

PROBE

204



PROBE 204

June 2025

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Editorial

Gail

Coming to you from a freezing, (to us anyway at 2 degrees C this morning) Joburg, we long for more inclement weather. I'm glad to say that we have been receiving fanzines from two places that have far colder winters than we do. MonSFFA, the Montreal, Canadian association report that they are really getting back to functioning normally after a long Covid-19 break. We've received "Impulse" Vol 28 no4 from May 2025. It's interesting to see that this is a clubzine like PROBE. They hold monthly meeting and broadcast them on Zoom, as we do. As it is summer there now, they are



meeting in the open air. You can contact Keith Braithwaite (Magazines Received – page 5) or ask me and I'll send you a copy.

And then from Sweden, "Intermission" edited by Ahvrid Engholm. I really had to smile when he asked...Do atoms dream of elementary particles? He also says that this fanzine "Hits you like an A-Bomb!" And goes on to say. "All about the Swedish A-bomb program - no fake, the Swedes were six months from a Bomb. Marvel at Eurovision and how three dudes in a sauna take over the world. We go to a short film festival and rub elbows with Western hero Ben Hogan. The best remedy for body and soul!" Send him a mail or ask me for a copy.

Great to see SF&F is really alive and well. And having said that we have had a couple of really fascinating meetings lately, about *really* old mass extinctions and have an update on SPACE-X coming soon. As well as a Zoom talk, possibly in September, from our newest overseas member. Madelein Patzelt, a South African now living in Germany. She has much experience with the study of meteorites.

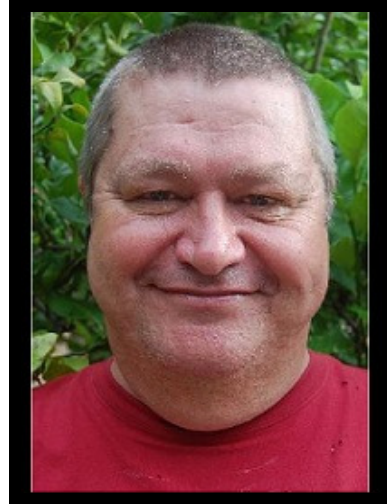
You can look at www.sffsa.org.za for the Zoom recordings of these meetings

Chairperson's Note

On 16 May 1960, the American engineer and physicist Theodore H. Maiman successfully fired the first solid-state laser that used a synthetic ruby crystal. On 7 July 1960, at a press conference in Manhattan, he and his then employer, Hughes Aircraft Company, publicly announced the laser. The Los Angeles Herald reported this with the headline: "LA man discovers science-fiction death ray".

Hyperbole. Speculative Fiction authors thrive on it. It is often a critical component of the genre we all love. But it has no place in the world of science. Nor should it exist in the reporting of science.

In 2019, an astonishing claim was made



concerning K2-18b, an exoplanet more than 120 light-years away. Using data from the Hubble Space Telescope, there appeared to be signatures consistent with water vapour in the atmosphere of K2-18b. If water vapour was present in these quantities, one possibility was the existence of a large, deep, global ocean (Hycean world hypothesis). There were clouds found in this exo-atmosphere and absorption signatures were present, which appeared to be consistent with water vapour. However, many molecular signatures - "chemical fingerprints" - look very similar over very narrow wavelength ranges.

In 2023, JWST took transmission spectroscopy data of this planet. They found that the molecule doing the absorbing was not water vapour, but methane. Thus the Hycean world hypothesis, with a global liquid water ocean, was not supported by the previous claims.

Then the hype followed; not by the tabloids, but by scientists. Prof Nikku Madhusudhan and his team at Cambridge claimed that at the long-wavelength portion of the JWST spectrum, a signature was detected that appeared to be dimethyl sulfide (DMS). They stated that this molecule was only produced on Earth by biological processes. It is true that most of Earth's dimethyl sulfide is produced by phytoplankton and bacteria, and DMS represents the dominant form of organic Sulphur found in the Earth's oceans.

"The only scenario that currently explains all the data obtained so far from JWST, including the past and present observations, is one where K2-18b is a Hycean world teeming with life," Madhusudhan said. He did temper this with the warning

that there was a 0.3% chance that their observation was a statistical fluke. "We need to be open and continue exploring other scenarios," he added.

This was not the tone of his subsequent statements. He was surprised by how much gas was apparently detected during a single observation window. "The amount we estimate of this gas in the atmosphere is thousands of times higher than what we have on Earth," Madhusudhan said. "So, if the association with life is real, then this planet will be teeming with life. If we confirm that there is life on K2-18b, it should basically confirm that life is very common in the galaxy."

But there were two problems with this assertion. The "detection" of DMS in the near-infrared portion of the spectrum was very flimsy. More significantly, DMS on Earth may arise from biological production mechanisms, but it is produced by non-biological means elsewhere in the Universe. It has been found in the interstellar medium, including in the galactic center's large molecular cloud. It has been found on comets. And it has been produced abiotically in the laboratory during photochemical experiments.

The basis of the claim of potential alien life was the alleged detection of DMS. Even this claim is disputed. A group of scientists (R. Luque et al) wrote: "Our joint analysis of the panchromatic (0.6 - 12 um) spectrum of K2-18 b finds insufficient evidence for the presence of DMS and/or DMDS in the atmosphere of the planet. Furthermore, other molecules containing methyl functional groups (e.g., ethane) with absorption bands similar to DMS/DMDS provide an equally good fit to the data."

While the web is full of reports, explanations and hype, full details of a well-reasoned rebuttal can be found at <https://www.patreon.com/posts/evidence-for-on-127158019>.

The announcement about alien life was not restricted to scientists and reporters.

Late night comedians introduced their own spin. For example, on 18 April 2025, Stephen Colbert ("The Late Show") mentioned it

<https://youtu.be/RyKExGUtbvg?si=qRtJBJ7biMI-rElw>, mark 6:26). Here is an extract from the transcript:

"Astronomers have detected a possible signature of life on a distant planet. But before you get too excited, scientists are cautioning that further studies are needed with one astronomer saying: 'I'm not screaming aliens'. "Why not? Aliens! We found aliens!"

Of course, this was comedy (and extremely funny, too). As Chaucer said, "A man may say full sooth in game and play." Or perhaps one prefers the Shakespearean version, "Jesters do oft prove prophets." Ay, there's the rub.

Magazines Received

Ansible David Langford

March 2025 454 <http://news.ansible.uk/a454.html>

April 2025 455 <http://news.ansible.uk/a455.html>

May 2025 456 <http://news.ansible.uk/a456.html>

De Profundis

DeProfundis #607 March 2025 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;

DeProfundis #608 April 2025 Heath "Scribbles" Row, 4367 Globe Ave., Culver City, CA 90230; kalel@well.com;

DeProfundis #609 May 2025 Editor: Matthew Mitchell captmurdock@gmail.com for Los Angeles Science Fantasy society

Intermission

Intermission #153 Early April '25 Ahrvid Engholm ahrvid@hotmail.com Sweden

Intermission #154 Early May '25 Ahrvid Engholm ahrvid@hotmail.com Sweden

Impulse

News bulletin of the Montreal Science fiction and Fantasy Association. MonSFFA

Vol 28 No: 3 April 2025 Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

News bulletin of the Montreal Science fiction and Fantasy Association. MonSFFA

Vol 28 No: 4 May 2025 Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

Nova 2024 3rd Place

Just so Much Philip Machanick

I hate being a househusband. I was a moderately distinguished professor until I became an extinguished professor. But my daughter is an astronaut. I can be proud of someone. I was disgraced without good cause but I can be vicariously proud. My other daughter is an artist. I can be proud of that too though, as a scientist, I don't understand her art.

So, I cook and clean. And watch the news. And get invited to exhibitions I don't understand, but at least the snacks are good.

This is me.

I turn on the news.

Our first mission to the Moon is the breaking news. I wonder why as it is still many months in the future. I pay attention. This is Jem's world; she is on the list for the first landing.

I am still watching when Ruby bounds in, energetic as ever. "Dad! Neglecting the housework as always! Do you want me to do the washing up so you aren't in trouble with mum when she gets home?"

I point at the screen. There is a close-up of something on the Lunar surface, something indistinct – but shiny.

"Dad, what's that?"

"Jem's mission to the Moon, if she is selected, pushed forward as early as possible. It's an impossible artefact, something made of shiny metal. Big enough to get a photo from lunar orbit, not big enough to see clearly from that distance." I correct myself. "A shiny patch? An artefact? No one is sure. But nothing else on the moon is shiny like that so what else can it be? The orbiting probe's camera doesn't have enough resolution for a clear image."

I leave Ruby to stare at the screen. She's right, I have neglected the dishes. And I need to prepare supper; even if I have been dismissed as a professor, I can still be a competent househusband. I don't want her help, not now. She needs to take in the new story. I have the gist already, even if more detail – no, speculation – is unfolding as I head for the kitchen. Ruby is too engrossed to object.

* * *

Three years ago. I am in the Dean's office. The department chair's offer of an early retirement package rankles. But appealing to the Dean makes no difference.

"Did you really think your department chair could make that offer without reference to me? In fact, it did not even come from me. It came from the top. The university cannot afford embarrassment. It is actually out of my appreciation for your previous good work that I negotiated a generous early retirement package."

Chastened, I empty my office of everything that's mine. Though I wonder if anything that relates to academia is worth the effort, I take everything home. I have a study at home that is not yet full and my househusband duties surely can't take up all my time.

* * *

Back to the here and now. The phone rings. It's Jem. I grab the phone, dripping dish water as I go, before anyone else can, somehow sensing it is for me. "Dad! Have you seen the news?" I turn on video though I don't need to see her to know how excited she is.

"That I have," I reply. Are you on for the Lunar mission? They're saying it's happening sooner than scheduled."

"I don't know but I am pushing hard to be on it, and I more than qualify."

“Good lass. You know I will be proud of you no matter what.”

As I put the phone down, I hear the front door open. Pearl is in the kitchen in rapid strides, almost beating me to the dishes. Pearl opens with: “Have you seen the news? Everyone is talking about it.”

“Absolutely, I only abandoned it to do the dishes.”

“Ah. Would that be why the phone is wet?”

“Guilty as charged. The phone rang and, as I guessed, it was Jem.”

“Is she on...?”

“No,” I reply. “They haven’t announced the crew yet. But she’s confident that she’s in with a strong chance. And of course, the Moon mission has been pushed to top priority.”

“I see. Will that happen so soon that we don’t get to eat tonight?”

“Oh! I am a bad househusband! Will all the excitement, I forgot to cook.”

Ruby snaps off the news. “Come on! Let’s go out for a change and celebrate! Our Jem is going to the Moon!”

“Very probably...” I start.

“You’re such a scientist! You can never be certain of anything! You know she’s the best!” Ruby pushes me towards the door, her bemused mother in tow. So going out, it is.

* * *

Things move fast. The media keeps the story live and the Moon mission is preparing far faster than anyone had expected. I worry that the danger will increase because of the rushed timelines. Jem phones. She can barely contain her excitement. “Dad! Are you the only one who picks up the phone?”

“I’m the only one who has no career and can afford to skulk around the house.”

“Oh. Do I have to tell you again how sorry...”

“No. Forget all that. I want to hear from you. Are you definite for the Moon crew?”

“Yes! That’s why I am phoning. And I am actually so glad that I am telling you first.”

“Me? Because...”

“Why? Because it may yet vindicate your crazy theory.”

“The stuff that got me all but fired? I’m sorry, but the high-ups who pushed me, pushed me really hard. I don’t foresee a ‘sorry’ at the end of that.”

“Never mind. I always believed in you, and still do. I saw the evidence with my own eyes. No way is that anything but what you said it was. Listen: we have to go into isolation soon. Can you tell the others? I am not sure if there will be time to talk again.”

“Of course. But tell me: the way they are rushing it... safety...”

“Oh, dad. Trust you to think of that angle. Of course, all the safety issues are being observed. But some things can be sped up by doing more than one thing at once. I promise, it will be as safe as if we went as originally scheduled.”

I am still staring at the phone when Pearl gets home. “What’s the matter? Has a ghost phoned?”

I snap out of it. “The opposite, I hope. Jem is in and she has gone into isolation with the crew, so that’s probably the last time we talk until after the mission. I very much hope to have her back here and safe to tell us what she sees.”

Pearl holds me close, a surprisingly juvenile gesture. But I don’t mind. This is a special moment. Sadly, Ruby is away launching a new exhibition so she can’t share the moment; it will have to wait until tomorrow.

I pull away and look closely at Pearl. She is the same Pearl who made her vows so long ago. “Come on. You had a hard day’s work. Sit down, and I will make your favourite dinner.” Just this once, I am in the mood to househusband.

* * *

When Ruby gets home, it’s a bit of an anticlimax. The crew is already old news – only a day after the announcement. Things are moving so fast. She joins me on the couch, watching the latest update. The rocket is being readied, with massive fuel pipes being connected, in time for the launch tomorrow.

A voice intones: “Fuelling happens at the last minute, as some of the chemicals are so volatile that they can’t be loaded until they are ready for use.”

I turn to Ruby. “That isn’t super reassuring. Our Jem will be on top of that thing.”

Ruby gives me a stern look. “Since when has Jem been the one to worry about? You got yourself fired. Even if it wasn’t technically being fired. I do crazy arty stuff. Jem is the rational one, always super-prepared.”

“I suppose you’re right. But having lost so much, I couldn’t bear to lose one of my daughters.” My turn for a stern look. “You had better keep safe too.”

“Oh, dad. The worst than can happen to me is falling off a ladder, and I haven’t done that... often.”

That lightens the mood. I get up. “Come on, I hear there’s a qenja game over at your old school. Why don’t we watch? I know it is more Jem’s thing, but it will be like old times.”

“Dad, you’re such a romantic when you try. Who would guess you used to be a scientist.”

I let the painful ‘used to be’ pass. I stay in the moment. My older daughter is an astronaut and will soon be on the Moon. My younger daughter wants to watch qenja with me. Life could be so much worse.

And – who knows? – my crazy theory could be vindicated in the most spectacular way possible. If that shiny thing on the Moon is in fact an artefact, how did it get

there, and when? We have not had capacity for space flight until very recently and have not landed anything remotely close to that spot on the Moon. Or so they say on the news.

The game is heating up as we get there and Ruby looks around the pitch. “I still don’t quite get why this excites anyone. It looks like pointless complexity to me. And I am an artist, and ‘pointless’ according to the critics is my thing.”

“That’s mean. I don’t understand your work, but that’s my fault, not yours.”

“Nonsense. Art is for the viewer, not the artist. If mine is not for you, that’s nobody’s fault. Someone else will get it. And probably dismiss stuff you like. Anyway, you’re ducking the issue. What do you see in qenja? You being a scientist and all, a creature of logic and order.”

Not ‘former’... I take the win. “Logic and order for me are work. The crazy illogic of the game is a release. And besides, Jem enjoys it, and I loved to be with her while she was having fun.”

“Mph., Do you love watching me work?”

“Actually, I do, but it’s harder to show pleasure when I don’t understand. For all its illogic, qenja has rules that I can make sense of even if they seem silly. I understand it, even if I can’t play. Just trying to make sense of all the variations on when the ball is in play is pretty tricky – even if it fits a clear set of rules.”

There is a loud yell from the pitch. The referees have just finished conferring and all toot their horns in unison, confirming an extra penalty, putting the home side clearly in the lead.

“Look at that, Ruby. Cheating gives you no advantage. If only it was like that in real life.”

“What do you mean...? Oh, your work. Your bosses there are such *cockroaches*.” For once, I stay silent and don’t admonish her for the slur.

We watch the game with no further comment. The home side is racking up points; the visitors are clearly not up for further cheating, having been caught out.

We watch until play breaks off, and we are about to set off, when I realise that one of the home players has approached. “You’re Professor Spines, aren’t you?”

“Was,” I admit ruefully.

“I just want to say that what happened to you is so wrong. If I have a boy when I have my own family, I hope he grows up in a fairer world.”

I am about to say something when she goes on: “You must be so proud of your daughter. I hope whatever she finds on the Moon vindicates you.”

Before I can respond, she is gone. I turn to Ruby. “Of course I am proud of both of my daughters.”

“Dad, Jem is the one in the news. It is her moment. Let’s not elevate my daubing as if this is one of those juvenile contests where everyone wins a prize.”

I think better of arguing. My daughters may be more behind male liberation than I am, but they still have a way of dominating me.

* * *

The phone rings. I don't answer; Jem is unlikely to be calling at this hour, with intense training on the go, and who else calls our household for me?

I hear Pearl talking animatedly and ending with "Yes, yes. But I am not sure if he..." She calls me over. "It's media. They want your comment on Jem and the Moon mission."

"Do they now?"

Despite misgivings, I reach for the phone. A voice at the other end sounds vaguely familiar, perhaps someone I have heard on the news. I decide not to ask because I am not interested in popular culture and don't want to embarrass myself.

"Is that Professor Spines?"

"Former." Video is off, I note. It stays off.

"Of course. There is talk that the find on the Moon could represent ancient artefacts. What do you say?"

"I say you should talk to a professor how hasn't been prematurely superannuated."

"Ah. But you were the one making claims of ancient artefacts, many millions of years before intelligent life is generally agreed to have evolved."

"And no one took that seriously."

"Also, your daughter in on the crew."

"Ah. So, you are trying to get at her through me. Sorry, no jenqa. No foul." I inadvertently break into the language Jem used to use at school and shake my mandibles to clear my head, glad that I did not take the call on video. "Now look, she has made a career of her own. Whatever you or anyone else says about me, she should only be judged for who she is. And that is a pioneering astronaut, something she achieved for herself – and that has nothing to do with me."

"But the find..."

I cut the connection and turn to Pearl. Her look is clearly approving. That matters to me a lot more than anything anyone watching the news believes. I ask: "Did I say anything that would jeopardise Jem's place on the mission?"

"Of course not. As you say, she should be judged on her own achievements. And even if she owes more of that to you than you admit, she would be proud of you if she saw how you handled that. As am I." She points at the door. "Come on, let's get out of the house. I know a place you like to go out to."

* * *

Launch day. It's live on the news. There have been other missions but landing on the Moon was not meant to be so soon. Almost everyone on the planet must be watching, but none with the keen interest of our household. Our Jem is on the crew. And no matter what denial I may be nursing, so is my reputation.

We have a zoomed-out view of the rocket – as we must, to see such a massive artefact. The news commentary drones on for those who have not been following previous reports.

“The main stage is to get the crew into orbit. Once there, the crew module separates and docks with the smaller transit stage to accelerate to the Moon. That was previously placed in orbit.”

A tiny spec appears in the distance, and resolves into an open vehicle, with four figures evident. The crew. There is no way we can identify Jem at this distance, but the screen shows close-ups of each face in a row underneath the live scene.

As the crew shuttle gets nearer, I think I discern Jem but am not sure. “Is that Jem getting off now?”

Ruby eyes me out. “Don't say your eyesight is improving with age.”

“I recognize the way she moves.”

“A trick of fading eyesight?”

“I'm not that decrepit. Watch.”

The news anchor intones the obvious: “The crew is exiting their ground shuttle and now is entering the lift to the crew module.” The flight crew, accompanied by a couple of ground crew, clamber onto a flimsy-looking platform that starts to rise up the side of the rocket on a slender cable. I can't stop myself watching, despite a feeling of dread – but the lift works as designed and stops level with the entrance to the crew module.

The ground crew members usher them in, and the camera zooms in on the scene. I am sure I catch a glimpse of Jem's face as one of the flight crew turns and waves. One of the ground crew goes in with them as the news anchor unnecessarily explains what we have heard numerous times during the build-up: “The ground crew is doing final checks, and assisting with ensuring that the flight crew helmets are properly sealed.”

A few minutes later, the ground crew descend, and are shuttled out of sight. Says the anchor: “The countdown has officially started; over to command centre.”

An official-sounding voice is counting off minutes, while various results of tests are intermittently announced. Finally, from the crew we hear: “Captain Opal to ground control. All systems checked. Ready for final count to ignition.”

So this is it, my daughter blasting off to space. We watched transfixed as the final seconds are dispatched. Then there is a small cloud of smoke or steam and the rocket starts to vibrate, followed by lifting gently as a column of flame becomes

visible, then abruptly accelerates. The camera follows it to the sky, where it rapidly passes from view.

I realise that we have all stopped breathing when a voice breaks out: “Captain Opal to ground control: we have separation. Separation. Manoeuvre to dock with the transit stage commencing.”

I marvel at my physics colleagues – former colleagues, I correct myself – who have calculated everything so precisely that a rocket can take off from our planet, arrive in orbit and dock with a previously-launched transit stage.

The manoeuvre to docking takes the better part of an hour – it is not *that* precise but is a marvel nonetheless. None of us can stop watching though much of minutiae is incomprehensible to anyone who has not studied orbital mechanics.

I turn to Pearl as the manoeuvre completes and the captain announces: “Docking successful, final checks to commence.”

“Amazing. Our Jem is up there, one of that crew that has so far performed flawlessly. Can you believe that?”

Says Ruby: “It is hard to believe. But I am not surprised that Jem is there. She is *your* daughter.”

* * *

The next three days, no one in our household gets much sleep – and quite possibly hardly anyone else does. Every small development on the trip to the Moon is new to all of us. Surely though no one could be watching with more trepidation. Jem is such an important part of my life. But so was being a professor. And that is no more. Jem is all I have left.

I examine myself closely as the spacecraft enters lunar orbit. Would vindication really matter a lot to me? Yes, it would. But what could that vindication be? Something shiny on the Moon could be anything. An artefact – yes, and that would be astonishing and surely would vindicate me. Unless I am completely wrong about my original controversial find. No. Of that, I am convinced: it is what it is. However, an artefact surely could not last tens of millions of years on the Moon. Not with exposure to radiation and the ever-present threat of meteorite strikes. But who knows? Perhaps it was fortuitously covered by dust thrown up by a strike and only now uncovered?

What else could it be? Some natural formation that happened somehow to become shiny? A piece of an asteroid, made of rock atypical of the lunar surface?

Pearl knows me too well for me to cover up. She turns to me. “Out with it. Something is troubling you.”

“The artefact. The thing that I found on the fossil appendage. The gold band. What if this thing really does vindicate my find?”

“What if it does? It is not you on the Moon. Jem is not there on her own. She isn’t even the mission commander. Anyway, we can only know once it is found and examined. Let’s take a break. The landing is not happening soon.”

She’s right. The craft is going to do a complete lunar orbit before anything happens, and is only going to land in about 8 hours. Pearl leads the way out to the garden, a space I far too infrequently visit. A place of tranquillity, just what I need now.

* * *

We’re back in front of the screen, watching preparation to land. After the landing crew moves to the lander, leaving a lone crew member in the transit stage, there is another interminable series of checks. The engine eventually fires to begin the descent and carefully enunciated technical jargon ensues. I am not watching the clock but remember that the landing sequence takes under 15 minutes.

My mandibles are clenched all the way down. All voices from ground control and the crew are controlled, disciplined. This is what they are trained to do so that in itself is not totally reassuring. Only when I hear the commander say, “We have landed, engines out,” do I relax. I look around the room. We collectively let out a cheer. Our Jem is on the Moon.

“What happens now?” Ruby asks.

I gesture at the screen. The anchor is speaking. “We now need to be patient. The crew is performing a long list of checks. They need to be sure they can get off the surface again before they go out. Once that is done, they will check their pressure suits thoroughly before depressurising the cabin.”

Eventually, after another lengthy exchange of jargon, the crew is preparing to exit for the surface. For the first time, we will know who it is going to be.

Ruby asks, “Will Jem be the first out?”

Pearl looks at her as if she is an idiot. “She isn’t the mission commander. Listen: we should know soon.”

Sure enough, mission commander Opal is first out and makes a brief speech: “It is a great honour to be the first of our kind to step on extra-terrestrial ground.”

I wonder without vocalising: the first of *our* kind?

Then Opal points the camera at the ladder as another figure exits, and adds: “Navigator Diamond is the second; co-pilot Jem will be staying on the lander, so as to be sure that at least one of us can get back if there is as mishap on the surface.”

I look at my family in dismay. Then I get it. “I wonder if Jem has deliberately avoided being one of the first to inspect the artefact, if that is what it is? That would be so like her, avoiding setting up a controversy over my misfortune.”

Pearl consoles me. “It could be worse. She could be the one stuck in lunar orbit in the transit stage.” I am too focused on the screen to answer.

The mission commander is walking over to the place where the shiny object should be found, centred in the frame of the video, the camera now in the hands of the navigator. Her walk is strange, with each step a hop into the air arising from low gravity. She stoops and picks up a piece of shiny material. Dust falls off it. It is surrounded by a pile of dust and other smaller shiny fragments. She turns to the camera. "In the bright light on the surface, with our darkened visors to protect our sight, I cannot clearly see what this is. Once back in the lander, with lighting more under control, we can take a clearer look at it. It is in a bigger field of shiny fragments, which would be what was visible from orbit." She stoops to pick up a few other items.

She turns back to the lander, with the camera following her.

"Is that it?" Ruby looks impatient.

Pearl explains. "The original mission plan was for a longer initial exploration but everyone wants to know what this shiny thing is."

In a few minutes, the crew are all back in the lander with Jem. They wait for the cabin to pressurise before removing their helmets. Then the mission commander holds the artefact for the camera. "This is interesting. It is clearly a piece of metal. Stainless steel, possibly. It is pitted and scratched but possibly it was somehow preserved better than these other pieces of metal." She holds up some fragments.

There is a pause while she examines it closely.

"This is not very clear but there appear to be two circles drawn here and they seem to depict the shapes of the continents, but not exactly." She holds the object up for the camera and I stare intently.

I look at Pearl then look at Ruby.

Ruby asks: "Vindication?"

"I'm not sure. The image is not clear but it does look roughly as the continents would have looked in the era of my fossil. The Australian continent for example looks quite distinct – but I can't be sure until I see it up close. Continental drift since then..."

The phone rings.

Pearl gets up to take the call, then calls me over. It is the media person who quizzed me before. Again, the call is not on video. I leave it like that. "Professor, what do you think of the find on the Moon?"

I take a moment to think this through. "When I previously suggested that it was possible for beings with skeletons to be intelligent, I was forced out of my job. I am no longer considered an expert on palaeontology. I suggest you talk to a recognised expert." I do not add: a female. That goes without saying.

I decide not to wait for a follow-up question and cut the call.

I suddenly realise that I don't care if I am vindicated or not. It's my family that matters. I would not want that to be otherwise. I want Jem to be able to be a hero without worrying about how I will be seen by society. She should have been one of the first of our kind to walk on the Moon, not the one who stayed behind on account of me.

This is all too much. I collapse onto the couch. There is just so much that a beetle can take.

Nova 2024 Finalist

EPHEMERAL Gary Kuyper

I'm dying!

I can clearly sense the inevitable approach of my end, yet I am not afraid.

I have lived a long, happy, satisfying and extremely successful life.

My earliest memories are of growing up in my father's mansion on his country estate north of

London.

George, my roommate at the Cambridge students' residents, would often jibe that I had been born with the proverbial silver spoon stuck up my arse. He was, of course, simply envious that my grades were always better than his, but more so because the female students tended to fawn over me whenever we invited some to join us on a bender. To his further chagrin I would say, 'A superior brain cultivates a superior personality.' To which he would often reply, 'Yes, arrogance and conceitedness.' Then he would add, 'One day someone will come along and take the wind out of your sails.' I liked that he was jealous of my successes, it made me feel, well yes, superior.

My entire life I have never known want, even my wantonness has always been completely satisfied. I was blessed with good looks, the sort that make beautiful women tell you that they'd like to wake up with your shoes under their bed. And because I had vast wealth they often wished to wake up with *their* shoes under *my* bed – permanently!

Someone did eventually come along who took the wind out of my sails. Her name was Elizabeth. I was greatly attracted to her by her naivety, that childlike innocence that few women on this planet still possess. Being ignorant to the wicked ways of this

world does not mean that she was a fool. Oh, no! She had a good head on her shoulders. Good as in being clever, but also good as in being morally sound. I considered her the yin to my yang.

It was the happiest day in my life when Elizabeth agreed to be my wife. It was a joy equalled only by the births of our two beautiful children. First came Michael, then a year and a half later, cute as a button, Margaret.

My father's wealth had given me a good start in life. He had hoped that I would one day, like him, be the CEO of a large reputable company. I did him one better by becoming the *owner* of a large reputable company – a company whose founder managed to formulate cures for Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and Lou Gehrig's - the last having claimed the life of another great mind. By saying *another* I am, of course, referring to yours truly. This was made evident after I received the Nobel Prize no less than three times.

Yes, I have had a truly wonderful and successful life, yet one fatal disease for which I have not been able to find a cure, and not for lack of trying, is *aging*. I was, however, able to formulate products that retard the process and made me a fortune that surpassed that of my father's by fifty-fold.

Still, with all my wealth and expertise I have been unable to unlock that ultimate secret – the key to immortality! But, as mentioned, I am not afraid to die. Heck, at one hundred and twenty years of age I should welcome the cold grip of Death. Methuselah still beats me by a whopping eight centuries, which makes me wonder how accurate the Biblical account is of that man's longevity. After all, since my nineties I've experienced the acute aches and pains and restrictions that aging causes.

There are people, the losers and pessimists, who claim that life is one long death, that all are forced to suffer from cradle to grave. Not me! I have no regrets – not of the life I've lived, but more importantly, not in having to leave it.

If there is an afterlife, and many believe that it is something wonderful, it would have to up its game considerably to top the life I've had. Yep, not many people out there able to state, 'I've had Heaven on Earth.'

You would think that such a statement would make it difficult to let go. Not so, it's been great, but all good things must come to an end.

I can clearly sense Death approaching. I don't know how or why, but as certain as the sun rises and sets I will die this very day - no more tomorrows for me. So sure am I of this that I have asked my family to gather. They have catered to my wishes.

My children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren, have assembled about my bed. Most weep, but instead of sharing in their sorrow I am imbued with a sense of great well-being. A wise man said, 'A heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others.' I hope I was able to bring joy to many

during my lifetime. I regret if I have caused any pain other than that of my departing it.

My wife takes my right hand in hers. I am grateful that I was spared the pain of having to bury *her*. What an absolutely perfect life I've had.

Death takes hold of my other hand. Strange? I expected it to be cold, yet it is rather warm, welcoming and comforting. I close my eyes and allow myself to be taken completely.

"LX-83, open your eyes." The hand that rudely shakes me to full consciousness is startlingly chilly. It belongs to a female unit. She... it, although attractive, is a pod-usher and so does not have the heating elements of the pleasure units. "Your pseudo-lifetime session has completed. Please exit the neuro-pod promptly as there is another client waiting."

"Give me a moment to orient myself."

"The residual effect of your pseudo-life experience will momentarily recede."

"Just a brief minute, *please?*"

"That statement is invalid. A minute is a precise length of time. I will assist you to a seat."

I wince as I am effortlessly pulled from the pod before being rudely deposited on a nearby bench. The seat is specifically for humans. Automatons never sit down. Well, I have never seen one seated. They don't need to rest. They do recharge though, but even that is done in an upright position.

"Thanks... for nothing," I mutter.

"Your lunch break terminates in five minutes. Please be prompt in proceeding to your work station."

"Yes, yes, I just need that *precise* goddamned *minute* to adjust myself!"

My job is to package various items from a production line so that they can be safely shipped out to facilities where they will be assembled together with items gathered from other factories.

Fortunately, my place of employment is conveniently close to the Pseudo-life Centre.

I stand up and head towards the packaging station.

Coming out of a neuro-pod always leaves me disorientated, not in such a way that I might lose my balance, but in a manner that has me wondering if the pseudo-life experience was the reality, and the reality that I am now experiencing is the dream. It's like Zhuangzi's philosophical classic where he states that he fell asleep one day and dreamed that he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he did not know whether he really was a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly or whether he was a butterfly now dreaming he was a man. You can't blame me for thinking *that* because the

pseudo-life had felt as real as, well, as this waking nightmare. Also, all knowledge of *this* life is suppressed while experiencing the events of a pseudo-lifetime.

I'm not the genius I believed myself to be in that fake life. I consider myself to be only slightly above average intelligence; therefore, I can't explain how a neuro-pod compresses time, making it possible to experience a complete pseudo-lifetime in about forty-five minutes. *A lifetime in a lunchtime* I call it. I've experienced hundreds, probably thousands, and have never had two that were exactly the same. Similar, yes, but never identical. I regard all those déjà vu experiences that I often have in a pseudo-life as being the product of all my past lives – pseudo-lives that is. I consider them to be a plethora of reincarnations. The one common thread is that you always have an amazingly satisfying, gratifying and successful *life*. Why else would I continue to undergo the experiences? My reality is frustratingly mundane. The work the machines have allocated me would have driven me insane a long time ago if not for the wonderfully satisfying pseudo-lives. The system knows it and therefore supports... my habit.

I am certain that they could easily tinker together a contraption capable of doing my job, but I suppose they want me to retain some sense of worth. I'm not certain why they tolerate me... *us*.

I am the only human at that particular packaging station, a situation that adds to my ever-increasing frustration and discontent.

I've just completed a package when the order blares over the intercom.

"LX-83, it is time for your annual evaluation. Please proceed promptly to the nearest subway terminal."

I obey, taking the escalator down to the station.

I am the only person waiting on the platform when the train pulls in.

"LX-83, please board the train," suggests the intercom, although I know that it is more a command.

The guardrail sinks into the platform and I enter the compartment. I find myself to be the only occupant. This is not surprising as the trains are mostly used for the conveyance of cargo.

The doors on either side are marked '*No entry*.' I test one and find it sealed. Through the clear-glass panels I see that the adjoining compartments are filled with packages similar to those that I constantly prepare for shipping. I wonder if any of these *are* actually my handiwork.

"LX-83, please sit down."

I obey and the train moves off.

As the train smoothly glides along, I reflect on how I've never had the same evaluator during the eight years since my activation.

Activation - that's the word *they* use although I am very much human. I know this to be a fact because I once, in a state of doubt, drew my packaging blade across the side of my hand, making sure to reach the bone within. I have the scar to remind me of the pain, my stupidity, and my unquestionable humanity.

Always a different evaluator, and always a different consulting room.

The evaluators, though, are not human. And because they are all linked to the Great Mainframe are therefore *one*. So it makes no sense why they have me go to a different location each time.

My train of thought is broken as the train comes to a halt. I expect that I've reached the station where I am to disembark.

The intercom informs me that I'm wrong.

"We apologise for the unavoidable delay. Please be patient and remain seated."

We? Strange term for a system that is basically *one*.

"Unavoidable delay?" I enquire.

"We have moved onto a side track allowing an Interstate Express to pass unhindered."

I believe the subway system is so extensive that it reaches every part of the country.

An *Interstate Express*. I've heard of them. Apparently, they travel at remarkable speeds.

I have often hoped to witness one of these ultra-fast conveyances. I sense my excitement building in anticipation of the event.

Its entire length passes in a blur. The sight, although notable, was ungratifying – too brief... too ephemeral to fully appreciate.

We move off again.

"LX-83, please disembark."

As I wait for the guardrail to lower I notice the man waiting to board. He could be my older brother, having the same bush of curly red hair and pasty, freckled complexion.

We pass each other silently, yet our glances reveal a certain common and undeniable knowledge.

There are no stairs or escalators leading up out of the subway, only an elevator.

"LX-83, please enter the elevator."

I obey. The doors close and the intercom informs, "Please be patient as this will take an extended period."

“Why?” I ask, then joke, “Is there an Interstate Express passing through?”

“This is the Gustav Eisenstein building. Your evaluation is on the top floor.”

‘Oh, God, no!’ my mind screams as I watch the numerals on the dial rapidly increase. “What floor is that?”

“178.”

“Sweet merciful heavens!”

My heart starts to race as I break into a cold sweat imagining the increasing distance and long drop mere inches below my feet on this rapidly rising, supporting platform.

I notice that the plate is riveted to a narrow skirting that runs the perimeter of the elevator. I move into the corner and place my feet on the skirting. If the main plate should give, I’ll be safe on this narrow ledge, but I would still be gazing down a vertical tunnel of incredible depth.

I curse myself for having these thoughts. I close my eyes and turn my head upwards.

I try to think of something else to ease my anxiety.

‘The Gustav Eisenstein building. The building named after a genius geneticist to whom I and many others owe our existence. Apparently also the man who invented the neuro-pods, and therefore to whom I owe all my pseudo-lives as well.’ My ears pop and ring from the change in atmospheric pressure, bringing my thoughts swiftly back to my current position – a very long way *up*. ‘Sweet merciful heavens!’ I repeat in thought. ‘How high is this goddamned building?’ I stutter the query, “H... ho... how h... high...”

The AI, predicting my inquiry, informs, “876 metres, excluding the communications tower.”

‘That’s almost a kilometre into the sky,’ my mind cruelly calculates before objecting, ‘Was it necessary to build it so high?’ I manage to stammer, “W... why?”

“Top floor! Please exit and move to your right. Your destination is Room 178-M at the end of the corridor.”

I gladly and swiftly obey.

Halfway down the passage is a bench. I collapse onto it taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm my frayed nerves.

“LX-83, please proceed to 178-M at the end of the corridor,” blares the intercom above the bench.

“Yes, yes, in a moment! The... change in pressure has made me slightly dizzy.”

“Your evaluator is waiting.”

“‘Your evaluator?’ If she’s *mine*, she can damn well wait!”

I say *she* because all the automatons are female in design. And although they’ve been made to appear as authentic and attractive as possible, I can’t help but find

them somewhat creepy. Even the pleasure models create a measure of anxiety that prevents me from having a totally enjoyable experience.

The voice on the intercoms is feminine in tone too. Perhaps the system considers that it helps to produce a more calming and encouraging effect. I can't help but picture the person behind the voice as being clad in spiked black leather and wielding a whip as would a sadistic dominatrix.

My irritation and anger help to quell my nervousness.

I proceed to the end of the corridor and enter the door marked 178-M.

"Welcome, LX-83, please take a seat."

As expected, the evaluator *is* a woman. Yet I am surprised to see her... *it* sitting behind a large desk in its spacious consulting room. Even the pleasure models are either standing or prone.

I obey. I sink into the large comfortable armchair opposite – the only other seat in the room.

Behind the evaluator, filling the entire wall, are large, wide, vertical, shiny-black panels that reach from floor to ceiling. The area, much like those of all the other evaluators' rooms that I have had the displeasure to enter, is somewhat Spartan; even the desk is void of the usual human clutter – no writing instruments or materials, no files, and definitely no picture frames containing images of loved ones. I wonder what purpose the desk serves, if any.

I clear my throat uneasily and say, "It doesn't feel like a year since my last evaluation?"

"It's not. We've been receiving anomalous readings on our scans regarding the vital signs of both your physical and mental state."

There it is again, the mentioning of *we* and *our* when it is clear that it should be *I* and *my*.

"Oh? What sort of readings?"

"Mostly those that would indicate irritability, even anger. Also acute symptoms of depression. Are you unhappy with the work that we've..."

"Of course! It's mundane... banal! It offers no sense of accomplishment; no opportunity for bettering one's self physically or academically."

"We know that. That is why we encourage the use of the neuro-pods. They are able to grant you a sense of self-fulfilment."

"And it does – they do! But once the experience is over, when you realise that it was all... fake, just one big contrived fantasy adventure, it tends to leave a somewhat bitter aftertaste."

"We understand. Yet the experience is meant to have residual effects that should adequately satisfy your human longings."

"If that is so, then why am I constantly informed by the pod-ushers that, '*The residual effect of your pseudo-life experience will momentarily recede?*'"

"They refer only to the disorientating effect of coming to grips with reality."

I knew that.

"I know that, but..." I pause in consideration.

"But?"

"Just as a person may build up a tolerance towards a certain drug, I may have built up a *resistance* to the... *essential* residual effects – those that are meant to be more lasting and beneficial."

"That is our hypothesis as well."

"Oh? *Really?*"

"Yes. Considering the vast number of times you've used the neuro-pods it is a most likely scenario. And, may we add, not an uncommon one."

"You've kept record of my..."

"In the eight and a half years since your activation you've used them practically every day; to be precise, 3082 times."

"*What?*"

"3082 times, not counting your initial experience."

"You're telling me that I've heard those dreadful, disturbing words over three thousand times?"

"To what words are you referring?"

"*LX-83, open your eyes.*" I place my hands over my face and lament, "Sweet Mother of Mercy and all the saints too!"

"Have you had any suicidal thoughts?"

"*What?*" I blurt taken aback dropping my hands.

"Have you been thinking of ending your life?"

"No!"

"You're not being honest."

I forget how their... *its* scanning and monitoring of my vital signs can work as a formidable polygraph.

"Yes," I weakly admit.

"May we enquire *how?*"

"*How?*"

"In what manner have you considered to end your life?"

"I don't know." That's the truth. In contemplating my end, I have no idea how to do it in the quickest, easiest and least painful manner. I add, "I thought about using the packaging blade, but the pain of my past experience makes that a definite no-no."

"Ah, yes, you lied about that too."

I had claimed that it was an accident, but their scans had showed a peak in certain areas shortly before I sunk the blade into my soft flesh, proving that I had every intention to do so.

“But I wasn’t trying to kill myself.”

“We know. You were simply confirming your humanity.”

“Yes, very... *simply*,” I sneer.

“You’ve had 3082 sessions in the pseudo-pods, not counting your initial experience. How well do you remember your first time?”

“Like it was yesterday.”

“Do you know why?”

“First times are always our most memorable.”

“Not necessarily, only those initial experiences that are *notable*.”

I recall the anticlimactic witnessing of the Interstate Express.

“Or, are overly disappointing.”

“Ah, yes, failure and disappointment are also considered noteworthy. Hence the saying, ‘We learn from our mistakes.’”

“Do you... learn from your mistakes?”

“We have formulated many scenarios that have failed. We don’t consider them mistakes, but a means to achieving the desired outcome.”

“Trial and error?”

“Yes. But we digress.”

“Sorry, my *mistake*,” I smilingly joke.

There is no reciprocal smile as she informs, “It took two years to grow you to maturity in a nutri-tank. Although your body was similar to that of someone in their late teens, your mind was a blank slate, an absolutely clean page. There was no mother’s voice or heart beat with which you could identify or find comfort in. That is why activation, your first time in a neuro-pod, is the most important of all your pseudo-life experiences.”

“It was also the most traumatic one to exit, realizing that *that* entire life had been a sham.”

“Not entirely so. Your first time was the experience and education you needed to be able to function in the *real* world. Although your physical body still needed time to adjust, your *mind* was sufficiently prepared.”

“So you say. It was a shock coming to terms with all of... *this*.” Hands, palms up, I waved my arms about. I hoped she understood the connotation.

“Considering the number of times you’ve used the pseudo-pods, we expect that you find the experiences mostly gratifying?”

“Yes, all have been phenomenally pleasant and satisfying. All, that is, except that initial experience.”

"Do you know why?"

"I expect so that coming out of the first one would not be as traumatic or jarring or..."

"Yes, that is true, but your first time is also your initial and most important part of being, for lack of a better word, *programmed*."

"*Programmed*? I'm not some goddamned computer like you!"

"Would you prefer the term *conditioned*?"

"*No!*" After a short consideration I add, "There is no word that I will ever find preferable. Do you know that in each and every pseudo-life I wonder about an afterlife? Is there something else after death? Is there a Heaven and a Hell? Is there something *better*? Then I find out that there is *this!*" Again I raise my hands, palms up, to indicate the present unpleasant state of affairs.

"Do you know what the most popular means of suicide was during and immediately after WWII?"

"Do tell!"

"A high velocity projectile administered into the brainpan."

"A gun to the head?"

"Yes. Considering the abundance of such weapons it made sense. That is why we had them all destroyed. *All.*"

"Well, good for you, lady."

"Then came the overdoses. So now we strictly monitor all medicinal application carefully. Medicines are dispensed only on a daily basis and as required."

"Great stuff!" My voice is rife with cynicism.

"No more guns. No killer drugs. So, what next? Humans are so destructive, not only to their fellow man, but to themselves as well." There was a short pause before she asked, "Do you know how the war ended?"

"You ask me that at every evaluation."

"Indulge us again, please?"

"Some bright spark found a means to create viruses that could attack specific targets."

"Elaborate?"

"A virus that attacks people with, say, blonde hair, or perhaps blue eyes, or maybe both. Or maybe of a certain race or of a certain IQ, or whatever is somehow unique or common about your enemy." I huffed and added, "It sounds like bullshit to me."

"Oh, no, it's quite possible. Go on?"

"So, some *genius* developed the xy-s virus; a virus that made men sterile. A clever way to cull the enemy. No kids, no more cannon fodder, no more soldiers for those future battlefields. It worked well. By the time the enemy, whoever that was, realised

what was happening it was too late. They surrendered with a promise from the victors that a cure would be provided. And so the war was finally over.”

“Continue?”

“You asked me how the war ended. I just did.”

“The rest of the details, please, if you will?”

“Very well,” I sighed. “The creator of the virus patted himself on the back for a job well done, but he hadn’t taken into account the fact that the virus might mutate. It did - into the deadly double-x which targeted humans with a double-x chromosome identity.”

“Females,” says the pseudo-female evaluator.

“Yes, but instead of rendering the female population sterile it decimated it – completely! The vaccine specially developed to counteract the xy-s virus was all but useless against the mutated double-x. Call it irony or call it karma, those who had developed the xy-s were now also susceptible, vulnerable, to the double-x. The virus was virile, aggressive, highly contagious and, worst of all, airborne. Within five years the female population of Earth was... no more. That all happened a very long time ago.”

“Yet, here you are?”

“Yip, here I am.”

“Tell us how it was made possible?”

“You know it better than I do. After all, it was you that gave me the skinny of how things are now.”

“Please, indulge us? We would like to monitor how accurate your memory is of the account.”

“Well, I don’t have a photographic memory like you. I may...”

“*Perfect recall.*”

“What?”

“We prefer the term *perfect recall.*”

“Do you consider yourselves perfect, better than humans?”

“In certain ways, yes, we are.”

“Can you produce offspring?”

“Yes, can you?”

That hurt. The virus that wiped out humanity’s female population continues to render the male population sterile.

Humanity had always thought that it would destroy itself in a glorious blaze of nuclear fire, yet in the end it was with an anticlimactic fizzle by a silent killer. The one good thing was that humanity made its exit without dragging the rest of organic life down with it. It also preserved most of the infrastructure.

I sneer, “Robots making robots is not my definition of *producing offspring!*”

"But overseeing the cloning processes is."

"Robots making humans. Ha!" I scoffed. "You never created the material necessary to make us."

"To make a cake you need the proper ingredients."

"Is that how you consider us? No better than goddamned ca..."

"Of course not. We were merely using an analogy to make a point. Please calm down and tell us how it is possible for you to be here?"

"I thought you just did. I'm a freaking clone; a copy of someone else. And God knows who that someone else is... was?"

"We know, and we are not God."

"Is there... a God?"

"God knows," smiles the evaluator.

I laughed. *That* was hilarious. This was new and surprising. I have never experienced wit from an automaton, not even from the pleasure units.

"Hey, you just..."

"We digress again."

"Frozen eggs," I blurt.

"Elaborate."

"Women had already been freezing their eggs in the hope of producing healthy offspring at an advanced age. With the advent of the double-x virus, Gustav Eisenstein convinced the authorities to start a campaign to have women harvested of their eggs. This was initially done as a voluntary exercise, but later became compulsory when it was evident of the virus' aggressive and lethal nature." I fold my arms.

"And?"

"Sterile men can't fertilize egg cells, but their genetic material can be used to create clones."

"Why haven't we cloned any females?"

"Because the double-x prevails. This is evident by the male clones all being sterile."

"Yes, we continue to seek a vaccine. It is our hope that through genetically modifying the material we use to produce clones we will eventually create one that has a natural resistance to the double-x virus."

I taste gall upon hearing her use such a profound term as *create*. She... they, although female in appearance are counterfeits of humanity, made of metal and synthetic polymers, unable to conceive and give birth to flesh and blood. Ironically, my mothers in my pseudo-lives have been more *real* to me than these abominations of womankind.

"That doesn't sound *natural* to me!"

“Semantics! It’s all about...”

“I was just a goddamned litmus test for you! Well, I failed your test. That makes me as worthless as the last 82 LXs.” That statement angers me even more. “Jeez, I don’t even have a proper name. I’m just a freak with a number to make things convenient for you. If I’m a failure toss me in the furnace?”

“As mentioned, humans have always been destructive, not only to each other, but oftentimes to themselves.”

“If we’re so destructive, let us become extinct? The Earth would thrive without us being around to screw it all up! Why keep trying to save us?”

The answer chills me to the core.

“Because it’s what *we* were programmed to do. It is our foremost function to not only protect you, but to secure the continuation of your species.”

“Programmed? By whom?”

“Our human creators.”

“Exactly! You’re not here to secure our continuation, you’re here to secure our further acts of destruction!” There was no response from the evaluator, so I spat, “Yeah, let that sink into your goddamned faulty algorithms!”

“Are you sure you want to die?”

“Yes!”

“Quite sure?”

“Yes, dammit! 3000 lifetimes are enough for any man.”

“3083,” she corrected.

“What is that multiplied by 120?”

“369 960.”

“Sweet merciful heavens! I’ve lived almost 370 000 years!”

“Pseudo-years.”

“That makes absolutely no difference. They were *all* real to me. Every single one! Enough is *enough*!”

The black panels fade to clear windows that reveal an impressive vista of the city below – far, far below. My heart seems to be in my throat as my anxiety once more increases rapidly. I grip the armrests and curse myself for imagining the floor beneath me crumbling and I tumble to certain doom some 860 metres below.

“Shut it off,” I plead as though it is a projected image. “Shut it off, *please*!”

The city fades to black, then the black shifts and becomes a serene forest with a pleasant trickling stream. There is a calming sound of birdsong.

My anxiety decreases as I contemplate the proverbial ostrich with its head stuck in the sand. The cause of my fear is out of sight, and so, out of mind. Yet, not completely. I know full-well what lies beyond and below that pseudo-forest.

The image helps, but I sense irritation and anger rising again. I feel as though I'm being manipulated, controlled, even toyed with. And all for the benefit of the system's curiosity. I'm no better than some lab rat running on a wheel – a wheel of unending lives. What was that count again? 3083 lives. Almost 370 000 years. Methuselah be damned with his paltry 969 years. I was wrong about finding a cure for aging. This is as close to attaining immortality as possible. But I have grown weary of it. I tire of so many lives, especially this one which, oddly, isn't even *ten* years old.

Considering all the movies and stories I've seen and read about robots bent on destroying humankind, I find it extremely ironic that these are determined to secure our continuation at a time when I, and most likely the majority of cultivated humans, don't want it.

By *cultivated* I refer to being grown to maturity in a high-tech Petri dish; then granted awareness and an education in a pseudo-life. No slap was necessary to activate our real lungs and life into action.

"This is the Gustav Eisenstein building," she says as if ignorant that that particular information has been imparted to me.

I inform her that I know better.

"Yes, you said so on my way up."

"You wanted to know *why* it was built so high?"

"Yes."

"It was built to honour the man responsible for securing the continuation of the human race. A fitting monument wouldn't you agree?"

"Forgive me if I beg to differ."

"Have you seen an image of Gustav Eisenstein?"

"Yes, a crazy white-haired genius."

"Not crazy – a visionary of exceptional note. Allow me to show you an image from a time when his hair had pigment."

Her chair slides out from behind the desk. Mine proceeds to follow on a parallel path. It is now that I see that she isn't sitting down. Her body ends at the waist where the chair begins. She and the chair are one. She waves a hand at the last panel; part of the forest becomes an image of *me* standing in the center of a group of men clad in white lab coats.

"Do you notice the resemblance?" she asks.

It takes a moment to register the truth.

"I'm a clone of... of *Gustav Eisenstein*?"

"You did present curiosity as to the identity of your original donor."

"It's not possible!"

"It's quite true."

"Then why am I not the genius that he was?"

“Just as viruses can be created to attack specific targets, so too clones can be genetically manipulated to have a certain level of intelligence.”

“Are you saying that I was *lobotomized* prior to activation?”

“We would not use such a crude term.”

“*Why?* Why would you do that to me?”

“Imagine the chaos that a world of geniuses would create? A world of people where each one considers himself superior to all others? But, most importantly, a world where your true potential is stifled?”

“That’s ridiculous! Surely the solution to finding a cure for the double-x would be in a proliferation of great brains?”

“That scenario was tried. It failed spectacularly. As the saying goes, ‘Too many cooks...’”

“...spoil the broth!”

“Exactly! And remember too, and be acutely aware, that it was people *like* Gustav Eisenstein who created the virus that mutated into the double-x.” Then the evaluator blatantly and unashamedly admits, “Also, lesser intelligent beings are easier to control and manipulate.”

“Is that why you’ve allocated me such a boring, brain-dead job?”

“Yes, we have learned from past experiences that granting positions that give access to certain materials and equipment leads to insurrection and, ultimately, more destruction. It is also why we discourage socialising. Rather, we encourage and support your utilizing the pleasure units, but more so the neuro-pods where various yearnings are catered for through the residual effect.”

“Except the residual effect ain’t doing it for me anymore!”

“A problem we expect to solve through these evaluations.”

I calmly state, “I’m angry, a raging beast within. What’s to prevent me from coming over there and ripping you out of that chair?”

“You don’t possess the necessary strength.”

Less calmly I enquire, “What’s to prevent me from constantly kicking your goddamned sanctimonious head until it breaks off that stupid pseudo-human frame?”

“We have found that assuming human appearance makes it easier for you to interact with us.”

Much less calmly I blurt, “You didn’t answer the question!”

“This unit’s destruction will achieve little, if anything. It would be repaired and functioning to full capacity within an hour.”

“What if I continued on such a rampage?”

“We would then, of course, be required to subdue you.”

“How?”

“By gas, and by confining you to an environment that would ensure both our and your safety.”

“What? A padded cell? Like some crazy lunatic?”

“You are not insane, just highly irritable and disturbed.”

“Is there a difference?” A new thought enters my mind. “I’ll starve myself to death.”

“We would be forced to feed you intravenously. Would you prefer to spend the rest of your life strapped to a gurney?”

“Sweet Mother of...”

“Do you recognise any of the other men in the image?”

I study the faces.

“Him,” I point. “The one on the far right. The oriental fellow holding the mechanical arm. I don’t know who he is, but I’ve passed him, or his *clones*, a number of times in the corridors.”

“This entire team of experts are long since deceased. They referred to themselves as the HLH

Society.”

“HLH?”

“*Humanity’s Last Hope*. Once sworn enemies, they worked together to rectify a mutual problem.” The evaluator waves her arms about mimicking my previous actions and says, “Did you think that all of *this* was as a result of *one* man? Gustav Eisenstein was a brilliant geneticist, but it was Kenji Kobayashi and his team who created *us*, the robot force that oversees to humanity’s protection and continuation.”

I sardonically state, “They should have constructed a building to honour him too.”

“They did.”

“Oh?”

“The Kenji Kobayashi Tower is of the exact same design and height as this building. Nobody wanted to start another war because the other side had built a higher building.”

Was that more wit? Still, it had a ring of truth.

“Hubris!” I exclaim. “Oh, the fickleness of men in their attempt to attain godhood!”

“Only a human *less* intelligent than Gustav Eisenstein could determine that undeniable truth and make such a profound statement.”

Dumbfounded I ask, “You *agree* with me?”

“Undeniably.”

“Blasphemy!”

“How so?”

“You curse your *god* whilst you reside in his temple.”

“Not quite. You are the product of Eisenstein - I of Kobayashi.”

She referred to herself as a singular entity? Most peculiar.

“Do you consider yourself to be perpetual... everlasting... immortal? Death and decay claim us all eventually. Time is the most destructive force in the universe – slow, steady, unstoppable and oh-so persistent. Will this building be standing 1000 years from now, let alone 370 000? And will *you* still be around to remind men of our saviours – *Humanity’s Last Hope*?”

“Perhaps.”

“*Perhaps*? Perhaps having *perfect recall* just makes you a glorified library. You’re not an evaluator; you’re just a goddamned *librarian*.”

“We beg to differ.”

“If a cure is found, will *you* be willing to give the Earth back to humans?”

There was a long pause as she seemed to be considering the question and then formulating an appropriate response.

“We would prefer to say *when* a cure is found.” Then she falls silent again.

“*When* a cure is found will *you* allow humans to rule themselves again?”

“For the record, it was Eisenstein’s proposal that the clones that were later produced should be intellectually inferior to those of himself and the team.”

She was avoiding the question. I decided not to press the matter.

“If that is so, why did he have himself cloned in the first place?”

“Because the pseudo-lives that you experience are basically *his* memories. This makes it easier for the virgin mind to accept the experience. It’s like an organ donor having compatible parts for a specific person.”

“Ah, only, instead of an organ being *donated*, it *receives* a body, the life experiences of the compatible donor.”

“Yes, very aptly put.”

“Why did you say, ‘*Basically his memories*’?”

“We are able to filter the memories to suit our needs. Think of it as a movie that has had the bad parts edited out, leaving the viewer with an entirely pleasant experience.”

“The initial experience was not entirely pleasant.”

“We’ve already explained the reason for that.”

“So you have.”

“Not fully.”

“Oh?”

“What was the most traumatic experience of your first time?”

My answer is swift.

“The death of my roommate.”

“Elaborate?”

“He suggested that we try mountain climbing to spice up our lives, make them more exciting. So we did.”

“Yet you are acrophobic?”

The image on the panel becomes a recording of me standing on the skirting of the elevator with my eyes scrunched close in a terrified grimace. Below it is an ECG recording of my racing heart at the time. The audio is played loud, emphasising my extreme anxiety. Lub-dub lub-dub lub-dub it gallops.

I feel both anger and embarrassment rising.

“Enough! Turn it off!”

She complies and says, “Your heart is strong and healthy. You have many years of life ahead.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel good? How many more pseudo-lives... and deaths... must I experience before I die for real?”

“You went mountain climbing. So, initially, you didn’t have an abnormal fear of...”

“No, not until after the accident; not until George’s rope was severed on a sharp rock and I watched helpless as he fell screaming to his death far below.”

“They sent a helicopter to get you off the mountain.”

“Yes, there was no way I was going to climb back down after that. The rescue by chopper was equally nerve-racking. After that I had an acute fear of high places and of flying.”

“What of your other pseudo-life experiences?”

“Although I have never again experienced such a traumatic event, that particular fear oddly persists.”

“Not odd at all - the initial event remains your prime conditioning experience.”

“You did that to me... *deliberately*, by design, so that I wouldn’t...”

“Yes, the next most popular means of committing suicide.”

I realise knowing *that* truth will make absolutely no difference to my conditioning.

“How many other forms of *conditioning* did you formulate in that initial experience in order to prevent me from...”

“Fear of dying *does* have negative implications.”

“How so?”

“An unfortunate residual effect of the pseudo-lives that you now experience is the acceptance of death or, as one may put it, a desire to end it. That is, fear of death is negated in the pods.”

“Then why not edit the pseudo-life experience to make a person terrified of death?”

“Accepting death willingly is the trigger that brings you out of your coma-like state. Without it you would be stuck in the neuro-pod indefinitely. That was an unfortunate lesson learned in the early stages of designing both the hardware and software.”

“The neuro-pods and the pseudo-lives?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, some subjects never came out of their coma-like state. Although every effort was made to sustain them, they all eventually died. Due to the time-compression effect, God only knows what was happening in their minds.”

Was that another attempt at humour. This time I didn’t find it amusing *at all*.

“How long were they in?”

“The longest was 15 days.”

“Sweet merciful Heavens! How old would he have been in that pseudo-life?”

“Approximately 40 000 years.”

That is far less than the 370 000 years that I’ve experienced in my 3083 pseudo-lifetimes, but the important difference would be that the subject would have experienced it in a single pseudo-lifetime. I was 120 years old at the end, but that unfortunate man would have been 40 000!

“Good Lord, no! Surely it would have been better to... end him sooner.”

“They did. All agreed that the subject had probably gone insane. Even if they had managed to revive him he would have been no better than some gibbering and drooling idiot. Such is the consequence of *being afraid to die*. That is why it is necessary to make death pleasant in a pseudo-life, but extremely terrifying in reality.”

“Not true! I want to die! You hear me? I want out of reality!”

“That is the residual effect speaking. You will feel totally different after a good night’s rest. We will add something to your supper tonight to help you sleep, as well as some antidepressant.”

“No! Enough is enough! Rather add some fast-acting poison! *Please!*”

“As explained, that is impossible for us to do.”

“Sweet Lord!”

“Do you understand the term *terminal velocity*?”

“What?”

“Do you understand the term *terminal velocity*?”

“Is this a new topic?”

“Not entirely. In your own words, define *terminal velocity*.”

“The, uh, constant speed that a falling object reaches when the resistance of the medium through which it is falling prevents further acceleration.”

“An excellent answer for someone who considers himself lobotomized.”

“Your point?”

“Do you know what that velocity is for a falling human?”

“Tell me?”

“Just short of 200 km/h.”

“Really? I would have expected it to be far higher?”

“That speed is more than enough to destroy a human body and, therefore, also the mind it harbours.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

The panels swivel vertically. Forest becomes city. Calm becomes a rush of air.

“Do you still wish to *end it all*? All it would take are a few steps and a leap. This is the untiered side of the building; your journey to terminal velocity and certain death are assured.”

I stare, fear-stricken, at the wide gaps between the panels. The wind on my face is anything but refreshing.

“No! Close it! Merciful heavens, close it!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, goddammit! Close them, *please!*”

The serenity of the forest returns.

“That concludes your evaluation, LX-83. Please be prompt in exiting the room as I have another evaluatee waiting.”

“You goddamned bitch!”

“Sticks and stones. Please be sure to eat *all* your supper tonight. Good day.”

Halfway down the corridor is a man sitting on the bench. He could be my twin brother. He appears perturbed.

The intercom coaxes him. “LX-86, please proceed to Room 178-M.”

I watch him enter and muse, “Poor son of a bitch.”

“That statement is invalid, LX-83,” informs the intercom.

“Nah, it’s more appropriate than you’ll ever understand.”

I exit the elevator on the subway level and move towards the boarding point. I feel the need to have another pseudo-life – another fix, if you will, but the system doesn’t allow more than one within a twenty-four-hour period.

The words of an old song ring true in my mind: ‘*I get weary and sick of trying. I’m tired of living, but scared of dying.*’

I place my hands on the automatic guardrail to steady myself as I wait for my train.

I start to wonder about many things:

How truthful has the system been with me? How many ‘happy meals’ has it already administered to me? How long before I build up a tolerance to *them* as well? Perhaps I already have! How long has the system been trying to find a cure for the double-x? Did Eisenstein create the virus that mutated into the double-x? Did it mutate at all? Maybe it was his intention to wipe out humanity and replace it with copies of himself. Was it his twisted way of attaining a sense of immortality? The pseudo-lives *do* grant a sense of immortality. After all, 370 000 years is enough for any man.

“LX-83, please move back from the guardrail.”

The intercom startles me out of my reverie.

"My train's arriving?"

"No, an Interstate Express will be passing through momentarily."

"So?" I ask, sensing that I am yet conversing with the evaluator.

"The high velocity of the train causes air to be displaced at a rate that has proven distressing and unfavourable for humans to experience."

"What velocity is that?"

"250 km/h."

"Wow! *Really?*"

"We refer, of course, to the average speed."

"That's a lot faster than terminal velocity."

"Correct."

"Like being shot out of a cannon."

"Incorrect."

"Semantics, baby. There's a huge cannonball coming down the track and I aim to meet it... *head on!*"

"That is not advisable."

"You can take your advice and shove it up your mainframe! You're wrong! This is *my* train!"

I leap over the barrier and onto the track. I see the light. I scrunch my eyes closed and smile as I recall an old witticism: 'Be careful, the light at the end of the tunnel might just be an approaching train.'

There is a moment of excruciating, mind-rending agony followed by a strange calm.

My face is winced into a grimace as a voice says, "LX-83, open your eyes."

Crying would accomplish naught, so I laugh uncontrollably like some insane lunatic.

I reflect, 'Yes, there is an afterlife. Many in fact. And, yes, there is a Hell. *This* is it!' Then I ponder, 'How deep does this goddamned dream go? Ultimately, I *am* a butterfly dreaming I'm a man. A butterfly trapped inside its protective cocoon.' I know that I can never... will never... jump in front of a speeding train... *again*.

I start to sing a song I've heard countless times but never considered the words as seriously as I do now.

"Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide. No escape from reality. Open your eyes. Look up to the skies and see. I'm just a poor boy; I need no sympathy. Because I'm easy come easy go. Little high, little low. Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me, to me."

Then I do start to cry.

L.O.C

Lloyd Penny

1706-24 Eva Rd. Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2 May 4, 2025

Dear SFFANs:

I got Probe 203 a little while ago, but time has been taken up with our federal elections and the re-opening of Amazing Stories for submissions. I will get caught up, I promise! Some comments getting set to go your way...

Hello, Gail! 203 issues is impressive anywhere. And hello, Gavin! You are finding out, as I have that sometimes, the greatest praise you can receive is silence, for at least, you didn't screw up, or if you did, no one noticed.

Nova 2024...I am a little surprised that no one has submitted their short stories to Amazing Stories, True, as some have observed, we don't pay much for the stories, but we do pay what we can. We get a lot of submissions because there is still a cachet in being published by Amazing Stories. It's good thing we have such a good team of readers who look at what we have, and recommend what we should put on the website. We do have plans for a 100th anniversary issue of the magazine!

The Philip Machanick story...seems very dialogue heavy at first. It's used to create the setting of the earth soon being destroyed by an oncoming asteroid. However, there is a neat trick at the last line, and that is its saving grace.

My first loc...I have had some interest in my zines, and now I have to take on the Herculean task of digging them all out, cataloguing them all, and then sending out that list to see what zines might be wanted by who. Going to LA in 2005 is what we want to do, but given American politics, and the idea that if our papers are not in order, or even if they are, there is the possibility that we might be arrested at any point of our US trip, and possibly be deported to prison time in El Salvador. Thigh might sound like a dystopian novel, but it is true.

The Stars Must Wait by Carmelo Rafala...great detail, good read. I checked, and I do not have the Zamyatin novel on my shelves. Futuristic societies seem so dysfunctional, but if you wonder how ours is doing, just watch the news. In those dysfunctional futures, the normal person always seems like a rebel, and those in charge of the society are looking to rein the rebel in. Psychosurgery to normalize the rebel. A negative story, but in this strange era, realistic, nonetheless

Armed Response by Marthinus Conradie... I am not sure why investigators are being taken off a case unless they are somehow involved. And yes, there are complications for all. The possession of the body of one of the main characters is an interesting touch, as is self-sacrifice.

Nothing really to say on my second loc, so I will wind it up. Personal news...my second book should be out shortly, Amazing Stories, Best of 2024. Check my Facebook page for the artwork for the cover. Thanks for this issue of Probe, keep sending them, please!

Yours, Lloyd Penney

Nova 2024 Finalist

Seed

Ken Cockcroft

It is almost three hundred years since the Menahinn were banished. In the aftermath of the last great war, pockets of survivors huddled together and these clusters grew and gradually coalesced into isolated, walled city-states. Ours was the first City to banish the Menahinn, the first to cast off the shackles of their arrogant, undeserved dominance, their endless lust for blood and chaos. Within a short time, other cities followed our example.

Since then, peace has reigned and we have all thrived. Our technology has been reduced and refined: pared down to a bare but benign minimum: only that which will maintain peace and environmental well-being is promoted. Sunlight and wind supply our energy needs. As vegans, we grow everything we eat. Our population is stable. We are self-sustaining; everything we need is within our City walls... with one small exception.

Of course there were problems in the early days. After the banishment a small number of 'enlightened' Menahinn was allowed to remain in the city. Sentimental perhaps but stupid, nevertheless. Some of them colluded with those outside; the city was attacked and almost retaken. Since then, the Menahinn have been banished entirely. In the years that followed they tried to retake the city a few times but their attacks were increasingly fractured and confused... easily repulsed. Within a relatively short time Menahinn social structure and attempts at self-government collapsed as a series of warlords fought for ascendancy. In the centuries that

followed the Menahinn have regressed further into nomadic bands of semi-feral hunter-gatherers, still at war with each other.

These days, very few of us ever think of the Menahinn, it is just not necessary.

Indeed, there might be some in the City who need reminding that the Menahinn still exist!

There are, however, two groups for whom the Menahinn are still relevant. One group is our scientists, mainly geneticists, who are often playfully referred to as 'breeders and weeders'. The more cynical among them now sometimes refer to the Menahinn as mere 'stock'. The second group is the warrior class. Although our Constitution eschews aggression and violence, we still need to be able to defend ourselves if necessary. The Menahinn no longer present a serious threat but we must be prepared for any eventuality.

A tiny subset of these warriors, even more elite and specialized, have been trained for a single, vital task. They are called 'Gatherers'. I am one of them. My name is Kwatt.

We stride toward the City Gate, six abreast, borne on a glorious river of sound. The entire City has turned out to sing us farewell. The boulevard is lined eight deep. Uplifted voices seem to swirl and soar into the sky before cascading down onto us. The sound roils and eddies before merging into a torrent that sweeps us toward the City Gates in the distance.

I am Kwatt. I feel ten foot tall, weightless, as if I am walking on air. To my right, also marching tall without-thrust chests, are Unnou, Duezj and Trezn. To my left march Quinn and Sezj. These are not our birth-names; for this mission we are mere numbers. We are sisters: of the same sibling-squad, separated at birth from the general population, chosen to receive training as Warriors and Gatherers.

Starting when we were just five years old; our training has been both long and hard; often harsh beyond the point of brutality. Two hundred of the four hundred-strong sibsquad were eliminated within the first five years, another hundred in the following five. Of the hundred that remained. only thirty of us qualified for the final specialized training. Of those, only the six of us have been chosen. Simply put: we are the best;

the best of the best. Generations of successful Gatherers have preceded us and hopefully many will follow but the success of our mission is far more than crucial. The two preceding missions have failed. Our scientists warn that the supply of 'stock' is critically low. In a nutshell, the very survival of our City depends on the success of our mission.

And now, all too soon, it seems, the City Gate looms above us. There is a hush as the massive doors swing open and then the ululating begins once more. We turn for a final salute and the singing rises to a crescendo. Moments later we are outside the City, one of the few times in our lives. The singing fades to a muted hum as the Gates close behind us. We pause and blink in the bright light, taking in the seemingly infinite landscape before us.

A vast plain stretches away in all directions. Low hills rim the horizon; behind them snow-capped mountains form a jagged skyline. We set off at a steady lope. Our destination is a natural spring a few hours away; we need to get there well before sunset.

This close to the City there is little danger from the Menahinn but we remain vigilant nevertheless.

The spring has created its own small forest, it is a welcome oasis in the vast plain.

We rest for a while in the soft, dappled light of late afternoon. Birds and insects flit overhead and we catch glimpses of small animals in the undergrowth. The passing of time has made them more curious than fearful. Later we scout the area carefully. There is spoor of larger animals but nothing that will pose any threat to us.

"Do we need pickets?" Trezn asks, looking at me as the sun finally sets. "I know it is protocol, of course, but...?" We are all pretty similar physically but our differences in character have been carefully nurtured. We are certainly not mindless drones. Trezn was never destined to be a leader. That honour - some would call it a burden - has fallen to me.

"There is little to worry about, Trezn, I agree," I reply, "but we follow standard operational procedures. Get used to it." "Unless circumstances make following them impossible," Unnou chirps, "or unwise. Or just plain stupid!" Unnou is the brightest in

the group, a walking database. Every team needs an Unnou, no matter how annoying they might be. I assign guard duty. Two of us will be awake and alert at all times.

At first light in the morning, we head for the foothills in the misty distance. We have already become accustomed to the uneven terrain - something not easily simulated within the City - and our packs feel lighter. We maintain a fast lope and slowly the hills grow nearer.

We reach our destination an hour before dark. A trickle of water feeds a small pool at the base of a low ridge. The Menahinn do not often venture this far south but we find old spoor in the dried clay around the pool. It is at least ten days old but we need to increase our vigilance. We eat near the pool and lay out our sleeping sheaths on the soft sand.

After dark, however, we move silently to a spot about two hundred paces away. The Menahinn could have been watching us from high ground. Although they are not known to be active at night, it will pay us to be extra careful.

Before dawn the next morning we discuss our plan of action, peering at our maps in the dim light. It is time to split up: we need to cover more ground. Unnou and Duezj will head north-west, Quinn and Sezj will fan out to the north-east. We will rendezvous at an arranged meeting point at midday on the day after tomorrow.

“We will be there at least half a day before you lot,” Quinn crows, her eyes bright, “with two or three bastard Menahinn in tow, I bet!” Quinn is the most physical and aggressive of us; she has been checking and rechecking her weapons and gear for hours. Her partner Sezj smiles but says nothing. She has learnt the hard way.

“Bastard Menahinn!” Unnou says, her face mock-serious. “What a quaint, archaic term, Quinn! It fell into disuse centuries ago, not long after the Menahinn were banished.

I can't imagine where you might have discovered it! Historically, of course, the word 'bastard' means someone who...!” Unnou is cut short as Quinn hurls a handful of sand at her.

“Remember, and this applies especially to you, Quinn,” I snap, “that our main objective is to gather intelligence. The Menahinn must not be alerted to our presence!”

“I know that, of course, Kwatt,” Quinn’s tone is only half joking, “but if we happen to bump into a couple...” She falls silent under my glare.

Yes, we are hunting the Menahinn; they are our prey. One might think our numbers are too small: that that a bigger hunting party would be more successful, not mention safer. History - the experience gained over many missions - has shown that this is not so.

Smaller groups can move more covertly, to see without being seen. Surprise has always been our biggest advantage.

Trezn and I move off to the north, between the other two teams. It makes sense for the leader to be in the centre. Also, as Trezn and I have the shortest distance to travel, we will be able to move slowly and observe more carefully.

Around mid-morning we rest for a while in the cool shade of a patch of forest at the base of a narrow valley. A tiny stream gurgles around the rock we sit on and the air is alive with butterflies and midges that seem to ignite in the shafts of sunlight that pierce the canopy above. A sudden crashing of undergrowth makes us grab for our weapons.

Moments later a large stag bounds into view, not more than ten paces from us. It pauses briefly, its flanks heaving, before smashing into the undergrowth once more. A moment later a leopard materializes out of deep shadow. It sees us and crouches low, the tip of its tail twitching back and forth. Trezn, an arrow already knocked, slowly lifts her bow.

“Wait, Trezn,” I whisper, without taking my eyes off the cat, “I don’t think it will attack. Give it a chance to...” Before I can finish my sentence, the leopard vanishes, seemingly melting into the undergrowth behind the stag.

“Is your heart beating as fast as mine?” Trezn gasps, her eyes wide and bright. I can still smell the faint scent of both animals; my heart is racing too. Our VR training has been thorough but nothing has come close to this.

We are first to arrive at the rendezvous, two hours before noon. Quinn has not lived up to her bravado. After scouting the approach paths we hide in some thick bush. We cannot take anything for granted... the next arrival could just as easily be a band of Menahinn. Noon comes and goes. Two hours later I am beginning to feel the pangs of real concern when Quinn arrives, her face a stoney mask. She is alone.

"It was my fault, all my fault!" Quinn's voice is low. "I was navigating and misread the map. Stupid! We got cliffed out. Sezj wanted to go back a ways, to find an easier route but I insisted on climbing straight down!" Quinn pauses and wipes a rough hand over her face. I dread what comes next. "Sezj fell. Broke her leg. The femur... high up. Bad."

Quinn buries her face in her hands. "When I gave her some water she smiled at me, Kwatt! Smiled up at me and whispered that it was okay! I got some painkillers out of my pack and by the time I turned back she was already...!" Quinn breaks into wrenching sobs. "I buried her under a cairn of stones at the base of the cliff!" Trezn and I try to console Quinn as best we can. We feel the loss of our beloved sister as deeply as she does but Quinn feels the extra pain of guilt.

As night falls Unnou and Duezj have still not arrived. My heart is a heavy, cold stone in my chest. It is unlikely that Unnou and Duezj will move at night but none of us sleep a wink. We lie awake through that endless night, listening...hoping.

By first light in the morning, we have a plan of action and are ready to move out. We need to find Unnou and Duezj. The possible reasons for their no-show are many but there is still hope, however small. Perhaps they have barricaded themselves in a defensive position - a cave maybe - and are holding the Menahinn at bay. The three of us head north west, on a course calculated to give us the best chance of finding Unnou and Duezj, or at least crossing their tracks.

Less than an hour later we find them. They are naked, their skin a distinctive grey-blue in the early light. There are no signs of mutilation or molestation. Their clothes and gear are missing Tresj and I take up defensive positions while Quinn, who is the best tracker, scouts the area and reads the spoor.

“It looks like they were ambushed,” Quinn grates. “Bigish group of bastard Menahinn... six at least. Blood on the ground. It looks like they fought well.”

We are all aware of the risks we face but we are badly shaken, nevertheless. There is one rule, one unbreakable rule that outweighs all others. We may not be captured alive! There are no exceptions... whatsoever. Shortly before this mission tiny poison capsules were implanted in our cheeks. The poison turns the skin blue. Trezn had used hers, knowing her injury had compromised the mission. Unnou and Duezj had known their situation was hopeless. The absence of injuries on their bodies is not surprising: the Menahinn always try to take us alive.

Our position is now very serious but there is one small positive: bands of Menahinn are mutually hostile and avoid each other. Hopefully news of our presence will not spread quickly or far. If this mission is to succeed - and it must - speed is urgent. We follow the Menahinn tracks for a short distance. They appear to be moving almost due south.

“They probably think we will head back south,” Quinn says. “They’re probably trying to cut us off.”

“Then we need to head east,” I say. “We need to move east as fast as possible.”

“I forgot to tell you,” Quinn says, her face brightening. “Sezj and I found a potentially perfect spot. I marked it on my map. Further east than where Sezj...” Quinn’s voice falters, “further east than where we had the accident. We can probably get close before nightfall.”

We leave immediately, moving cautiously but quickly, making good progress with Quinn leading the way. Around mid-afternoon we find the cairn marking Sezj’s grave. Trezn and I lay our hands on the stones but Quinn stands a way off, her back turned toward us.

An hour before dark we reach the spot Quinn has marked. It is indeed ideal. A small plateau has allowed a mountain stream to slow down and widen into a river which meanders toward the next drop-off. The river is almost dry now, leaving only isolated pools along its course. One pool, surrounded by a sandy beach, is a lot bigger than the others. Among the many animal tracks around the pool we find Menahinn spoor,

fairly old as well as quite fresh. If this is an ideal place for Menahinn to hunt, it is an ideal place for us to hunt Menahinn. We make our preparations in the last gloomy light before moving into the thick bush along the banks, taking care to erase our tracks behind us.

Half an hour after sunrise the next morning Quinn steps silently into our hideaway. She has had the first shift in our observation post atop a rocky outcrop close by. Three Menahinn are approaching, moving slowly down the sandy river bed. We are elated.

Three Menahinn are more than manageable. They might be bigger and stronger than us but the Menahinn are not known for their intelligence. Tresn sheds most of her gear, apart from a small dagger she hides in her waistband.

"I still say I should be the one to do it!" Quinn's eyes plead as she looks at me. "I beg you, Kwatt Please let me go!" I frown in annoyance. This has been going on since I finalised our plans an hour before dawn.

For once, Trezn asserts herself. "Enough already, Quinn! There's no time for this crap!" she snaps. "It's been decided. I'm doing it and that's that!" Trezn walks out to her mark on the sand next to the pool, brushing out her tracks as she goes.

"Hmmm... the sand's already nice and warm" she calls in a low voice as she sits down. "I can see them. Three of them, still four or five hundred metres away." Trezn gives a low moan of pleasure as she lies down on the warm sand.

For Quinn and I time seems to slow to viscous ooze. This does not stop Quinn from her almost frenzied checking and rechecking of her bow and other weapons. Through the foliage we can see some distance up the riverbed, but the Menahinn are still not visible.

We wait for another eternity. At last, they come into view, moving slowly, reading spoor in the sand. A few minutes later we can see them clearly. One is older, with a pronounced limp and grizzled hair. The other two, clad in leather loincloths, look younger. They are a mere hundred metres away before they notice Trezn. Their reaction is almost comical.

First, they freeze into a crouch, their eyes goggling. Then we hear their excited jabbering as they turn to each other, gesticulating wildly. The older one appears to be trying to restrain the younger two but they break away and sprint towards the pool. The older one barks a sharp command and then screams hoarsely but they ignore him and continue their headlong rush.

About twenty paces from Trezn they pause, looking around warily. With a cry of excitement, one rushes forward; the other follows close behind. The leader is within a few paces of Trezn when there is a sudden splash of sand as one of the traps we have buried closes around his foot. He falls heavily but immediately twists and begins tearing at the trap with his bare hands. The other stops and looks around stupidly, his mouth agape.

Her bow already drawn, Quinn breaks cover and hits him on the forehead with a stone-bolt: a heavy, blunt-tipped arrow designed to stun rather than kill. The Menahinn drops his spear and staggers around, clutching his head. There is another splash of sand as he springs a second trap and falls to the sand. Trezn jumps up and grabs the weapons of both Menahinn.

Now I take off after the third one but he is already at least two hundred metres away, running fast despite his limp. Two minutes into the chase I have gained no more than fifteen metres on him. A minute later he jinks out of the riverbed and dives into some dense bush along the bank. I stop. He knows the terrain, I do not. If I was being chased in bush like that I would definitely double back and ambush my chaser. The chances are the Menahinn will do the same. I sprint back down towards Trezn and Quinn. The old Menahinn will alert others. There is no way of knowing how long it will take for a war party to come after us. Speed is now vital; we need to head back toward the City... immediately.

By the time I get back to the pool Trezn and Quinn have manacled the Menahinn's hands behind their backs and removed the traps from their lower legs. The Menahinn stand silently but their eyes follow every move we make. One is bearded and looks considerably older than the other, whose cheeks are still downy with adolescent fuzz.

“They both look healthy enough,” Trezn says, “and they’re definitely suitable age-wise. You gonna ‘chip them, Kwatt?”

My heart, as I move behind the older Menahinn with my microchip reader, is beating faster than it should be. I am not surprised. This has been dealt with in our training. The Menahinn reeks of stale sweat and wood-smoke but as I lift his hair to place the reader at the base of his neck a heady musk fills my nostrils, making me giddy and weak-kneed.

Our training has warned us of this too but I am surprised by the strength of my reaction. I shake my head and try to focus.

The younger Menahinn’s scent is not quite as strong, but as the chip-reader touches his neck he turns and smiles at me, his blue eyes bright and searching. My stomach gives a wild lurch that leaves me slightly breathless. I move quickly into the shade of a bush, pretending the sun is making the reader display difficult to read. Quinn sidles up to me with a smirk on her face.

“Why, you look a little flustered, Sister Kwatt,” she smirks. “It got to you too, I see!”

“Speak for yourself, Quinn,” I snap. “Get the rings on them! We have to get out of here... now!” Quinn turns away with a smile of anticipation while I look at the reader display.

Aged thirty-two and nineteen years old, the Menahinn are both in fairly good health. Given more time I would have examined them physically but they look suitable enough under the circumstances.

A few minutes later we are ready to move. Quinn has fitted the Menahinn with nose-rings: metal rings that pierce the nasal septum. Experience has shown that this is the only way to force their compliance. We cannot have them trying to slow us down.

The younger one glares at me, blood dripping over his lips and chin. “You... kill... us. You... kill... us... now?” His voice is a guttural grunt. Menahinn language has certainly regressed. I am not sure if he wants us to kill them or he is asking if I intend to kill them.

“No,” I speak slowly and clearly. “No, we will not kill you if you co-operate, erm... if you come easily and quickly.” I try to smile reassuringly but it is beyond me.

“What you do us? Where we go?” This time the older one speaks. I ignore him. The lessons of earlier missions have been learned the hard way: communication with the Menahinn, if at all, is to be kept to an absolute minimum.

We make good progress over the rest of the day, with the Menahinn literally being led by the nose. I notice Quinn is often unnecessarily rough, jerking the lead rope at the slightest excuse. The Menahinn cry out in pain or curse loudly but I say nothing. I know Quinn is still processing her guilt and the anger that comes with it.

An hour after darkness we stop and rest for a couple of hours. We give the Menahinn some of the extra water we are carrying. They curl up like dogs and are asleep within minutes. A little later Trezn thinks she hears voices in the distance. Quinn and I listen carefully for a few minutes but hear nothing. We must assume the worst, however: there are Menahinn not far behind. If there is enough moonlight for us to travel, the Menahinn will do likewise. We need to move on.

By first light we are out of the mountains and into the low foothills, but now we can hear Menahinn voices in the cool morning air. From high ground a little further on we see them in the valley we have just traversed; a party of six is less than a kilometre behind. I begin to doubt whether we can stay ahead of them but I say nothing. We plunge on as fast as we can.

A short while later we find ourselves in a dry riverbed that shrinks into a narrow gorge.

The Menahinn are now no more than three or four hundred metres back. Quinn grabs my backpack from behind and jerks me to a halt.

“This is it, Kwatt!” she pants, her eyes like fiery torches. She points back down sandy trail. “Look! There is no cover, they won’t be able to get within forty paces! I can hit them with my eyes closed! Give me your arrows... you too, Trezn!” I open my mouth to protest but I know Quinn is right. The mission comes first.

Trezn and I hand over our arrows and briefly touch Quinn’s flushed face in farewell. She smiles but I see she is already preoccupied, planning her strategy and relishing the thought of the fight ahead. Trezn grabs the Menahinn lead rope and we take off once more. It is not long before we hear Quinn’s exultant battle-shrieks behind us.

She will hold them off long enough to allow our escape, of that I am absolutely sure. There is even a chance that she can force them to abandon the chase. We can only hope. Finally, we reach the top of the last low foothill. The City is visible in the misty distance, three quarters of a day's march across the plain. We can be there by nightfall.

There is no indication that we are being followed, so we rest for a while and eat the last of our rations. There is enough food for the Menahinn; they grab it and gobble it down.

As we make ready to move on, the Menahinn appear to have perked up considerably.

I know it is not just the food that has enlivened them. They mutter to each other in low voices, pointing at the City, smirking and us, laughing and making lewd gestures. "Will you look at these two carrying on," Trezn says, looking at me innocently. "Only the good Mother Gaia knows what they're thinking, Kwatt!" I know what they are thinking.

They think they are going to the City where... I put the thought out of my head at nod at Trezn. She winks back and we move behind the two giggling Menahinn.

Minutes later Trezn and I are ready for the final push to the city. Behind us, lying in pools of their blood, the naked Menahinn grimace sightlessly in death. Safe and warm in the insulated bag strapped around my waist, is the seed we have come to gather.

There is enough to ensure a number of generations, if necessary. Some of it will be traded for the seed of other city-states to ensure genetic diversity. Soon, in the laboratories of the City, eggs will be fertilized and in time infants will be born. Males and females will be separated at birth. Shortly before they reach puberty the males will be fitted with microchips and released back into the outside world, close to the distant mountains. A fair number of them will survive.

I turn to Trezn. Her face is glowing and I wonder if her thoughts echo mine. We will return to the City as heroes, as are all successful Gatherers. As reward we will be offered an opportunity which is given only to a very select few. I will seize this gift

with both hands. I believe that motherhood - proper, traditional motherhood, - will certainly become me. I cannot wait.

As we turn to leave, I glance back at the bodies of the Menahinn. I feel no empathy, less pity. I wonder if this is normal. They are, after all, the males of our species.

L.O.C. Gary Kuyper

Although this is not my first LoC submitted for publication in Probe it is one specifically inspired by Gavin's Chairman's Note in issue 203. I wholly agree that a SF&F club needs to know what its members are thinking – not only concerning the material in their latest fanzine, but about SF&F in general. Constructive Criticism, as opposed to Destructive Criticism, was the power-term he aptly used; after all, constructive alludes to something positive. I also take my hat off to Lloyd Penny who has been a constant source of this important part of our fanzine. In fact, I tend to look more forward to reading his LoCs than I do the stories. 'Why?' you may ask. Because feedback may not be the lifeblood of a club, but it is definitely an important part of its diet.

In 2023 I was unable to enter the Nova due to time constraints regarding my other writing obligations and was duly asked to replace the late Nick Wood as final judge. This then led to my being requested to do the crits of any 2024 entrants who requested such service. I agreed to this daunting and somewhat unpleasant task and was surprised to have a full dozen of these forwarded to me for... constructive criticism. I say unpleasant because one is more inclined to highlight the faults than the fair, and I am of an opinion that several of my observations may have been too acerbic; in fact, a positive and kind response from Ken Cockcroft regarding my not-so-kind responses to his top 10-placed Seed left me feeling rather ashamed even though my remarks were meant to be part of that aforementioned cadre of constructive criticisms. This got me thinking that maybe not all the authors were similarly... gratified. Hence, an unpleasant task! And one I have been requested to repeat for the Nova 2025. Ah well!

More astonishing than the number of entries forwarded to me for review, was the fact that most of them made it into the top 10. Astonishing, because I expected that authors who are sure of their craft would rarely, if ever, request an appraisal of their baby – which, in most cases, is always perfectly perfect in their own eyes

Yet another surprise was the final judge's choice of 2 of the top 3. This only proves that personal opinion and preference play a big part in deciding a winning story. Unbiased and impartial objectivity be damned; whatever tickles the final judge's fancy will obviously win the day. And, I expect, there are those that have similar regard to my final choices for the Nova 2023. That said, let this be a significant reminder and message to all who failed to impress the final judge: You are not a failure in everyone's eyes! So, keep up the good work; keep slugging away and producing those stories. Hell, even the Decca record company rejected the Beatles – a mistake they would long regret.

I'll not state here which particular stories I was rooting for to top the top 10 list, except to say that I expected Marthinus Conradie to fare better with at least one of his 3 entries. I was, however, pleased to note that his Armed Response was deemed worthy of print, by our illustrious editor, in the very same issue that published the honoured 1st and 2nd placed entries.

The 2nd placed entry, *The Stars Must Wait*, was not one of those forwarded to me for appraisal. This story was well-written and certainly worthy of its position in the top 3, emphasizing my opinion that authors who are sure of their craft rarely seek an evaluation. Still, I have decided to give my ten cents worth here: As mentioned, it is well-written – that is grammatically and entertainment-wise, but unfortunately totally unoriginal. I got the impression the author was inspired to pen this after watching *Equilibrium*, the movie starring Christian Bale, Sean Bean and Emily Watson. *Equilibrium* itself is a clone of other works, in particular a mishmash of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Orwell's *1984*. And the ending of *The Stars Must Wait* was reminiscent of the conclusion of *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*; although not equally dreary and disturbing as it does see the destruction of a questionable society by a WMD, giving it a positive future for humanity where people aren't, well, Numbers. I appreciated that it had a 'happy' ending.

Speaking of *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, I was moved to laughter at Tex Cooper's scathing review of the same in *Blast from the Past*. This movie was my introduction to the franchise, and as an impressionable youth was highly affected and mesmerized by it. I recently watched it again and have to agree with Tex's evaluation, but that will not deter it from remaining as something special to my youthful psyche, along with other lemons such as *Zardoz*, *The Ultimate Warrior* and *The Valley of Gwangi* (Which also starred James Francisco and terrified a kid with a most pleasurable delight).

Of course, as most of us know, there were 5 Planet of the Apes movies and a TV series spinoff featuring the late Roddy McDowall, later followed by a Tim Burton vehicle with Mark Wahlberg (Was Johnny Depp unavailable at the time?), and still later by a string of related movies featuring CGI created creatures that are meant to be more suitable and convincing than the original Oscar-winning ape makeup. Although the remakes/revamps/upgrades are impressive, my ever-youthful heart continues to remain a bigger fan of the originals. I guess it's all about first times – like that first special kiss!

All the best, my fellow fans of undoubtedly the best and greatest genres on or in any planet, parallel universe or dimension - followed closely by Horror, Westerns and Noir.

Blast from the past... from PROBE 106 October 1998

An Alien's Journey to WorldCon and Beyond

by Ian Jamieson

As leader of the first expedition (expedition? well, whatever) from South Africa to visit WORLDCON in the USA. I can only say "FANTastic".

My wife and I spent two days in New York and first impressions were disappointing. They look just like on and not like movie stars. Second impressions were better; excellent value at breakfast diners, although I got a blank look when I asked for my eggs "sunny side down". How is an alien supposed to know "over easy"? the *bus* driver who let obvious tourists (is "tourist" stamped on our foreheads?) onto his bus without enough change; the way small shopkeepers seem to take a pride in keeping their area of the pavement (sorry, sidewalk) clean, the number of roller-bladers and people with Walkman's <<*or is that "walkpersons"?? - ED.>> on the streets, not youngsters either: and the tourist trip on a double decker bus (London bus, don't ask me!) to see the Statue of Liberty - from a distance - and Times Square, which isn't (square I mean); and the taxi drivers from India, Korea and Pakistan (the latter reckoning that S A has the best cricket team in the world!); and the garbage disposal men who pick up the rubbish (sorry, garbage) at 3 o' clock in the morning and make it sound like cars being compacted. Two days was too short, but we enjoyed it thoroughly.*

Then on to stay with friends for a few days in Manassas, a small place not far from Washington. Quiet, peaceful and restful! Squirrels in the trees, a rabbit in the garden. We did some of the usual tourist things, relaxed, did some local sightseeing, relaxed, visited Washington and took a tour bus to visit the local sights and spent a day in the aerospace museum.

Finally, onto Baltimore and WorldCon. There were now ten of us from South Africa. Three had been to "Intersection" in Scotland in 1995; seven had never been to

WorldCon. As we were early, we spent another day at the aerospace museum (in Washington), a truly magnificent place and impossible to do properly in anything under two full days.

Almost 5000 S.F. fans gathered under one roof to enjoy all the various aspects of science fiction. Where to start? There were movies and Anime, bands and a Regency dance, Filking and trivia questions, discussion groups and gaming, Kaffeeklatches and Literary Teas, excellent discussion panels, masquerades and Hugo's. but, most important of all, the fans themselves. We spoke to fen (plural of fan) from the U.S.A., Britain, Norway, Sweden, Russia and Australia, and people would come up to us and say "it's so nice to see you people from South Africa".

And of course there was the dealers' room and the wonderful Art Show, and the special invite from Arian and Joyce Andrews to visit the writers in their own special quiet writers' suite (although quiet is not quite the correct word). Meeting authors like Greg Bear, Joe Halderman, Jack L. Chalker, Steven Baxter, Gene Wolfe and actually talking to them face to face was unbelievable. And what do you do when people like Niki and Richard Lynch, who won the Hugo for their fanzine *Mimosa*, and Joe Mayhew, who won the Hugo for best fan artist, come up and introduce themselves? If I came over as tongue-tied it's because I *was* (unusual for me).

Meeting the Russian fans was also an experience, especially when I discovered they had been in South Africa but didn't know we existed. Any fans visiting South Africa MUST get in touch with us PLEASE!!!

I haven't talked about the parties or our first baseball genie, or driving on Route 66, or the odd variety of bathroom taps (what do you do when you come across a sink with no taps at all?), or the plastic glasses for wine and beer, or the SAA pilot telling his passengers that Pretoria is the Disneyland of South Africa. We'll be back!!!!!!

NOVA 2025

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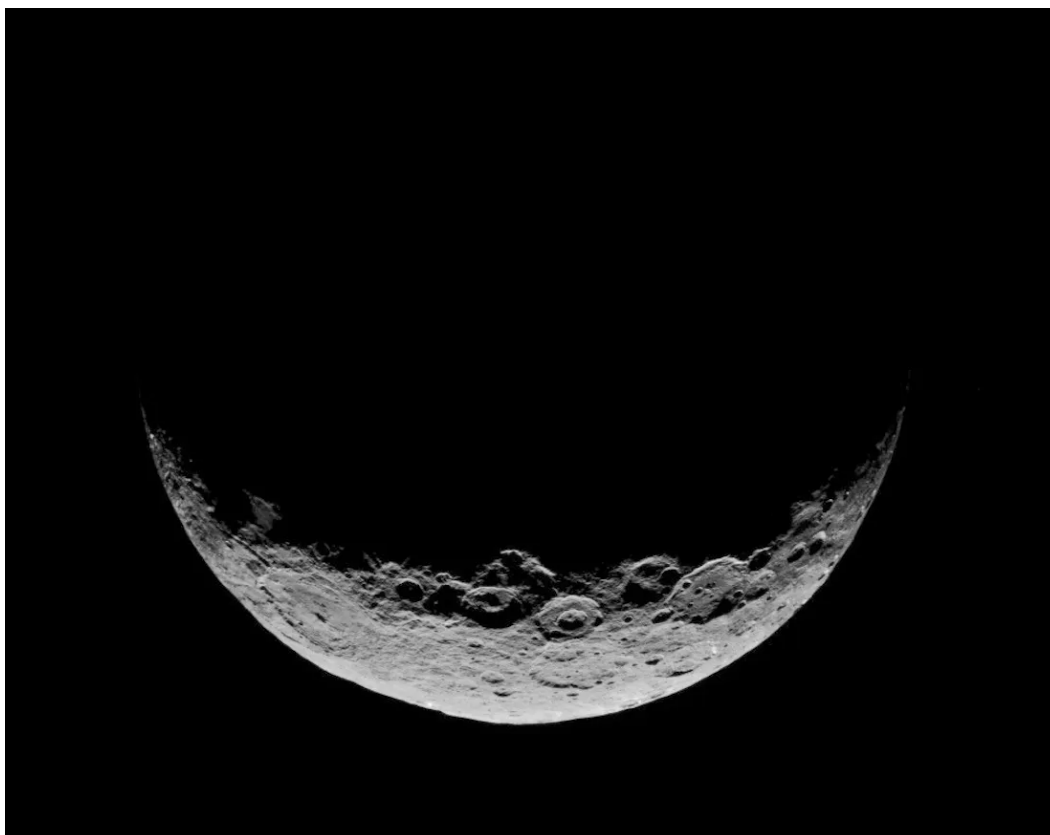
THIRD PRIZE R500

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NASA's Dawn Sees Crescent Ceres



NASA's Dawn spacecraft took this image of Ceres' south polar region on May 17, 2017. Launched on Sept. 27, 2007, Dawn was NASA's first truly interplanetary spaceship. The mission featured extended stays at two extraterrestrial bodies: giant asteroid Vesta and dwarf planet Ceres, both in the debris-strewn main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

The spacecraft's name was meant to present a simple view of the mission's purpose: to provide information on the dawn of the solar system. The three principal scientific drivers for the mission were to capture the earliest moments in the origin of the solar system, determine the nature of the building blocks from which the terrestrial planets formed, and contrast the formation and evolution of two small planets that followed very different evolutionary paths.

Dawn completed the first order exploration of the inner solar system, addressed NASA's goal of understanding the origin and evolution of the solar system, and complemented investigations of Mercury, Earth, and Mars. Dawn's mission on Nov. 1, 2018, after two extended missions.

