



Illustrated by Tomislav Tikulin

The Deviltree

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The creature was not the last of its kind, but it had been a very long time since he had seen another like himself. Loneliness had been Deviltree's unrelenting companion, driving him to the edge of the cliff once more to look out onto the valley below. Tree-devils were a solitary species but also highly intelligent beings, and this particular one was prone to curiosity.

Filling the breathing sacks to full had a satisfying effect, and he held the air within his segmented, dark gray thorax for a few long moments before deflating them.

He reached all four of his scaly, upper limbs to the sky while simultaneously digging into the soil below with what passed for his toes—four sets of them—and flexed. Like the deep breath, the stretching of limbs simply felt good, especially when he needed to center himself or just remind himself that it was good to be alive.

The valley below was experiencing this planet's warmest season. The distant river cutting

through it swelled with a rush of icy, fresh water from the surrounding mountain. The trees' canopies were full and thick, providing plentiful shade for this planet's equivalent of birds, insects, and animals.

Deviltree could not remember any other world, although he knew that this was not his world of origin. The memories of his early life faded with each passing season. He'd even stopped making the tally marks on the great white rock by his old lair. It didn't seem a count worth keeping when he couldn't remember why he was doing it. Mostly it made him sad, so he had stopped.

He stretched his neck trunk, causing the segmented plates that covered his flesh to part, and swiveled his head from side to side, making it turn almost all the way around. A tree-devil's head was little more than a continuation of its neck trunk with a vertical slit that opened for breathing and eating. Four sensory organs, two on each side of the slit, performed the functions of sight via compound lenses.

Once again, he was contemplating the need to stretch without really understanding why he was doing it. To him it just felt good and satisfying, and while he didn't understand the need to do it from on-high where anyone or anything could see him, his instincts drove him to it today just as they had driven the ritual every day for the last thirty planetary revolutions.

He closed his eyes, stretched yet again, and almost missed the thing streaking across the sky, splitting the clear blue with a line of white, a type of cloud Deviltree had never seen before.

Lowering his upper limbs, he tracked the cloud, shifting his vision beyond the spectrum of visible light into the ultraviolet and infrared. The segmented plates and scales that covered his lower and upper limbs, his thorax, and abdomen lifted, as though they were rippling along his body. As they separated from the skin, billions of mimetic particles smaller than motes of dust drifted out from underneath the scales. They surrounded him in a cloud of sparking color—aquamarine and gold, emerald green and orange, indigo and lilac—creating a cloud of sparkling flux.

The enormous energy of the distant sonic boom was like a thunderclap as the white streak above made its way toward the ground, down into the valley below. As the waves of energy reached Deviltree, they passed through his flux, creating waves and ripples that felt like a caress.

It had been a long time since Deviltree had known anything like it. It was so much like when he had first come to consciousness, understood himself as a living thing, that the sense of memory overwhelmed him.

Deviltree wanted more. No, not just wanted: needed, craved.

He reached out, the flux flowing into tendrils until they were one long, thin string, but no matter how far he extended his flux, he could not reach the dissipating streak of white falling toward the valley. All the particles told him was that the humidity of the air, the taste of it, was not a threat.

He remembered reaching for the pinpricks of light that pierced the darkness of night and failing to touch those sparkling embers too. Those lights were not like the fire that sometimes consumed the forest after a sky-cutter crashed. And the distant embers were not like the branches of lightning that sparked and reached down from the sky during storms either.

Deviltree liked all those things—the taste of the storms, the enormous electrical and magnetic fields that the lightning strikes created. It even liked the feel of the water falling from the sky. But the fire that lightning or a sky-cutter sometimes ignited was not Deviltree's friend. The chemical reaction known as fire could consume and destroy his flux. Fire could not be sampled, nor mimicked, despite being chemical in nature, and he didn't understand why.

He didn't like it when fire destroyed his flux. He needed his particles, his flux, to survive and protect himself, to hunt. Losing too much flux and then making more always weakened him, and he didn't like being weak and defenseless.

He wondered if this thing that had cut through the sky and reached down into the valley was like the lightning or like the other sky-cutters he'd seen from time to time. Or was it something else? There was no fire, no smoke. The sound waves the mysterious thing had generated were not like those of lightning—similar, yes, but different.

Different was good. Different was interesting.

Deviltree drew his flux back into himself, creating a swirling vortex of matter that coalesced around and hid his eight-limbed body. He stood there at the edge of the cliff, looking down into the valley for a long time until curiosity got the better of him.

As the triple suns set, following each other behind the mountains, a herd of eight-legs came to the edge of the cliff to feed on the surrounding grasses. One of the eight-legs bumped up against Deviltree and looked up at him with its black-and-yellow eyes. Shiny, black bodies stood out against the bluish-green grass, shimmering in the dying light.

Deviltree lowered himself so his upper limbs touched the ground. He pivoted his limbs until they were radially distributed around his thorax and abdomen. He called the flux out once again, forcing the colors of the particles to black, until they cloaked him in darkness and he looked like a young eight-leg.

So configured, he rolled in their dung to enhance his mimicry, shook himself off and joined the herd. He had done so before, many times, when he'd needed to hide. It was a familiar shape, one he didn't need to reach out and sample again. It wasn't always a good plan, as there were other predators out there, ones who hunted the eight-legs, but the eight-legs would move down into the valley, toward the river, and that was the direction where the sky-cutter was.

Hidden among the herd of eight-legs, Deviltree would go into the valley in search of the sky-cutter. And if the eight-legs changed direction before they got to where he wanted to go, he would break away and seek the sky-cutter on his own.

* * *

Masaki's knuckles were still white as she held onto the acceleration seat's armrests like her life depended on it. The *Yeager* had made a safe, if turbulent, landing, that much was clear. Both Carter Sanou, the *Yeager's* captain and pilot, and the copilot Karolina Panuski were making oral entries into their logs in calm, everyday voices, like they just hadn't almost died.

Framed by the cockpit's seemingly endless array of controls and monitors, Carter threw a look over his shoulder, dark eyes sparkling in a dark face. He grinned, revealing stark, white teeth.

"Told you there was nothing to worry about." He had a deep, rich voice that Masaki usually found reassuring. And she would, undoubtedly, find it so again, just as soon as her stomach caught up with her. She was pretty sure that they had left it behind, somewhere in the atmosphere, when it had crawled its way up her screaming throat because they'd hit what Carter had dismissed as "a little chop."

"You can let go of the armrests," he said as he pushed up and out of the pilot's chair.

Masaki looked down at the armrests. Her fingers were so numb she couldn't feel them, much less make them move.

"Just give me a minute," she said. "Or ten."

A skeptical look settled on Carter's face. "Very well. We have to check the exterior." He moved past Masaki, and she heard his confident footsteps as he took the ladder down to the shuttle's cargo hold.

Karolina finished flipping switches and talking to the *Yeager's* computer. Unfortunately, a combination of beak-like nose, weak chin, and her short, blond bob made her look a bit like a turtle. Masaki flushed with embarrassment at the unkind thought.

"You all right?" Karolina asked. "For what it's worth, you just went from green-tinged to red-tinged to white-as-a-sheet."

Masaki nodded. "Yeah. Lots of feelings right now. Just give me a few moments."

Karolina stood and reached into one of her flight suit's thigh pockets. She pulled out a familiar light-blue package.

"If you need to throw up, it's better to do it in here." She dropped the barf-bag in Masaki's lap and headed for the rear.

Masaki closed her eyes, banged her head against the padded headrest, and counted backward from ten all while taking deep cleansing breaths. By the time she was done, she didn't feel too much like barfing, and she had loosened her grip on the armrests.

Experience was supposed to make this easier. This was her third flight down from the starship

in a shuttle. She was fine on the big ship with its crew of one-thousand-ish, its massive feel and steady gravity. But the smaller ships. They really got to her. And she was just as scared now as she'd been the first time.

"Get it together," she mumbled to herself. "Get it together or they'll fire you and ship your sorry ass back to Earth."

And Earth was the last place she wanted to go back too. She had beaten out hundreds of candidates for this slot. Her parents had paid bribes and called in every favor they'd had. Masaki had done favors for three of the stakeholders, and if she failed at this she was going to spend the rest of her life doing more of the same, because that's how things worked in the United Earth Federation, and she hated it.

Things were better on the *Korbinian Boyer*, the starship up in orbit, where competence and merit seemed to carry more weight. Or at least they had been so far. Which meant she'd have to prove herself on this mission. And she couldn't do that if she didn't get over her fear of flying in shuttles.

"You coming or what?" Carter's voice drifted up from the deck below.

"I'll be right there," Masaki said and unbuckled the acceleration harness with trembling fingers.

Well, at least, she'd let go of the armrests. Surely that had to count for something.

The purpose of this trip was to get a closer look at the anomaly the *Korbinian Boyer's* drones had picked up when they'd done a high-altitude pass over this planet, currently known only as M-204985z. While M-204985z had the virtue of being very Earth-like, it had been at the bottom of the list for further exploration or development. It had only caught the *Boyer's* attention because of what looked like a quantum communication signal coming from the planet. The drones had made a second pass over the region to verify their readings, but found that the quantum signal source had moved. A third pass had confirmed the movement.

When Masaki had seen the readings she'd insisted that they check them out. Her boss had reluctantly agreed that it might be something, but he'd only given her three days to find out what. Otherwise the *Boyer* would have to expend fuel to slow down, make orbit, and then reverse the process to resume its path. That was a major change in mission parameters, one that no one was willing to authorize without a better reason than what Masaki had given them.

By the time Masaki made it down the ladder, the adrenaline in her system had dissipated, and she was feeling better. Carter and Karolina were checking their sidearms, bantering about getting back to the *Boyer* in time for a gaming tournament.

"How close are we to the anomaly?" Masaki asked.

"It's a bit of a hike," Carter said.

"I'm guessing, the rest of today and part of tomorrow," Karolina said as she opened up one of the supply lockers. Within, one of the robotic pack mules was folded up with its legs tucked underneath it.

"That's going to cut it close," Masaki said.

She did the math inside her head, accounting for the standard Earth day, M-204985z's day (which was a bit longer), and coming up with only hours in which to actually find and assess the anomaly.

"That only gives me six hours," Masaki said, "maybe seven. That's not a lot."

"With no other place to land," Carter said, "this is the best I could do, or risk damage to the *Yeager*."

"I understand," Masaki said. "It wasn't a complaint, just an observation."

It took them the better part of an hour to load two mules down with gear and head on out.

Karolina lowered the cargo bay doors. Air and sunlight rushed in and sent goosebumps scrambling up Masaki's arms. Sure, she'd stepped on other worlds before. But always in some kind of environmental suit.

This was the first time she'd breathed in unfiltered alien air, felt unfiltered alien light on her skin. The air was crisp, chilly, and filled with woody scents that weren't quite right.

Carter and Karolina led the two mules down the ramp, their weighed-down stomps making

the ramp vibrate. They reached the bottom, and Carter turned around.

“You coming, newbie?” he asked, a smirk on his face.

Masaki’s steps echoed as she made her way down the ramp. Carter had brought them down in a small clearing, something that looked like it had recently burned, probably from a lightning strike. Fresh shoots were pushing their way up from the soil. Karolina and the mules were already at the tree line when Masaki took that first step off the *Yeager*.

The sounds of the ramp lifting behind her didn’t take away from that first sight as she looked up at the triple suns. The main star dwarfed the other two a thousand times over, but still, to see such a sight over trees and mountains so familiar . . .

“First time?” Carter asked.

“Yeah.”

* * *

Deviltree broke from the herd of eight-legs when they settled in for the night, taking refuge between some of the larger boulders by the riverbank. He recalled the flux, taking it back into himself and dove into the river.

The silver-darts were plentiful this time of the season. He didn’t even have to form a net out of his flux to trap them. Instead, he dove in, shifted his vision so they were easier to see and stabbed them with the points of his long-fingers.

Once stabbed, he flicked them out of the water, onto the shore.

Usually, he’d come up for air as needed, but he was in a hurry, so he formed the flux into a snorkel and used it to breathe.

When he counted two eights of stabbed and ejected silver-darts, he surfaced and sent out his flux to settle over them. Most of them had stilled, either from the stab or from suffocation. A few were still alive though, their hearts beating frantically, the electrical impulses from their brains tapping out frenzied codes.

Deviltree had given up trying to decode those signals. At first, he’d tried decoding them because he desperately wanted to communicate. But there was nothing there—a rudimentary intelligence, a sentience, yes, but no sapience. No tree-devilness.

And then he’d realized that if he found sapience, he could not feed on them. Not the way he wanted to anyway. It was one thing to stuff their corpses into his face-slit and ingest them that way, converting their matter to energy. It was another to truly feed and satiate himself, to reach into their minds, to taste their sentience and feed his flux directly.

The flux had learned to do without. It had stopped complaining to him about the lack of proper sustenance, the lack of presence. It was at times like this—when the ebb of life left his food—that the flux was most tempted, that it reached out and sampled the waning life and drank it in, one bioelectrical reaction, one quantized unit at a time.

He allowed his flux to hurry the inevitable, told himself that the silver-darts would have died anyway, even if he hadn’t chosen to feed on them. The flux shimmered, giving off sparks of light, sending energy back and forth along their connection, making Deviltree shiver with pleasure, with delight, and then finally, guilt.

Once all the silver-darts were dead, the flux flowed back under his scales, and he grasped the nearest carcass with his right upper forelimb, turning it over this way and that. It rested across his four fingers, a soft, silver mass against the tough exterior of his bark-like skin. He looked at it for another moment, ignoring his hunger.

The silver-darts were covered in scales like he was, but they weren’t him. No flux came out from beneath their scales. They were not tree-devils. And he could not mimic them. They were too small.

Not that any of the creatures on this planet had ever shown any sign of hesitation, of remorse, of guilt when they hunted him, when they’d tried to kill and eat him. Not one. No matter their size.

When the two eights of silver-darts were no more, Deviltree set out in the direction of the sky-cutter. He passed landmarks he recognized—the cave with the tall but narrow opening, the copse of trees covered in slimy bioluminescent fungus that tasted vile and made him sick, the

large hive of stinger-flies that had eaten some of his flux and made him feel disoriented until he cut off contact with those particles.

And as he got closer, an electromagnetic buzz, like a memory, hummed underneath all the sounds of the forest, turning from particles to waves and back, tempting the flux particles to emerge so that he had to exert his will over them and make them stay within.

Back and forth the signal went, wave, particle, sometimes both, drawing him toward the sky-cutter.

He sped up, eager, curious, and a little frightened.

* * *

Even with the mules patrolling the camp, Masaki had a hard time sleeping. She was not just sore from the hike, but this planet's gravity was actually higher than Earth's. Not by much, just 3 percent, but it seemed that was all it took. That, and having lived aboard the *Boyer* for the last two years, where the only exercise someone like her got was when she made it to the gym.

Both Carter and Karolina were doing better than she was. Being ex-military, they seemed to have no trouble keeping up with the mules, even while wearing backpacks.

Masaki was pretty sure the blister forming on her right toe was going to pop soon. She'd wanted nothing more than to sit down and catch her breath, but she'd said nothing, opting instead to put on a brave face as she brought up the rear once again.

The next day, M-204985z's triple suns were at their apex when they reached their destination. The little red dot on their gauntlets told them so, letting out a beep as the dot swelled and the grid in the background expanded.

Carter was tapping on his gauntlet, his face in shadow from the brim of his cap. He looked around, disappointment on his face.

"What did you expect?" Masaki asked. "A monolith?"

"Apes dancing around a monolith, actually," he deadpanned. "Bonus points for uplifting music and if they are brandishing large femurs as weapons."

"No," Karolina said, "bonus points if they're banging out uplifting music on drums using said femurs." She dropped her pack and took off her cap, wiping at her sweat-darkened hair.

"The target area is about half a mile in diameter," Masaki said. "We'll have to look around."

"Sounds good." Carter reached for his canteen and took a drink. "We'll set up camp here. We'll take care of that. Masaki, your six hours start now. Do your thing. I'll send a report to the shuttle for relay."

Masaki walked past the mule Karolina was unpacking. Carter had gone off into the trees, probably for a bio-break.

"You going to be okay, exploring on your own?" Karolina asked.

"Yes, I think so. Survey said no large predators on this continent. I just hope it doesn't turn out to be a wild goose chase." That was Masaki's biggest fear—that she'd wasted everyone's time. She'd never live it down. Maybe she should have let her boss talk her out of this.

"Have you ever chased a quantum entangled goose before?" Karolina asked as she worked the mule's straps.

"We don't really know if it's quantum entangled," Masaki said. "We just think it might be. It's very similar to our quantum encryption, that's all."

Karolina dug into one of the supply cases and pulled out a gun and holster. She held them out to Masaki.

"Just in case," Karolina said.

"I'm a horrible shot," Masaki admitted.

"You passed all the qualifiers, didn't you?"

She had, sort of. One of the bribes had gone to let her retake that test. Reluctantly, she reached for the gun belt and lashed it to her thigh. As she shifted her weight and pivoted her foot to cinch the holster's bottom strap, her blister popped.

She winced and fought off the urge to stomp her foot and swear at it.

"Help is just a call away," Karolina said, raising her gauntleted arm.

They did a radio-check to make sure the gauntlets were working.

Masaki took one of her specialized cases, the one with her detectors, set it on the ground, and opened it up. It took a precious twenty minutes to set it all up, but she finally got what could be interpreted as a signal in the easterly direction. They might not be able to decode the signal, but it was definitely there.

Carter was busy digging a fire pit, and Karolina had one of the mules propped awkwardly on three legs as she changed out a component on its fourth leg.

"Looks like there's something toward that white rock face," Masaki said.

Carter looked up. "We'll follow as soon as we're done here."

Masaki picked up another one of her cases, the one with tools for taking samples and beacons for marking finds, and set off toward the rock face.

Birds—or this planet's equivalent—flitted overhead, and on occasion an insect would fly nearby, but so far nothing had landed on them. Maybe humans didn't smell or taste right. As Earthlike as M-204985z was, it didn't need mosquitos.

Fifteen minutes later she was looking up at the rock face. It looked like a giant wall of white quartz that would be blindingly beautiful when the light hit it just right.

Her inner scientist was bristling at having to ignore all the strange bugs and worms and flowers. She quelled it by looking down at the countdown timer. If she was right, and there was something here, like a quantum encrypted beacon, then the *Boyer* would change its mission, and they'd have all the time they needed to explore and catalogue this place properly. Until then, her inner anal retentiveness was just going to have to shut up.

She came up to the rock wall that her instruments were insisting was the source of the signal. Bushes covered the base of the rock and she wasn't quite sure if the small, white sort-of-triangles littering the ground were stone or bone.

Masaki bent down to pick one up and passed it in front of her hand-held analyzer. It flashed a "possibly organic" answer at her.

She looked at it more closely. Roughly an inch long, it had a rounded triangular shape to it, almost like a seashell. It wasn't all that strange. She'd found seashells when hiking on Earth too. Once those Earthly mountains had been under the sea. No reason to expect it to be different here, even though the "seashell" wasn't.

She was going to have to get closer to the rock. And that meant moving the bushes aside. Those thorns didn't look very friendly. Gloves first.

She dug around in her backpack.

"You want a hand with that?"

She looked up. Carter had followed her. He'd brought one of the mules as well and told it "Patrol mode." The mule took off, loping through the trees like a decapitated deer.

"Sure," she said, pulling on gloves. "I need to get behind these bushes. Give me a hand?"

"I have a better idea," Carter said and pulled his machete out of its thigh holster.

He gave her a wicked grin that made her laugh.

"Fine, have at it," she said and moved aside, taking out her portable scanner in the hopes that whatever signal the drones had detected was nearby. She got the same intermittent, maybe-something-maybe-nothing pattern and scowled at it.

Carter spent about ten minutes hacking at the pencil-thin branches with far too much enthusiasm. His motions sent beetle-like insects scurrying up the rock face.

It took a few more moments for Masaki to realize that the marks on the rock face were not beetles. She moved closer, her hand out.

Whatever had made the marks had the ability to go about a quarter of an inch deep, in precise, evenly spaced groups, a combination of dots and dashes.

Goosebumps rose on her arms, and her heart was beating so hard it was the only sound she heard, like the rest of the world had simply faded.

"What is it?" Carter asked.

She ran her finger over the markings. "I can't be sure, but . . ." She had to stop and swallow the lump forming in her throat. Her skin tingled, her stomach too.

"See these dots—one, two, three. Then this dash. That's four. Over and over again. All the

way from the bottom to here.” The markings only went as high as her shoulders. Well, almost.

Carter frowned at her. “I don’t understand.”

“Someone made these. These aren’t natural.”

“You can’t know that.”

He had a point. Sort of.

“Look at it like this. If you or I were stuck here or tallying something, we might make tally marks like this.” She picked up a stick and used it to make four vertical marks in the dirt. Then she ran a fifth tally mark through the first four.

“Yes, that I get,” he said.

“So, each group is five, and two of these are ten.”

He nodded.

“We use such tally marks because we have five fingers and two hands. We use them because we use base ten.”

“Uh-huh.”

“These are base eight.” *Or maybe sixteen. No, don’t complicate it.*

He looked from the tally mark on the ground to the ones on the rock and back again.

“If this is not some natural phenomenon.” He said it like he hoped that she was wrong.

“Correct.”

“Could it be natural?” he asked.

“I’m a mathematician, not a exobiologist,” she said. “There is life on this planet. It’s similar enough to Earth, maybe there is a lifeform here that can count.”

“An eight-fingered lifeform.”

“That would follow, yes.”

“An intelligent alien lifeform.”

She nodded.

“Well, damn.”

* * *

The sky-cutter was exactly where it was supposed to be, in a clearing not far from Deviltree’s old lair. He approached it with caution, surrounded by his flux. It had formed around him like a shield, enclosing him in a cloud of swirling color, ready to reform as needed, or make him fade into the background.

From the tree line he sent out the flux, making it unfurl like a ribbon from his body. It snaked toward the sky-cutter, through the grass, slithering forth like a snake. The sky-cutter was quiet and still, and had been ever since he’d reached it, except for the humming, the buzz that had drawn Deviltree to it.

The harmonics were just familiar enough that he could tell that the sky-cutter was like the music-maker in his old lair before he’d damaged it in a fit of rage. He couldn’t remember what had enraged him, only that he’d woken from the rage, and the music-maker’s sounds had not returned to the old pattern. And that there had been fire.

He didn’t want to think about it. Those kind of thoughts led to ruin, to long stretches of time where he hid in darkness, where he went to dark places that hurt but could not be escaped.

These harmonics were the opposite of those dark places. They sent out pulses that ordered the flux into standing waves. He let the flux particles order themselves until they were all formed into a wave with himself and the ship as nodes. The anti-nodes took form as he halved the distance, making the scales covering his body vibrate and release more flux.

Something in the sky-cutter was drawing him in, drawing him closer, calling him via his flux.

He knew that the silver-gray shell of the sky-cutter was not alive, was not what was calling to him. Nor was the sky-cutter like the mountain. Inside, it was mostly hollow. Its harmonics told him so.

Inside, he must get inside.

And as soon as the thought formed, the flux collapsed from the standing wave it had been drawn into and enveloped the sky-cutter. There was a small imperfection in the sky-cutter’s skin, one which a flux particle pushed open, drawing others with it like a bead on a string.

In they went, to gather information and send it back through their connection to him, that unquantifiable thing that kept him and his flux connected in ways beyond the physical.

Deviltree closed his eyes, concentrated on the flux, on the information being sent back.

How much of his flux—of himself—did he dare send inside?

He tested it, pulled some of the particles back. Mostly they obeyed, so he sent them back in and lost himself in the sensory overload of new information—the frequencies, textures, the colors, the scents, all the strange molecules and substances.

There was nothing living inside the sky-cutter, but there was a strange facsimile of a creature and next to it, a bundle of fibers—keratinized protein. The flux flowed around the fibers, sampled it.

Billions of bits of information were processed, and a high probability was calculated. The calculations suggested that the keratinized protein had once belonged to the creature in the facsimile, specifically, the fibers covering the creature's head.

No shell, no scales, no flux.

No tree-devilness.

Nevertheless, now that he had all that information, now that he'd sampled it, assimilated it, he could—

Oh, how interesting.

* * *

Carter wasn't happy. He and Masaki had taken extensive scans of the rock face and determined that there was a hollow space behind it. They couldn't figure out how to get to it, however, or what it was. They left a marker beacon and headed back to the campsite, but they couldn't get hold of the *Yeager*. The shuttle's intelligent agent—not quite an AI—wasn't answering or confirming a relay.

"We need to head back," Carter said as he slammed the backup transmitter back into its case. "Now."

"Do you think we're in danger?" Karolina asked.

Masaki could tell that she wasn't happy about being told they'd have to head back right after she'd gone through the trouble of setting up camp.

"Leave the equipment," Carter said. "It'll only slow us down."

"You can't be serious. It's just a comm failure. They happen all the time."

"It's not the comm failure," he said. "It's the timing of it."

"How long before we can expect a rescue?" Masaki asked. She'd been so excited about the proof of alien intelligence that she hadn't really thought about what else it might mean.

Carter made a face.

"If we don't check in, they'll have to send help, won't they?" Masaki asked, her voice rising.

"I don't know," he said. "I'd like to think the *Boyer* wouldn't just abandon us, but . . ."

"But losing three people is nothing," Karolina finished for him.

"Part of the risks we all agreed to," Carter reminded them.

That clause about the high probability of never returning to Earth suddenly took on a new meaning. One that turned Masaki's stomach. Those kinds of clauses, the ones that were designed to make sure that her "heirs and assigns" could not sue anyone should anything happen to her had become so ubiquitous that no one really read them, or truly understood them.

Well, she was understanding them now.

"This is an important discovery," Masaki said. "Surely they wouldn't abandon us."

"They don't know what you found," Karolina pointed out. "Not unless the relay is able to transmit your message, which apparently it's not doing."

"Oh." Masaki looked at the possibly organic bit of bone or seashell or whatever it was that she'd pocketed as her personal souvenir. "Then I say we go back to the ship."

What was left unsaid was the fact that the relay could be down for a thousand reasons, including that the ship was damaged, perhaps too damaged to fly.

"The mules can illuminate the way. It won't be pleasant, but we can make it back, even at night." Carter said it as he unpacked one of the bigger guns the mules had carried.

Karolina did the same, snapping it together with so much oomph that the noises made Masaki wince.

“Do you really think we’ll need those?” Masaki asked while suddenly wishing she had become proficient with more than the little guns. “I mean, we haven’t seen anything bigger than a pigeon.”

“True,” Carter said. “Ever wonder what might have cleared out everything bigger than a pigeon though?”

“Just because the fly-by’s that found your signal didn’t find anything worth noting, doesn’t mean there’s no apex predator around here,” Karolina pointed out. “So just in case there is, it’s better to be prepared and not need these babies”—she patted the rifle again—“than to need them and not be prepared.”

Masaki didn’t argue. She also spent the first part of their trek back actively not calculating survival probabilities and telling herself that even if she did, it would all be garbage-in, garbage-out. So she worked on prime numbers. When they proved inadequately engaging she leveled up to Fibonacci primes, but they proved too distracting because she almost twisted her ankle on the uneven ground. So she switched to Einstein primes without imaginary parts.

Carter took the lead, with one of the mules at his side. The mule projected a beam of light that cut the darkness like a beacon. Karolina stayed mostly at Masaki’s side. The other mule brought up the rear, projecting light behind them.

Every once in awhile, Masaki would catch a glimpse of the night sky despite the mules’ distracting lights. One of those specks up there was the *Boyer*. And another was the Sun. As a mathematician she understood the scale of numbers better than most, but until that very moment she hadn’t truly understood the enormity of the Universe and just how indifferent it truly was.

What was the loss of three people to the *Boyer*, to the Earth, or the Universe? She wasn’t going to run the numbers. No, she was going to choose to believe that numbers were not the only thing that mattered. If they weren’t the only thing that mattered to her as a mathematician, then they couldn’t be the only thing that mattered to the people up on the *Boyer*.

It was just fear. Fear of the unknown, of the enormity of what those little scales or shells or whatever they were resting in her pocket meant, of the dots and dashes on that wall.

Everyone saved their breath for the pace Carter was setting. When any of them flagged, he’d announce a ten-minute break and call the *Yeager*. Then, when he couldn’t reach it, he’d swear under his breath, and he’d get this terrible look in his eyes that made Masaki feel guilty for bringing them all down here.

“When we get back to the *Yeager*,” Karolina said, “and find out that it’s nothing but a burned out fuse, we’re all going to laugh about this.” She drained her canteen and wiped moisture off her chin.

The Yeager doesn’t use fuses. Masaki kept the thought to herself.

“And think of the stories we’ll have to tell,” Carter said, although his tone wasn’t quite as amused as his words suggested.

He brought them to a halt and had the mules kill their lights.

“The *Yeager* is over the next hill,” he said as they hunkered down around him. “We are not going to burst into that clearing. We are going to approach it as quietly as possible. And by we, I mean me.”

Carter and Karolina exchanged nods.

“Oh, I get it,” Masaki said. “I’m the one you’re protecting.”

“Is that an objection?” Carter leveled a stern gaze at her.

“No, not really,” she admitted. “It’s your job. I get that.”

The next half hour was more nerve-wracking than Masaki had expected. Without the bright lights, the forest looked far more hostile and dangerous. Every noise made her jump. Shadows became shapes as her mind worked desperately to give them meaning.

Carter and Karolina had donned night-vision goggles. Masaki felt like she was just along for the ride as Karolina guided her in the dark. Finally, they hunkered down behind the fallen trunk

of a tree and watched as Carter made his way to the *Yeager*.

Masaki's hands were shaking the entire time. It was almost anticlimatic when he reached the *Yeager* and the ramp lowered for him like it had been waiting for his return all along, like nothing was wrong. He walked around the ship and finally raised his arm and gave the "all clear" signal.

Karolina lowered her goggles, flashed a smile. "See. Nothing to worry about."

Then why aren't you putting away your big gun, Masaki wanted to ask.

Mules at their side, Masaki and Karolina approached the ship. Between the fatigue and the adrenaline, Masaki felt like she was going to collapse, probably before she made it to the ramp.

"Everything looks fine," Carter said. He'd brought up the *Yeager's* external lights and left them on. They cut the darkness with harsh, intimidating beams. "Still no comms though. Looks like we'll have to figure that one out."

"I'll get on it," Karolina said. She put the mules in stand-down mode, and they folded their legs underneath their chassis. "We can unload them later. I'll be in the back, running a systems check."

"What do you want me to do?" Masaki asked.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to make us some coffee and sandwiches."

Masaki smiled. "Actually, coffee and sandwiches is probably all I'm up for right now."

She didn't mind, not really. The normalcy of it was, if anything, soothing, reassuring.

Masaki heard Carter calling the *Boyer* from the cockpit above as she made her way to the compartment that served as a galley.

She flipped the light on and was reaching for the panel where they stored the coffee when she caught a reflection in the polished metal and promptly let out a scream.

The eyes staring back at her went wide, the mouth below it opened in a mimicry of a scream without sound.

She turned around and backed away from the naked child squatting in the opposite corner of the galley.

The child lunged past her, scrambled along the floor and right out the door.

Stumbling, Masaki followed, not quite sure of what or whom she had seen as the child ran down the ramp to be swallowed up by the night.

* * *

Deviltree ran down the ramp and back to the tree line as fast as he could on two legs. He'd drawn two of his upper limbs down to his torso and raised two of his lower limbs upward to approximate the human form. Despite the fear and surprise, and the conflict within him, he'd maintained the right symmetry in order to allow the flux to camouflage him and complete the illusion.

Recreating himself as one of these people, these humans as they called themselves, had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. It had taken all his skill and discipline. Had it not been for the instinctual knowledge he'd assimilated from the base-pairs (so simple, that concept of pairs, of two-ness) in the keratinized protein, he wouldn't have stayed inside the sky-cutter.

He'd worked so hard to achieve the shape of a human child, to get every visible cell right, to recreate a perfect copy, that the longer he spent decoding the genetic code, the harder it had been to do what at first seemed the prudent thing—to run.

It had been so long since he'd felt an otherness that was this familiar, this fitting. Even though humans had no tree-devilness they were not like the silver-darts or like any of the creatures on this world. Within the sky-cutter (called a *Yeager*) there was a sort of rudimentary intelligence that his flux had started decoding and understanding.

Contact with the *Yeager* had opened up a bigger world for Deviltree. It had taught him that there was a larger ship up above. That this planet was not the only one with life. That these humans were more like him than not.

Finally, he could have the companionship of an Other, a unity with a creature of comparable sapience, not just sentience, something that he'd lost, oh so long ago. That's why, instead of running, he hid in the nearby trees.

Deviltree shivered, and his new body shivered too, the thing the humans called a skin, pebbling and crawling over the flux sustaining it from underneath. He willed the flux to stay contained, to restrain it from spilling forth. He wasn't sure he had the energy reserves to change again, not without having to feed. And he didn't want to let the flux feed either.

Even his brief proximity to one of the humans had tempted him. He had been ready to run, to keep the flux from feeding on them, even before the human screamed. And when she had, he'd tried to approximate the sound, but couldn't. His "mouth" could mimic the gesture, but he didn't actually have the internal organ the humans used to speak, those things they called vocal cords.

He created a reasonable facsimile of these cords as he waited, tapping into the decoded knowledge the keratinized protein had imparted. He pushed air through the cords, making them vibrate. But that wouldn't be enough. It wasn't just noises he'd have to make. It was specific noises.

Time. He needed more time to decode the noises and their patterns and rhythms. The flux was multiplying within him, eagerly anticipating more information, building the sense of anticipation that was already making him reconsider allowing it to feed.

* * *

"What the hell are you screaming about?" Carter asked as he dropped down from the cockpit with a thud. Karolina poked her head up from the deck below.

Masaki had her hand to her chest as she stood by the ramp. She was shaking like a leaf. The words recounting what she had seen rushed out of her between gasps, and she could tell by the skeptical looks on her companions' faces that they didn't believe her.

"I know what I saw," she said defensively.

"A child?" Karolina asked. "A human child?"

"Is there any other kind?" Masaki said.

"I think your imagination is running away with you," Carter said as he reactivated the mules and sent them down the ramp. "There is no sign of forced entry and the only way anyone could have gotten into the *Yeager* is via hacking. And not just any hacking. Quantum decryption type of hacking."

"I'm aware of what it would take," Masaki said. Boy, was she! She didn't even want to think about it. "But I know what I saw."

"Well, we can settle it right now." Irritation had slipped into Carter's voice. "Let's see what the mules pick up."

The mules had barely made their way down the ramp when Carter raised it, which gave Masaki at least a bit of validation. If he truly thought it was just her imagination, he would have left the ramp down.

Masaki and Karolina followed Carter up to the cockpit. The heads-up display came to life as he tapped in commands. It took the mules less than a minute to find the heat source in the tree line.

Carter aimed their sensors at the creature and an image formed.

"Well, I'll be damned," Carter said.

"How? How is this possible?" Karolina said. She'd been standing and she lowered herself into the pilot's chair with a thud.

"Another crash maybe," Masaki said. "A lone survivor."

"Could this be who made your marks in the stone?" Carter asked.

"Maybe. I mean, I'm no child development expert, but he looks to be about seven or eight. But I have no idea what he used to make the marks as deep and—"

"Masa—" Karolina said.

"Maybe there was another survivor," Carter suggested. "An adult or something. Either way—"

"That doesn't explain why it's base eight," Masaki insisted.

"Masaki!"

Both of them glanced at Karolina who looked like she had just seen a ghost. She was staring at the blinking child on the screen and tears were rolling down her face.

"What's wrong?" Masaki asked, feeling foolish.

"That is the spitting image of my little brother," Karolina said.

"You're imagining things," Carter said. "We're all tired, stressed."

Karolina worked the controls and magnified the image. The child's mouth was moving like he was trying to talk. She wiped at her eyes and then looked away.

"Where is your brother now?" Masaki didn't think that he'd been lost in a crash.

"Died about twenty years ago. I have a picture of him and a lock of his hair tucked in my gobag. I don't go anywhere without them. Not even on missions. I just didn't want to haul them with me on our little camping trip, so I left them behind."

"This is getting too weird," Masaki said. "Maybe there's something on the planet making us hallucinate."

"The mules aren't hallucinating," Carter said. "For all of us to be hallucinating the same holographic image from the mules, now that would be something."

"I can't argue with that," Masaki admitted. "No matter how much I want to."

"What now?" Karolina asked.

"Our comms are still down," Carter said. "But the rest of our systems are fine. We can take off, go back to the *Boyer*. Let the engineers figure out why the comms died."

"I don't think we should leave. It"—reluctantly Karolina glanced at the child in the image—"whatever it is, we need to figure out why it's here. We need to figure out if it's human."

"And if it's not human," Masaki said, "then we have to figure out if we should take it up to the *Boyer*. We can't just leave it."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Carter said.

"So what's next?" Karolina asked.

"Why are you asking me?" Masaki said.

"Because you're the scientist." Carter was looking at her like someone who was conducting a test, and for a second Masaki had the insane thought that this entire thing might just have been something contrived for those very reasons.

She was about to crack a joke about it, but Karolina gasped.

The child was coming into the clearing, slowly approaching the *Yeager*.

"He looks so much like Zak." Karolina gulped. "So much like him, it's uncanny."

"I'm going out there," Masaki declared. She wasn't sure where her sudden attack of courage was coming from, but she wasn't going to question it, because once it faded she wasn't sure what she would do. Run and hide maybe.

She could see the headlines now: Idiot mathematician screws up first contact.

"I'll cover you," Carter said. "Karolina, stay here. If anything goes wrong, get out of here. Get back to the *Boyer*. Our best chance is in you getting back and reporting what happened. That's an order."

* * *

Deviltree wasn't sure how much longer he could contain the flux. The particles were telling him in their own way that there was danger nearby. He couldn't be certain if it was from the *Yeager*-thing or the humans inside or something else. Fear was rising inside him, a growing sense of the fact that the *Yeager*-thing might and could leave, and that he'd be alone again.

He strode forward, taking cautious steps, getting used to the sensation of how the rocks and twigs felt underneath his new feet, how the breeze felt along his human skin, how it ruffled the keratinized protein fibers growing out of his human head.

The mule-things kept their distance and continued sending pulses of electromagnetic energy at him. He had considered generating his own energy pulses, masking or distorting the data so that they could only send back the information he wanted them to send back, but rejected the idea. His understanding of the humans' electromagnetic language was unlikely to be up to the task.

Unlike the silver-darts, the eight-legs, or the creatures that hunted him, these humans were intelligent. They could tell that he wasn't one of them, yet they had not attacked him.

It was hope.
His only hope.

* * *

Stomach tight, tremors threatening, Masaki followed Carter down the ramp and overtook him.

“Let me go first,” she said with a courage she didn’t feel. What she actually wanted to do was run back into the ship and throw up. “And whatever happens, don’t shoot it.”

He cast her a sideways look and made a noncommittal grunt.

“I don’t think it wants to kill us,” Masaki said.

“No, it just pretends it’s one of us, as it lures us out of the ship.”

“Then why not pretend it’s a big, burly man like you?” Masaki asked. “Why not turn into something big and nasty so we’d be afraid of it?”

“Who says it won’t?” Nevertheless, he fell behind.

She approached the “child” slowly. He had come out of the tree line and stopped a quarter of the way, and there was something about the way he was shifting his weight that looked very much like indecision.

He looked not just human, but artificial, like a doll. The closer they came, the clearer the “perfection” of it became, the more uneasy she felt. It reminded her of the 3D computer animations of the early twenty-first century, where the computer generated images elicited revulsion instead of empathy, the so-called “uncanny valley” of anthropomorphism.

Did a computer, or something with incredible computing power create this disguise, this image? And why was she about to meet it, talk to it?

Because that’s why we’re here. That’s what we came out here to do.

They reached the halfway point, and she came to a stop in order to give the child a chance to run.

“What now?” Carter asked. He had lowered his rifle. It was pointing down at the ground.

“Let me get closer. Stay here.”

He looked around as if surveying the clearing. “All right, but just so you know, I will fire on it if it threatens you.”

How does one respond to that? Thank you? Maybe.

It took her longer than it should have, but she moved forward, debating whether or not a smile might be misinterpreted. All the first contact protocols she’d crammed to pass the right tests had been forgotten, shoved into short-term memory because the chances of her being the one to need them had been so small.

Wind ruffled the child’s blond hair as it shone in the light cast by the mules. Every hair was perfect, like it had never seen sun or been subjected to chemicals or the rough treatment of a brush. Same with the child’s face. It had never been sunburned or touched by wind or even slept upon—it was that pristine.

It might have gotten the image of Karolina’s brother from a picture, but it had none of the imperfections in that picture. A good datum to file away. She wished she had a way to make an actual note about it.

She reached out with her right hand. It was shaking, but she couldn’t help it.

“My name is Masaki. We are from Earth.”

Sure, Masaki. It undoubtedly speaks English.

This was not how it was supposed to happen. There should have been a team of people who’d studied things, planned things, who knew what they were doing. And Masaki Fairley, apprentice mathematician, third class, United Earth Federation Starship *Korbimian Boyer*, might just be part of that team if she got everyone’s coffee orders right.

The child raised his left hand, mirroring her motion. There was no expression on his face, and he didn’t even blink.

That uncanny valley effect went from five to a full blown ten, making Masaki’s skin crawl. She didn’t just feel her skin pebbling, she saw it, the hairs raising on her wrist and forearm.

The child’s forearm followed suit, mimicking the goosebumps.

ANALOG

Masaki tore her gaze from his hand and met his. Nothing in the eyes. No recognition, no emotion, no intelligence. Uncanny just rose to a twelve, maybe a thirteen.

"I'm not seeing the real you, am I?" She thought she'd said it only to herself, but apparently not.

The child pulled his hand back and spread out his arms, holding them at about chest level, palms facing each other.

Something that might have been mist but probably wasn't, flowed out of his palm, making a ribbon of color. The ribbon shimmered and pulsed.

One pulse. Pause.

Three pulses. Pause.

Five.

Seven.

Nine.

It sped up, and she lost the ability to resolve the pulses into distinct groups, distinct . . .

"Primes," she whispered and nodded as if expecting the child to understand her. "Yes, primes. I understand."

She wished she had something, a flashlight maybe.

The pulses stopped, and the child lowered his hands to his sides.

She raised her own, palms facing outward, and curled her fingers into fists.

Raised one finger. Pause.

Three fingers. Pause.

Five, seven, nine.

No, not nine.

She curled the thumbs of her hands down so she was holding up only eight fingers, then began again—one, three, five, seven. For the nine, she raised eight fingers, then lowered her hands slightly and popped up with only one finger extended. Base-ten nine was eleven to a base-eight creature, so . . .

She held her breath.

Started over: one, three, five, seven, eight and one, eight and three.

Breathe, Masaki, breathe.

The clearing around them, the forest around it, the whole planet seemed to vanish. It was just her and the child, so close she should have been able to feel his breath.

The mist between the child's fingers sparkled like glitter, forming into shapes, darting back and forth between his hands like living sand. Something that looked like the *Yeager* formed in the cup of his left hand. A vaguely human form appeared in the right. Waves flowed back and forth between them, nodes becoming anti-nodes, the amplitude and frequency changing so fast she couldn't understand what was being conveyed.

The closest thing to what she was seeing, assuming she wasn't losing her mind, were simulations of what encryption in a quantum computer would look like. An impossible thing if she really thought about it.

Later. Figure it out later.

The standing waves dissolved and then reformed into a double helix, the strands twisting upon themselves.

"DNA?" she said, breathless.

The child stepped back, the helix broke apart, reformed. Things moved along the helix, like bugs crawling on a twisting ladder. They flashed, swarmed, dissolved, and coalesced into coherent forms once again.

Too fast. You're going too fast, she wanted to shout at him.

Did it want her DNA? Did it want to touch her?

She put her left hand out, touched the fingertips of that hand to the ones on the right, hoping to convey the intent to touch.

"Masaki . . ." Carter's voice vibrated with warning.

Once again she touched her fingertips together and then thrust out her right hand so it was

between the gap of the child's hands. She wanted him to touch her.

Smart. You're smart. I know you're smart. Please be smart.

But the child was still, almost like a statue. It definitely wasn't breathing.

In an attempt to make it a less threatening appendage, she folded the fingers of her right hand, all except her forefinger and thrust it out a bit more.

The child mimicked the motion, and their fingertips almost touched.

Would have touched.

The lights that the mules had been casting on them swung in an arc to the sound of screeching metal. Behind her, Carter fired his gun into the darkness. A darkness that moved. She caught a glimpse of a crushed mule an instant before its light went out. More gunfire. The other mule flying into the trees, legs flailing, like it had been tossed.

Something grabbed her wrist. The child. He had her wrist, was looking at her with his doll eyes, the gaze fixed instead of darting between her and the flickering lights. The child pulled her down to the ground, rolled over her, and sprang up, to face a creature so black that it was like a giant silhouette above them.

A silhouette that looked like a bull elephant with too many limbs, too many trunks. It raised its forelimbs like it was about to squash the child.

Masaki screamed. She didn't mean to. It just happened. She slapped her hands over her mouth, held them there, frozen in place.

Carter. Where was Carter?

The elephantine monster pivoted its enormous torso toward her. She scrambled backwards, her legs too unsteady to support her.

I'm going to die.

She had come all this way and she was going to die.

The child moved, placing himself between the monster and her and as he did, his skin shimmered, turning from pale to black. Not a human black, but dark like the monster, like a thing that didn't reflect light. Its arms and legs turned and twisted as it moved, no longer human, but elephant-like.

The alien was mimicking the attacking monster, or at least a smaller version of it.

The monster stopped in its tracks, lowered its head, sniffed uncertainly. And it was in that moment that the shapeshifter—the thing that had looked so much like a human child—struck. It plunged a saber-like forelimb into the monster's torso. The black of its camouflage turned into all the colors of a rainbow, flowed away from the shapeshifter, into the monster, lighting it up from the inside, pouring through its mouth, its eyes, its flailing trunks.

As the rainbow flowed from the shapeshifter, it left behind something that looked like a giant stickbug. Eight limbs, stiff like the branches of a tree. It was covered in triangular scales edged in red. They looked just like the "seashells" she had found. It had segmented branch-like "fingers," four on each of its upper limbs. The stickbug swiveled its head so it looked almost directly back at her with four compound eyes. Those were the eyes that really saw her, not the human eyes it had mimicked. And its mouth—a slash but vertical, glowed red.

The elephantine monster collapsed, and the stickbug pulled the appendage it had used to stab it from the body. Color sparked and flowed between the shapeshifter and the monster, a cloud of particles that swirled over the tree-like body first like a cloak, then like flesh. It settled around him, but made no attempt to look human again.

It was making its way back to her.

Masaki pushed up, stumbled, fell back down.

Heart beating like it was going to burst out of her chest, she crawled away.

A shot rang out, making her turn.

Karolina was at the bottom of the ramp, her rifle against her shoulder.

Another shot rang out, hit the shapeshifter, making the cloud of particles ripple as it passed through what would have been the chest on a human.

"No," Masaki shouted, getting her feet under her. "Karolina, stop!"

* * *

His flux had tried to tell Deviltree that there was danger and that it was close, but he'd ignored it. He'd thought that the flux was agitated and angry because of the humans, of the mule-things, the *Yeager*. Deviltree simply hadn't thought that a nightstalker could be nearby.

He'd cleared out the nightstalkers three eights of years ago, killed or chased them all off, established himself as the apex predator for this territory.

Now that his flux had fed on the nightstalker's waning life, it was content and returned to him willingly.

He turned to the she-who-had-tried-to-touch-him. The bioelectrical signals flowing from her were frenzied, confusing. It would be some time before he understood the complexity of those signals, but it was reasonable to assume that she was afraid. The nightstalker scared *him*. It probably had the same effect on other intelligent creatures, even ones with mule-things, and *Yeagers*.

Deviltree let her see his true form and was saddened when she moved away from him. Saddened, but not surprised.

Things were coming back to him now, things that had faded with the planet's revolutions. With lack of contact and with being able to sample only less intelligent beings.

The flux flowed back over him, information flowing along their connection, billions of billions of bits of data, fortified by finishing off the nightstalker. What an efficient killing machine they were, he and his flux. One to kill the body. The other to decode the biochemical and electromagnetic signals that were the essence of life.

He heard the other human as she exited the *Yeager*. He also heard the sound made by the metal that struck the small drum of chemicals inside her weapon. And the explosion that followed. It was fire, but a very small amount, nothing that would destroy the flux, not now that it was fortified and could flow out of the way.

The explosion imparted another fire, also contained, within the weapon itself. The fire expanded, pushing another piece of metal forward. He could make out the waves of compressed air as it spun down the weapon's barrel, as it left it, as it cut through the air.

The wavefront in front of it told him it would impact the flux, but not his thorax or any part of his true body. He needed to let them—these humans—know that their weapons could not hurt him. Maybe then they could get back to what they had started—communicating.

He knew now what he needed to do. He needed to show them that he was not a threat. That he was not of this world, not like the nightstalker, or the eight-legs. He needed their help. Perhaps they could help him figure out how he had gotten here.

The she-who-had-tried-to-touch-him made a loud sound and ran toward the she-with-the-weapon and placed herself between the weapon and Deviltree.

* * *

Masaki kept herself between Karolina and the shapeshifting stickbug. The barrel of the rifle wavered, then lowered to reveal Karolina's shocked face.

"Carter's dead," Karolina said.

"I know. The other creature killed him, not this one." Masaki extended her hand. "Give me the rifle."

Karolina didn't give her the rifle, but she did lower it and clicked on the safety. She looked out over the clearing, her gaze finally coming to rest on the shapeshifter. It hadn't changed back to a child, but was very still, its dark gray scales with their red edges making it look like a tree that bled.

"What is it?" Karolina asked. "Is that the thing that looked like . . . like . . . Zak?"

"Yes."

"What are we going to do now?"

Why are you asking me? Masaki wanted to shout. She grabbed her insecurity by the throat and stuffed it into a deep, dark place, along with her doubts.

You're the scientist. You're in charge now.

"I want you to fly back to the *Boyer*," Masaki said. "Tell them what happened."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to stay here."

“With that thing?” Karolina asked, making a face. “Why?”

“We’ve just made first contact, Karolina. The only way to get that information to the *Boyer* is for you to take it back. And I’m not leaving the . . . alien.”

“Why not? We could come back for it. Find it if it runs and hides. The *Boyer* will change course now. They’ll have no choice, once they know.”

“It’s intelligent. It saved my life. And it doesn’t want to be alone.”

“How do you know that?”

“Gut feeling,” Masaki admitted. In truth she hadn’t been sure that was the case until she’d spoken the words. And it was a good reason. Much better than not wanting to go back because for once in her life she had done something important, and Carter had died and she didn’t want it to be in vain.

“Since when do scientist go by gut feeling? Aren’t you all supposed to be about logic?” Karolina’s voice had that broken, near-tears edge to it.

Yes, but we’re still . . . human.

“I have a theory,” Masaki said instead.

“Care to share it?”

“Only if you promise not to repeat it. At least not until I’ve had a chance to confirm some of my assumptions.”

“All right.” It was guarded, the way Karolina said it, but it would have to do.

Masaki could feel her adrenaline rush waning, and when it did, Carter’s death was going to hit her like a ton of bricks, and she was going to break down and sob like a little girl. She had minutes, if that.

“I think that the stickbug isn’t native to this world,” she said, letting her intellect bully her emotions into the background. “I think that it’s an alien that broke our quantum encryption to get into the *Yeager*. It damaged something. That’s probably why we lost comms. I think that alien, or the sparkly mist it uses—yeah, I know it sounds crazy—somehow used the DNA from your brother’s hair to create a facsimile of him. I think it camouflages itself as the offspring of anything it views as a threat. Genius really.”

“That’s creepy, Masaki. Why would you want to be alone with it? It’ll be days before anyone can come back for you.” Karolina’s expression was wavering between hard and torn. She too was on the edge, that much was clear.

“Because it’s not mimicking a human child now.”

“You willing to bet your life on it not seeing us—you—as a threat?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

Now that Masaki was working the problem as a mathematician, as an equation with variables to solve for, she was less afraid. The possibility of a creature that could hack quantum encryption suggested a quantum-entangled lifeform. It was dizzying to think of the number of calculations that the stickbug must have performed to decode, to reverse engineer human DNA, something that it probably had never encountered before.

The implications were staggering, and she would never forgive herself if she didn’t do everything within her power to make the alien feel safe, to understand it, to connect with it.

It looked so very much alone. Those tally marks on the rock suddenly made sense. If she’d been marooned on an alien world, she too would have tallied up the passing years. And there had been so many of them. The stickbug had been here a long time. Perhaps centuries.

That it had remained sane enough to reach out to them, to try to make contact and connect, that was something that she could not simply ignore.

She could not and call herself human.

Monalisa’s writing career really began when she taught herself English by reading and translating Heinlein juveniles at the public library. After she devoured the juvenile section, she moved on to the grown-up books.

She made her first professional sale to Kristine Katherine Rusch, a short story called

ANALOG

“Pretending to Sleep,” but her first published work was Bellona’s Gift in Terra Nova. She’s self-published novels and novellas in her Ravages of Honor epic space opera series. Her short stories have been published in Fantastic Hope, The Founder Effect, World Breakers, Robosoldiers, and The Ross 248 Project.

While space opera is her favorite genre to write, she considers herself genre-fluid and has written in several speculative subgenres, Romance, and Literature.

She is currently working on sequels, both to Threading the Needle and in her Ravages of Honor series.

Monalisa graduated from ASU with dreams of becoming an astrophysicist. Instead she designed and tested semiconductors, worked on an engineering master’s degree, and then tackled the hardest job on Earth—motherhood. When her kids were old enough to go to school she kept herself busy by doing volunteer work at a hospital and was recruited to run radiation oncology and nuclear medicine research programs.