures recede into the distance until the auto doors closed, hiding them from his sight.

"Clear the court room." he said.

For what seemed like hours the man was dragged down corridors and stairwells in an unpleasant red haze of semiconsciousness. When he finally came to a state of relatively full awareness he was in the airlock atrium, being manhandled over to a car, where two more Cyborg guards were waiting.

To his overloaded senses it appeared at first to be no more than a five metre long rectangular box of light armour plate, an old Shadow Police car? He could see that one end was sloping at a slight angle and had on its upper half a flat viewport of quasi-glass, the car stood on four short legs and beside them four ducted jets were visible.

The Cyborg Guards near the car moved towards him, one pressing a control on his multipurpose electro-nightstick as he did so, and a loud hum was suddenly to be heard, emanating from the inner airlock door.

The car was on a turntable set flush in the concrete floor and was only noticed now by the man as it started to rotate the car to face the inner airlock door, which was now slowly opening, perhaps for the first time since the ancestors of the spheres present population ran screaming through it to escape death in the furnace of atomic war so many millions of years ago.

Forgetting his predicament for a moment the man wondered what these people must have been like, caring people trapped in a situation out of control or as the histories had painted them: a group of racist, warmongering, superficial, pleasure seekers with no concern for the impact they were having on their planet. The man gasped beneath his gag, the pain of the Cyborg Guards bionic grip on his arm bringing him back to reality.

The inner airlock door was now fully open, revealing an empty room with massive doors at the far end; grey dust covered every surface and lay especially thick upon the airlock's short, but broad floor.

The cars rotation slowed to a halt. It was now facing outward and he could see the powerful jets at the rear end of the car that gave it its forward thrust, they seemed unusually large for flight in the sphere but unhappily small for

flight in the presumed nightmare world of The Outside.

All four Cyborg Guards now dragged the man over to the car. The Guard with the drawn nightstick operated another control on it and a door in the right side of the car (which had previously not been visible, so flush fitting were the doors) now opened, the man was roughly shoved inside the car and his bindings removed.

Now fully alert and temporarily free of the Guards grip the man removed his gag and breathed deeply, he turned to face his captors.

"What the hell is all of this?" He all but screamed in their face, and paused in surprise. Looking over the Guards shoulder he could see people standing solemnly behind a huge picture window mounted high up in the back wall of the atrium, he recognised the High Councillor and the seven members of the Inner Council gazing down at him their faces emotionless and hard.

He tried to push past the Guard and out of the cars narrow doorway. "What have I done!?" he yelled at the silent watchers "Why are you doing this to me?"

The Cyborg Guard shoved his nightstick into the mans shoulder and pressed down hard on a large red button on its side, for a moment the man quivered taut as the shock jolted through his body and then he fell back into the car seat, numbed and groggy.

A moment later, the man stirred. He rubbed his shoulder and glared ruefully at the Guard. "Bastard." He rasped painfully. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

The Cyborg Guard leered viciously, waving the still sparking nightstick in a vaguely jovial manner. He then stood back and remotely operated the car door, still grinning as it angled down and shut with a hermetic hiss, hiding him from the mans view.

The man leaned back in the drivers seat and looked around him, there were various inexplicable controls that he had never seen before and a joystick directly in front of him. He shook his head and wondered how they expected him to fly this thing as he'd used public transport all his life.

His dashboard supplied an answer to his question.

A soft electronic voice clearing came from small semi-opaque metaglass sphere mounted in the centre of the dashboards upper surface and simultaneously it opened two multifaceted electronic eyes; which, as the tiny sphere swivelled around on its magnetic base, opened and closed their multi-irises, focussing on him. The man jumped in surprise, he'd presumed the sphere to be some variety of navigational aid!

"Good evening," it said in a calm sexless voice. "I am this cars synthetic intelligence, multiple interface and pilot unit, people usually call me Driver if they wish to address me, though I will answer to any name you care to choose."

"Ah, pleased to meet you," replied the man. "Driver will do me fine, thank you."

"If I may enquire sir, what's your name?" asked Driver.

"My name is VJ104980," said the man. "And don't bother with the "sir" bit, it's not really a word I'm comfortable with or used to, just call me Veej, that's what my friends call me," Veej paused. "When I had friends, that is."

"Veej." Driver replied, its eyes glowing faintly as it contemplated the new data. "I have adjusted my communication patterns in keeping with your request, are you ready to proceed?"

"Do all cars have auto-pilots like you in them?" Veej asked, hoping to delay the moment.

"No," Driver answered. "I'm what you'd define as an optional extra," and it paused "I myself am ... ahem ... an obsolete model, one of the first built in fact, that's why you got me." And Veej noticed to his surprise, a slight touch of embarrassment in the supposed-to-be-emotionless A.I.'s voice.

"You have emotions?" he remarked (a trifle questioningly). "That's unusual for an A.I. isn't it?"

"Yes and yes." replied Driver. "They gave us early models all sorts of extras - just for experimental purposes I'd presume - I know that most of the later models didn't get half the add-ons that my series did."

And Driver refocussed its electronic eyes on Veej in a way that if Driver had been a human would have involved a narrowing of the eyes, questioning and contemplative.

"You're a sharp one, Veej." Driver observed, "Tell me, why are they exiling someone like you?"

"I wish I knew." Veej sighed.

And though Driver possessed rudimentary emotions, Veej's bitterness was beyond the experience of the tiny computer. Suddenly it paused beeping softly.

"I'm afraid I've been given the signal to leave." Driver remarked. "I'm sorry about this, I have no choice; the signal made veiled references to a quick and painful death if we do not proceed immediately."

Driver turned to look through the view port, the cars engines entered warm up mode, and a multitude of self-test lamps lit up on the dashboard.

"I understand," said Veej heavily. "Lets do it then."

The Cyborg Guards had left; the car now hovered on its small jets, retracted its legs, and began to glide forward into the open airlock. As the car entered the airlock the inner door closed slowly behind them.

They waited.

A new set of signals beeped over Driver's audio circuits, and it test fired the main engines in anticipation. Seconds later the outer doors opened outward on massive hinges of ceramic steel, sliding smoothly on graphite lubricated hinges.

Veej and Driver received their first sight of The Outside.

Until this moment Veej had not known that something could look so green.

Directly outside of the city walls were huge green towers of foliage with bases of wide brown and grey material, a long forgotten word came from the recesses of Veej's mind to associate itself with the image: trees.

In the thousands of years that had passed since the founding of the city, the radiation that had killed everything in the surrounding countryside had faded away, and nature had returned with a vengeance in humanities absence.

The trees spread away in every direction as far as Veej's eyes could see, in the occasional ragged break in the forest canopy he could glimpse rolling hills in the far distance covered with an indistinct emerald substance that couldn't be anything else but fields of grass.

Veej looked up and gasped in wonder. Above him, the sky was a cloudless, perfect blue; he squinted, fancying that he saw a group of small objects flitting by, could they be birds?

"I think I know why they gave me such limited supplies." Veej whispered, finding it hard to speak, overwhelmed as he was with awe at the sight in front of him. "They knew that I wouldn't need it, god-damn-it they knew!"

"I am now authorised to tell you that this car must immediately proceed to an distance not less than one thousand kilometres from the walls of the Domed City." Driver piped up, breaking into Veej's reverie. "If we don't immediately comply we shall be vaporized, and should we try to return to within the no-go zone at any time in the future, this car is wired to self-destruct."

"Let's go then." Veej replied, dragging his eyes away from the wonders in front of him to focus on the rear view screen nervously. Though he couldn't see any weapon with which they could carry out their threats, he didn't doubt that it existed and had no particular desire to see it in action.

The car glided forward, the turbojets at the rear slowly picking up speed. Still keeping an uneasy eye on the rear monitor, Veej watched as the mighty doors shut silently but firmly, leaving barely a discernable seam visible from the outside.

Veej bowed his head and sighed deeply, there could be no denying of the fact that - despite whatever may happen in the future - he was now forever isolated from his world.

He was still as uncertain as ever as to why he was even in this predicament, he presumed it must have something to do with his report to the council (it wasn't as if he'd had much else of any controversy happen in his life lately) but he couldn't think of a reason why his knowledge of a coming space ship terrified the council so much that they would go to such lengths to silence him.

And just why hadn't they told anyone about the outside world coming back to life?

He was shook out of his reverie by a fast-moving blur, just visible out of the corner of his eye. Looking up, he saw that the car was now travelling at what must have been several hundred kilometres per hour, the fast moving blur was the dark tips of the trees that surrounded them, quickly whipping past the car to be lost in amongst the green mass of the forest behind them.

"Driver, where are we headed?" he asked.

"I wasn't programmed to take you anywhere specifically, my instructions were limited to transporting you beyond the exclusion zone." Driver replied. "I am currently following a random coordinate at maximum velocity, this should take us beyond the zone in approximately two more hours." And Driver paused, its tiny head turning to face Veej before continuing "did you have a particular

direction in mind?"

"No." Veej replied, distracted. He gazed at the land rushing by outside his controlled environment and felt a mixture of sadness and wonder. "Just look for a safe place to land." And paused - a new idea seizing him - he turned back to face Driver. "On second thoughts make that a safe place to land near running water." He instructed, "I want to see if there's fish out here."

"OK," replied Driver. "And while we're at it you can tell me some more about yourself, and especially the details of how you got here."

"Why not." mumbled Veej, "I've got nothing better to do!"

And he looked back at the rapidly receding city one last time.

Veej gasped in sudden realisation. "I'd always wondered why they called it the Domed City." He murmured to himself with a grin "Ironical that to know the answer you have to see it from the outside!"

And so it was, that from the outside - with more than three quarters of its huge bulk buried in the soil and underlying bedrock - the spherical city appeared to be a huge dome. Massive, broad, stained by thousands of years of exposure to the elements, the "dome" rose up from the surrounding foliage into the sky, its apex lost from view in a large bank of clouds.

Smiling sadly at the discovery, Veej turned off the rear-view screen. He decided that from now on it was time to look forward rather than back, for there was nothing to be gained by gazing mournfully at his lost home.

It was time to think of the future.

As Veej made his last silent goodbye to his homeland, Millions of kilometres away in the cold vacuum of space, the starcruiser that had caused Veej so much hurt was in a slingshot orbit around the sun.

Its near lightspeed hurtle had thrown it from beyond the edge of the solar system to its centre in record time and its computers now rapidly collated the information they had gathered and prepared to make their report to their master.

Within the starcruiser's flight deck a red light on a small brass stand glowed.

This caught the eye of a small powerfully set creature of pale indeterminate colour that was the sole occupant of the large craft; its eyes were small and dark brown-black in colour, its hair a greyish brown-green and covered by a soft skull cap of dark blue leather-like material. It was currently seated in a well-padded flight chair, mounted behind a broad control panel encrusted with a myriad of complex and inexplicably bizarre instruments and interfaces.

Though humanoid in general appearance, there was no mistaking the entity for an actual human. Humans, after all, had never been known to have four thumbs, neither were they to be found with twelve toes. If one were to do a simple gene test no doubt would remain. This individual was no human being; its species had evolved on a different track, similar perhaps but definitely not the same.

The High Councillor - if he had encountered the being - would be both

surprised and terrified at the meeting.

Surprised, because he had ironically never honestly considered that the ship that rocketed into his solar system was anything but the human colonists he had expected and feared for so long. And terrified, an emotion he would perhaps feel just at the sight of the blue-uniformed alien (xenophobia was after all a product of ignorance, and the High Councillor had a more than his usual share of this weakness) but more so he would fear the tiny creature if he knew what its true purpose was ...

The entity turned to a control panel behind it and threw a switch.

An electronic voice boomed out of a large overhead speaker.

"Report on star system G903-5303," it said. "Only one solid planet of size and mineral distribution required for profitable exploitation."

The creature looked disappointed.

"Which one?" it asked.

"Third planet from solar core," replied the computer.

"Set a course for the third planet." the being ordered. "Prepare a converter unit for use, and wake me when we arrive."

It stood and went to a side room where a bed was set into a wall; it lay down and went to sleep instantly.

>From the flight deck, the sound of engines could be heard.

"So you say that a space ship is heading this way?" Driver asked incredulously.

"Yes." replied Veej. "At least, that's what the computers at Galactic Central thought, I never got a chance to check the proximity scanners myself and since all our equipment is inside the sphere it could be just a bad reading." Veej grinned bitterly at the thought. "Now wouldn't that be ironic, exiled because of a scanner glitch!"

"I have built in scanners, Veej," said Driver.

"Another optional extra?" Veej enquired with a half smile.

"Yes." It replied. "Would you like me to see if I can pick anything up?"

"You're welcome to try, Driver," replied Veej. "We have nothing to lose."

It had been several hours since they had left the sphere's exclusion zone and Veej was feeling the first pangs of hunger, he reached into the small pouch of rations for some food concentrates and looked with curiosity around him.

They were parked on a low, relatively flat, ridge of stone that lay between another of the huge forests (that seemed to have reclaimed much of earth's surface) and a broad, slow flowing river that babbled quietly to itself several metres away.

The shore of the river was shallow and muddy, but relatively stable, and Veej had earlier in the day waded out into the cold but clean water until it had reached up to his knees. Staying there until his legs had begun to get stiff and numb but not succeeding in seeing the fish he had been hoping to see.

But his disappointment was tempered by the knowledge that this was only one small part of a big river and he had plenty of time to check elsewhere.

Indeed he had all the time in the world, for even though the cars power supply was limited and so was the food, Driver was powered by a quantum battery that was good for over a hundred years and was small and easily carried, so Veej would still have it for company. And as for food Veej was sure (if a little apprehensive) that food would be able to be found in amongst all the surrounding massed examples of nature's fertility, in some form or other.

While Driver quietly hummed to itself - as it scanned the surrounding visible space to the limits of its sensors - Veej walked about aimlessly, enjoying the wind on his face and the organic taste of the air. The warm afternoon sun dried his clothes of the last touch of dampness from his earlier excursion into the river and his bare feet began to get used to the uneven level and texture of the ground beneath them.

Time passed slowly, the first signs of dusk began to appear in the sky.

Somewhere in the distance Veej could hear the hooting high-pitched calls of what he presumed to be a bird and from behind him there was a soft ping as Driver's scanners finished their long and detailed survey.

"Veej." Driver began, sounding subdued and slightly nervous.

"Yes?"

"I've found your space ship and it is big!" Driver exclaimed, its tone distinctly un-computerlike. "It's larger than the sphere!" it added, its voice quavering at the thought.

"It really is there?!" Veej inquired shrilly, just as shocked as Driver at the true size of the object.

"Yes!" said Driver. "But not where you said it was, it has just slingshot itself out of a solar orbit and I bet you can't guess where it's headed!"

"Earth?"

"Good guess."

"Can you tell if it's going to land?" Veej asked in a mixture of excitement and fear.

"Not until it comes into orbit," replied Driver. "But then I'll be able to tell you not only IF it will land but also WHERE, to within an error range of several kilometres anyway."

"Keep me posted, Driver." Veej requested.

"You bet!" it said.

An alarm sounded on the flight deck of the starcruiser.

Waking from its dreamless slumber the short non-terrestrial got out of bed and re entered the flight deck.

"Report," it barked.

"Now in orbit around third planet," stated the soulless metallic voice. "Scan indicates that this planet will be ninety eight percent exploitable."

"Anomalies?" enquired the creature.

"One," replied the voice. "It would indicate a low level technology of alien design."

"Land nearby," ordered the creature. "We'll do some close scans of this anomaly."

"Calculating trajectory, landing procedure initiated."

Driver spoke suddenly:

"It's in orbit, Veej - no wait! - It's already started to enter the atmosphere!"

"Can you tell where it's going to land?" asked Veej.

"Yes, just a moment," Driver paused then announced in surprise. "It's going to land not more than two hours flight from here at maximum velocity, on the border of the sphere's exclusion zone!"

It's external surfaces glowing red, the massive starcruiser smashed its way through the atmosphere and hurtled towards the emerald-mottled horizon. Minutes later, now glowing white in some sections and surrounded by a halo of atmospheric disturbances due to its huge size, mass and temperature, it reached the area of the planet where the anomaly had been detected.

As the ship passed through the stratosphere and slowed to manoeuvring speed, it oriented itself more precisely and at a more sedate pace headed towards a patch of ground that looked stable enough to accommodate it. In its wake the mighty forest trees were shattered and uprooted by the ships passage, caught as they were in the conflicting gravitational waves between it and the planet below. While at ground level the earth rippled, twisted and liquefied under the clash of forces and it groaned loudly in protest.

Within the nearby sphere, walls cracked and shuddered under the strain, it's populace whimpered, quivering in fear and uncertain of what to do or where to go.

In the Council chambers, the doors had been sealed and barred. While the walls shook and the floor heaved and bucked beneath them, the Inner Councillors bowed their heads in terror, unable to think or act rationally. Their worst fears would seem to have come true, for surely they were under attack by some inconceivably powerful colonial weapon?

The High Councillor gripped the arm rests of his magnificent chair with white knuckles, his face drawn and haggard from fear. He watched as the walls of the chamber began to shatter under the strain, dropping large chunks of masonry among the cowering forms of the Inner Councillors.

He reached for a hidden drawer in his high table, within it his hand closed on the cold steel of a laser pistol. The Councillors had never been able to decide upon a final course of action against the colonists, so each had decided to take their own individual actions should the worst eventuate. This was the High Councillor's chosen reaction to their all too inevitable fate, one final pathetic act of cowardice from the leader of parliament of cowards.

There was a sound of released energy, of burning flesh and of a body softly falling from its high chair to the floor below.

The other Councillors raised their heads in surprise, but it was not the sound of a craven death that woke the Inner Councillors from their fear-induced paralysis; it was something far more inexplicable.

For not a second after the High Councillor's dead body had hit the floor, the shaking stopped...

Rushing towards the predicted landing site, Veej and Driver saw a great disturbance in the sky, like a ring of massive thunderstorms all linked in a wide loop of sparking luminescence. It surrounded something that projected through the atmosphere, stretching from all the way out in space right down to touch the surface of the earth below, something that glowed hotly, something that was huge beyond one insignificant humans tiny comprehension of scale.

Driver slowed the car as they approached the massive structure, before long it filled the entire viewport with its enormity. Slowly, details became discernable as the giant starship cooled, it seemed to not so much be a single structure but many, all tightly packed together in one huge twisting mass of vaguely cylindrical form.

The car halted, hovering on the spot.

"Shall I stay at this distance or move in closer?" Driver asked nervously.

But Veej didn't reply, his mouth gaped speechlessly at the incredible sight before him.

The small being monitored several computer scans of the large sphere embedded in the crust of the planet, apart from the low level technology that had already been detected and some unimportant organic lifeforms of unspecified nature there was nothing of any interest.

The sphere of hollow masonry could be ignored. The refining could begin.

When Veej had regained the use of his voice, he had instructed Driver to move closer to the huge starship and slowly circle around its enormous breadth.

He was now staring at what had - from a distance - appeared to be only a slight protuberance on the surface on the ship but on closer inspection was revealed to be a mountain-sized construction, comprised of large pipes, spheres and totally unidentifiable multifaceted shapes, densely packed together and linked in a seemingly haphazard manner. And all moving slowly, in an uncomfortably familiar way.

"It looks like its breathing." Veej gasped.

"It looks like an insane mess," observed Driver. "But there seems to be a specific function hinted at by the overall design, a refinery certainly, but to refine what?"

"I don't know," said Veej. "But this doesn't look good to me at all!"

"Normally I'd attribute such a statement to paranoia." Driver observed. "But in this case I'm inclined to agree with you."

Seated in its control chair the tiny being pulled levers and pressed switches. Lights flashed in new patterns on the control panel and a glittering crystal control unit lowered from the ceiling, the creature pulled the unit towards itself and pulled a chromed lever on its side.

Veej and Driver watched as a mechanical arm extricated itself from a mass of twisted pipes at the apex of the metal breathing mastiff before them, its large claw held a massive flat topped cone of some dark translucent material, the claw extended further and placed the cone on the ground.

Another lever was thrown, and the control unit returned to its socket in the ceiling, the red light on the brass stand glowed brightly.

"Conversion unit now functioning, exploitation now in progress," announced the computers dead voice. "Ready for take off."

"Boosters in two cycles," ordered the being. "Sixty percent gravitational thrust."

"Affirmative, counting down..."

As they watched Veej and Driver saw the dark cone begin to glow, slowly getting brighter until it was impossible to look at without darkening the viewport, it was as if a tiny sun had landed in the middle of the plain.

"I know what's happening Veej!" Driver exclaimed. "Its an atom refinery!"

"What?!" cried Veej "How?"

Veej became aware that Driver was accelerating towards the space ship, which was now rising back into the sky, a tongue of energy was crackling between the top of the glowing cone and an open portal near the base of the ship, towards which the car now turned.

"That cone is breaking down the atomic structure of the planet," gasped Driver. "And then converting it into an energy beam which the ship must be storing within itself."

"Oh my God." Veej found no other words to express the shock he was feeling, the sheer callousness of the operation was beyond his reckoning. "Can we stop it?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Driver. "I have several ideas but they involve finding the control section of this craft."

The car flew into the portal, through which travelled the beam of pure energy, it landed on the floor of the tunnel on the other side, the energy beam continued towards a parabolic collector at the far end of the tunnel.

Suddenly a strident alarm sounded within the cabin. Veej looked about frantically, wondering at what may be the cause.

"We're drifting into the exclusion zone!" Driver announced fearfully "We'll have to pull out or we'll explode before we get close enough to the control centre for me to access it."

Veej experienced a short burst of terror which just as suddenly became a long burst of inspiration.

"What is your control range?" He asked Driver.

"About ten kilometres." Driver replied, "The control centre must be higher up, beyond my range."

"So if I detached you from the car," Veej mused "you could fly it by remote down to that atom refinery?"

"Ye-es." Replied Driver "I could do that, but the refinery is well within the exclusion zone, I'm not certain I could hold off the detonation of the charge long enough!"

"But its worth a try, yes?" he asked Driver.

"Let's do it." Driver exclaimed, and Veej could well have envisaged Driver with a devil-may-care grin on its face, if it had had a mouth.

A moment later Veej and the freshly detached glassine sphere that was Driver were in the tunnel and the car was making best possible speed towards the glowing cone.

Bare minutes later, the car was hovering near enough to touch the giant cone as the bomb buried within its superstructure finally reached critical mass.

The whole sky glowed white, the air boiled and Veej was thrown to the tunnel floor by a cyclonic wind, falling next to where Driver had stuck itself magnetically.

The blast fragmented the cone and hurled one last massive power surge along the dying beam just before it failed. The surge fused the parabolic collector, burnt out the conversion circuits and threw the small powerfully built creature from its chair and into the wall behind it with the distinctly resonating thud of soft flesh hitting hard alloy at high speed.

It was several hours before the tiny creature woke. Only to find itself tightly bound with a combination of the deceleration straps torn from its flight chair and the scorched wires from the shattered conversion console. To its shock there was a tall ugly creature standing over the flight controls, it seemed to be talking in some gibberish-sounding language to a small glassy sphere that was attached to the console and appeared to be replying in kind.

"Get away from that console, creature." The entity screamed at the tall alien and it squirmed with its bonds ineffectually.

Veej turned as the tiny alien began shouting incomprehensibly at him from its place in the far corner. Its voice was ripe with what sounded like outrage - if emotions could be compared in such a way - though for all Veej knew the alien always spoke in such a tone of voice and was merely asking him the time.

The creature was trying to get loose but wasn't having much luck. All the while it continued to shout, a greenish tinge colouring its grey skin in its rage.

Veej reached into his pocket for the small bag of food concentrates, dumping its contents onto the flight console he then rolled the bag into a tiny ball and stuffed it into the raging aliens mouth, gagging him.

"Whatever you have to say will have to wait, my friend." Veej murmured. "Though I'm sure this isn't very comfortable for you, you did just try and suck my planet dry, so I'm not at my most friendliest today."

The alien stared at him, its eyes bulging in apoplexy, it continued to struggle ineffectually for a few moments but eventually gave up in apparent disgust.

"I wonder why though..." Veej mused, returning to the flight console. "Why come to Earth when this ship passed close enough to some of the outer planets to refine them first, what is it about this planet that made it a prime target?"

"I'm afraid the only way to know that, is to learn the aliens language and ask it." Driver observed.

"Have you had any luck with accessing the ships controls yet?" Veej enquired.

"Nearly there," Driver replied. "It's taking longer than I expected, but I wasn't really designed to access alien technology."

They had been on the flight deck for a little over half an hour when the alien had regained consciousness. Even though they had found an elevator from the base of the ship to the flight deck almost immediately after the power surge, it had taken several hours to travel the great distance between them, despite the ridiculously high speeds the lift had moved at.

"I think I have the controls for a viewscreen active now." Driver replied. "Here goes..."

The far wall exploded into a burst of kaleidoscopic overlapping colours that slowly resolved into a perfect stereoscopic representation of the outside world. In the middle distance the Domed City could be clearly seen, but all did not look well with it. Much of the forest on the side facing the ship had been blown over by the explosion of the refinery and fires were burning on its fringes, but the dome itself had an indistinct stain upon it, which was not immediately recognisable.

"Zoom in on the city, Driver."

Driver complied and the stain was revealed for what it truly was: a huge crack had split the "dome" from its apex to ground level. Enough of the thick masonry of the outer wall had split away that the inner structure of the city

was clearly visible.

Veej gasped in amazement at the sight. Though he was unsure whether the damage had been caused by the initial impact of the ships landing or the explosion of the refinery afterwards, or indeed whether it was the second impact when the ship had once again come to rest on the ground after the immobilizing jolt of the power surge he could not say, but the damage was extensive and perhaps beyond repair. Certainly, it was beyond anything that the Council could possibly hide.

And at the thought, Veej smiled. For the only fact he could be certain of at this point was that in one shocking moment the population of the city had been finally exposed to the truth of the outside world, and there would be no denying the evidence of their own eyes. And though he did not know the reason for which the Council had been hiding the truth, there was no denying that the truth was out now for all to see and he was certain of one other thing: after the initial wonder had passed at the sight of the outside world, there would be questions asked, many questions.

And Veej chuckled to himself gleefully; he wouldn't have wanted to be in the Councils place right now...

After the first tremors had faded, there had been a long unnerving pause before two further massive shocks had rocked the city almost simultaneously, leaving nearly every city structure in some degree of ruination. In the hours that had followed the disaster absolute pandemonium had reigned, for though emergency services had succeeded in putting out the many fires that had started and power had been restored to most areas, the panic that had swept throughout the city was not a product of the many disasters that had suddenly befallen them but something far more terrifying: the city wall had been breached.

The panic had travelled throughout the city in waves of all too understandably corporeal terror. But the initial panic had begun to fade almost as quickly as it had begun, because of one single fact that was undeniable: they were exposed to the outside air and yet, they were still alive...

Fear had just as quickly been replaced by curiosity. And now, where only hours before there had been a stampede away from the breach in the wall, there was now a slow procession of those whose curiosity had overcome their fear. And the group was growing larger all the time.

At the massive crack in the city wall they stood and wondered at the land presented to them. From close up the forest was not as badly damaged as Veej had presumed and the people were amazed at the huge green towers of foliage that stood before them. The more courageous of the citizens had begun to walk out into the forest, to touch the trees to breathe the clean air and to be amazed by the many birds that were flying hither and thither, disturbed as they were from their usual roosts by the violent events of the day.

And the questions had finally began to be asked, and the eyes of the people turned back to stare at the cracked dome and the Councillors they knew to be within. And not all their eyes were friendly...

Barricaded as they were in the remnants of the Council chamber, only whispers of the happenings outside reached the Inner Council members who remained.

After the final shocks had hit the city the already-weakened dome of the Council chamber had collapsed spectacularly and now only five Councillors were left to cower in fear, too scared to stay in the unstable ruin of the chambers, yet far too terrified to go out into the city amongst the mobs that must certainly be coming, all too soon...

"So what shall you do now, Veej." Asked Driver "I'm fairly certain this ships refinery is useless now, but it's flight circuits still appear to be operational."

"I have so many choices available to me all of a sudden." Veej replied with a grin "Who would have thought so after yesterday."

And he mused quietly for a moment; silence reigned, except for the occasional renewed struggles of the bound and gagged alien in the corner.

Veej leaned on the control console and gazed thoughtfully at the image of the dome on the viewscreen and the rolling green hills and dense forests in the distance beyond it. Then, turning away from the sight, he sat carefully in the narrow flight seat and looked around him.

"Go home, explore the world or explore the universe..." He whispered quietly, he turned and looked at Driver with a grin. "Not as easy a question to answer as you'd think." He observed wryly.

"Have you decided?" Driver asked.

"I've decided." Veej replied, "To sleep on it."

And with that, he leaned back into the chair and closed his eyes.

THE END.

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