

THE TWO VISITORS

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Sunita Jadugar ('Sunny' to her ESA team-mates) gazed at the blizzard of the monitor, frowning. A second ago she was sure she had seen a ... what? A shadow, a shape, appear briefly out of the visual static. But all there was now was the endless snow-storm that had bedevilled her monitor for hours. Her instruments had not been working properly since she had come into orbit around the moon. She tilted her head to look out through the cupola. Her eyes relayed information which her brain was still questioning, but there it was: the largest moon in the solar system, Ganymede, darkly cracked and icy and, beneath the frozen surface, cthonic oceans – a glimmer beneath the skull. The JUICE mission had confirmed what they had all hoped for – evidence of water, more than all of Earth's oceans combined, and with it, the possibility of life.

The proof of life on other planets would take the pressure off the fragile miracle of Earth with its too many people and too few resources. If life could exist elsewhere then humankind had a second shot.

Did it deserve one, Sunny pondered? At times, the infinite silence and darkness of space made her melancholic. Sometimes she looked out of the cupola and saw nothing at all. No hope, no meaning.

But today – the mission went by Lunar Base Time – all of that had changed.

For months Ganymede had been a speck in their most powerful telescope, a blot on the face of Jupiter. Once dwarfed by the gas giant's red eye, now it filled Jadugar's field of vision. Her Punjabi features were transposed onto it in the viewing window's reflection.

Her mother, her father, would have been so proud. They had taught her to look up, to behold the stars, to wonder at the myriad possibilities they held.

How far she had come, how far.

It had been a lonely haul since separating from the mother-ship, Hera. She piloted one of the three scout crafts – one for each of the three of the four Galilean moons scheduled to be explored, Europa, Callisto, and Ganymede, named after their respective destinations. Io, the driest known object in the solar system, and a volcanic hell, was a non-starter. Of course, she kept in touch whenever their respective orbits would allow – precious windows of human contact. Hearing the voices of her fellow expedition members kept her sane. By herself,

alone, millions of miles from home, the vastness of space pressing in around her. Sometimes she found it soothing, meditative –playing some ambient music as she attended to a task – but today it was making her jittery. She was starting to hear things – voices in the static – and, lately, see things.

She scanned back through the monitor's data.

There.

Yes, a distinct shape. She played it on a loop. There was no mistaking it. A shadow in the light.

A humanoid one.

She shuddered as though an icy hand had suddenly caressed her.

She could feel something watching her.

Looking up, she saw, beyond the cupola, the dark silhouette of a man, or something like one, staring back at her.

He, and it was definitely a he, was naked, chiselled, muscles delineated as though cast in bronze. His skin writhed with power: obsidian shot through with lightning – a negative of the fire-storms raging on Jupiter. His eyes burnt with the intense spectrum of a forge. Then he reached out a hand, and pressed it up against the glass, close enough for her to see the luminescent labyrinths of his fingerprints.

An aureole of sparks extended his touch, furnace sparks seeking access.

Jadugar froze in terror as the thing lent closer – gazing, scrutinizing, leering at her. Those forge-eyes penetrated to her very soul.

And then he smiled, his teeth as red as the Eye.

Jadugar recoiled, kicking herself away from the cupola, and somersaulting with practised grace. Kicking off from the opposite side, she launched herself along the main shaft of her ship, sleek but vulnerable in her skin-tight base-suit.

All her instincts screamed run. But first she had to send a message. She had to warn the others.

She pushed herself along, the zero-gs working with her, giving her speed, but not enough. It was like flying through treacle, swimming in quick-sand. Ganymede had the seventh highest gravity in the solar system. Was it starting to affect the craft?

She reached the comms, and quickly opened the message channel. 'This is Jadugar, Ganymede. There is something out there. It is attacking the ship. It's...'

The comms fizzed and sparked.

He was before her. He was inside.

The intruder must have been at least seven foot tall, his dark frame sucking in all the light. Forked lightning crackled across his broad frame.

He opened his arms as if to embrace her.

Jadugar reacted physically before even being able to think of a response. She'd had enough training to know how to defend herself, both in armed and unarmed combat.

Sliding out of his grasp, she used the nearest available weapon – the fire extinguisher. Snapping out the pin, she fired it into his face, into the furnace of his eyes, momentarily blinding him. The force shot her across the command deck.

The controls were going haywire. Everything was blinking red. The system alarm brayed in her head, making it hard to think.

As the intruder swept his arms around in an arc, the panels went out one by one, as though the shadow of an eclipse past over them.

Suddenly the ship was plunged into red light, the emergency back-up kicking in.

The Ganymede was dying.

Lucid in a crisis after years of training and preparation, Jadugar knew immediately what she had to do.

She made for the dock.

Inexorable as a shadow, the darkness followed her.

Sweat beading from her face, floating away as she spun this way and that, she made it to the suit locker, hit the button to open it, screaming at the slow hydraulics.

Two red eyes. Twin Jupiters. Getting closer.

No time. He'd been on her in seconds.

She could hear the calm voice of her Canadian instructor, back in Star City.

Work the problem.

In a flash she knew the denouement of this. Punched the control panel, lit up in the half-light. She palmed it. Issued the command: initiate de-pressurisation.

The countdown began. Ten. Nine.

The suit locker slowly opened.

Eight. Seven.

Finally, she could slide in.

Six. Five.

Close it up.

Four. Three.

Helmet. Lockintoplacedammit.

Two.

Gloves. Left.

One.

Right.

The forge eyes were before her. The red mouth.

The storm inside, threatening to engulf her.

Hands crackled, reaching for her ungainly body.

A blast of light, rushing wind.

A point of singularity into which everything was sucked.

The intruder – flushed away. A red scream, until that was taken too.

Jadugar tried to hang on – wedging herself against the side of the locker.

But. She. Could. Not. Hang. On. Forever.

Her strength went.

She was sucked out of the airlock.

Floating, in the vast darkness. Spinning, amid all the flotsam and jetsam.

The cold eye of Ganymede watching over her.

Coming in and out of vision – her ship. Spinning away, like a misfiring firework.

All hope lost.

No one would get her out of this.

What was it her father used to say?

‘Always paddle your own canoe.’

She looked around at the evacuated contents of her ship.

There must be something.

Work the problem, girl.

Her small black idol of Ganesha floated past her, hiding stars as it gyrated. Her teammates had ribbed her at her ‘lucky gonk’. A sentimental keepsake of home. But, in this moment, so much more.

There.

The EVA pack.

If she could reach it.

There were small jets on her suit. Good for short blasts only. Limited power. Just

enough to steer her in the right direction.

She lined herself up. The angle had to be just right.

Then occluding her view of the EVA – a dark figure.

The intruder. Between her and the pack.

She had to risk it. No other way.

It'll be like a school-yard game. The bully in her way, waiting to give her a beating if she came close.

Jadugar gritted her teeth. Fired the jets.

Shot like a rocket towards the waiting arms of the intruder. Arc-light crackled between his hands.

At the last minute, she fired her jets again. Dodged his deadly grip by millimetres.

'Not today, Mister Sparks.'

Last burst. No second chances.

She hurtled towards the EVA.

Closer. Closer.

Red eyes in pursuit.

She reached out with all her might.

'Come on!!!' she screamed.

A dark shadow behind her.

Her gloved hand brushed a stray strap of the EVA pack.

She flailed, grabbed it, pulled it, pulled it closer.

He was nearly within reach.

She grabbed the joystick, punched the controls to fire it up. Held on, as the thrusters shot her away from her pursuer.

She could barely keep a grip, dragged along by the rocketing pack, a white block of power.

The black shadow followed. Relentless.

She couldn't outrun him for long like this.

Jadugar pulled herself with all her strength into the arms of the pack, clipped herself in.

Blasted away from the being. 'Eat thruster, mister!'

Heart beating wildly, she tried to breathe slower, ease herself into the grace of flight. At first the jink-jinking was accidental, as she regained control – but that was enough to buy her time.

Then, zen. Like back in the training pool. Steady the breathing. Don't use up all your oxygen.

Faces looking at her from above the water-line, blurred, all integrity of outline lost.

Changing shape.

As she had to. Adapt to survive.

She soared away from him, it, whatever it was.

Back towards the ship, spinning dangerously out of control, losing orbit.

It was too late to save it. The moon had caught it in its deadly riptide.

But there was something aboard that could save her.

She steered herself to the life-pod attached to one end. It was little more than a sarcophagus, designed purely for re-entry.

Entering the vessel was hard – as it spun out of control. She had to hold her nerve.

And all the while – the nightmare at her back.

Calm. Breathe.

A silent prayer to an old god.

With a well-timed blast, she was inside. She ditched the pack, and floated along to the pod. Activated it.

Lightning crackled in the darkened craft. The moon looming in and out of view. Everything going haywire. Flowers of fire in the dark.

She slipped into the pod, sealed it. The launch sequence kicked in. She prayed that it would not malfunction – its systems independent of the ship.

The forge-eyes glaring at her from behind. The hands of lightning.

Blast off.

The pod was jettisoned in a blur of intense g-force.

Through the tiny window she saw the Ganymede explode.

No way home.

Only down.

The life-pod began its descent, and her world become a continuous vibration. Outside, the glare of intense heat. She was a shooting star.

All was light, noise, motion.

Her mother singing: *You are my sunshine.*

Then, blocking the light – the dark face.

Holding on, somehow.

The g-forces, the heat, blended, melted stretched, the figure, yet still it clung on,

crackling with power. It became a thin hide, a parachute of skin.

Jadugar passed out as the life-pod smashed through the icy surface, its intense heat melting a smooth passage through into the subterranean ocean below. At the last moment the emergency thrusters fired to slow her terminal velocity.

The pod smashed down like the gavel of a High Court judge.

But ... she, somehow, was not in smithereens. Her craft, her vertebrae, were intact.

Part of Sunny's brain registered the cold fact: splashed down in the icy waters of Ganymede.

The ripples of her impact subsided.

The folds of the chute, crumpled leewards, and tangled up in them, the intruder, limp, but not quite life-less.

Sunny.

A voice calling. Her father's?

Wake up, slug-a-bed.

She regained consciousness.

Water, or something like it, slapped against the window of the sarcophagus.

A whole dark ocean of it.

Far above, the exit wound of her arrival through the ice, stars glittering, remote, unattainable, beyond.

Sensors informed her of what she could not believe.

She had survived.

And here she was, inside Ganymede.

She made a silent prayer to the anima mundi: *may we learn from you, and not merely take.* The pod had a stellar sail, provisions and, if all else failed, a paddle.

She pulled in the chute, hauling in her catch like a fisherman. The intruder was a flimsy ribbon of limbs, spluttering, quenched.

This was her hammer now.

She would harness its power, she would learn from it, and she would survive.

But then, as she looked at the sentient being laying prone before her, exhausted, vulnerable, a man of stars fallen into an abyss, she thought again.

Hadn't such primitive instincts and inclinations got them into this position in the first place? Here she was, the first human on a new world, the conquering colonist, and the cycle could start all over again. Or not. She had a choice.

The alien, the other alien, began to stir.

Sunny made a decision.

She would learn its language, or teach it her's, and on this strange moon, beneath the stars and ice, they would start to tell each other their stories.

Notes:

I chose the problematic ballad of The Two Magicians ('The Twa Magicians', 'The Coal Black Smith', Child 44/Roud 1350), as a creative challenge and as an illustration of what could be called the 'Ballad Tale' process, which frees up both the author and the material. How to reconstruct such a ballad? There are many songs in the folk tradition that depict the status between men and women unevenly, perpetuate negative images of women, of motherhood, of the empowered female operating under her own agency. Rather than reinforce their questionable subtexts, the conscious practitioner should surely seek to subvert, challenge or transform such material? This is not to bowdlerise ballads, turning them into anaemic, neutered shadows of their former selves, Disneyfied and disembowelled. With a little bit of ingenuity it is possible to repurpose even the most misogynistic or morally suspect of songs (leaving extant versions as important if repugnant artefacts of social history). Perhaps this is easier for the ballad-tale writer, than the ballad-singer, although many such reworkings have succeeded in song, even if it is through the cadence of the singer or the arrangement which transforms the tone and thus ironic distance of the performer to the material. There are several different versions of the song, originating from at least two known sources (my favourite being via Nancy Thym on 'If I had Wings Like Noah's Dove'. Nancy cited her source as a blacksmith named, perfectly, 'Mr Sparks', of Minehead, Somerset, who sang it to her on August 8th, 1904). Many famous, and less famous, folkies have had a crack at it – Bert Lloyd, Martin Carthy, Dave Swarbrick, Bellowhead, et al. I first came to know the song, as most did, through Steeleye Span's lusty 1974 version on 'Now We Are Six' (and I used it's opening lines to jumpstart my version: 'She looked out of the window as white as any milk/And he looked in at the window as black as any silk'). It is hard to get that jaunty tune out of your head, but the Dovetail Trio have done a good job with their 2015 version. They dug out some new verses, including:

Then she became a star, a star all in the night
And he became a thundercloud and muffled her out of sight

The variant chains of transformations are fascinating. The Child 44 version is perhaps the most thorough: turtle dow/another dow; eel/speckled trout; duck/drake; hare/greyhound; grey mare/gilt saddle; het girdle/cake; ship/nail; silken plaid/green covering. Yet strip away all of this fith-fathing and essentially what you have is a chase, and a game of brinkmanship – one that is foreshadowed in many myths and legends (Arne-Thompson tale types 333 & 325). A.L. Lloyd, in his 1966 sleeve-notes on the track, saw it in the early Indian myth-cycle:

In Hindu scripture, when the first man pursued the first woman, she thought to hide by changing into a cow, but he became a bull and so cattle were born. She turned into a mare and he into a stallion, she a jenny and he a jackass, ewe and ram, on and on till all the world was created, down to the ants.

Unaware of this initially, I had made my protagonist an Indian astronaut. For me, this confirmed I had got back to their quintessence of the ballad. But, of course, I have my resourceful heroine come out on top in the end, to completely subvert the power discourse. Sunny is just as much a magician as 'Mr Sparks', as her surname, Jadugar, suggests (Jaadoogar is Punjabi for 'magician'). As the writer, I have, in my small way, joined this company of enchanters, adding to the layers of transformation with my lateral adaptation. It does not 'break' the original, if indeed one can be traced. The seed is already amongst – and has been for millennia. We are a hybrid breed, born of stardust and mud.