

Small Creatures

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“You’re an interesting species. An interesting mix. You’re capable of such beautiful dreams, and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you’re not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we’ve found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other.”

– From *Contact* by Carl Sagan

With a twist of the head, Padar rolled out a question towards those seated. “What do they call themselves again?”

“Humans,” Rakoron answered with little emotion.

Padar nodded. “Hue–*mans*.” The word felt strange.

Turning back, he soaked up the sight of their world outside. Thin plumes of smoke and exhaust bellowed from numerous towers of varying height. Factories stretched midway towards the horizon. Piers jutting into a wide, gray river sat adjacent the production plants. The waterway stretched to the sea beyond.

Tamglis recognized the expression on Padar’s face, staring out the broad window: the longing eyes and cocked, downcast head. No different from countless other times, speaking of bygone days, eyeing the same view. How open fields sat there once, covered in peach colored leleps. Clutches of sici sprouted up here and there, breaking the monotony. Long ago. Those carefree days seared into the mind when one could ignore the future because the now seemed so clear. So perfect. Everything has changed now. Progress had a price. It still had a price. Now more than ever with the new *mayeso*. All this produced one burning thought: What will *they* cost us? These humans.

Remaining quiet, Tamglis sat behind Rakoron and two others. Adjacent was another, hushed and taking notes. All sat in plush chairs. Fear did not radiate from any of them. No. It was not fear. Tamglis perceived only a sense of foreboding. Rakoron, eyeing documents drawn up for the meeting, spoke. “Yes. Come from a place called Earth...” The word hung in the air.

“Another world, Paz,” Accandish said, addressing Padar by the title society conferred upon him. “Hard to imagine... another world.”

Rakoron twisted round. “Not so hard. Since a Yedat could look into an eyescale, the Learned believed other worlds exist around other *ca*. And could be livable if they do.” Back to Padar. “These humans are proof.”

Padar took a few, small steps towards the group, pointing one finger upward. “And their ship... vessel circling ours... contain them from this Earth? What brought them here?”

“Yes, Paz.” Rakoron returned to the notes. “Apparently, this Earth was to be destroyed by what they called a... a *new-tron star*.”

“Another funny word!” Accandish spouted.

“And that is?” Padar asked.

Rakoron jerked to the left. “Forcaut?”

The Yedat seated there shuffled. Drawing a deep breath sent a wheezing sound through the room. “What our Learned call a *kyru-ca*. In human speak they have a similar phrase— *dark light* or *dark star*. ” Enunciating the word, Padar’s confused expression begged for more. “Only a theory. For us so far. These humans not only have proof of them, but encountered one. It passed close enough to their Earth to destroy the entire planet.”

“A whole planet? How is this possible—” Accandish then stopped. “Forgive me, Paz.”

“Did not the ancients believe a great serpent spat out Canyeda as it leaped from one pashnum to another? And that it would return to consume its creation?” Padar asked.

Tamglis remembered those stories, knowing Padar stopped believing them ages ago. Now the time came to reconsider such notions, if not perpetrated by imaginary creatures. Real science was far scarier.

Forcaut continued. “You see, as Learned believe, *kyruca* is nothing more than a *ca* — like our own— that has died, burning its fuel, collapsing onto itself.” Forcaut illustrate the point

with dancing hands. “Until it is only the size of a city... or smaller. But the *oughtcan* it possesses is immense pulling everything towards it, and —according to theories— anything coming too close would be ripped apart by such force. Not even light can escape.”

Padar listened with intent. Tamglis recognized that look as well: he got the point without asking for details. Like all the others, Tamglis digested the grim description. With arms wrapped behind, their Paz paced towards a large desk, one handmade from imported *feruma* wood.

Accandish shuffled in the chair and spoke. Tamglis recognized how the silence and lack of opinions weighted upon Accandish. Best to speak before someone has something more interesting to bring up. “If I may, Paz,” he began, “they picked a rather odd time to show up.”

Padar stopped and turned. “Why here? Why us?”

Tamglis and everyone else turned to Forcaut. Their eyes piled on like weights. “From what Rakoron and I learned, the humans constructed four...”

“Yes. Four,” Rakoron confirmed.

“Four massive vessels, like that here, to take up as many from the world they could. And as I understand, each sent in a different direction.”

Padar nodded. “And how many *hue-mans* where they? On this... Earth?”

Forcaut shrugged. “They were not specific. But from what they suggested— billions.”

“And how many of them are in this ship now?” Accandish all but demanded.

Rakoron answered. “Eight hundred and five—”

“And we must keep in mind, Paz,” Forcaut added, “some of these are descendants of those who lived on this Earth. Others were in a state of sleep and reawakened. They have traveled for three and one half ages.”

“Descendants!” Accandish looked up, giving Padar a spurning glance. “I wonder how long they have been gone. And how could they live, eat, *breath!*”

“I suspect,” Padar began, “like our ships beneath the seas or high altitude flyers. Boebuss developed one... and began production when the war ended. Unlike earlier models, they are completely self-housed from the elements at such heights. We made the large bored auto rifles for them right here... did we not Accandish?”

“Yes, Paz. And had the Sialvast not wanted a truce, these would have bombed their cities and those of their allies to rubble!”

Padar stood quiet for a moment. A wave of melancholy sprang from the Paz, hitting Tamglis, bringing back memories of all the other times the subject of the war came up. Padar then paced towards a long, dark table stretched along the wall. There upon sat various honors and status awards presented Paz Padarzoksziv and family over time. Amid sat a picture with four stern faced figures dressed in similar uniforms. The simple frame around the young faces nowhere near ornate as those adorning other photos and affirmations. Grippled by silence, no one spoke. He stopped in front of the table and hoisted the photo with genteel care.

Rakoron, Forcaut and Accandish exchanged looks, but said nothing. Tamglis caught Accandish’s spurring, sympathetic glance. The remorse pouring from him was genuine.

Padar broke the silence, not looking up from the photo. “You said... Accandish... they picked an unusual time to show up.”

He swung back around. “Yes, Paz.”

“I wonder if they will understand why we fought. It does not mean we are... what is the speak...”

Not even Tamglis ventured an answer. Despite the urge, Accandish slouched in the chair. Padar sat the photo back, then moved without a word back towards the desk. Behind it sat a high backed, cushioned chair, similar in design. Behind this, through the large window, the sky took on a mauve hue.

“Do you wish to go over the recommendations of the Assembly of Nations?” Rakoron asked, pointing at two bounded reports of bluish paper upon Forcaut’s lap. The liver colored top page held the High Seal of the Allslat.

Padar sat. The chair spewed a grunting noise. “No.” Hissing in a high tone, gesturing at the desktop, “Place them here. I must leave soon and prepare for the reception tonight at the Goldvoine. Members of the Allslat will be there. I am certain those recommendations and what to do with the hue-*mans* will be the speak of the night.”

“Yes, Paz” sprang from those as they arose. Forcaut sat down the documents and filed out with the others. Only when the door closed behind them did Tamglis stand. He took in the austere, but blank look, face held high. Two long, smooth brows began at a small, rounded beak just above the mouth. They ran in a v-shape up and along the face, disappearing behind the head. No short quills sprouted from them like the brows of males doing all the talking. Large, round eyes aside each remained fixed upon him. Light from their sun moving lower each moment began covering the room. The orange tint struck her face, giving the eyes a bluish tint. A simple, solid colored scarf tied into a loose knot hung around the neck.

Walking towards the back wall, the scarf caressed gently her neck with each step. Once there, grasping the two handles upon the flush doors and swinging them open exposed multiple shelves. “Some water?” she asked. Her voice shuffled through the room.

A squeaking noise from his twisting chair came before the answer. “Yes. But tinge it with *saxos*.”

“Of course.”

From one shelf an ornate brownish cup. From another a bottle of clear liquid. With gentle care, she poured a small amount into the cup, swirling to coat the inside. Finally, clear water from a small tap.

Gliding back towards Padar with cup in hand, a confession was in order. “I felt a spot of guilt being there with them.”

“Guilt? With the *hue-mans*?” Padar asked with confusion. Taking the cup, a retort. “A unique honor to be there. One of the few non-Allslat or Naabat.”

“They were disappointed you did not come. And surprised you sent me with Rakoron and Forcaut. Several of the *cyzezar* send their regards.”

Swirling the cup, the liquids remixed. “I had my reasons. And I am sure those *recommendations* will cover everything. Best to send you there. Prepare for the future.” Glancing up, uncomfortable eyes stared back. A sip of the highly alcoholic *saxos* not only wrought a benign stimulation, but clamped down the dower emotions. “So tell me, my *ninsama*... tell me about these people? What did you feel? You can feel them, like us? Or is it different?”

Tamglis sought the right answer. “I can. They have a different... feel but not much different from us.”

“I did fear it might overwhelm you. Hurt you.”

Rubbing hands together, the answer came. “The humans were no doubt excited, glad to finally discover a place with life. Settle down maybe. I did not understand all the science and

engineer speak, but I sensed they can go no further. The ship is... tired? But then... oddly... I felt disappointment.”

“With us.” A statement more than a question.

“My only words—” She groped for the right ones. “They expected something... not better... advanced?” Padar leaned back, soaking in the words. “They were nice and pleasant. The suits they wore to protect themselves made conversation odd—”

“Yes. I remember the photos in the gazettes.”

“But beyond their skin the fact we did not have... *space flight*... advanced calculating machines... saddened them. So too that we... have many different speak across Canyeda. When a Naabat convert our speak into another for *mayeso* from beyond our Nations... this saddened them too. They never said it. I felt it.”

“What did they think they would find? Some race of advanced beings with no problems other than how to lift ourselves off Canyeda and venture beyond. Devoid of problems like hunger and poverty, with no other pastime save devotion to pure science? All speaking one language wearing the same clothes? A mystical caste of advanced beings unified by an unseen, omnipotent force and a world full of inanimate machines to assist them? We are not still living in holes. I remember when young we did not have freeze boxes for food, medicines for those boil plagues and most could not afford a *cosfantob*, depending instead on a cart drawn by some unfortunate beast. But today...” Gazing out the window brought pride. “Look at what we have done. Your world is much better. Look at how far I came from just a small store...” His pride fell away. Another drink. “Yes. All that had price. But now... now, these factories produce modern conveniences. They must have discovered about the war, our arms factories, the uneasy ‘peace’ we live under. Think us *pondish*— without culture or structure.”

“It appears they do not have such conflict. They have harmony among the different types of humans.”

Padar did not turn from the window. “We can boast no such accord.”

“I also sensed fear.”

“Of us.” Another sip.

How to answer that. Staring at the floor for a few moments, the answer came. “No. Not us... really. Of tomorrow. The future.”

Padar glanced over the factories. “Such industry these *mayeso* once had on this Earth to create such vessels. Travel the void for that long.” Turning back. “You need not worry about them for now. In a *cecuri* but one you will finish your studies at the Exium academy. Even as our only remaining offspring... our one and only *ninsa*... Jukpid and I expect them to give you no special treatment.” The photo on the shelf drew their attention. “You will inherit the Zoks legacy of the Ziv line. All I have built.”

“That will not happen for many ages.”

“Perhaps.” He turned back. “You are a special person. Not just to your Jukpid and I. Despite the burden, your gift will take you far. And to our advantage. Now more so with these hue-*mans*.”

“The Exium has been much different schooling. A big change for me. I only hope...”

Padar finished the drink. “You are doing fine. Like our new guest. From what I have seen they can adapt.”

“Great change is something humans fear most, I do think.”

“They will learn.” A grimace. “So will we.”

Adari trudged down the curved hallway. His eyes glued to the floor. He neither lagged along nor hurried through the ship, keeping pace with his shadow waxing and waning upon the deck. Every few steps he'd glance at the clean, white walls on either side, lit by the same soft lights casting his quiet silhouette. Now and then, gaps along the walls broke the monotony: electrical conduits heading up and down, clear tubes carrying invisible gas from one level to the next, some labeled O<sub>2</sub>, others N<sub>2</sub>, sturdy pipes bearing the bold word WASTE. Doors here and there led to various rooms. One sat next to a large window facing inboard. There he paused, glancing in.

He watched the two people inside. Both wore the same clean, simple light blue clothes. One stood on either side of a large box lying flat, no different from all the others lining both sides of the room. Two arms dead center elevated them above the floor. A throng of wires and tubes sprang from each. Clustered into a tight bundle, they lead to the overhead. A look to the right: pressure door to the next section sat open. The room adjacent held rows of the same wired-up boxes sitting just as motionless. A glance to the left: the view no different along the rounded hull. Looking back, the two rotated the box upright, exposing a clear window covering the upper half. He couldn't tell if the occupant was male or female. The unknown person was strapped in, head and body encased within a white, skintight suit. Hints of condensation dotted the glass. Embedded below the clear pane was a monitor screen and small keypad. Fixated on the unknown, silent person within, he reached for his left arm, caressing the bicep just above the elbow.

As quickly as the sight grabbed his attention, he turned away. The journey continued.

Down the hall lay another large window. This one faced outboard and held a different sight. Again he stopped. Leaning over and staring, he didn't focus on the world below. Instead,

the reflection painted upon the thick plexiglass seized his attention. He looked over his hair, holding that ever so slight wave. The emerald eyes. The fuzz along chin and cheeks.

“Not bad for a two-hundred year old man.”

Adari turned at the familiar, sing-song east African voice. He stiffened up. “Two-hundred and nine,” he said. “Biologically... late twenties.”

Tehope smiled, moving next to him, sharing his view of the outside. Gray oceans and reddish patches dotted the green and brown landscapes beneath light purple clouds. All moved beneath the rotating ship. “The proteins derived from those bacterium back on Earth were only meant to slow down metabolism. Sub-zero temperatures did the rest.”

“*Planococcus halocryophilus*.” Adari began, staring outboard. “*Plano*, derived from Latin *planus*— flat. *Coccus*— round shaped bacterium. *Halo*— luminous circle. *Cryo*, from Greek *Kruos*— frost, extreme cold. *Philous*— liking, attracted. Round, flat shaped bacteria that likes the cold.”

“Proteins modified from those microbes started as protection against frostbite, but became vital for adapting humans to hibernation. Of course, reviving everyone now and then was also necessary for normal, human development. Although, confined here for so long is anything but normal.”

“I saw the techs flipping— I mean... rotating the...” Adari looked back out the window. “I like the awake times. Can read... study...” Crossing his arms, he stroked each bicep.

“Still don’t like all those needles. Don’t know anyone who does.”

“I know I was running late. I should a hurried.”

“Don’t fret over it Adari. I knew you were coming. Plus, it gave me an excuse to stretch my legs.” Adari saw Tehope’s reflection as he stepped up to the window, his head cocked to the

left. “Their Arctic areas are more extensive.” Noting the same gray-white cap covering the northern pole, Adari said nothing. “Their sun isn’t as bright as ours was. I suspect they have similar microbes swimming around some frozen lake, possessing the same bacteria, allowing them to survive and thrive in water so cold it would kill a human being. Or in their case, a Yedat.”

“Biology is your field.”

“And yours?” Tehope asked. Adari felt his stare. He didn’t answer, eyes dropping and lips curling downward. A hand met his shoulder. “You’re going to do fine.”

The warm, comforting touch through the thin, recycled cotton-paper shirt gave him focus. “When do you go down?”

Tehope swung each hand behind him. “No time soon. Still need to bring other groups out of tardastasis. Like yours.”

Adari mumbled. “*Tardus*— slow sluggish. *Stasis*— slowing or stoppage of the normal flow of a bodily fluid.” A pause, then he continued. “I heard there’s problems with coming to and from the surface.”

Tehope nodded. “The indigenous population struggled accommodating our shuttle bringing back the initial landing team last year. Our resources are geared towards moving from ship to surface. Not so much the other way around.”

Adari nodded. “Like they planned way back when. Of course, was just a kid. Didn’t understand all that.”

“There were many plans back then. Arriving at a planet already spoken for wasn’t one of them. Then again, what lay around Epsilon Eridani here was always an educated mystery.”

“I remember. Guess no one really thought E Eri Alpha down there would even exist.”

“Dubious that intelligent life as far along as the Yedat sprang up near such a young star. Then again, life springs up where it wants to, when it wants to. Not where it has to. But come. We’ll leave that little mystery to planetary geologist.” A gesture to the left. The two then moved down the narrow, curving walkway.

“Cataloging the Bocanodat language is quite the feat,” Tehope said.

“The literature they brought up and a... radio transmissions have helped a lot.”

“I know you haven’t been compiling data very long, but what do you find most interesting about their language so far?”

“The Bocanodat? That’s the one I’m focused on now.” Adari kept his eyes on the clean, rounding floor. “They don’t use spaces or pauses in their formal names. They are one long string indicating given name, their tribal or nationality name, and tribal branch. Tribe isn’t an accurate term, but our only equivalent. And they don’t have the words ‘mother’ or ‘father.’”

“Oh?”

“They use their given names.”

Tehope nodded. “And their children?”

“*Ninsa* is the root word meaning child, offspring. The suffix *ma* indicating female – feminine. Suffix *ah* for male– masculine. But they also have the connotation of possession if stress is put on the suffix. *Ninsa-ma*... my daughter. *Ninsa-ah*... my son.”

“Do you find it strange they have those, but not ones indicating their parents?”

“Their term for parents is like our word progenitor with no distinction between male or female.” A shrug. “But strange? Everything’s strange now. For a while.” The duo paced for a few more steps. “Also been looking at the *Templiason* language. They use symbols for words. Pictographs is the correct term—”

“Focus on the Bocans, Adari. They're our hosts.”

He nodded.

Passing a door labeled ‘Mech Rm 4’ Tehope spoke. “At least we were able to manufacture suitable replacement bulbs with their help. One group... the Zoksziv Company I think... has been a great help. Not as efficient, but being close to this sun our solar panels can generate close to full power.”

“Close?” Adari asked, glancing up at one of the soft, bright lights illuminating the hall.

“From what I am told cosmic radiation has degraded their photoelectric ability. Not much different than what those X and gamma rays do to human tissue. Cladding protecting most of the habitation areas has reduced that.”

“The water and liquid fuel circulated around the outer hull, used to cool the reactors and power the rockets when we need to.”

“Yes. You remembered. That and the very low frequency radio wave bubble we generate around the ship. They weren't perfect, however.”

“I keep hearing about the reactors. I hear—”

“Don't bother yourself with such things. Just stay focused. Once you get to the surface you'll need to stay focused.”

Slouching and staring at the floor, Adari nodded. “Yes. Of course. Like you taught me.”

“Always remember what you do is very important to the prospects of us surviving there. The Bocanodat have been the most helpful.”

“Root word *bocant*... sunlight. A variation of *nos* meaning either after or lower... *Bocano*. Truncation of their species name Yedat. Bocanodat. The Yedat towards the setting sunlight. Or west in human terms.”

“Interesting.”

“Like Australia back on what used to be Earth. Derived from the Latin term *Terra Austrailis*... Southern Land.”

“Once a loose confederation of indigenous people, the Bocanodat have grown to a rather powerful nation as we understand nationhood.”

“They are behind us, I mean... not all that far”

“From what my more historically inclined friends tell me they’re on the verge of an electronics revolution. Moving from vacuum tubes to electromechanical technology.”

The two came upon an open area. Light colored tables and chairs affixed to the floor dotted the room. They headed towards one, eyed by the three seated there.

“Doctor,” said one of the men.

Tehope greeted each in turn. “Simon. Lucette. Bashar. How are we today?”

Adari looked them over, but remained mute, noting how each dressed. Save for different colors reflecting personal taste, their short sleeve, utilitarian shirts and long pants were no different from the others. Nor any different from what Tehope and he wore.

“Good,” Lucette said. She raised a white cup. A wisp of steam lifted off from within. “I take it you are just as busy as us.”

“Not too busy for a tea break!” Everyone save Adari let out a laugh.

“These sixteen hour days are actually enjoyable,” Bashar said. “And far from the normal routine!”

“Now that the Exodus will soon begin,” Simon added. “Speaking of that, how are you Adari?”

Looking over at the counter holding the various dispensers for tea, water, juice or whatever other drinks one desired and was available, Adari rubbed his palms against his pants. After a moment, he turned back, eyes fixed upon Simon's chest. A mumbled response. "I am fine... Doctor Lang."

Tehope saw the subtle twitching of Adari's forearm flat against his side. "Why don't you get yourself something, Adari. We can take it with us back to the infirmary."

"Yes. Of course." He left. Back to the table.

Simon looked up. "We were just discussing the physiological differences between us and the Yedat."

Bashar nodded. "How strikingly different their eyes are."

Lucette broke in. "And I find it fascinating the males of their species are the ones who take great care in their appearance. Genetically they have features considered more appealing verses the opposite sex."

"No different than a good number of species once existing back on Earth," Bashar said. "In the animal world, many males are more colorful or through evolution gained certain traits to attract females. Peafowl are a good example. The peacock is far more colorful than the peahen—" His chin fell limp against the synthetic shirt. A sorrow-filled breath left his mouth. "Too bad we couldn't save the actual species... not just photos and genetic samples."

The morbid observation hung in the air. Simon broke the silence. "My compliments, Doctor, with Adari. He's seemed to have come a long way. Your time with him during his awake periods have been fruitful."

"Exceeding expectations, I may add." Subtle pride tinged his answer.

Simon bobbed his head. “Even so, it’s odd how he was chosen for the next groundbreaking group. Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“He’ll do fine,” Tehope said. “He has that unique skill, one that computers can’t give us, among other reasons. Don’t think anyone thought about it back then. At least he won’t be confined to a protective suit like the initial teams.”

“The same is true for all those going first,” Lucette added. “Part of me wished I could be one.”

Tehope smiled. “Guilty of the same feelings. But our talents are needed here first. Still much to do, to study...” A cocked eyebrow. “And decide.”

“We shouldn’t get our hopes up, like before,” Simon added, glancing over at Adari. He stopped at each tap in turn, scrutinized the label above each, then moved to the next. “Will he be ready, doctor?”

Tehope answered behind grimaced smile. “The bigger question is will we?”