

Code L1

written by

Andrew Jackson

illustrated by

HEATHER ANNE LEE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Jackson started writing and illustrating at age twelve, and never gave up the former but (thankfully for his readers) has stopped the latter! One of his earliest memories is of watching Star Trek with his dad and falling in love with the speeding ships, bizarre aliens, and the diamond glitter of myriad stars in that eternal blackness.

Even now, as he explores the strange new worlds of family, fatherhood, and a career in retail, he's never lost his love for the stars. Counting authors such as Stephen King, Iain M. Banks, and Alastair Reynolds among his literary influences, he revels both in reading and writing rich, tangible worlds other than our own. Born too late to watch the Apollo missions, but too early for interstellar travel, he must content himself with dreams and the sad knowledge that he may never know what's out there. Is there anybody there? Why aren't they talking?

On walks down leafy lanes of his native Surrey, England, Andrew examines these questions. He likes to think he looked at a particular tree one time and pondered its age and almost otherworldly summer greenness, and so was born "Code L1."

The story itself is an exploration of the Fermi Paradox—the hypothesis that, if we have galactic neighbors, they should have called by now. Perhaps they've seen the darker sides of humanity, and they're afraid of us coming out into the stars. Or perhaps, if they could, they'd tell us why they've been so quiet. Perhaps, it's best not to know.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

HeatherAnne Lee was born in 2004 in Federal Way, Washington, and has lived across the US from Hawaii to New York to Vermont. HeatherAnne, or

"Heather" to her friends, now resides in Savannah, Georgia, pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Heather started drawing as soon as she could hold a crayon and never stopped, graduating from crayon to graphite to paint, and now she primarily works digitally. Despite working on a screen, Heather holds to her painting knowledge, layering colors and textures on her drawing tablet, emulating traditional painting techniques in a digital medium.

Heather takes much of her inspiration from the world around her, translating reality into epics and stories of dragons and knights. Heather always strives to push her work to the limit, working with clients to bring their stories to life through her illustrations.

Code L1

T

here was nothing wrong with the planet, at first sight.

From above, AC-211 looked like a marble in space; a small pea-green ball flecked with spots of deep brown and the azure pockmarks of small oceans. Thin, wispy banks of cloud chased each other around the equator. For some reason, it made me think of a veil over a shrouded corpse. The thought scared me, if only for its cynicism. Coldly, logically, that was all the job was—preparing a body for viewing. There was a reason the vets called these assignments *undertakings*.

I forced more pleasant images into my head. AC-211 was eighty percent rainforest, and hot as an Australian summer. It was green as freshly mown grass, as a parrot's wing, as—

“Money.” Julio Vasquez stabbed a plump finger at the viewport, grinning at me across the shuttle's long cargo hold. “This place even looks like a dollar bill.”

I shook my head as titanium shutters slid over the viewports, metal already glowing cherry-red with the heat of atmospheric entry. The hold was filled with scanner drones, first-stake warning beacons, bundles of survey spikes, and two large tents. Four of us sat two to a side, strapped into soft, pliable couches to cushion atmospheric entry.

“Just think,” he continued. “We're the first here! We can trade our pensions for a plot and a bundle of cash and—”

“Inadvisable,” squeaked O'Malley, furiously polishing his thick-rimmed specs with a sweaty cloth. The little lawyer was mostly green and had spent most of the ride biting at his manicure. “Unless this

ANDREW JACKSON

place strikes gold with the investors, you'll just have a pile of sticks in the middle of nowhere."

The shuttle jolted and my teeth met briefly in my tongue. A red light went on over the cockpit hatch. I tried to focus on how horribly damp my underarms were, and not the intermittent *ops* and *creaks* of the stressed hull.

"Perfect," grunted a shirtless Park, somehow managing to swig from his hip flask. His hand swept over his bald skull, massaging red eyes. "Sounds like retirement."

Park needed another word beginning with *r*. The security guard had the easiest job on planetfall. While Julio and I set up our gear and argued about who got to write the technical report and who the tourist pamphlet, Park drank copiously and passed out. He carried a pistol, but never used it. Not in the nine jumps I'd made with him, nor in the thirty-six previous. He was an annoyingly well-paid redundancy.

For a second, my stomach took flight, lodging somewhere in my throat. I gritted my teeth, swallowing it back like a gone-off MRE, and when it settled, so had the shuttle.

The heat shields slid back, and we were met with a dazzling, red-orange sunrise. I had to close my eyes for a moment as we descended; massive, broccoli-like trees below us glowed crimson with the dawn. Rocky chasms glittered with unknown minerals; inland lakes became pools of fire. Far, far below, large native birds were turning the sky black with their wings.

"It's a shame that in twenty years, this'll just be another city," I said, placing a hand on the porthole. The red sun turned my dark skin translucent.

Julio laughed. "You're a dreamer, Yasmin. There's a section on your kind in the handbook."

I flipped him the finger.

"Good morning, stooges!" Carol-Anne's Texan twang came over the speakers. "We're about five klicks up and descending fast. Point nine-six Earth g's, sunny skies, temperature a balmy 32°C, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, heavy on the former. Looks like we'll be breathing easy!"

“Why does she always have to sound so damn happy?” muttered Park.

Even from this height, all I could see was kilometre after kilometre of rainforest. Trees the size of battleships, hundreds of metres tall. Some fallen like collapsed buildings across the forest floor, covered in monstrous, writhing pale worm-things. Muddy rivers, distant, misty mountains. Maybe it was a trick of the alien sun, but branches seemed to sprout like arms from some of the great trees.

The pilot was steering us towards a large, red-rock plateau, raised high above most of the forest. It was covered in boulders, patches of brown earth, and thick stands of green and gold-leaved brush. In the dawn light, some of the protrusions looked regular, rhythmic. Almost like—

“Holy crap,” squawked Carol-Anne, as the images solidified. My eyes bulged and Julio whooped. Seemingly starting atop the plateau, reaching like spider’s silk into the forest below—stretching from tree to massive tree—were hundreds of thin, glittering metal cables. “We’ve got a Code L1.”

Julio and I shared a look of pure exhilaration. We were both still fresh enough in the company to be excited. Code L1. L for life.

As I watched our PR man wrestle with his seatbelt like an impatient child, I reminded myself that, gods knew how I empathised, I had a job to do.

“Got to do the boring science bit first.” I popped open my hand terminal, connecting to Carol-Anne’s dashboard and the shuttle’s external sensor network. There was no sound but for the erratic breathing of the crew and the odd thump as the vessel settled on its landing struts. No lurching stomach as some vast carnivorous plant pulled the shuttle inside. No clamour of alien limbs on the rear hatch. No weapons fire.

Julio huffed audibly as my eyes—and most importantly, my nose—gained several orders of magnitude of sensitivity. Topographic maps of the surrounding terrain scrawled in electric blue lines across my screen.

“We scanned from orbit,” he said. “If there were any lurking nasties, we’d know.”

O'Malley muttered something about procedure.

Little dots began to populate the invisible lines extending from the shuttle into the jungle around us as the algorithm noted points of interest. Patches of warmer and cooler air. Scent markers that could mark a patch of dung, or our deaths. The lights were green, green, green. One wavering yellow...and then light green. No reds. I let the scan run on.

"Don't be so sure," muttered Park as he snapped himself out of his restraints. "When my last crew first scouted Sigma III Avalon, we thought the air was fine." He grinned sickly. "When we stepped out, the captain's lungs came out of his—"

"All right!" O'Malley snapped, face now a faint grey colour. "I'd prefer to keep my lunch." He looked at my terminal as it beeped the safe signal I feared would never come. "Copy me your scan, Yasmin."

I swiped my survey across to O'Malley, who read agonisingly slowly and carefully. Finally, he nodded. The final piece of red tape fell away. The world was ours.

"Don't get your hopes up," grunted Park as we dragged a cooler unit out into the muggy, wet morning heat. "This is my sixth L1."

We lowered the unit to the dry soil of the clearing, plugging it into a port on the side of the ship. It instantly began to thrum and standing near it was suddenly delicious. The sun pounded down on the red spear of rock, and all of us were drenched in sweat. I took a long, slow breath, savouring the head rush of the heavy O₂. The new scents were a bomb in my sinuses. Foreign flowers, astringent animal dung, and an underlying tang of something between cinnamon and honey that made my stomach growl.

"How can you say that?" muttered Julio as he swept back his long, damp hair, perched on the stump of a sapling, chugging from a water canteen.

All around us, the jungle teemed with life. Up here, the trees stood in clumps, parting only reluctantly for the powdery rock and occasional animal trails. Large, pale-skinned fruits hung from several, many half-eaten by insect life. Bugs the size of footballs, horned and winged, hard-shelled and maggot-soft alike, buzzed and

rustled about their nests and hollows, some embracing that hot sun, some shrinking from it. Birds, or leather-winged things like them, flew in great squalls overhead, their cries like whooping drunks. Sometimes, in the waist-high brush, between the green and purple plants, there was the swish of something larger, and pained cries from far below were cut off abruptly.

“For every hundred and fifty worlds surveyed, there is a three percent chance of an L1,” said O’Malley. He was patrolling the clearing, peering nervously into the brush. “There is little chance of you seeing six of them.”

Park shrugged. “Shows what you know, stat-man.” His knees were deep in some foul-smelling muck as he popped the clips on the “war chest”—a slim metal briefcase the colour of space itself. Inside lay four palm-sized silvery disc shapes. Park wiped a damp thumb against his slacks and then pressed the print into a sensor atop each disc. They came alive with high whining sounds, like each concealed a swarm of ill-tempered bees.

“But there’s life everywhere,” I said. I’d seen a water world populated by mile-long, barely sentient molluscs, two other green planets, and three ice worlds, one with a frozen waterfall a billionaire had carved a nightclub into, subsequently wiping out a thriving civilisation of ice-toads. But nothing as diverse as this. My head was on a swivel, jerking at every scent, every rustle, every distant cry.

Park’s four disc-drones rose silently into the air around us on invisible jets of superheated plasma. Park resealed the case, lobbed it over the top of O’Malley’s head into the open cargo hold, then flopped down in the dirt and unscrewed his hip flask. “You’re talking an L2. Now, I’ve seen a hundred of those.”

O’Malley rolled his eyes.

“What’s an L2?” said Julio, turning up his uniform cuffs to maximise his tanning. He was eyeing the four drones uneasily.

“Non-sentient life,” sighed O’Malley. “Almost as prolific as Mr. Park claims.” He scratched his neck, then reached into his pocket and pressed a small injector to the irritated skin. I suddenly noticed the cloud of tiny insects circling me and moved away from the cooler, back into the baking sun. The lawyer squinted at the distant

ANDREW JACKSON

mountains and muttered into his wrist terminal. "Possible tectonic activity. Any quakes above Richter five and they can sue us."

I looked at Park, drinking; Julio, basking; O'Malley frowning at the untamed jungle and brushing creases out of his suit.

"Am I the only one that's excited?!" I spun in a circle, breathing the alien air and listening to the jungle.

O'Malley flinched at a distant animal roar and kept muttering. "Hunter-killer team may be required to pacify larger life forms. Don't want a repeat of the Featherstone Scandal...."

Park yawned. "Seen it all before, kid. Big guys packed up and left, wildlife took over." He shuffled closer to the cooler. His swarm of drones chased after him like ducklings following mother. "I walked through the ruins of a city the size of New New York a few years ago. Even the machines were gone. Nothing but wind and skyscrapers. Spooky, when you think about it."

My heart found my throat and Julio jumped to his feet as the bushes ahead rustled. But it was only Carol-Anne, the blonde-haired pilot kitted out in a non-regulation Hawaiian shirt and brown cargo shorts. Her eyes were bulging like golf balls.

"Guys, you...you have to see this!" she shouted, before pivoting and vanishing back into the scrub. "They're still here!"

The rock was about two klicks across, but even in the heat, we crossed it in minutes, crushing pungent berries underfoot, leaping gullies and boulders as we kept the bobbing, bouncing shape of Carol-Anne in sight. Julio and I were only outpaced by the unnatural glide of Park's military disc-drones ahead of us, probing the scrub with thermal optics. Behind us, the security man meandered, and O'Malley tripped and fell, cursing repeatedly. We waited for them to catch up before Carol-Anne pushed aside a tree frond the size of a car door and revealed our Code L1.

For a moment, none of us remembered how to breathe, as we drank in things humanity was never meant to have seen.

The alien building sat in an earthy clearing overrun with springy orange weeds. It was tall and spindly, made mostly of powdery red

rock. Here and there, patches of metal poked through, now the same rusty hue as the stone. My heart pounded against my sternum, missing every other beat. I felt light on my feet, insubstantial, like I might just drift away. This was...real! Built by non-human hands. Or maybe not hands at all.

Julio read my mind and pinched me. I didn't wake up.

"How long has this been here?" I whispered, joining Carol-Anne. The structure rose twenty metres above our heads, long and narrow and covered in thick green creepers. Occasionally, the stubby bill of a bird-thing poked out and retreated, like an unreliable cuckoo clock. The building peaked in a broad, flat top, like someone had smashed it flat with a giant hammer. Innumerable thick metal cables branched out from the peak, reaching down into the jungle below. The spider's threads we'd seen coming in.

"Wait 'til you see what's inside!" Carol-Anne grinned wildly. I noticed a roughly oblong hole in the rock, a rusty hatch creaking in the wind. The door looked weirdly flimsy and narrow, barely wider than my shoulders, but over twice my height. Dizzying imaginations of scale were cut suddenly short by a small, brown ratlike creature scuttling out of the entrance and diving into the nearest bush with a flick of a pronged tail. A strong scent of peppermint washed over me. Despite myself, my heart began beating faster.

"I don't think—" began O'Malley.

That black space seemed to hold my lungs in a viselike grip. What if there was something in there that changed...everything? Or nothing at all? A sudden, awful thought came to me. An ancient chair holding a desiccated corpse in a ruptured United States spacesuit. A lost remnant from some long-forgotten expedition before we found the skip corridors. No aliens at all. Just more of us.

I took a deep, shaky breath, and stepped into the unknown.

Inside, the space was wide and cool, the roof narrow and high, turning the entire structure into an inverted hollow cone. The storey above overhung the space on three sides, and the one above that, the same. There was a musty smell of great age, fresh animal dung, of—

Crunch.

ANDREW JACKSON

Something snapped underneath my boot, making my pulse skyrocket. I recoiled, almost falling into Park coming through the doorway.

“Whoa, what’s—” he said, and then fell silent, staring like the rest of us.

The room was littered with various consoles and interfaces, mounted at desks the height of my shoulder. Giant, red-rock chairs wrapped in shrivelled, bite-marked cables and covered in a white carpet of bones. Bones everywhere, covering every surface.

“*Dios*,” breathed Julio.

“This is a first,” said Park. He watched with something suspiciously like interest as one of his drones teased a fist-sized lump of bone with its Tesla projector. There was a small flame, a *pop* and then a smell like ash filled the space.

I took a tentative step into the room, bent down and picked up what could have been a femur, if the creature had been three metres tall. It was hollow inside and crumbled when I gripped it.

“Don’t touch anything!” O’Malley yelled from outside. “We need to clear any artefacts with corporate before—” A gust of wind blew the door shut, sealing the lawyer outside. Or us in.

“They’re all hollow,” said Carol-Anne, picking up something that could have been a ribcage and throwing it against the wall, where it shattered. “Must have happened ages ago.”

“Have some respect for the dead!” I hissed, sinking to my knees to pick gently through the rubble. Had they chosen to die up here, like this? What was this place, this tall tower high above the world? A radio mast? A weather station? Most of the consoles were light and airy, razor-thin and weirdly, slickly shiny, even under the layers of fine dust. All dead.

“Maybe this was some kind of mass suicide,” Julio said.

“Or a virus,” said Carol-Anne.

We both looked uneasily at my hip pocket, where my terminal was still quietly sniffing this dead air.

“Or a weapon,” muttered Park. His hand caressed his hip flask, but he didn’t drink.

“Come look at this!” I hissed, turning over a large bone structure in

my hands. It started smooth and round on the bottom and tapered upwards to a narrow point. Various holes sat under heavy skeletal ridges—most uniformly square. My brain didn't want to see it. It kept trying to create curves—relatable sockets that weren't there. But some things seemed universal. My fingers trembled across large incisors, the stumps of molars. Nothing sharp. "These guys were herbivores."

"Some master race," said Julio, subtly pocketing a smaller bone. "Museums won't pay out for cud-chewers. People want nasty; they want blood."

"Be careful what you wish for," said Park, sounding so unlike himself that I shivered.

"How did they get to the upper levels?" asked Carol-Anne, tracing the rafters with her flashlight. Occasionally, a wind-disturbed bone tumbled from a higher floor, landing in the pit around us.

I held up what must have been a torso, twice the size of mine, but light as air.

"I think they were leapers," I said. "It would explain the height and hollow bones."

"So, they don't even fly either," grumbled Julio. "There goes another exclusive."

"Found a way up," Carol-Anne yelled from across the chamber. Beyond a recessed doorway, large, tall steps were mounted, perhaps for children or the infirm. Climbing them, I felt a little of both.

The remaining rooms were much the same. Dusty, dead machinery, wires running into clumps of translucent crystals, many melted to slag; strange characters scrawled into walls, hidden animal nests, and bones. Lots of bones.

"Carol-Anne," said O'Malley, still panting from his rapid, curse-filled ascent behind us. He pointed a finger first at the pilot then a waist-high mound of melted, sticky crystal and frayed wire. "Plug into that. See if you can pull any data."

She glared at him, then threw him her auto-jack unit, which bounced off his chest and fell into the bones. "Plug in yourself, *sir*. I ain't going within a light-second of that stuff."

Startled, I realised I'd barely registered the tech, glossing over it like window dressing. It wasn't like anything humanity had ever

ANDREW JACKSON

found out there had been compatible with our systems. Or had worked in several millennia. I did fossils, not fuses.

O'Malley opened his mouth to protest, read Carol-Anne's face, and shut it again. He mumbled something about not liking heights anyway and vanished back down the stairwell, stomping unnecessarily hard.

A doorway on the upper level led to an offset balcony topped with a glass dome. A large, cylindrical building stood, in the centre of a wooden-floored concourse. The bones up here were sun-yellowed and crumbling, and the greenhouse effect was fearsome. Wind whistled through various holes in the canopy, making eerie musical notes in the dead skulls.

High overhead, dozens of thick metal cables converged together, bending like drinking straws into the great cylinder. Carol-Anne couldn't get this door open.

"Maybe that's far enough," said Park, sounding happier now he could see the sun again. "I think this calls for a toast." He raised his hip flask. "To—"

From below, O'Malley's scream cut the air like a blade.

Maybe I'd seen too many of my dad's old NeoWesterns. I—and maybe everyone else—expected Park to snap to life, pull his pistol, and let rip. All he did, as we stood frozen, watching O'Malley squirm in the dirt, was cock his head and laugh. Park's drones hovered about the scene, whirring, gun-tubes silent, as if sharing his mirth.

The lawyer wrestled with that little brown creature, shrieking, uniform muddy, paunch exposed as he struggled to hold his corn chips out of reach. The stifling air was choked with that peppermint scent.

Forked tail wrapped around O'Malley's other arm, the animal extended a long, conical snout towards the food. High, keening yips rang from its throat, and similar sounds echoed from the trees around us.

"He just wants the chips, man!" Julio shouted over O'Malley's shrieks. "Let go!"

Carol-Anne strode forwards as Park fell on his ass, still laughing. She pinned O'Malley down, yanked the bag out of his clenched fist, and threw it into the dirt. The creature lunged as soon as she retreated, shoving its face deep inside the bag. The lawyer scrambled to his feet.

“Shoot it!” he bellowed at Park. “Shoot the damned thing!”

The treeline rustled as three, four, five more of the furry creatures trotted cautiously into the clearing. I realised, when I remembered to breathe, how much my fingers were going to hurt after I’d finished typing up *this* report. “Might need some more ammo,” I said.

Sunset on AC-211 was a beautiful thing. The big red ball of the star was shrouded in distant clouds of purple mist, turning the sky to bonfire embers. I felt it glowing against my face, a now-cooler red heat reflected from the surface of my terminal.

“The skippers surrounded us like...” I whispered as my nails click-clacked off the smooth surface.

Julio, resting on his elbows beside me, was surrounded by his own pile of screens displaying half-finished drafts of the tourist spiel, and week-old results from some gravity-ball tournament. I had the vague idea he’d said something.

O’Malley had already traipsed back to the shuttle, and its dubious sleeping facilities. Carol-Anne was inside the building, kicking bones around. Park straddled the cliff edge, drinking, covered in the small furry creatures. Another sat in my lap, looking up at me with the wide, trusting eyes of a puppy. I’d named them for the way they’d run up to us, moving in a sort of hip-rolling hop, using all five legs and their long, prehensile tails. This one was Skippy. First of his name.

“I said,” sighed Julio, “corporate will want us to leave behind a weather satellite. Monitor the seasons.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, stroking the orange-furred belly. It was soft, velvety and giving as a cat’s, without the danger zone that got careless owners bitten. The thing cooed and blinked two lazy, silver-flecked eyes.

Julio huffed and dropped his terminal, nervously watching Skippy, who had demolished four ration bars and a tin of dried raisins before curling up against me.

ANDREW JACKSON

"You're a biologist, not a zookeeper," he said. "How about we stick in our lanes and get this place signed off?"

"I thought this was your ideal holiday," I said. I wondered how these things drank, mated, pooped. I couldn't stop wondering. Had they known the leaper race? Been their pets?

"Money, Yaz. M-O-N-E-Y. In case you've forgotten, we're essentially galactic estate agents. Just trying to get a little slice of a very big pie."

I sighed, and Skippy seemed to sense my mood, huddling in closer.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could just...appreciate all this?" I looked down across the great trees, swaying in the wind, the surging rivers, the yawning, wet marshlands. Thousands of biospheres I would never know. "Instead of bulldozing it for luxury condos."

"Hey, I want a luxury condo," said Julio. "Maybe afford to retire out here one day and become a boring old fart like you."

"You're scared," I realised.

"Aren't you?" he said. "I don't think L1s are as common as even that stuffed suit says. Those bones freak me out." He swallowed, looking down into the endless forest. "I think when civilisations die, they die for a reason."

"What are you saying?"

"Let's just hope that reason isn't still around."

The night felt colder, after that.

Much later in my bag lying in the cargo hold, I woke to the sound of rain rattling across the shuttle's roof. It lulled me back under quickly, like a lullaby by a warm nightlight. Julio was wrong to fear this place. I just knew it.

The hull was thick. Park's screams came through it anyway.

For the second time in less than a day we sprinted through the cloying trees, waking up on the run, choking on humidity and nameless terror. Where were the drones? If there was a threat, why weren't they engaging? Park sounded as if he were being murdered. As if—

The trees opened all at once, revealing the alien structure, and the

big security guard down on his knees, bent over several shredded animal corpses.

The dirt floor was still damp with rain and sodden with the light-coloured blood of the skipping creatures. Little snouts, severed tails, and skinless pelts lay all over the campsite. The peppermint smell was masked by the stench of wet, bloody flesh and the somehow sour tang of the rainwater. O'Malley opened his mouth to speak and vomited instead.

“Jesus, man...” Julio gasped. “Did they...eat each other?”

“Or something else did.” Carol-Anne glared at Park. “I said you shouldn’t have trapped them.”

The skippers had eaten out of Park’s hand, and gone into the large, chicken-wire cage easily enough, but as soon as the moons vanished behind dark clouds, they’d begun to chitter and snap at the bars. Could they have had some reason to be under cover? Some chameleon-like predator even the drones couldn’t pick up?

The damp jungle was quiet, steaming in another sweltering sunrise. Water dripped thickly from leaves and vines, and collected in several standing pools. I found my gaze fix on one of these, watching the water ripple in the light breeze. There was something about it that bothered me. The muddy particles seemed to be moving almost...sluggishly. A sudden memory swept across my tongue of Gramma’s dense banana milkshakes that required a strong jaw to drink.

I shook my head to clear it, angry I’d let my thoughts wander. “Whatever did this, it’s gone...right?” I asked.

“Poor little guys...” Park stuttered. I was shocked to hear tears in his throat. Shocked and a little scared.

“I know.” I patted his shoulder awkwardly. “I know.”

“Screw this!” exploded Julio. “Let’s just get out of here. Drop a hazard beacon and send in the badasses.” He darted his head around. “I don’t like this place.”

O’Malley gasped and we turned to look at him, staring into his terminal. When he looked up, his face was the colour of porridge.

“That might be a problem,” he said.

The shuttle was an ugly grey block on stilts, now half an ugly grey block, front end poking diagonally out of a sinkhole of swirling brown muck. Sharp-featured bird-things perched frequently on the elevated cockpit as the morning sun rapidly baked the mass solid. Their cries sounded suspiciously like laughter.

Carol-Anne pocketed her terminal. “Good news is nothing is broken,” she said. “Bad news is she won’t fly again without moving all this crap.”

Park gave a sulky drunken hiccup. The rest of us began yapping at the pilot.

“How are we going to eat?” asked Julio.

“Paragraph C in subsection 4-A of the handbook specifies that it is the pilot’s—” began O’Malley.

“How did this happen?” I interrupted, gesturing at the shuttle. “We were gone, what, ten minutes? All this water came from *somewhere*.” The empty sky seemed to sparkle with some hidden mirth. A lone, wispy cloud hurried by on a strong wind, far overhead. Surely, we’d have heard something. A localised shower—even one this extreme—should have made a hell of a racket. Shouldn’t it?

There was an uncomfortable silence as everyone considered the alienness of the world we were stranded on.

“The orbiter!” Julio barked, frantically searching the baby-blue sky for the one moving star. “If you tell it to engage auto—”

“Tried that,” said Carol-Anne. She pointed at the western horizon, where a distant wall of dark cloud spoiled the view. “That storm’s screwing with the signal. And it’s only going to get worse. It’s coming this way.”

I felt a sudden chill despite the baking heat. “Then...”

“I can clear the mud, if you lend me that.” Carol-Anne nodded at one of Park’s military drones, hovering peaceably over Julio’s shoulder. Fat lot of good they’d done the skippers. “The kinetic pusher on this little guy can get it done. Eventually. And there’s more than enough food in the cooler.”

“The pilot is held liable for any and every—”

“Do him a favour.” Carol-Anne jerked her head at O’Malley. “Get him out of here before I kick his ass.”

Julio found out what the cables did by accident. I'd helped him force the rooftop door to the big cylinder, and inside we found a few more consoles, a few more animal nests, a few more bones. In the huge space, several chambers were recessed into the walls. They were long and narrow, and three still harboured skeletons.

"What do you think?" His eyes twinkled as he forced himself into one. "Think they're like teleporters? Just imagine if—"

Julio disappeared with a rush of whooshing air and a rusty, metallic shriek.

"Julio!" I shouted, rushing towards the space where he'd been. He screamed from somewhere over my head, and then again, fading with distance.

Legs pumping with adrenaline, I kicked aside the bones and ran back outside, searching the tangle of tubes overhead. The distant banging as he bounced around the pipes was all the more terrifying when I saw how so many of them had snapped off or rusted away.

I shaded my eyes against the glaring sun as I tried to see where he'd gone. From far below, O'Malley shouted something.

The tube spat Julio out about three hundred metres away, into the bower of a massive, purple leaved tree. He fell out of a curved mouthpiece-looking aperture, caked in rust and detritus.

Fumbling with a scanner eyepiece, I zoomed in to see him lying on a pad of spongy white material. He looked both terrified and elated.

"Whoa...Yaz!" he shouted down my terminal, full of static. "You've got to try this!" He got shakily to his feet. "They're pneumatic tubes. You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Money?"

"Ding, ding, ding!" he said. "Amusement park!" He paused for a fraction of a second. "Julio's Humps. Sound good?"

O'Malley broke into the channel. "Yasmin, don't you dare. We'll be accountable for damages to the architecture, and any injuries incurred—"

"Sold," I said. "But we're working on the name."

Besides, I needed to get out of there. Away from the anxiety about the storm and the shuttle, and from Park, who was still brooding over the butchered animals, hand never far from his gun.

O'Malley was right about the tube travel, at least. The system had been designed for the hollow-boned leapers, and I bounced around the car like a pinball in a washing machine. But the pain was offset by a wonder so great I could barely breathe.

All throughout the tree's dozens of levels, spindly wooden huts clustered together, most now collapsed or rotten and overgrown with clinging, multi-hued weeds. Metal was used sparingly—mostly just to buttress the bowers and carved wooden concourses. Most of *that* was caked in thick carpets of rust. How long had this been here? How long had they been gone? I itched to climb the bowers and try to carbon-date some of the structures, although most of the levels were a good five or six metres vertically distant. Perfect for a leaper, less so for us. But everywhere, I could see more glittering tubes, stretching kilometres into the misty jungle-like connective tissue between muscles. This was more than a code in the handbook. This was a world. Or it had been.

We stuck together by unspoken agreement, using the tubes where possible and climbing where necessary. The pure, dizzying air was pungent with the scents of unknown plants and stagnant water. And everywhere we looked, bones upon bones. Since the massacre of the skipping creatures, they'd taken on some of the gravitas they deserved. As excited as I was, I tried to remember that this planet could still easily get us killed.

"This is what we should be doing," I said, as we brushed aside dripping vines and ducked through a hole bored in a massive trunk. One of the disc-drones preceded us into the gap, painting the dark wood in flashes of electric blue as it scanned the passage ahead of us. O'Malley had insisted it accompany us. Julio had insisted on naming it "toothless." "Not idiot-proofing the unknown for the rich and stupid."

Belying myself, I extracted a needle-probe from within my terminal and prodded the soft wood until sap began to flow and my terminal set about its analysis.

"The board—" he began.

“Screw the board,” I said, as we came into a network of hollow tunnels in the depths of the tree. It felt good to voice it. All the science fiction novels my parents raised me on—where we went to the stars to better ourselves and find our inner humanity—had turned out to be so much vain hope. Forty years ago, when a bunch of college geeks accidentally invented the skip drive, the only thing that came out with us was the rot in our hearts.

Julio laughed incredulously. “Space tourism is the only reason romantics like you even get to come out here at all. All I see is what I’m paid to, Yaz.”

Something rattled farther down the warren, and he huddled closer to me.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “So, you’d give this up to sell another asteroid?”

Julio’s silence tasted very sweet.

Like the transport hub, the inner tree was hollow all the way to the bottom. The difference here was falling had greater consequences. A nest of monstrous creepers bulged two hundred metres below, with thorns the size of shark’s fins.

Julio gulped as we stood on a narrow ledge, looking down on a series of platforms staggered around the trunk—the now-familiar vertical space apart. Cracks in the bark provided little spear shafts of light, but most of the illumination came from clusters of bioluminescent plants placed in repeating patterns. Many were now brown and dead, and some harboured nests of flitting, winged creatures that watched us with too-big eyes. Cool breezes brought the pungent scent of damp decay. “Toothless” descended on a cushion of air below us, its ghostly blue beam of light picking out colonies of light-shy bugs, vibrating, slimy nests the size of our heads, and once, a pair of skippers, playing tug-of-war with a mutilated, spidery mess with far too many limbs.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the new ecosystem. For a moment, I could almost feel what it must have been like, when they were still here. Smells of plants and pets, spiced foods bartered at stalls. The hubbub of conversation—assuming they were vocal. Some of

the platforms had bowl-shaped depressions surrounded by rows of rings. Theatres, forums? Overlaying it all, the constant *thud-thud* heartbeat of the alien city. The beating feet of the creatures as they leapt and landed, leapt and landed. As natural as breathing. I could even *see* them if I concentrated hard enough. Two long arms, two legs, a torso, like a human stretched on a rack. Covered in a thin, grey skin that turned black in the sun. Would they have had tails? Unconsciously, I found myself rubbing my coccyx and the arboreal remnant there. Tails. No question.

“This is why we didn’t see any civilisation from orbit,” I breathed. “Because they lived in the trees.”

Julio shivered, listening to the muffled roaring of—still unseen—distant beasts. “Don’t blame them.”

“It’s not about who’s biggest and strongest,” I said. “It’s about who’s smart enough to avoid them.”

Julio kicked a rock from the ledge, listening to it rattle down the tall city and out of earshot, startling a hoard of screeching bird-things from their nests. “If they’re so smart, where are they?”

Julio solved the jumping problem by finding more of those steep-stair passages—or *kidways*, as he dubbed them—weaving through the trunk, with narrow exits on every level. We explored several collapsed dwellings, finding little but rotting wood, invading weeds, and more bones, before settling in a cluster of buildings that were mostly intact and stable.

Water to each platform was supplied by runoff from a complicated aqueduct system that ran around the trunk, mostly long dry and dammed with muck. In the high-ceilinged rooms, stagnant water sat in several deep wooden basins which I took for bathtubs. Many now harboured glittering, darting amphibian colonies. Everything was bathed in a neon-blue filter from the plant-lights. Blue like a morgue. I checked my terminal, making sure Toothless was getting all this for the xenoanthropology department.

“This must be how they slept,” I said, as I ducked into another room filled with tall racks of what we’d first decided were shelving units, then changed our minds to beds. Beds full of bones.

"All these stupid birds and no one thought to make a feather pillow," Julio observed, pirouetting in place to record the room on his terminal.

"Vegetarians, remember?" I bent to check out the lowest shelves, spotting more of the strange carved patterns Julio insisted I was imagining. Most of the rooms we'd entered had looked like a tattoo parlour's catalogue, covered wall-to-wall in symbols and cursive scrawls. A language as dead as its speakers.

"Yeah, and they grew wings and flew to heaven," Julio grumbled. "Where are the sinners?"

More symbols were scratched into the place where bed met wall. These racks were narrower, and the bones here were smaller.

"Hey, I think these were the kids," I said. A chill ran through me as I imagined them dying in here, like the adults. Whatever had wiped the leapers out in one stroke, like snuffing a candle, I hoped the little ones were spared that terrible knowledge. Had they played like us? Did they have toys and friends and school and overprotective parents? Did they dream?

Julio joined me, gulping at the small bones. "Hope they didn't go like Park's skippers."

"Wait..." I whispered, fingers deep in the crevices of a small, hand-sized carving. "I think I understand some of this."

Julio rolled his eyes. "Looks like a doctor's handwriting."

"Here's a sun," I said, tracing a big round O-shape, radiating wiggly lines. "And here are the people." A collection of single strikes in the wood, like a tally chart. "See how they vary in height?"

"Could be just a grumpy little rat marking his turf."

"And what about this?" I pointed at a collection of small markings that looked like commas, falling from the sun. Many were still filled with sticky amber sap.

"More damn birds?"

"It's rain!" I whispered. "They were showing the rain."

"Why's it going upwards, then? And why is it coming out of the people like that?"

He was right. Some of the little tally-chart people were carved horizontally, their ends meshing with the upward-falling rain.

"That's to show they're dead," I said, but I was losing conviction

ANDREW JACKSON

in a theory still in the first trimester. “Maybe some religious belief?” The more I stared, the less I saw.

“Dead from rain falling upwards.” Julio chuckled. “Maybe we should stick to selling this place and let someone else work it out. Let’s get back to camp, huh? We don’t want to accidentally fall into the sun!”

We left the tree-city almost as we found it, but a piece of my mind stayed behind, turning the images over and over. What if the extinction event had something to do with those carvings in the wood? What if they hadn’t gone quietly? What if we were next?

We slept in the building that night. Until Carol-Anne extracted the shuttle, the rock walls helped us feel a little safer. Park had swept the bones on this level into one neat, mountain-like pile, and was still sitting atop it now, like the grim reaper on his throne, nipping frequently from his hip flask and staring into nothing. There’d been no discussion of watches. No one was brave enough to suggest he get some sleep.

“Creeps me out, man,” Julio whispered as we lay on our elbows on thin sponge mattresses.

I wasn’t sure if he was talking about Park or the rain hammering the roof. Outside, there was the occasional, pained shriek, like things were dying bloodily. The buzz of a patrolling drone would intermittently pass through the walls. Park had been tinkering with their sweep patterns and friend-or-foe systems all evening, trying to calibrate for something beyond our understanding.

“How’s progress on the ship?” O’Malley asked, shivering in the cool air and hugging his knees. He kept darting fearful glances at Park, as if afraid he would snap at any moment.

Carol-Anne was, somehow, almost asleep. “Over halfway done,” she said. “I’ve left the drone working through the night. Should be able to fly by morning.”

“Good work.” O’Malley nodded, as if he was in charge. “I’m thinking about putting a quarantine notice on this place, and—”

“Whoa!” Julio sat up straight. “You can’t do that! Quarantine means we don’t see a dime.”

“Maybe better that way,” muttered Park, as fresh roars and cries rang out from the distant valleys. What was going on out there?

“Worse,” I said. “We’d have to cover fuel and expenses ourselves.”

O’Malley sighed. “Would you rather be sued when someone richer than you dies out here?”

“It’s just wildlife, man,” Julio said. “Call in a hunter-killer team and be done.”

“The stuff we found today—” I began.

“Is all very interesting, I’m sure, but the comfort of the client comes before your imagination.”

I glared at O’Malley and Julio joined in. He seemed to sense the atmosphere, and shuffled away, muttering into his terminal. Carol-Anne’s sudden snore startled me out of my anger, and I fell into the mattress and tried to sleep.

My terminal screen read 03:00. The numbers swam in my sticky eyes as I blearily wondered what had woken me. Distant thunder rumbled; constant rain hissed over stone. Closer at hand, clothing rustled, footsteps pattered. A cooking pot tumbled over with a *clang*. Someone was breathing heavily, too rapidly, muttering under their breath. A little spike of adrenaline ran through my chest.

Then the small shape of O’Malley coalesced out of the blackness, stumbling past me.

“They’re everywhere!” he gasped, voice thick with sleep. “They’ve... they’ve come for us! It was hubris to think...”

I groaned and rubbed my face to clear the sleep fog. “It’s just a dream,” I mumbled, not sure who I was addressing.

Carol-Anne and Julio were still out. Park was awake, eyes glazed like the surfaces of frozen lakes. The room stank of his cheap gin. He was the security man, for God’s sake. He should—

“Wait...” I said to the panicking lawyer as lightning flashes lit up Park’s bone throne. Had O’Malley opened the door? There was a smell of damp vegetation tinted with hot electrical discharge. Rain hissed on dirt. “We don’t know—”

But he was already gone.

ANDREW JACKSON

I was about to yell to Park when O’Malley began screaming again. Not like before. This wasn’t terror. This was agony.

I ran after him, stumbling over Julio, who came awake shouting and cursing. Park sat like a stone. Somehow, Carol-Anne was there first, and threw the door open to living hell.

O’Malley’s back was to us, rigid as if immobilised, held by some invisible force. I activated my flashlight, almost dropping it as my body fought to get back inside, where it was quiet, where it was safe. The beam lanced through the shards of rain and stunned Julio, who was trying to force his way past me.

A high whining sound cut through the rain, and suddenly, the drones were there, probing with their blue beams.

“Screw this!” yelled Carol-Anne. “Hold on! Just—”

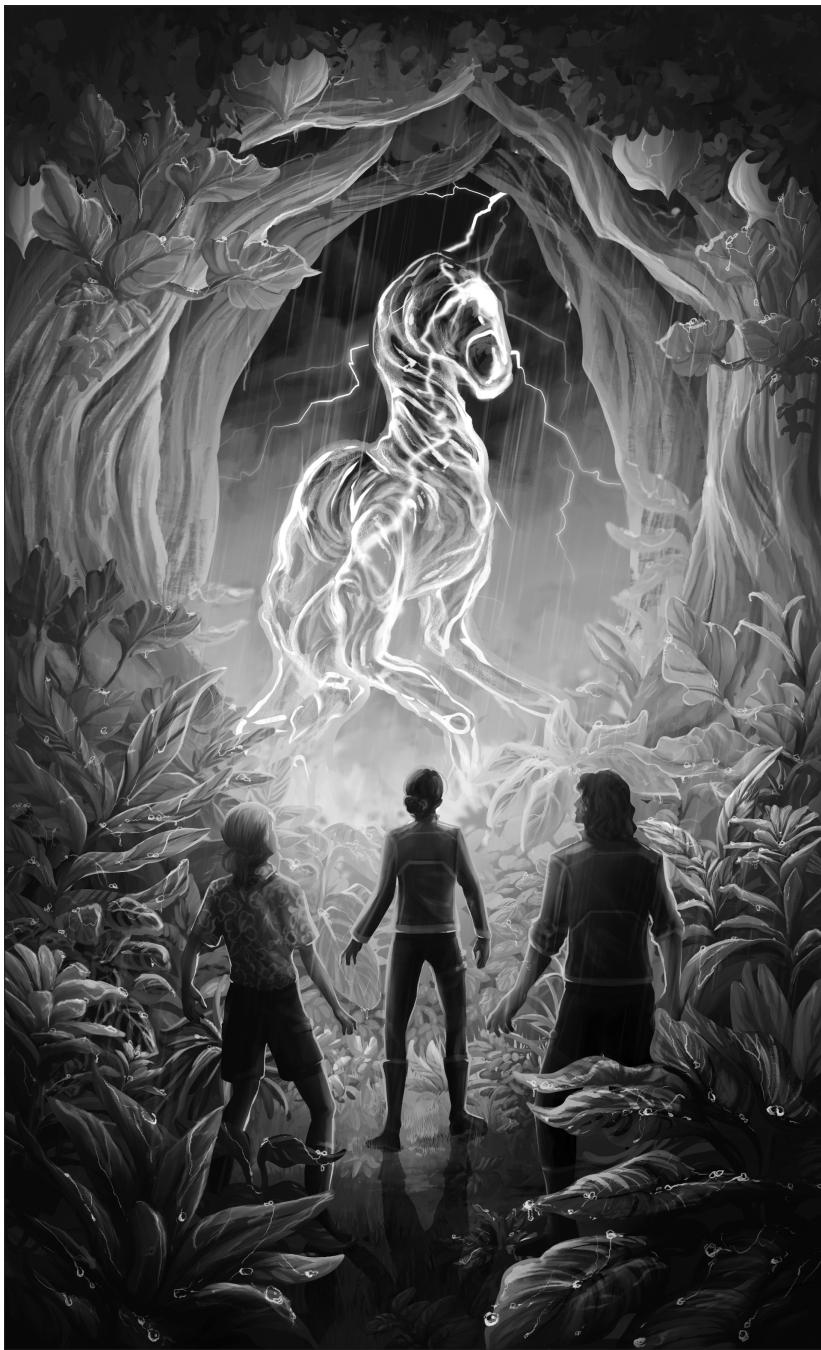
“No!” I screamed, throwing my arms around her as I finally saw what had the lawyer. Heard the rain increasing, saw shapes in the dark, as the silvery disc-drones began firing, heat-blossoms flowering around their gun ports, bursts of automatic tracer rounds rattling my teeth.

O’Malley was being held by what looked like a static, churning wall of water. It was twice his height and shaped like a spindly starfish. Long, long limbs reached down from a central body to hold him tight as one of the prehensile “legs” roughly probed his body, tweaking and teasing and pulling, like a cat playing with its prey.

“What the hell is it?” Julio shouted. Carol-Anne strained against me, but I held the smaller woman tight.

“You go out there, you’re dead!” I roared. A bullet whined off the door inches from my face and pinged off into the night. The drones were confused, unable to acquire live targets, constantly angling to avoid shooting O’Malley. The water creature rippled with the fusillade, like rain on a pond, but just stood there, impossible and implacable.

The rain monster cocked a translucent, teardrop-shaped head to regard the lawyer. There was a sharp, sour smell beneath the wet dirt and blood. The rain beat harder as O’Malley’s screams became choking sounds. Suddenly, his arm was gone, vanishing to an awful ripping sound as his suit and limbs were mercilessly tugged apart. His feet beat a crazy tattoo against the dirt.



HEATHERANNE LEE

ANDREW JACKSON

And in the rain, in a rough semicircle, all around, more of the water monsters, tall as elephants and spindly as needles, watching. Waiting their turn.

There was a shearing noise, then O'Malley burst like a ripe melon. The monsters surged forward, watery tendrils touching, grasping for what remained. Still more loomed behind them, ranks on ranks of the things. Then, in front of the horde jostling for pieces of the bloody jigsaw O'Malley had become, the rain shimmered, and forms began to suggest themselves, a metre from my face. A thin tendril of water, like a spout in a bathtub, reached out to tickle my face, turning my skin to ice. I took a breath to scream, and instead managed to hurl myself backwards into Julio, dragging Carol-Anne down with me. One of the drones tried to follow us in, but seemed to hang in midair, grasped by a rope of water, then it was yanked backwards, beeping an alarm, and the door slammed shut.

"Park!" I screamed, stumbling over to the prone figure. "Park, get up! We need you."

The security man shivered and turned over, hiding his face. I grabbed him by the shoulder, flipped him over and slapped him twice, hard. Outside, water was crashing against the door.

"I don't think they can get in," Julio gasped. "Not if they're—"

Park's silver-dollar eyes cleared slowly. His breath was stifling.

"They got O'Malley," I panted, trying to control my breathing. My hands curled in Park's lapels, unable to stay still. O'Malley's awful end kept replaying behind my eyes. "You have to help us!"

Carol-Anne was pacing. "What the hell...?" she muttered, over and over. "What the hell...?"

"How many?" Park slurred, pulling himself upright. His hand found his gun, and I was relieved to see it was steady. "What are they?"

"Damn monsters!" Julio shouted, backing away from the pounding door.

Monsters, maybe, but there was something about those teardrop-heads...ancient skulls crumbling in my hands.

"I think...I think they're the leapers," I said. "The people we thought were dead."

Julio laughed hysterically. "That's insane, Yaz. We saw the bones—"

"They're made of water!" screamed Carol-Anne. "How can they be made of water?"

"Secure that door," barked Park, rubbing a hand over his eyes. It was as if he was shedding some old shroud, not questioning, just responding to the alien threat. "Barricade any openings. If they're made of water, we'll be safe in here." He thumbed his terminal. "My drones aren't responding."

"Gone, too." I shook my head.

"And the shuttle? Don't tell me they got that one as well."

Carol-Anne thumped her forehead to clear her thoughts. "Drone's still working. An hour, maybe two. If—"

"Shh!" Julio hissed suddenly, his voice echoing sibilantly around the chamber. "Do you hear that?"

All I could hear was my own erratic breathing, the thready *thump-thump* of my heart. The door was no longer rattling, but the dripping water seemed louder somehow. Almost as if—

High above the pile of bones, a tiny crevice in the rock was discharging a thin, dirty stream of water. It made hollow, resonant *plinks* as it landed amongst the skulls and femurs. And as we watched, the bones began to move.

From the long, narrow feet up, a monster began forming, at first slowly, then faster and faster. Calcium-stained water began surging as if contained within a skeletal-shaped force field. Bones began knocking together, flowing out on little waves of water as the alien coalesced amongst them. Terror was a butterfly in my throat.

"Go, now!" Park hissed. "Get up top, and—" He flicked the safety off his weapon, sighting down it at the forming creature. That sharp, sour smell was eye-watering.

An idea came to me, sudden and unbidden.

"The trees!" I shouted, looking at Julio. "If we can get into the trees, we've got a chance."

"Then, move!" Park roared. "I'll be right behind you."

As we turned for the stairs, Park threw down his hip flask and began firing, the reports like thunder in the enclosed space.

We ran breathlessly through the floors, stumbling over bones, pulling each other along to Park's gunshots and wordless cries.

As we approached the door to the roof, there was another commotion from below, and my theories were horribly confirmed when—in a rustle and crunch of bones—the water monster was airborne, throwing itself a good seven metres, to come crashing down on the level beneath us. The teardrop head turned to regard us, terrifyingly smooth-featured where there should have been eyes and a mouth.

“Leapers...” I whispered, then Julio was shoving me through the door.

The storm was breaking right overhead. Underneath the glass roof, the night sky was roiling black clouds, shot through by the occasional bolt of jagged blue lightning. A wall of water pounded down on the dome, making conversation impossible. The three of us moved at a dead run, feet inaudibly crushing bones. Sweat stung my eyes, and a stitch tore at my side, but I knew if we stopped, we were as dead as O’Malley. Through the multitude of holes in the dome, little runnels of water were forming those narrow skeletons, some already moving towards us before they were fully formed.

Carol-Anne reached the transport hub first, followed by Julio. I turned at the last second, stopping in the doorway.

“Park—” I began.

“Leave him!” roared Carol-Anne. “Get inside! Now!”

Julio tugged my right arm, and in the same moment, something took hold of my left. I screamed and pulled free from Julio, beating at the tendril of murky water holding me tight. My hand sank into the warm swirl and dragged through it like oil, coming out stinging and raw, skin faintly smoking. Pain roared up my arm and I bit into my tongue. The grip tightened as the watery alien pulled itself towards me.

Then, suddenly, Park was there, barrelling through the roof door, half his face hanging off to expose jagged teeth and bone. One of his hands was gone, but his other was holding the gun.

The pistol flared, muzzle flashes like tiny flowers. The bullets tore into the creature holding me, punching through and out the other side. The water surged and displaced around the rounds, and the grip on my wrist loosened enough to tug myself free.

“Park!” I screamed, fighting Julio to get to him, but the aliens fell on him like a wave, crushing, ripping, tearing. Park died silently, pistol still blazing.

“Now!” screamed Julio, picking me up bodily and throwing me into one of the tubes. Carol-Anne hit the button and then I was flying.

Still in shock, we fell and stumbled across the sodden bowers of the tree-city, dodging the waterspouts and the bones, the fresh carcasses of flying creatures, and somehow, made it into the trunk alive.

We didn’t stop running until we were several metres deep, far from the downpour and the sour stink of the aliens. From the corpses of our friends. From hope.

Somehow, we were back in the tree-city. Specifically, the children’s sleeping quarters, facing the wall of alien drawings. Carol-Anne had curled up near them, tracing them with her fingers and whispering to herself. Julio just stared at me with bug eyes.

“I have a theory,” I said, after an interminable silence, where we jumped at every whisper of wind, every crack of thunder, every distant trickle of water.

“A theory,” Julio said. “Can we eat a theory? Can we fly a theory out of this hell?”

“Think,” I continued, ignoring him. The words felt better the more I used them. Like a ladder I was climbing to freedom. “How does rain form?”

Carol-Anne laughed hollowly. “It’s a bit late for a science lesson, Yaz. This is magic.” She shivered. “Dark magic.”

“Firstly, water evaporates under heat,” I said. I got heavily to my feet, nudging her out of the way to expose the drawings. Now my brain was busy trying not to be terrified, it was making the connections it couldn’t earlier, almost too fast to follow. “Look at this.” I pointed at the rain, flowing upwards out of the stick figures.

“Like you said, maybe it’s their religion,” said Julio. “Souls leaving the body.” His nails made soft, rhythmic clicks as he chewed them in the dark.

ANDREW JACKSON

"I think we're both right, in a way." I thought back to those old science fiction novels my parents had loved. The Heinleins, the Clarkes, the Wyndhams. "Do you know what sublimation is?"

"That's when a liquid becomes a gas, right?" said Carol-Anne. She looked better for having something to do.

I shook my head. "It's when a solid bypasses liquid state, under the right conditions. Jumps straight to a gas."

"What are you saying? That these...things turned into air?"

"I think so," I said. I stroked the contours of what I'd thought raindrops. "I think this *does* represent their souls; their idea of what was going to happen. They knew this was coming, and they wanted it." I looked at the child bones again, some lying on the larger shelves, cradled by the adults. "But, maybe not all of them."

"You mean spiritual or physical evolution," Julio hissed. "Transcending the body or something. So, what happened? How did we end up at water zombies?"

"I think it didn't go how they hoped," I said. "I think they exist up there in the clouds, not quite alive, not quite dead. When it cools, when it rains, they can take liquid form." I shivered. "I think they want to reverse it. I think they want to come back."

"That's why they want us," Carol-Anne breathed. "Take us apart, find out how we work, try and use us to cross back over."

"Or maybe they're just insane," Julio said. "Assuming you aren't, of course. They could have been trapped up there a thousand years." He shivered violently and looked upwards, seemingly staring through the wood to the dark skies and the unknown stars beyond. "There's another thing you haven't considered. The level of tech we've seen doesn't suggest they had the science. What if this was done *to* them, by someone else?"

The thought was somehow the worst yet.

"Drone is done," Carol-Anne said, sometime later. She laughed sadly. "We can leave any time we want."

"So, what, we wait until morning?" Julio said. "This has only happened at night so far."

"Actually, it's only happened when it's rained," I corrected him.

"And I've got some bad news," said Carol-Anne. "Before we lost

contact with the orbiter, it was monitoring a larger storm front moving through the lower hemisphere."

Nails exhausted, Julio began chewing his cuticles. "Meaning?" he whispered.

"Meaning we've got hours of this. Maybe days."

Julio shivered as thunder rang through the ancient corridors, faint blue light painting our faces like horrible theatre masks. "I don't think we can live that long," he said.

I cradled my hand, still raw and stinging. Little pale spots stood out on the dark skin, like patches of salt. Already, they'd begun to creep up my forearm. What happened if they didn't stop?

To distract myself from the fear, I resumed studying the wall. How had it happened? Julio was right—the technology we'd seen had been minimal, but that didn't mean there wasn't more, out of sight. A symbiosis with nature didn't make them primitives; it might mean the opposite.

"Dry ice sublimates when heated...." I muttered to myself.

Somehow, using unknown, impossible science, the leapers had tried to—or been made to—transcend the corporeal, but they'd failed, and were now part of AC-211's water cycle. Were the distant oceans just moving bodies of their fractured molecules, occasionally evaporated and deposited as rain? If they'd traded one set of physical properties for another, that meant they still obeyed physical laws.... I kept staring at the drawing of the sun, remembering how the monster that should have killed me had warped around Park's bullets. Around the projectile or...

"Heat!" I shouted, making the others jump and cry out. "We need heat! They can't form if it's too hot. Start a fire and turn these things to ash!"

Julio looked at me as if I'd grown another head, but Carol-Anne was nodding along. "I see where you're going, but—"

"The drone," I said, thinking of the little handheld, barely three klicks away and light-years out of reach. "Can't it—?"

"It's got a nuclear motor." Carol-Anne was pacing rapidly, feet thumping on wood. "If I fly it a safe distance from the shuttle and trigger a meltdown—"

“Guys?” said Julio.

“Not now!” I hissed, mind flying ahead. It *might* work. Our blood was so loaded with stims and neutralisers that we could probably handle the radiation for a short time, but unless we got to the orbiter in minutes, we’d be dead.

“Guys?” Julio repeated, and we both stopped our pacing and calculating to listen. And heard that awful *drip-drip* of nearby water, like a leaking faucet. My eyes swept frantically upwards, taking in the bulging, spidery pipe network. I’d forgotten about the aqueducts. In the corner of the room, the water in the washtub began to stand up.

“Move!” screamed Carol-Anne, shoving us from the room. My guts turned to ice as the monster surged after us, forming as it fell forwards in a wave. From other rooms, more of them were already emerging, overhead pipes bursting, showering us in fetid vegetation and that sharp, pungent stink. From platforms deep in the dead city, water creatures were jumping, surging up the trunk like whale spouts to come crashing down again, closer and closer with each leap.

“We need fire!” I gasped as we scrambled up the kidways, hearts pounding, screaming mindlessly. But the wood was sodden and ancient, and we had no way to strike a spark. As we ran, Carol-Anne thumped her terminal, telling the drone what to do.

We burst into the storm in a tumble, falling over each other and yanking ourselves to our feet. We were still ahead of them—we still had time! The tube hub was only twenty metres away, but the terrain was slippery and uneven, the wood now a hazard in the dark. Leaves glittered and shook in the downpour, and by the glow of the jagged lightning, we saw them ahead, outlined around the edges like barely there ghosts. Hundreds of the water leapers, standing, waiting in the rain. We froze where we stood; some latent prey instinct maybe, praying they wouldn’t see us. Wouldn’t do what they’d done to O’Malley.

Julio gulped. “Well, it’s been a pleasure—”

My only warning was the briefest, head-swimming stench of ozone, before lightning blew apart the night like a firework.

The force of the bolt hitting the tree, ten metres ahead, threw us flat. Every hair on my body stood rigid and the heat from the strike

seared my eyes. The wounded tree screamed, and the thunder almost blew out my eardrums. Julio was shrieking wordlessly, clutching his head.

But as we helped each other shakily upright, we saw the wall of hot red fire ahead of us, and the aliens turning to little puffs of vapour in the sudden heat.

I heard myself laughing hysterically, yelling something unintelligible. I grabbed Julio and Carol-Anne by the arms, fighting my instincts and running at the fire.

Despite the rain, the blaze spread quickly, turning the wooden huts to pyres, criss-crossing the trunk like veins. We held our uniforms over our mouths, inhaling thick black smoke as we ran for the transport hub. Fire seared our faces and choked our words, but the things couldn't follow. When they tried, they simply winked out of existence.

Julio took a great lungful, staggered, and fell. Carol-Anne and I somehow managed to prop him up between us and push on. The rain was warm on our skin, and it couldn't solidify.

The transport hub was glowing flame-red, the metal warping, adding more venom to the fumes. As we bundled Julio inside, I heard a larger explosion, and for a moment, the night turned bright as noon. Carol-Anne's skull was visible through the skin of her face. Shockwaves buffeted the tube, stressed metal groaned, and little particles pattered off the pipe.

“That was the drone!” she shouted. “Come on!”

The three of us crammed into a single car, and rocketed up the pipe, just as the great tree split in half and fell into the rainforest below, spewing fire and death.

The jungle on the red-rock spire was gone. So was most of the building. We were spat out of the pipe, fell two metres onto jagged, misshapen rocks, then descended in staggered slides, pulling Julio between us like a heavy suitcase.

The night was dark again, but through the flashes of lightning, we saw the stumps of former trees, the charred remains of bushes. Flecks of ash became a blizzard. In the middle of the rock spire, a

ANDREW JACKSON

great depression had been cleaved by the nuclear explosion. Distantly, a small orange mushroom cloud climbed into the night.

Carol-Anne coughed harshly and stabbed at her terminal. "Shuttle's still intact!" she yelled. The air was hot and bitter, like we were chewing metal. My face already felt sunburnt. "We can make it!"

The storm pounded down around us, but as we hauled ourselves on, I noticed the rain was curving around the site of the explosion, like a stream parting around a dam.

"You were right, Yaz," Julio coughed weakly. "You...you beat them."

"We're not there yet," I said, or tried to. My tongue felt the size of a pillow, and little spots were dancing in my eyes. We didn't have minutes, we had seconds. Carol-Anne's skin was the shade of Martian dust.

Somehow, we reached the ship. Julio wasn't moving anymore, his breath a terrifying, wispy rattle. Carol-Anne dropped the hatch, shoved him into the cargo hold and strapped him down. We staggered together into the cockpit, where I grabbed an adrenaline shot and jammed it into her arm with the last of my strength.

The pilot shuddered violently, eyes bulging open. She was already losing hair, but she was awake and flying. I fell into the seat next to her, legs like lead.

Carol-Anne's fingers were a blur as she engaged the start-up sequence and sealed the hatch. Around us, the plateau trembled with aftershocks from the detonation. Shrieking winds blew flurries of ash against the viewports. The wounded air glowed a dark, violent red, like an infected wound.

A sudden lurch and the deck tilted thirty degrees. The rock underneath us was now a sickening slope to the rainforest below. A boulder the size of a house fell past us, into the abyss.

"We're going down!" I screamed.

"I know!" Carol-Anne pounded the console. "Something's holding us. I can't raise the landing gear!"

She flipped an overhead switch, and one half of the viewport became the view from the aft cameras. I squinted into the dark, and then another flash of lightning illuminated a swirling tunnel

of water, like a waterspout on its side, split into forked tendrils and holding the landing struts fast.

“It’s impossible....” I gasped. Somehow, despite the heat, the storm, the gamma radiation scrambling our cells, the aliens wouldn’t, couldn’t let us go. Maybe we were their last—their only—hope.

“I’ve had enough of these guys,” muttered Carol-Anne. She looked at me and grinned. “I’m about to do something very stupid. Hold onto your lunch.”

I barely had time to strap in before she stabbed at the dashboard, and the thrusters came on full power. There was a harsh, rending scream of twisting metal, and everything behind us disappeared in blue fire. I was slammed back into my seat, lips peeling back from my teeth as the dark jungle spun crazily below us. Alarms screamed, and everything was bathed in flashing red lights. My head felt like a balloon filled to bursting with hot air. There was too much pain to feel fear. Even when those awful screaming sounds began, that might have been a billion cheated souls, or just the wind. Mercifully, I passed out before I could decide which.

We left AC-211 as we’d found it: an alluring pea-green marble covered in wisps of cloud, its trio of moons now joined by all the warning buoys we carried in the holds. Carol-Anne had coined the term Code L1+ and the board had snapped it up. She was sharing the copyright pay, because it was all we were getting. That, and the nightmares.

Two weeks later, I was recovering in the ship’s burns suite, watching the weird, purple-tinged darkness of the skip corridor back to Sol. Sometimes Gilbert, the medical AI, chimed into the silence to remind me to take a pill or get some rest, but otherwise it was just me and oblivion.

Julio popped in one afternoon, tapping away at a terminal that hadn’t left his side since he woke up. He still had the occasional coughing fit, but he and Carol-Anne had recovered much faster than me.

“How’s it going?” He smiled and sat down on the edge of my bed.

ANDREW JACKSON

“Grown any weird appendages? Feel like murdering me?” He nodded at my stump of a left arm. Beneath the gauze, the skin itched where bone was regrowing. Gilbert had decided it was better to be safe than sorry, lopped it off below the elbow, and incinerated it.

I smiled weakly. “That’s just my normal reaction.” I looked at his terminal. “Carol-Anne told me the gag order came in this morning.”

“That’s just too bad...I signed with my publisher four days ago.” Julio grinned, looking like himself for the first time in weeks. “A *big* publisher, with a lot of money for legal fees...”

There was a soft chime, like a spoon ringing on glass, then Gilbert’s pompous English accent filled the suite. “Please drink half a litre of water, Yasmin.”

A med-drone buzzed over to me, holding a glass on a tray. The liquid inside was transparent and cool, rippling gently with surface tension. These were always the hardest parts of the day. I gulped and looked away from it.

Julio caught my eye. “Yeah...thought that might be an issue.” He reached into his pack and produced two bottles of beer. “I’ve been living off this stuff.”

I accepted one from him as Gilbert started to squawk.

“You publish this and we’re all out of a job,” I said.

We clinked bottles and drank.

“You forget who you’re talking to.” Julio winked. “Wheels are in motion. What would you say if I told you we could get paid just for exploring the stars, like you always wanted?” His smile flickered and died. “Something tells me humanity is going to need us.”

I stared at the water for a long time before I gave him my answer.