

Perihelion

Online Science Fiction Magazine

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LIZ EMBWALLAH ADMIRED HER flawless yellow skin and the sexy tufts at the tips of her ears as she gazed at her reflection in the viewscreen of the navigator's console. At ease in her chair, she played with her long hair, wrapping brown curls around her finger, and mused about their expedition to Gamma Murmer II's Hill Country.

"Just think of the stuff I'll be able to get with my share of our profits. Those Hill People really know how to make musical instruments. Woodwinds, strings, aeolians—you name it. No one's ever heard such rich tones. When the bidding starts for our 3D scans, those music moguls waiting at Starbase Prime will be bouncing like kittens on hot sand."

Liz heard the pad, pad, pad of moccasins coming down the hall from the crew quarters. She glanced over her shoulder.

Captain Eustan Chi'Kilts stepped onto the bridge. As usual, she smoothed the fabric of her black shorts over her upper thighs, and pulled down the bottom of her vest until the red stripe matched the seams of her shorts. But she wasn't wearing her customary smile. "Liz, was your room cool enough last night? I didn't sleep well. Had dreams where a big rock's tumbling down a tunnel after me, about to catch my tail ..."

"I slept fine. You were sleeping soundly enough when I left your room last night.



Last Close Encounter

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Have Marki give you a good scan."

Eustan waved her off. "Got a chapter of my latest novel for you to critique, if you don't mind." She dropped a reader into Liz's lap. Eustan's tenor voice, slow drawl, and blue skin and fur indicated her family's origin along the western coast of Taupo's largest continent.

Liz looked at the reader. "Earth again? I really don't see why you write about that backwater planet. Who'd want to read about those primitives?" Liz said in her husky baritone Public School accent.

"Well, for one thing, humans are heterosexual, not monosexual. Having two separate sexes makes their lives more complicated than ours. More complicated lives means more interesting stories."

A flicker on the navicon screen caught Liz's eye. "Eh, what's this?" She sat up.

"Something's distorting the space-time field ahead," Marki, the starship *Marcopo's* computer, replied through the console speaker. Her accent betrayed her construction over a thousand years ago.

Liz's whiskers twitched as she leaned closer. "That's no meteoroid. It has to be pretty big to cause a noticeable ripple. Better get a fix on it."

"I'm sure it's nothing," Eustan said. Then, "Marki, love, we need to be making better time. How about heating up the warp drive a little, just to be sure that we're first back before the Final Countdown auctions?"

Before Marki could reply, Liz said, "Biggest thing that I've ever found. Let's see what the prelims say about it."

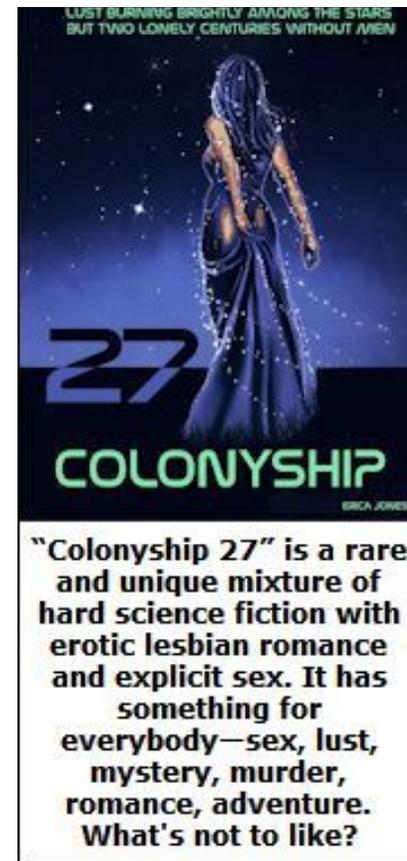
"Oh, furballs!" Eustan leaned over the back of the chair, nibbled Liz's ear, and caught a whiff of her scent. "Let's just pretend it's not there," she whispered. Her hands slid down from Liz's shoulders, passed into the armholes of the green navigator's vest, and fondled her upper breasts.

"Mmm ... Oh, Eustan ... Not now. This could be important," Liz said. She looked around and dilated her pupils coyly. "Maybe later?"

"Important? One more brown dwarf to keep track of?" Eustan said as she stepped back.

"I'm thinking she's too small for a brown dwarf, probably a rogue planet," Liz said.

"Well then, she'll be too small to bother about. Now, forget it. See if you and Marki



can't shave a little time off of our ETA."

"But Eustan ... A rogue planet!"

"I said, forget it. A rogue planet is too small to waste time on."

"I'm sure that SEC-Astro won't think a rogue planet is too small. They'll shell out a few unees for coordinates of anything that might damage a starship in warp."

"A few unees ...? Not as much as we could lose if we stop to look at every bit of junk along our flight path and blow our advantage at the Final Countdown," Eustan said.

"But it's still a hazard."

"Hazard my twitchy tail! Starship sensors would pick it up, just as we did, and initiate diversion. These things are no hazard. SEC-Astro just thinks they'll get a better share of the budget if they can show a bigger database. Ignore it!"

"If they decide to audit our log, they might wonder why we didn't bother to check out a bogey. We could be fined," Liz said.

"Look, Liz. If you're worried about a fine, I'll pay it out of my share of this haul's profits. How's that?"

"I still think we should take a quick look. We've got lots of time."

"Oh, really. Lots of time? Let's just see about that. Marki, how close to Starbase Prime are the other ships?"

After a minute, Marki reported, "Captain, the *Tawny* and the *Roam Sou* are both at least a day-and-a-half farther out from Starbase Prime than we are. The others, even farther. We do have time."

"Yes, and every time we run across one of these things we're going to have less and less time," Eustan said.

"What do you mean, *every* time?" Liz said. "We've *never* seen one of these in all our years out here. SEC-Astro doesn't just compile coordinates, you know. This thing could be interesting enough that they might remember us and assign us better flight paths. Better flight paths, better time, better profits."

"Okay, you've twisted my tail," Eustan said. She ran a finger across the back of Liz's neck. "Might just as well be us that gets paid for the discovery. A unee is a unee. Marki, bring us out of warp. Put us into orbit and you girls can do your stuff. Just remember ... we've got places to go."

As the *Marcopo* approached the rogue planet, Marki reported, "This is much too small for a gas giant, Captain."

"Okay. Just a snowball? I told you so. Not even worth our bother. It'll sublime before doing any harm," Eustan said.

"Scanners are reporting a density of 5.5 so it can't be a snowball," Liz said, peering into her viewscreen for a first glimpse.

The small dot gradually grew larger. Finally, Eustan said, "Put us into orbit, Marki." She glanced at the ETA clock on the Captain's console before she continued. "Give her the once-over. Might as well give the bean counters at SEC-Astro their money's worth. Wake me if you find anything worth charging extra for. I'm going to take a nap." She stretched, then sat down at the capcom beside Liz. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Her tail coiled in her lap as she drifted off.

While Eustan dozed, Liz and Marki scanned the rogue planet for minerals and photographed the topography.

"Marki, this isn't looking like your typical rogue planet ought to," Liz said.

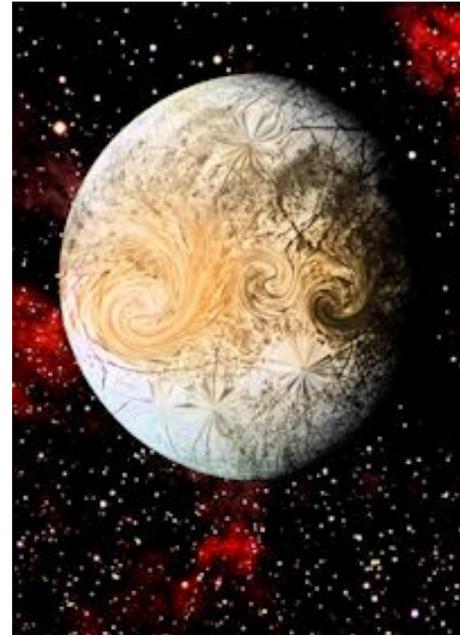
"Yes. Maybe you'd better give the Captain a poke."

Liz shook Eustan's arm. "Eustan! Eustan! Wake up. I see cities!"

Eustan sat up. "What! What? You're seeing something that *resembles* cities. It's just your imagination. Be satisfied. I let you do your scan. You've wasted enough time. We've covered our tails. No worry about getting fined. Now, let's get on our way."

"Okay, Sweetie. Tell me what your imagination sees," Liz replied, poking her finger at the capcom's screen.

Eustan took a quick look. Then she stared. "Marki, increase magnification," she said. The tip of her tail twitched. The fur on her arms, back, and legs stood on end. Drifting past the reflection of her blue face ... "Streets laid out in hexagonal



patterns! Buildings—some tall, some maybe houses—but all hexagonal! Vehicles on the streets. I don't see anything moving. What about electromagnetic signatures or life signs?"

"No," Marki replied. "Nothing but the planet's magnetic field. No movement. No sign of life."

"I saw another just like this one before I woke you up, Eustan," Liz said. "Who knows how many more there are?"

"Marki," Eustan said, "Go to powered flight. Keep your sensors keen—we don't need any surprises—and bring us down to just above the buildings. Let's take a look."

"Sure we can spare the time?" Marki said.

"Enough out of you, Marki. If this is what it looks like, that garbage from Gamma Murmur II is nothing, even if you get us back early. This is nobody's interstellar outpost—there's no protective dome."

"Everything's covered with snow and ice," Liz said. Her head turned slowly back and forth as she marveled at what she saw. "Look. Doors and windows on all those buildings. We've found a frozen civilization."

"Where's their star?" Eustan said. "How could it have just vanished?"

"This is going to be *big*, Captain," Marki said.

"Yes." Eustan bounced around in her seat. "The way folks in the SEC shell out for cultural information and artifacts, what do you suppose this will be worth? This could be as big for the Stellar Economic Community as the Marmara fleet finding Earth was for Taupoi. Remember your history? Our clothing styles, music and art, architecture—they all changed overnight."

Liz hunched forward in her seat, watching the city drift by in the viewscreen. "But it didn't last. Your novels notwithstanding, who remembers Earth as anything more than an entry in a history database?" Liz said.

"Oh, I see your problem," Eustan said. She reached over and patted Liz's arm. "You want people to remember this as *Liz Embwallah's Rogue Planet*, instead of *SEC RP Number Something Something*, don't you? Well, as Marki said, bless her heart, this is *big*. We have a civilization unknown to the SEC. And not *contaminated* with hostiles like Earth was."

"Oh, Eustan, why do you go on and on about Earth?"

"Earth was an interesting place, even if it wasn't ready for SEC membership," Eustan said. "But, back to our rogue planet. When we break this news, archeologists, ethnologists, you name it—they'll go mad." She reached over her head and snapped her fingers. "You found it. Maybe they'll call it *Embwallah*. Whatever the official name, I'm sure that people won't forget it so soon.

"In the meantime, forget about Gamma Murrur II. Don't worry about what this place is going to be called. We're going to be rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"Hey, gals. What about your old pal, Marki? What's going to happen to me?"

"No worries, honey," Eustan said. "I'll see that you come out on top. Let's spend two or three days scanning everything we can. Marki, that'll make you an expert on this place. Why, I'll bet we can get your entire digital persona transferred to one of those bigger, more modern starships that'll be sent back here. You'll be too valuable to be left in this little Falcon-class piece of ... Well, don't worry. You'll love it!"

With a little encouragement from Marki, Eustan's "two or three days" turned into a week.

On the morning of the last day, Eustan stepped onto the bridge. She didn't stop to adjust her uniform as usual.

Liz was giving Marki instructions for the final scans, but she noticed and looked around from her console. "Something wrong?"

"I've been having unsettling dreams about this rogue planet of yours, Liz," Eustan said. "Something's not right. Can you backtrack this thing? If we knew where it came from, it might give us a clue to what happened to it. Might be good to have at least some idea before we get back."

"Backtrack to its star? You must be kidding. We have no idea how many eons this thing has been out here."

Eustan tilted her head and frowned.

"Okay, Captain," Liz said. "I'll see what Marki and I can do."

Later, Liz sat up in her chair at the navicon and glowered at the results of their calculations.

"Marki, are we sure about this?"

"You'd better tell the Captain."

"No, let her nap. We'll recheck it again. And again if necessary. Let's make sure we've accounted for every body that could possibly affect its path."

"Okay, here we go." But Marki eventually had to say, "Sorry. No significant changes, Liz."

"I guess we can't get around these results." Liz melted back into her chair.

"Still, we can't be certain that far into the future," Marki said. "Maybe we've missed something. Hey, the Captain's coming to."

"Eustan, we have a problem!" Liz said.

"Now what?" Eustan asked as she stretched and looked around.

"Marki and I have been massaging the flight path for this world. Still can't find a parent star. However, playing the track into the future leads to Sol and," Liz said, punching a fist into the palm of her other hand, "a probable collision with Earth."

"No! Earth?"

"Yes. We've checked and rechecked."

Liz had expected Eustan to be shocked. To express denial, but ...

"Hot furballs! Now we've *really* got something! We need to give this thing a catchy name ourselves—something the copy editors can get their teeth into," Eustan said, jumping out of her chair.

"You mean, something better than *Liz Embwallah's Rogue Planet*? Well, I don't know about you, but if I were from Earth, I'd call it Doomrock," Liz said, watching Eustan dance around the bridge.

"Yes!" Eustan said, clapping her hands. "Doomrock! It may not be official, but if we use it first ... Can't you just see the headlines?" She spread her hands before her. "Those unees will be rolling in! Marki, resume warp. We've got places to go and things to do." 

Jack Ryan has a Ph.D. in Biochemistry. Now retired, he writes science fiction. His stories have appeared in "OG's Speculative Fiction," and have received Honorable Mentions in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest for 2010 and 2011.

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