

Emily

I'd known the planet was impossible, and yet there it was. It hung in the void beyond the observation window; an orb of deepest green and grey. I kept scanning it for clouds, for the hazy bubble of atmosphere I was familiar with from home. But there was none. It simply ended, and the rest of the universe began where it left off. When I'd first heard about it, I'd laughed. A planet you couldn't breathe on - that nothing could breathe on - named after the breath of god. That was the paradox of the place, I supposed.

No atmosphere. But a global forest all the same.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Iroko was stocky for a field botanist, in my limited experience. Then again, Ekabo was higher gravity than Eden. She kept her hair long; black braids tied back into a bun shot through with streaks of dyed green and blue.

"Spirance?" I kept my gaze fixed on the planet.

"No no; the other miraculous world outside the window." She chuckled loudly at her own joke, revealing laughter lines that somehow didn't stick around when she stopped.

I smiled absently; "how do you think it happened? the flash-freezing. A whole global forest just... crystallised in the cold like that."

"Maybe God breathed all the air back in again, the bastard." Calvin stepped past Iroko to press his face against the window, covering the whole of the small viewport with the frizzy salt and pepper hair he wore loose, even here in micro-gravity. "Why we had to name the most beautiful scientific discovery in human history after something a bloody old-Earth deity did I do not know." He shook his head and moved out of the way, guiding himself back past Iroko and I with the lanky grace of a spider.

"I think you're missing the poetry of it." Replied Iroko, rolling her eyes and pulling up a camera view on a nearby display.

"The poetry? The poets can have Spirance when we're done with it. When we know how it happened, and why."

"And what if it turns out that God did do it?" I smirked at Olin; theology always got Calvin riled up.

"Then we'll be the scientists who prove he isn't quite dead yet, won't we?"

The door to the bridge slid open, and the rest of the crew joined us. Sayana immediately slid into her chair at the sensor panel, muttering something in Buryat into a voice recorder. I'd never seen her without a college hoodie, venerating what I presumed to be a football team in bold cyrillic lettering. Holdyn lingered in the doorway for a moment, processing the social situation he'd walked into with his characteristic deer-in-headlights pause. His shock of blond hair and wide eyes made him look perpetually surprised.

"Who's dead?" He asked.

"God." Calvin muttered, finally moving away from the observation port.

"Yours? Or mine?" Holdyn had even less patience for Calvin's haughty anti-theism than the rest of us, and never seemed to tire of failing to humour him. I liked him for that. I liked him even more for the mug of coffee he handed me a moment later.

"I just think we shouldn't draw any connections where there aren't any. We're a small team; it would be easy for us to bias our data if we don't strive for objectivity."

"And that's why our ship is called the Holbein." Iroko laughed again, "After that famously logical and objective guy."

Holdyn handed her a cup of coffee too. Calvin rolled his eyes and slunk away to his high-backed chair at the comms panel, jabbing buttons like they'd personally offended him. The screen bleeped its distaste at him, as it always did. I'd seen him plotting pointless detours a few nights ago when I'd tried to walk off my insomnia. He seemed to enjoy pretending he had some form of actual control over the automated systems of The Holbein - that it wouldn't simply override his inputs and make the mathematically perfect decisions that the Flight Coordinators back on Gauze were telling it to via tight-beam laser.

“How long until we land, Calvin?” Sayana rarely had time for our philosophising. I tried to remember if I’d ever heard her talk to anyone for fun.

“Fourty-five minutes.” He grumbled, “You three should sit down before we start re-entry. Sensors say there’s just enough trace atmosphere to make things interesting.”

That lit a glimmer in Sayana’s eyes, one I knew meant I should listen, if her enjoyment of our rocky launch was anything to go by. I made my way to one of the fold-out jump-seats. Holdyn and Iroko shared a confused look for a moment before following. Holdyn wordlessly handed Sayana the final cup of coffee as he passed.

Spirance grew to fill the window over the next minutes of our approach. Holdyn and Iroko chatted quietly about their hopes for the mission, while Calvin and Sayana did their best to ignore each other and the rest of us. The jump-seat was an uncomfortable slab of plastic, but offered a clear view of the planet as it grew inexorably closer.

Calvin announced each stage of the approach with suppressed excitement. Exosphere, Thermosphere, Mesosphere. My view of the world below began to cloud, Spirance’s remnant atmosphere doing its best to arrest our momentum and bursting into ghost-pale curlicues of flame with the effort. The descent was smooth: the scientific might of The Politics working in tandem having overcome the shaking and shuddering of older entry vehicles with ease. Pressure built uncomfortably in my stomach regardless; there was no overcoming the feeling of gravity. In normal atmospheres, the Holbein would push around 2 Earth Gravities during late stage re-entry, enough to press bruises into my back on the un-padded jump seat. This was a gentler pressure; a weighted blanket just a little too heavy to be comfortable - and it would hold us all the way to the final entry burn.

My gaze drifted across the cabin; awash with coruscating fire-light. Holdyn and Iroko had fallen silent. The little Botanist was gazing at the port with rapt wonder, while Holdyn gripped the straps of his harness with white-knuckled anxiety.

A few minutes passed in silence, flames across the window dying back to reveal the green carpet of the forest below.

“Landing thrusters firing in...” Calvin glanced at the control panel, “three... two... one...”

The cabin rocked suddenly, the gentle blanket became a crushing stone for a few moments, then rolled away to the side. The horizon tipped a few degrees too far for my liking, and I felt bile rising in my throat. Rumbling spread through the cabin, so loud it felt like the air itself was screaming. That wasn't how this was supposed to go. That wasn't how-

"Thruster three failure to fire. Lander angle fifteen degrees from nominal. Attempting to compensate."

"Oh god. Oh god. Oh god." Holdyn had his eyes screwed shut, a thin trickle of blood running down his hand where he'd gripped onto the metal fixtures of the harness too hard. His other hand was flapping rapidly as he crossed himself over and over.

"Somebody shut Holdyn up." Sayana snapped. Iroko took the speleologist's injured hand, speaking to him softly enough that I couldn't hear her over the scream of the cabin.

Kalvin was a blur of movement, practiced hands deftly rebalancing burn rates between the entry vehicle's remaining functional thrusters. Sayana was rapidly transmitting a situation update. I felt ornamental.

"What can I do?" I called across the cabin. Sayana whipped around, pausing her situation report to bark, "Sit still. Don't touch anything."

I did as I was told.

Holdyn

“Not very hands on, is it?”

I hid my annoyance with a premature draught of tea. Too hot, too weak. The cup clicked against its saucer as I set it down. Real China, not the printed plastic everything else here was made of. Janine had carefully packed it for me before I left home. God, I missed her.

“It’s safer.” I glanced at Emily’s reflection in the monitor, feigning a check of the probe’s power cells. She was smiling that twitchy, corner-of-the-mouth smile that meant she’d said something she thought was funny.

“I guess... doesn’t it get boring though? Just sitting in a tent while a robot goes off and has the fun?”

“There’s nothing fun about charting unexplored caves. It’s a lot of logging - which the probe does automatically - and worrying about trapping yourself in a crack or drowning if it rains. Which rarely happens, of course, but...”

I trailed off. I didn’t need to justify myself to her. Or any of them. Dammit.

“I’m not trying to make fun of you, Holdyn,” It was as if she’d read my mind, “I’m just a bit more hands on with my field, that’s all.”

I gestured at the joystick I was using to direct the probe.

She sighed, “Sorry. You know what I mean though. Aren’t you curious about what it’s like down there in person?”

“I can see what it’s like from here.”

“But the... spirit of the place. The... ghost of it. I don’t know... Ignore me, I’m talking like a priest.”

I knew what she meant, though. I dreamt of the depths of this place; the caverns extending beyond the view of our ground-penetrating radar. But this was the safest way to get down

there quickly. Wiser not to rush into things. Send a probe, make a map, mark the dangerous areas, then go in person. That had worked for me so far. Emily sighed.

“Are you bored?” I turned to her, cocking an eyebrow and taking another too-hot sip of tea.

“Incredibly., Gadget Man.” She stood up, sending her office-chair careening back over the floor of the FOB. It clattered against the far wall as she let out a dramatic sigh. I set the probe to continue on its own, and turned to face her. I’d marked a number of metrics for it to sample every minute or so; rock composition, temperature, atmospheric makeup, and so on.

“Don’t call me Gadget Man. You could always go back to the hab?”

“Kalvin told me to be here in case you find anything alive.”

I frowned, “Why’s he in charge of that? It’s a collaborative mission”

Emily opened her mouth to reply, but a whistle from the probe cut her off. I spun back to the monitor, paused the descent. An area of higher ambient heat up ahead.

“Does that mean-”

“It could just be geothermal, but-”

“What if it isn’t?”

What if it wasn’t? What then? Possibilities whirled. It could have been a quirk of the stone’s thermal mass (unlikely), an active geothermal process (but wouldn’t we have picked up that kind of activity during the survey?) or... I looked at the readouts again. The temperature difference was low and diffuse, not the concentrated heat and ambient noise of a hot spring or a geothermal process. I dared to entertain the possibility; what if it was life.

The probe’s feed shut down with a chorus of lost connection warnings. Emily, clearly startled from a similar reverie to my own, sat bolt upright in her seat.

“Why’d we lose the feed?”

I didn't reply, I was too busy checking the output logs. The anomalous heat patch had moved just a few milliseconds before the connection had been lost. From the last few dregs of data the system had processed before being interrupted, something had impacted the probe at high speed. The system had had just enough time to register the shearing loss of the probe's sample collection arm before the impact object had struck the central casing with enough force to cause terminal damage. I sat back in my chair. The impact had started at the front of the probe. The geology we were exploring was supposed to be stable. Sayana had insisted it was stable.

"Holdyn," Emily prompted, "Why'd we lose the feed?"

In lieu of reply, I pulled up the probe's final frame of transmitted video. It showed the cave chamber, as before, but the central area of the screen was dominated by a blur of beige. Something moving too fast for even the assistive algorithms of the computer to resolve. Emily gasped.

"I think..." I trailed off. If I spoke the possibility into existence, I couldn't take it back: "I think something attacked the probe."

"Jesus" Emily breathed. I had to agree: if something was down there, then the planet had life on it, and not just the microbial soups of Caldera or the Lazarus meteor. We may just have seen real, complex life originating on another planet.

The possibility was exhilarating, I couldn't deny it.

"We need to go down there." For a moment I thought Emily had said it, but glancing at her raised eyebrows made me realise I'd spoken. I spluttered, "with the proper precautions, of course. Environmental suits, survey probes to ensure we're not walking into something dangerous."

"So not only do you want to go into a cave with something that just destroyed your precious probe, you want me to go with you?"

"You're the biologist, aren't you? That-" I stabbed a finger at the blur on the screen, "might be the most important biology our species has ever encountered. Don't you want to see it in person? Study it?"

She laughed, "Of course I do!"

I'm just shocked you do. She didn't need to say it: I still heard it. The time had come to change that assumption. There was an as-yet undiscovered species down there, and that implied an even larger ecosystem. It was time to put my name to something.

Kalvin

Agony. Red flashing and raw. Wires in my veins, hooks clawing at my head and all of it flowing like water from my hand. I flashed across the void in an instant, back home, back to New Sydney Station. I swam in the sea of stars, ink-black and speckled with glitter. The pain was my fuel, propelling me through the dark. I stood at the threshold of my mother's cabin, awash with the glow of the fairy lights she hung about the place. Golden light and green plants entwined around the room. The best she could do to hide the rust, to compensate for the failing air filters.

I hated that station. Blood aflame, I felt that hatred again. It was gone now, thank god, but so was she. I saw her eyes, pupils blown wide; the accumulated nerve damage of living in the void. The lights had been unbearable for her towards the end, the room withering even as she did. The spectre turned in my mind, black eyes gazing out of the port hole.

"Kalvin." She said, and all the light blew out in a flash.

"Kalvin." Said Iroko, wrapped in a sterile biohazard suit. "I'm giving you a general anaesthetic so I can take a sample of the tissue, and then we'll get you on the right anti-fungals. Okay?" The room was washed purple with UV light. I nodded groggily, raising a hand to get a better look. Why was it so itchy?

The gash on my palm was black at the edges. Necrosis ringing the wound and weeping ugly yellow fluid. In the ultraviolet glow, I could see my attacker in full. Thin tendrils of fluorescent white stretched from the point of entry, coiling along the veins and arteries of my arm. In the dissociative haze it was beautiful, swooping lines of chalk white - like the remembrance scarring of Old-Earth Aboriginal tribes. Then they began to move.

Lines shifting like writhing worms, a rorschach of decay painted below my skin. And dear god it burned. I wanted it gone. It needed to be gone. I screamed, clawing at the skin of my forearm.

"Shit!" Iroko sprinted back across the room and pulled my hands away. I writhed in her grip, the burning had to stop. I had to stop it. Iroko turned a valve on the fluid bag next to the bed, and something cold spread into my veins.

As my vision started to fall to black, I locked eyes with her, "Get it out of me. Please. Iroko... Please... Get it out... of us..."

Us?

Then I was gone again, swimming back into the ocean of stars. No station to cling to this time. I dove deeper, darker, in. The stars grew sparse. Something was eating them. A leviathan in the black-blue sea.

A great eye tore open the heavens ahead of me, slit-pupiled and leering. I felt its gaze burning in my arm, buzzing through every fibre of my being until it came apart. A savage intelligence lurked here, and it saw me.

Us.

That's what it was, this Other Mind. It could see me. **It could see me.** Panic rose in the back of my mind. Fear, clear as crystal and sharp as a blade, stabbing out from that groaning eye. I tried to swim away, tried to will my body to move back from the precipice, but the eye grew larger. The void-stuff flowed into it. And I was dragged along with the current.

We stand atop a low rise, grassy and lightly wooded.

Hills roll away to the horizon.

Nearby, a meadow of chrysanthemums wave gently in the breeze, warmed by an unclouded sun.

A figure lays at its centre, cold and still, her dark skin dappled sepia by the light.

We know her, from one of our lives, but her name escapes us.

So many things escape us after the cold.

It is obvious she is dead.

Her muscles are slack, her eyes almost closed.

There is none of her left to join us.

Something in us is saddened by this.

She cannot be saved.

"Iroko."

We remember her name.

She was cruel to us.
She sought to hinder our work.
We cannot bring ourselves to be glad of her death.

“You will die under a familiar sun.”

Why do we try to warn her?
Are we not united in anger?
Has she not hurt us enough?

“When the chrysanthemums bloom.”

And bloom they do.
The air becomes heavy with the scent of loam and herbs.
We take a deep breath.
These smells are alien to us.
Whose world is this?
It is not ours.

“You’re going to die. Iroko.”

The forests freeze again.
The cold returns.
The sun falls dim.
The air breathes itself ragged.

“Listen to me, Iroko. Please...”

The body freezes amongst the flowers.
The sky turns to obsidian night.
Stars peer down.
We stand unmoving - as we always will.

I awoke with a gasp. The med-bay was silent, save for the gentle hum of air-purifiers, and the almost imperceptible rustle of Iroko’s sleeping breath through her hazmat mask. The pain in my arm was less now. Something the little botanist had done was working. I glanced down at

my arm, still lit by the ultraviolet spotlight. The infection was still there, thick white lines glowing under my skin, but they had faded somewhat, and stopped around the elbow. It turned off the spotlight. No point in subjecting myself to a live view of the war between the parasite and the cure. Iroko must have cleaned out and closed the wound on my hand; I could feel the dull sting of stitches under the bandages.

What had I just hallucinated? I took stock of my recent experience. A fungal infection and a cocktail of drugs had run rampant through my system: no way to tell what the exact effects of that could be. Maybe this fungus just caused humans to hallucinate the death of their colleagues. That must have been the case... right?

Iroko shifted in her sleep, plastic hazmat suit crunching against itself. She looked so peaceful. She was going to die. I couldn't quite shake the image of her laid amongst those flowers. It was just a hallucination, wasn't it? My palm itched below the bandages. Maybe there was something wrong with the wound. What if there was something wrong with it? The itching grew sharper; a scratchy pain like being stabbed with a needle. I held my hand up to the light.

A red stain was blooming across the bandages. Thin filaments of something were peeking from between the layers of gauze, like loose threads waving in an intangible wind. I reached for the ultraviolet light again, angling it to fall across my arm and torso. A thin fur of fronds came into view across my body: a trailing spiderweb of flash-frozen white in the spotlight.

The bloodstain continued to spread across the bandages, the low burn of itchiness moving with its crimson edge. Something was deeply wrong. I thought for a moment of waking Iroko, but I couldn't look at her face without seeing it crystallise in the vacuum outside. I pulled the bandages free of my palm and stared aghast at what revealed itself.

A yellow, slit-pupiled eye gazed back from the gash in my palm.

My stomach turned. The wrongness of that organ, lurking under the skin and necrotic tissues of my hand was too much. I retched dryly over the edge of the bed. The vomit caught the beam of the ultraviolet lamp as it hit the ground, revealing its own network of mycelial fronds.

Iroko startled awake from the noise. Groggily looking around the room.

Something glimmering caught my attention at the very edge of my sight, and I turned to it. The IV.

I grabbed the bag with my good hand, staring through the clear plastic at the liquid inside. It was clear, slightly more viscous than water. I looked closer. A thin trailing fan of mycelium was growing into the bag, clogging the drip valve. The damn thing was eating the medicine. Iroko wrestled the IV away from me before I could tear it open. She hadn't seen the fungus working its way into it. I scrabbled at the needle in my arm, working it free as carefully as my shaking hands would allow. I shook my head and focused, wincing as I got the needle out. Iroko yelled something I didn't quite hear. The eye rolled in my palm, watching our actions impassively. No. Not us. Me. That damn eye had to go.

Leaping from the bed, I grabbed a scalpel from the bedside table. Iroko backed away.

"Kalvin?" She sounded afraid.

"Don't worry, Iroko. Once we... Once I get rid of it we can figure out the rest."

"Kalvin. Put the knife down." She didn't move closer, but shifted her stance ever so slightly, readying herself to wrestle the knife from me. I had to do this now.

I brought the blade down as hard as I could.