

Ruins

by Philip Boyes



The Cardinal

The Cardinal woke to dust and cold and the unroofed sky. Clouds, high – too high – overhead, failed quite to block out the unfiltered scarlet sunlight.

Red giant star, approximately four standard astronomical units from the planet. Exhausted and burnt-out, killing itself on hydrogen as it ekes out a few more billion years. He knows the feeling. Radiation at this distance: ultraviolet, obviously. Gamma and X-rays. A handful of more exotic emissions. Concentrating, he could feel his cells bursting and mutating, a million proto-cancers blossoming throughout his body. Probably no need for concern. He'd be dead of exposure and thirst long before the radiation takes him.

It began to rain. He didn't move. As the water pattered down on the wreckage of his face the Cardinal devised in his mind an experiment to determine the precipitation's acidity. He came up with two that might achieve some measure of success, given the apparatus available to him –

- *subfusc day-ropes, tattered; burned in places.*

- *glass vial containing trace residue of mercury; shattered at one end.*

- *carved silverwood pipe, given him two centuries ago by a shabogan artisan in Orieste.* (He tried to recall the girl's name. Failed. She'd be dead now anyway. Such short lives.)

Only then did he realise the rain was burning him.

It was harder than he expected to lever himself upright. All very well wearing a fashionably mature body in the cloisters and lecture-rooms of the College; it makes one pay Outside. Joints ache and muscles protest. *Pain is quite bracing, my child,* he used to tell the youngsters; *it shapes character. Besides, when you live as long as we do, you need something to remind you what living is.*

Utter rot.

It just hurt. If character-shaping it was, then his character was likely to be sour and resentful from now on. It took him an age to shuffle himself under the shelter of a broken building. The roof was gone but a fragment of the first floor remained at the intersection of two

walls. He pressed himself deep into the corner and wrapped the remnants of his gown around him. There was a wind picking up.

It was obvious to him that Outside was something he was pitifully ill-equipped to handle. It was cold and painful and every glimpse of the wide-open sky and distant horizon made his stomach pitch somersaults.

He began to estimate his likelihood of survival for any significant spell; realised too late what a bad idea this was and endeavoured instead to focus on the architecture around him. He used to be rather good on architecture, a lifetime or two ago. He had conducted extracurricular tours for interested students around the College and the greater Citadel, demonstrating with meticulous attention to detail how to identify true Rassilote scrollwork or distinguish between pre- and post-Interval crenellation.

The architecture of this place gave him nothing. It was utterly alien to him. He could distinguish a dozen or so distinct styles in the ruined village(? – *town? homestead?*) he found himself in, but none of them made any sense. It was jumbled and superimposed, a palimpsest in stone and metal and concrete, but not in the logical and sympathetic way of home. Early elegance was effaced by later brutality, then back again; more advanced techniques seemed to precede cruder ones. The aesthetic was alienating and indecipherable.

The Cardinal huddled there in the rain and attempted to compose a Theory of Developmental Progress for the natives of this world. He could not. He couldn't even begin. The lack of any cultural reference-point was crippling. He felt stupid and lost, and that made him irritable. He felt a need to snap at someone but there's nobody there; he was utterly alone.

For the first time he remembered the girl.

'...if they find you, find what you can do... We need to leave, child!'

'But...'

'No no no! We mustn't dilly-dally. If we stand around here discussing matters like a pair of old women they'll catch you. Is that what you want, hmm? We must leave, as quickly as we can. Now come with me!'

He drags her out of his study and down the cloister. Outside, the leaves on the fentrees are turning azure for the autumn. They smell of liquorice and cloves. Into the library. His granduncle's capsule stands between the antique bookcases.

He pulls books from the shelves to the left, trying to find the one with the key in it.

'Leave?' the girl asks, tackling the implications of the word for the first time. 'Where?'

'How should I know? Do I look like a plan? I mean to say, do I look like I have a plan? We must go where they can never find us!'

'Can you fly a capsule?'

'Of course I can't, child! I'm a historian, not an ambassador! You must fly it! You must talk to it with your mind and have it take us somewhere safe. Can you do that?'

'I...'

The Cardinal picked his way through the outskirts of an ancient and destroyed city. It was a shell of a place, the husk left behind after a war comes, stays for a while, then moves on. Leaning on a dry-wood staff, he entered the city along a broken and pitted road, cratered from shells and strewn with burnt-out vehicles and long-petrified bodies. The creatures of this world had been bipedal, almost hominid. Not so very different from the Cardinal himself to outward appearances. At first he was curious, trying to reconstruct what he can of their culture and its end from the manners of their deaths and the artefacts they carried. A warlike species, but not devoted single-mindedly to martial pursuits: there were the broken remains of shops and gardens, galleries and temples. He went inside a jeweller's workshop to shelter from the rain and was rather taken with a ring he found there. The only unbroken item in its shattered display-case, it was a work of extraordinary craftsmanship given the civilisational stage and economic constraints of the species that created it. Naïve, yes, betraying a fundamentally immature imagination and tell-tale shortcuts and substitutions that he thinks tell of an economy increasingly suffering under shortages and war-footing. But skilful and vigorous and beautiful and a little bit garish. He wondered what it said about him that he liked it. He examined its great blue stone through an eyeglass he found in the back-room, and decided it was that combination of limitation and ambition, beauty and kitsch that struck a chord with him. It opened a chink into the psychology of the creatures that had made it. He wondered what the schools and colleges of this world must have been like. Did the teachers here try to keep up the pretence of normality as the gravity of their situation bit? Did they go on teaching right up to the end? Or did they too find reasons why they must flee?

Somewhere along the road, he understood with a start, he had begun to empathise with these aliens.

It would be the work of a lifetime to study this place. He could immerse himself in the details of it, reconstructing every aspect of this vanished culture from its remains. There were those among his colleagues who went in for that sort of thing, spent entire cycles of their lives out on fieldwork. They came back changed, less clubbable, less interested in the politics and gossip and scholarship of the Citadel. In short, uncanny. The others – the Cardinal among them – puzzled over them, questioned them, tried to understand them. They could not. Why waste so much time reconstructing what one could witness in its pomp just by rolling the Eye back a few centuries? When one did so, the species in question invariably turned out not to be very interesting anyway: the same in all salient particulars as hundreds of others filed away in dusty databanks and dustier memory. In the end they just laughed at the Archaeologists. The Archaeologists never laughed back. Their eyes were haunted by lost worlds.

He understood them better now; now that he was cut off from them by aeons and parsecs and entire dimensions of existence. It would feel like cheating to peek forward or ahead. What a project for the mind, what an exercise of thought it would be to give this species life again in his researches. He could do it. The temptation was strong.

Anything to distract himself from being lost. From the Outside and the awful, infinite sky.

He looked up at it now and the expansiveness of it all made him weep. An unfamiliar sensation: an abstract biological response known only from ancient and emotionally overwrought texts. The Cardinal began to calculate how it will affect his dehydration. By the time he had an answer, the tears had stopped.

He walked on. No stopping, no study. Not for long, anyway. Maybe a sit-down here and there to catch his breath; a potter around a library or a bookshop where he found one: as much to comfort himself with the familiar as to learn anything about this world. He couldn't read the books, after all. Sometimes he paused to examine things with his jeweller's eyeglass (he took that; left the ring), always his eyes ranged over the city around him. He formulated his theories and hypotheses, swaddling himself in the safe landscapes of his mind, but he never surrendered himself to them whole. He must find the girl. He would never get away from here without her.

Suburbs gave way to true city. He climbed a great ridge and discovered that towering ancient battlements ran along its crest. The wall has been breached in places: in some with energy weapons; in others by crude explosives. The stranded ruins of primitive war machines were still beached among the scattered masonry. This had been the edge of the city long ago, he guessed. There was a precipitous drop on the other side, but from the foot of the cliff the city's metal and concrete bones now stretched on for miles beyond.

The old man almost gave up when he saw that sprawl. The vastness of it, the openness. This was not how civilised creatures should live.

And a deeper, more selfish voice: *I shall never find the girl in there.*

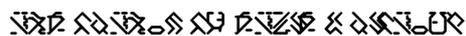
What kept him going? The sight that loomed on the horizon.

(He had seen horizon now and found himself addicted).

A mighty domed citadel, fortified and ancient and rising above the plain. From its grey canopy rose stone turrets and starship landing-platforms, communications arrays and castellated eyries.

It was the first thing he had seen on this world which was truly familiar to him.

The Cardinal capered on the battlements and giggled with delight.



The Worldly Girl

If the scientists didn't look so wild she might have thought she was home. It crossed her mind that this was her own world's future, or its distant past. She could think of not a single reason why this shouldn't be the case. Evolution's capable of swooping caprices, above all in a species

like hers. And yet she had a strong feeling in her heart that this was another planet and that these scientists shared not even a basic chemistry with her own people.

The fact that their skin was teal helped with remembering that.

She'd had herself down for a goner when the capsule blossomed in the vortex; her and Grandfather both. He'd been wrong to think she could control it. She never believed she could. But have you ever tried arguing with a man like that? Grandparent, teacher, politician, all in one. In all his lives she didn't reckon it had once occurred to him that he might not know best.

Get us away! she begged the capsule. *Take us somewhere safe. Somewhere they can't come after us!*

She loosened its leash, allowed it to plunge beyond the surface of dry reality. The capsule's mind surged at the taste of freedom, singing a song of time through her soul. It sloughed relative dimensions like glittering water droplets as it arrowed through the metatemporal medium. Kingfisher of time, shining blue.

It broke from her control a moment later, or ceased to bother letting her think she had any control. Feral mathematics slipped their bonds, roared defiance to the time-winds and turned the capsule inside-out. She was thrown out of its protective womb, screaming the thirteen names of her mothers. Baptised in the vortex. Everywhere and everywhen kaleidoscoped through her mind.

The memory of it was gone a moment later and she lay on a hard concrete floor in the dark. Distantly, with her ears or her mind, she heard the capsule's excited breathing receding into the beyond: untamed, wheezing, groaning.

'What are you?' asked a frightened voice. 'Where did you come from?'

This place wasn't home, but it was somewhere she could wrap her head around. She imagined all the places she might have ended up, with all of time and space to choose from. Places deadly in an instant – the hearts of stars and worlds without atmosphere, the deathly voids between. Places inhabitable but maddening: so alien and unfamiliar that her sheltered mind would have broken at its first attempt to comprehend them. Instead she found herself in an ancient citadel of serpentine and mica, hermetically sealed against a hostile wilderness beyond. Strange and alien though they were, she could understand the scientists who lived here, the aeon-forged ritual of their existence.

Even as it had shaken them loose like parasites, the capsule had done as she'd asked. It had taken them somewhere safe.

It was the fear here that she found most alien. Her own people regarded the Outside as hostile and dangerous, a barbarous piece of baggage from their history. It had its uses, of course: the lower orders had to live somewhere, and its farms and mines produced the foods and minerals which supported the Lords of the Citadel in their lives and work. But it was backward

and violent and burdened with a multiplicity of odd and perplexing cultures. No rationality, too much redundancy, too hard to reconcile. The girl's people peered down stately, aquiline noses and disdained the Outside. Early in youth – or what passed for youth – they might spare it a single thought. That was enough for them to weigh its value against the intellectual pursuits of the Citadel and the infinite universe beyond, find it lacking, and dismiss it altogether. Most of them never thought of it again, even once, for the remainders of their existence, however many millennia that amounted to.

Disdain and indifference, but never fear. To fear something, you had to allow it into your mind. You had to have an imagination open to alternative possibilities, that could tell stories and brood on potential perils to come. Her people lived in an eternal present and what unknown future they had they left it to matrices of slaved metaminds to evaluate. A people so complacent that they had lost the capacity to fear.

The girl was afraid now, and that was as much proof as any of her deviance, of the taint and the opportunity she represented. She'd already infected Grandfather: fear grew in him like a cancer.

Where was he? The scientists knew nothing of him, and their devices monitored their whole citadel. *Maybe he was Outside*, they wondered. And when they spoke the word, there was potent terror, even hatred in it.

*

'What is your name?' the scientist who'd found her asked. She sat in the centre of a darkened hall, lit up from above by a cone of faltering blue light. There were other scientists around them, holding back in the darkness. Servitors moved silently between them, checking and adjusting their masters' life-support chairs. She could only see her questioner in any detail. He was squat and wasted. The mechanisms and systems of his life-support chair ticked and bubbled softly. A deep, resonant sound like an artificial heartbeat came from somewhere deep in its machinery. All the chairs in the room were perfectly in time, that heartbeat throbbing out all around her in a way the girl found a little uncanny.

She shook her head. Did she have a name? Had she ever had one?

'My name is Yavelling,' said the creature. 'I am chief scientist. What is your name? Where did you come from? Are you from *Outside*?' He spoke softly, kindly, but there was an edge to his partially synthesised voice. Something that seemed eternally poised to tip over the edge into mania. Did he know it was there, she wondered. Did the others hear it, or was it only her cultural preconceptions? An awareness of the dangers of madness was deeply ingrained in her people's psyche: it walked the closeted, stifling halls alongside them, unspoken shadow, constant companion.

She had no answer for the scientists and they seemed to accept that for now. They allowed her to explore the Citadel. Often she was by herself. That was better. On the rare occasions when Yavelling had free time enough to escort her, it was more like a lecture than exploration. He reminded her of Grandfather. He showed her their experiments, explained the complex climatic and economic modelling by which they hoped to divine their world's return to habitability. She listened distantly, trying to keep her mind from wandering. Her first time away from her own world and time, and it was no different from being at home: he held her interest no more easily than the cardinals and instructors had done. He droned in near-rapture about radiation half-lives and soil exhaustion, of recovering carry capacity, of the need for careful management and husbandry of the world.

Does any of this help you find Grandfather? she wanted to shout. *Can any of your instrumentation find one old man among the ruins?*

'How long have you been working on this?' she asked instead. The equipment was ancient, as much a relic as the Citadel itself.

'Many millennia. The improvement in planetary environment has been considerable, but Outsider disruption has disrupted and prolonged the work. They are *not* scientists. Not rational creatures. They breed uncontrollably, squander natural resources, pollute and destabilise the atmosphere. Things are worse when they are at war.'

'Why don't you just leave? You have the technology. If this world's ruined, why don't you just find another?'

Yavelling stared at her as if she were mad.

'There is only *this* world.'

She thought on that, alone in her chamber that night. There were, it seemed to her, two fatal contradictions in the scientists' philosophy which meant they would never succeed in rebuilding their biosphere and leaving their protective Citadel. These were as obvious to her as they were impossible for the creatures themselves to recognise. First: they were obsessed with the Outside, but they hated it. So acclimatised were they to their confinement that the thought of the disorder and freedom of anything else had become utter anathema. Second: for all their professed rationality and scientific stewardship of this world, it was a simple article of implicit faith for them that they were the only people in existence. Her own people thought they were supreme because they saw all infinity and considered it beneath them; these scientists thought they were supreme because they refused to countenance the idea that there could be anyone else.

She wondered what the servitors made of that.

She wondered what it meant for her.

She found part of her answer on her third day in the Citadel, halfway up an ancient stone staircase that led towards the pinnacle of a tall turret that protruded from the centuries-newer dome.

Dyoni Will Come!

Strange place for a graffito. And too high up the wall for one of the scientists to have written it.

‘What does it mean?’ she asked Yarvelling.

The scientist was irritable, as he often was when she deviated from what he wanted to talk about: in this case the climate- and weather-monitoring station his research group had retrofitted at the top of the tower.

‘Irrational scrawl by some dissident servitor. We run them in for such things from time to time.’

‘What’s Dyoni?’

‘Legendary revolutionary-saviour figure. The Outsiders believe she will save them. A cultural reaction designed to preclude the need for them to take responsibility for their own actions.’

‘Are the servitors dangerous then?’

‘Everything has potential to be dangerous. That is why it must be managed.’

He tried to hustle her on, up the stairs. She wasn’t done yet.

‘Yarvelling, will Dyoni come?’

‘There is no Dyoni.’

‘And if one day there is?’

‘Then she will be managed.’

Dissidence takes many forms: the servitor who dreams of liberation from her service; the Lord so disillusioned with the tawdriness of the universe that he decides to wield the full power of his office and remake it for the better; the family stripped of lands and House for speaking out against that Lord’s madness. All have one thing in common, so the scholars of the girl’s world say: they are shaped by circumstance and individual choice. No-one is born a subversive. It is everyone’s duty to resist the radical.

Another way in which she represents a threat to their cosy certainties.

From the moment she could hold a conversation, the others had found her strange and unsettling. Her answers to questions were wrong in unexpected and troubling ways. She flitted between interests either eccentric or downright peculiar; her mind never seemed to settle on any one thing. She asked questions. A lot of questions. They didn’t always make sense, and when they did, it was a sidelong, tangential kind of sense that betrayed a mind skewed at a weird angle to the rest of her culture.

She obsessed about Outside, in all its variations.

No experience or choice had made her this way, but even as a child it was apparent to her that she was seen as aberrant, even dangerous. Surgeons and surgeon-generals whispered over her. Co-

She gave them names based on the noises they made and what she imagined them to look like: Snuffy, Splatto, Colonel Honk. The more ferocious they tried to sound, the more they made her giggle.

Some vague fragment of her consciousness was aware that this was probably not entirely sensible behaviour, but what the flippy! She was the sole survivor of a spaceship crash that had killed her mum and dad and pretty much everyone she knew. Their mangled bodies were still in the wreckage of the *Barnes Common*: the earth was crusted over with a thick layer of compacted dust and she wasn't big or muscly enough to break it and dig holes to bury them. She was, to be honest, pretty much a straight 180 of big and muscly: scarce over a metre and a half, sixteen years old, with the build and bunches of a girl half that age. Being small had never bothered her before: it just made it easier to get into places you weren't supposed to be; made it easier to be overlooked, underestimated.

Underestimating Vicki Pallister was something you did at your peril.

There was a city a short distance from where they'd crashed. It was in ruins, but she wasn't about to mope around the shell of her spaceship for the rest of forever so she packed up her things in her cute little backpack, grabbed her stuffed panda, and yomped across the plain to look for help.

Help took a long time to materialise, and by the time it did, she'd realised she didn't really need it anyway. Three months she spent in the city. She was Queen of the Ruins, ghost in a dead city. The place tugged at her with echoes of the familiar: it had something of Liverpool about it; something of Carcassone and of Gaudí's Barcelona. It was every city on Earth and none of them. Unutterably strange, long-gone to dust and ruin.

From place to place she wandered, settling for a few days at a time, maybe a week. She always left, but only because she was curious about what was round the next corner or because she spied something fascinating on the horizon; not because of dangers or hunger of monsters. She was pretty on top of those, to be honest. The emergency rations from the ship's unused escape pods lasted her the first month – more than long enough for her to work out which of the weeds and roots among the skeletons of buildings she could eat. She became a proficient monster-hunter – the smallest, deadliest predator in this ecosystem of the unnatural. She learned the territories and behaviours of the strange beasts that roamed the city and came for them when they were sleeping or injured. The dead of night, the height of the day, they were all the same to Vicki. It always saddened her to kill such odd and wonderful creatures, but a full belly silenced her qualms. She had no choice. Whatever she was, she was a survivor. She took no more than she had to.

Inevitably, a girl as curious as Vicki was drawn towards the Citadel that bulged up over the rooftops like some great fairy toadstool rendered in stone and cement. No deliberate intention, but day by day her wanderings took her closer, the lure of its battlements and spires working on her subconscious mind.

One day, something in the orbit of twelve weeks after she'd arrived on this world, she was stalking something small and dark through a once-grand district, lost to artificial night in the smothering shadow of the nearby dome. Vegetation seemed to thrive in the damp half-light and the monumental architecture and municipal plazas had long ago become overgrown with pulsating, fleshy jungle. The creature was quick and nimble so she had to move fast, but the plant-life was dangerous here. There were thorned succulents that could infest the nervous system and effectively possess animals; creeping purple tentacles that could spray stinging bursts of fungal spores. She'd learned the landscape from seeing monsters make mistakes and die. Glad again to be small, she ducked and danced her way between the perils of the jungle.

I am the Huntress of the Wilds! I am the Mistress of the Woods!

The little monster led her into the burned-out and crumbled wreckage of a large building. A town hall, maybe? A school? You shouldn't read too much into a structure's function based on how big and shiny it is – she'd been campaigning on enough worlds to know better – but every fragment evoked something, set her imagination storying in cascades.

The monster scrambled up a broken stairwell, risked a shattered doorway in search of shelter. Mistake: there was only a small gallery beyond, its broken parapet overlooking the remains of a debating chamber or lecture-theatre. Between the mosses and the pseudo-ferns she could see an eye-like design inlaid in coloured stone in the floor. There was something hunched in the middle of it, rocking slowly in the pupil.

It looked like a man.

The monster hadn't noticed him or didn't care. It was panicking: nowhere left to go. It had dinky little wings but they were underdeveloped, too small to lift its Labrador-sized bulk. It drew up on its hind legs and flared its tapir-snout at Vicki, baring mole-like teeth. It roared, or tried to: the sound that came out was a coldy huffle.

'Snuffy?' She laughed. 'Snuffy, it's you? Really?' That voice in the dark from her first nights here – she never had seen the creature it came from. She hadn't pictured anything quite so silly. She batted it aside. 'Go on, get away. I'm not going to hurt you.'

She only wanted a closer look at the man.

Snuffy grumbled and hissed, edged round her suspiciously, then toddled away to watch her from the doorway as if fearful of some trick. Ridiculous creature.

The man was old with skin pale as translucent as paper: the oldest, whitest old white dude she'd ever seen. He was curled up, hugging his bony knees to his chest. The tattered remains of a crimson-black cloak were wrapped around him. His hair wisped and fluttered in the breeze, as fine and insubstantial as spider-silk.

Her instinct was to go down and help him, but the survivor instinct she'd honed these last few weeks held her back. Wait. See.

He looked strange: a bit... *off*. Just because she hadn't seen another human being in months? Or was he really something else? There were creatures in the galaxy that looked human

and weren't. Humanishes and humanesques. Some of them you could interact with as if they *were* human; others you most definitely could not.

That pale skin... the emaciated frame. There was something almost vampiric about him. Or perhaps he just didn't get much sunshine. He didn't look well.

Vicki crouched in the gallery and watched him. From the doorway Snuffy watched her. The man saw neither of them. He rocked and stared at the floor and sometimes muttered to himself, but Vicki couldn't make out what he said.

The next day she came back and he was still there; apparently hadn't moved. The third day he was gone. Snuffy was pottering round the undergrowth like a freakish truffle-pig. He acknowledged Vicki's arrival with a grunt and a snuffle, but didn't run away. She left some food and a case of anti-rad meds from the ship in case the man came back, and went looking for him. The little monster followed at a cautious distance. What did it see her as, she wondered? A friend? A master? Prey?

The man turned up near the curtain-wall at the base of the dome. He moved like something weightless, wind-blown: although he leaned bodily on a wooden staff, there was nothing to him.

'Need to get in,' he murmured to himself, or words that Vicki remembered as that. She got a sense he wasn't actually speaking English, but couldn't seem to focus her brain on what it actually *was*. 'Need to get In.' And suddenly he exploded into action, hammering on the masonry with his fists and clobbering at it with his stick. And he shouted: 'Do you hear me in there? Hmm? Do you hear me? I need to get Inside!'

There was no reply. Of course not. The old man kicked the wall once more, seemingly out of petulance more than anything else, and sat down with his back to it, breathing heavily and mopping at his brow with the edge of his robe. Vicki would have gone to him then, but she caught a glimpse of his eyes. Tired and old, they nevertheless glittered with dark-shining depths. Her breath caught in her mouth.

In the moment she hesitated, something moved in the jungle to the right.

She dropped to her haunches, her hand on the ray-gun at her belt. Snuffy came closer, tensed, ready.

A girl.

A girl not much older than Vicki herself: sixteen or thereabouts, with short dark hair and pale skin just like the man's. She wore a snug vermilion tunic similar in style to his garments, though hers was pristine, barely a stain on it. She carried herself with confidence but she wasn't a hunter. There was a feyness about her movements: not-quite-right, just like the man, but in a different way.

'Grandfather!'

He spluttered a noise, incoherent in his astonishment. Or perhaps that was her name. Tried to get to his feet; the girl ran over to help him.

‘Child! My child! Where have you been! I’ve been looking for you. I thought perhaps They had found you...’

They?

‘Grandfather, are you all right? I heard you shouting. You look sick. How long have you been out here?’

‘Some time.’ He chuckled, and it wasn’t a healthy laugh. ‘Yes, my dear, quite some time.’

‘The capsule? Is it with you?’

‘I haven’t seen it.’ He sighed deeply, as if the exhaustion of days was catching up with him. ‘Oh, Child, I...’

‘What is it, Grandfather?’

‘Hmm? Oh, this place. Everything. The Outside. It’s too much. The size, the weather the unpredictability. Altogether far too much. The truth is, I thought perhaps I could manage, but I can’t. I’ve been alone too long. We’re still alone.’

Vicki stepped from her hiding-place. ‘You’re not alone. That’s just fear talking. Fear makes us feel alone. I’ve been watching you, making sure you’re OK.’

The girl put her hand to her mouth in surprise but the man barely registered Vicki. He was still focused on his granddaughter. ‘We... Child, we’re not meant for this.’

‘You’re zoo animals released into the wild.’ Vicki murmured. She wasn’t sure she’d actually meant to say that aloud.

‘Who are you?’ the other girl asked.

‘Vicki.’

‘Is that short for something? Vickinderbal? Victor?’

‘Just Vicki. V-I-C-K-I. It’s not short for anything.’

‘We can’t cope,’ the old man complained, dabbing at his forehead. ‘We’re never going to be able to cope.’

‘Nonsense, Grandfather! Look at you: you’ve survived!’

‘Survived? Hmm? Is that what you call it? We need to find an entrance to this Citadel, child. We need to get Inside and safe so we can work on a way to call back the capsule.’

‘I’ve just come from inside,’ the girl said. ‘That’s not where we should be going, Grandfather. The people there: they’re scientists, but they’re even worse than back home. They’re blinkered and fearful; they keep slaves; they think they’re the only intelligent life in the Universe.’

‘Scientists, you say? They could help us!’

‘Slaves?’ Vicki repeated.

‘Servitors, they call them. There are other people on this world: a vibrant, boisterous people, like the shabogans – the scientists keep a population of them in the Citadel to help look after them. It’s not inside we should be going: it’s Out. Out into the world to find the Outsiders. They’re the ones who’ll help us.’

‘We can’t,’ said Vicki. ‘You can’t just turn your back on this place if people are being kept as slaves in there! What kind of people are you? You’d ignore injustice just to try and get off this planet?’

‘Do you know these Outsiders, child?’ the old man asked her. He still sounded distinctly uncertain about the whole idea.

‘No, I don’t know them! I’m not from here; I’m from Liverpool! My ship crashed.’

‘She has a ship,’ said the girl.

‘A *crashed* ship,’ Vicki repeated. ‘And I’m not letting you anywhere near it unless you help those people.’

‘Help them, child? Help them? My dear girl, what do you suppose *we* might do? An old man and two little girls...’

She drew the ray-gun. ‘Call me a little girl again, Grandpa, and I’ll lamp you! I’ve survived on this world for months. On my own. And I’m doing a damn-sight better than you, by the looks of it.’

The old man huffed and harrumphed but didn’t argue. Vicki had met his type before: all bluster and arrogance, but stand up to them and the front melts away. She’d seen him rocking in the schoolroom: she wasn’t about to let him take charge. The other girl found something suddenly interesting to look at on the wall, but Vicki thought she saw a half-smile on her face. Lord, she was a cutie!

*

Compromise: they would hike as far as the Citadel’s airlock gate, then decide whether to try and go Inside or carry on out into the city and the wilds beyond. The girl led them: she knew the way. Vicki walked alongside her, holding the ray-gun and keeping an eye open for the dangers of the forest. The old man brought up the rear, Snuffy dogging his feet. He tried to shoo him away with his stick a few times, but it didn’t get him anywhere.

‘He likes you, Grandpa,’ Vicki called back.

The man harrumphed indignantly. ‘I’m not your grandfather; don’t call me that.’

‘Then what should I call you? You haven’t told me your names.’

The old man glared at her.

‘Our names would... mean nothing to you,’ the girl said. ‘We should leave them behind, like we left our world and our people.’

‘Then you must choose new names. I can see you as a Clara. Or a Sarah. Susie, maybe?’

‘I shall... think about it.’

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The Wanderer

Being Outside had shattered his ability to judge space and time. His mind was calibrated in the small distances of his home Citadel and the grand dimensions of the cosmos he studied from afar. It quailed and gave up at the intermediate. He had no idea how long he had been on this world, how long since his last meal or how much longer he could manage without proper water or medicine. He couldn't even properly pin down how long it took them to get to the gate. It seemed like a long time, but that might have been his irritation and indignation and tiredness. Perhaps it wasn't really. His granddaughter – yes, he should think of her that way; not as 'the girl' or 'the child', not any more – seemed to know the way. It shamed him to recognise that she was managing this wilderness better than he. But then, this was what she'd been born for, what she'd always craved.

She had always had the wildness in her. He wasn't worried for her. But what about himself? The Citadel was all he'd ever known and he'd never wanted to leave. Was he, as the alien castaway had said, merely a zoo animal foundering in the wild? Or could he adapt? Was there something else he could become?

He searched for that curiosity, that sense of wonder he had felt while exploring the city. He tried to grasp it, bring it within himself. But he was exhausted and culture-shocked and some ridiculous alien beast was sniffing at his heels. He couldn't manage it. Not yet.

The overgrown jungle thinned out in front of the gate. There were no more standing ruins. They emerged from the trees on to a blackened swarth of cinder and rubble and ash.

Environmental contaminants:

heavy metals

nuclear fallout, well into its half-life

dead nanites by the billion, wind-blown like dust

shell-casings

burnt deposits, fused silicates: evidence of infernally high temperatures.

The war must have ended centuries ago, millennia perhaps. Even after all that time, nothing grew here. There had once been a broad road or esplanade leading through the city to the Citadel gates, but some final catastrophic hammerblow of the war had hit this place with its full force, breaking against the gates like storm waters.

He remembered the storms hitting the walls of the old, disused harbour at home, the waves crashing over the fortifications and abandoned workshops. His people could have calmed the waters. He'd never till now wondered why they did not.

The gate itself was a disc of black metal of gargantuan thickness and brutalist construction, bolted without care or sympathy between the turrets of an ancient stone gatehouse.

The same observation he'd made in the city outskirts where he'd first arrived, now tinged with something else.

Sorrow? Regret?

'Cor,' said Vicki 'Bit doomy-looking, isn't it?'

His granddaughter nodded. 'There are smaller doorways set into it. But I think they're easier to open from inside than out.'

That made him chuckle despite everything. She could always lift his spirits. 'Very likely, my dear. Yes, very likely indeed. Some fortress it would be if they weren't.'

'You see, Grandfather? I don't think we could get inside even if we wanted to. We should go on.'

She had a point, but he wasn't going to let this place defeat him.

'Nonsense, my dear! We must camp here and make a careful study of this gateway. There must be some way inside, if we only apply ourselves.'

Easy to say; harder to achieve. No obvious less well-secured openings. Climbing wasn't an option either: the lower portions of the wall were fused to glass-like sheen that afforded few handholds. Besides, he was no mountain-goat. And he hated climbing. Even if they could somehow scale the wall and get up to the battlements, the blank concrete dome of the Citadel proper rose sheer behind it.

Far above them, in the crown of towers and landing-pads that rose from the top of the dome, something glittered with a sapphire light. Too far away to get a good look at; gone in a moment. But for that instant it was as if the clear royal blue opened something in him. He felt greater than himself.

Eye-blue. Time-blue.

Expectant.

Or just his imagination. The palpitation of an old man's heart. Gone.

The gate began to open.

He started forward but his granddaughter held him back. There were things emerging. Squat, domed and armoured as the Citadel in miniature. Reconnaissance drones of some kind?

'Robots!' cried the alien girl, clapping her hands in delight. 'Chumbly little robots!'

Dozens of them fanned out. A great war-machine that looked every one of its centuries trundled out behind them. Human figures dangled limp from tall spars attached to its carapace.

Something turned in his stomach. He had lived centuries, but he'd never seen death. Never realised its true ugliness or horror.

'What have you done?' his granddaughter shouted. 'Why?!'

The squat things glided forward and surrounded them. They were metallic, liveried in gunmetal and faded blue paint; the same colours as the half-effaced markings on the ancient tank. A symbol of national or other identity affiliation? In places the armour had a translucent, quartz-like quality. He glimpsed something fleshy and almost human hunched inside, nestled among electronics and life-support systems. Not robots then.

The scientists had donned their ancestors' armour and come out to face the world.

'A miscalculation was made,' said one of them. The voice was emotionless, but in an affected, deliberate way: like a colleague explaining the fundamental flaw in one's hypothesis. *Nothing personal: just the way things have to be.* 'There are more threats to the restoration of the biosphere than we anticipated.'

'Yarvelling,' said his granddaughter. 'It's you, isn't it? What have you done to the servitors?'

'Our assumptions were excessively conservative. We failed to anticipate the possibility of other forms of life. Calculations regarding carry-capacity were based on pre-war norms. You do not conform to those norms; it is likely the Outsiders no longer conform to those norms; *we* do not conform to those norms. Prior population predictions are consequently unreliable and the potential effects to projected environmental recovery no longer calculable. Furthermore, we believed this to be the only inhabited world. Your presence here demonstrates this not to be the case. Threats multiply. Viability is imperilled. We have two options: begin again from scratch, or escalate proactive risk-mitigation measures.'

'You've been wrong about rather a lot, haven't you?' he asked, feeling his irritation grow. 'Hmm, yes. Close to everything, it seems. And you call yourselves scientists? All that jargon. All those long-winded ways of avoiding saying what you mean! You're not scientists at all. You're politicians! How long have you squatted in that castle of yours, building worlds in your minds based on fundamental tenets that are utterly mistaken?'

'We have emerged now.' The voice sounded tense, almost pained. It ground out through the armour's amplification systems, distorted almost beyond recognition as having being produced by a living thing.

'You killed those servitors – those people!' Vicki accused. 'You're... monsters!'

'Threats within must be managed before threats outside can be tackled.'

'But you needed them!' his granddaughter said. 'They helped you! You needed them to survive!'

'We can survive in this armour... indefinitely.'

'And never touch the world itself?' he heard himself ask. 'Never breathe unfiltered air?'

The girl Vicki cocked an eyebrow at him, as if to say: *You've changed your tune, Grandpa.* And what if he had? Hmm? Hold up a mirror, force them to look, and a lot of old men don't like what they see.

'When the threats have been managed and the biosphere has been stabilised, we will be able to dispense with the armour.'

'And who are those threats, Yarvelling? Did you come out here for us? Or for the Outsiders? Or for all the other worlds out there? Where does it stop? How scared are you of the Outside?'

'We are not... scared. A cost-benefit calculation has been made. Risks have been evaluated. Certain threats have been analysed and found to represent an untenable danger to

ongoing survival and our ability to recolonize this world without the need for life-support apparatus.'

'You mean everything, don't you?'

'Everything.' He couldn't tell whether the creature was just repeating the question to itself or if that was the answer. Perhaps it didn't even know itself. It sounded afraid, lost, as if it couldn't quite believe himself what its analyses had told him was the rational course of action. He felt disgusted. A creature such as this might be so ruled by its fear that it might commit any crime without ever being able to accept that that's what it was.

Vicki drew her ray-gun. The other creatures twitched in their armour. Little protuberances swivelled to point at her. Guns, he had no doubt. Something else rose in him; something beyond disgust. He didn't know what it was, not yet.

The situation was on a knife-edge, he felt. It could get away from them in half a heartbeat. Decision time. What was he?

'You say "managed" but you don't mean that, do you? You poor, deluded creature, you can't bear to admit it, can you, even to yourselves? Come on, hmm? We're all friends here. What are you planning to do to the Outsiders?'

'We will do what we must,' said Yarvelling, and its voice sounded like defeat. 'The Outsiders are a dangerous infestation. They must be... exterminated.'

'Quite so,' he heard himself say, drawing himself up to his full height and taking hold of his robe's ragged lapels. 'Quite so. You must act as you feel that you must. But I'm afraid we must do likewise, mustn't we?'

Vicki was nodding enthusiastically. Her creature Snuffy was at her feet, growling and sniffing at the true monsters. His granddaughter closed her eyes, went quite still. He'd seen her do that before as she came to an important decision. Opening her eyes, she turned to Vicki.

'I've thought of a name,' she said. 'Dyoni.'

Blue light shone atop the dome, and on the dead breeze came a sound of life. A wheezing, groaning sigh of approval.

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