

Around a Sun Named Inferno

by Hugh Barlow

The sun is named Inferno. I do not remember the numerical designation given to it by Earth's astronomers—I didn't care then what it was when I was hired, and I don't care now. I do remember that it is somewhat bigger than Sol, but not enough bigger to matter too much. The light was very near the same yellow light that Sol gives, and that was what made the astronomers look there for habitable planets. They didn't find any planets that were habitable, but they did find a moon that was, barely. The planet the moon orbited was a gas giant a bit bigger than Jupiter. We named it Hades. Hades is too small to be a companion star to Inferno. It is not quite big enough to be a brown dwarf. It is big enough to generate its own heat, but no visible light. The moon, Dante, orbits around Hades right on the edge of the habitable zone where water freezes. Only Dante's proximity to Hades keeps the ice from forming and permanently shrouding itself in water ice.

Unfortunately, it is too close to Hades for that snowball's chance to survive. Water is too warm to freeze on the surface of Dante. It is HOT and humid. Too humid to seem like the fires of hell. Instead, it is like the sweat baths of hell. Dante is about the size of Mars, and as such has about the same gravity. It was nice to not have to deal with the extra weight I carry in Earth standard gravity, because to go for a walk on the surface, I had to lug around the weight of the enviro-suit.

The stupid suit made me look like an angel, which I hated. I wasn't here to save anyone's soul, not that any of the native animal life HAD a soul. If I have a soul myself, it is most likely in need of salvation, and in no way should I be cast in the role of a heavenly being. I was here to help the scientists study the planet. The stupid suit had black wings that came out of the back that were used like a

radiator to rid the wearer of waste heat and keep him (or her) comfortable. The white “gown” of the suit was filled with superconducting filaments that transferred the heat generated by the body to the black wings. It was white to help the suit reflect the visible light and infra-red light that would draw heat into the suit.

For some reason, a silver reflective surface was not as effective. I do not know the technical reasons, but it had something to do with the nature of the fabric used to draw heat away from the body. The clear bubble that surrounded the wearer's head often refracted visible light so that it looked like there was a rainbow colored halo about the user's head. The waste heat from the wings also did funny things to refract the light. I often think that the people who wrote about angels in ancient times actually saw time travelers who were wearing an enviro-suit. But, I digress; while not actually part of the scientific expedition, I was tasked with tagging along to ensure the safety of the scientists, and to help carry some of the instruments that they would need when they found something of interest. We had just finished doing a cursory exploration of a desert region between two mountain ranges (it is hard to believe that there could actually BE a desert region on the planet, but humidity is actually relative). While still more hot in the desert than the mountainous jungle region, it was too dry for the local vegetation to thrive. The desert did have its version of a cactus-like plant that survived in pockets, but it did not have the riotous diversity of plant life that the jungle did. There was also an assortment of winged insectoid types of life, although the scientists assured me that they were NOT insects in the way that I knew, and some sort of creature that looked like a cross between a turtle, a lizard, and a walking stick (You know, the kind of insect that looks like a stick? What are they called? Ah, the praying mantis, that's right).

Even the seals on the the enviro-suit cannot keep out the stink from the atmosphere on Dante. There is a lot of volcanic activity on the planet, and the air is filled with the smell of sulfur. Most of the life on the planet requires sulfur for metabolic processes, even the plants. The Tur-Liz-Sticks shuffled about on the dirt of the barren

region looking for water and food. Besides the insect like things that scuttled about, the only other source for food and water was the cactus-like plant. I watched the scientists watch one of the Tur-Liz-Sticks (my name for them—the scientists had some technical gobbledy-gook that they used to describe them). The little bugger trundled up to one of the cactus plants and carefully wormed his way between the spines of the cactus and drilled a hole into the plant with beaver-like front teeth. He carefully worked his head back and forth until he had a hole deep enough to make the plant begin to bleed, and then a surprisingly long and dainty tongue flicked out and lapped at the moisture released. This went on for a few minutes until the moisture stopped flowing and the plant seemed to seal itself against the fluid loss. The Liz-Stick then wormed around to another part of the plant and did the same thing. He kept this up until he seemed to get fat, and then he trundled off again. In passing, the tongue flicked out and caught one of the bug things like a Terrestrial frog, and it flicked back into the Liz-Stick's mouth where he chewed contentedly until he found a nice warm rock to lay on. Don't ask ME why the Liz-Stick wanted to find an even warmer place to rest after eating, the scientists seemed to think he needed extra heat to process the proteins from the bug like critter. The scientists were rather curious as to why Lizzy (I had taken to calling my favorite one by name) and his kind needed the armor that he carried about with him since there did not seem to be any predators big enough to harm him in his native environment. They had dissected a few of them and noticed that the number of ridges in the shell seemed to correspond with age. The Liz-Sticks seemed to be armored everywhere except for a soft spot on the stomach and for an area that surrounded the spine spikes that protruded from their backs. There were grooves on the side of their torso that the legs snapped into when they rested, and the inside of the legs were soft, but the outside was armored. When the legs were withdrawn, only the outside showed. Even the eye sockets were armored, and the brow ridges would snap shut when the Liz-Sticks would nap during the day or sleep at night. The nose had

shrouds over what passed for nasal passages, and Lizzy had nice sharp tiny little pointy teeth along the sides of his jaw. I guess he needed them to break the carapaces of the bug like critters he ate. Even his lips were armored, and only retracted from his drill teeth when he went to sip the sap of the cactus plants.

Scientists are a lot like little kids. They get focused on something, and it seems that nothing else matters. They ignore things like their environment, and they need a baby-sitter to make sure that they stay out of trouble. That was my job, although you would not think it the way the “kids” kept loading me up like a pack mule every time they went out to explore. It was on one of these little forays when we discovered why the Liz-Sticks were armored. We followed one of the Sticks to the edge of the desolation to a region where the jungle began to encroach. The Liz we were following was having difficulty getting through the ground cover that crept out from the jungle, but seemed to be making his way toward a puddle that sat on the edge of it. The air was so humid near the jungle that beads of water condensate were forming on the bubbles of everyone's enviro-suit in the party, No-one clearly saw what happened when the Liz-Stick reached the water near the jungle's edge because of this. I saw something reddish colored and about the size of a collie hop out from behind a “tree” (I was also informed by the scientists that the jungle did not have any true trees as we know them in the Sol system), and it seemed to snatch the Liz up in a claw and hop up into the branches of the not-tree and disappear into the gloom. I grabbed my slug thrower up and waited for something else to come out of the jungle, but all I heard was something that sounded like a bobcat screaming the word “crack” in a long drawn out howl.

Actually, it was more like “CrrraaaaAAAAAOOOaaaCCcckkkkkk!” With the consonants and vowels getting louder and softer and the “Ks” at the end distinct in a cracking sort of sound. The scientists later discovered that this was the cry of the female harpy announcing to her young that she was bringing dinner home. The males had a similar cry that was used to warn other males that they were encroaching in their territory, but the voice was much deeper

like a huge bullfrog, and the distinct cracking noise came both at the beginning and the end of the cry (it was more like “K, K, K, KrrrraaaaOOOOaaaaacccccK, K, K, K!”) When the male harpy made his cry, you could see what looked like a pea travel up and down behind his throat wattle as he made the distinct “K” sounds. We didn't know all this at the time, and the jungle held many secrets.

To me, it was frightening. Little did I know that I had good reason to be scared. The scientists, however, were excited! They wanted to rush right in and see what had taken the Liz. I made them stop and consult the base before I allowed them to carefully approach the puddle where the Liz had disappeared. I would NOT allow them to enter the jungle without more of my fellow baby-sitters along for their protection.

The jungle was dark and damp. As the moist air of Dante rose up the sides of the mountain, all the moisture was wrung out and deposited on the foliage of the “not trees.” In turn, it fell on the denizens of its branches. The heaviest rainfall started in the evening, and ended in late morning. Precipitation decreased as the day warmed, but only to a light drizzle. In the canopy, it hardly mattered since water stored in leaves and cups formed where the branches met was shaken out as the day progressed. The constant flow of water on the helmets of our enviro-suit made the setting surreal. The wings and the bottom of the robe-like suit made travel in the jungle even more difficult. I had the machine shop on the ship make machetes to help clear a path. Even the light-weight hardened aluminum blades with ceramic edges had difficulty with parting the vegetation, and the going was slow. The verdure (such as it was, being more red than green) rang with the sounds of alien creatures. I came to trust those noises, but they frightened me at first. I have discovered that the worst sound in the jungle is silence. When the wild is silent, prepare to defend yourself. As we stumbled along on the forest floor, we came across what looked like a midden pile.

Bones, shells, and debris were scattered in a rough circle between the boles, and everyone looked up at the branches above when the distinctive call of the male harpy rang out from what can only be

described as a nest in the tree above. Branches and vines were interwoven to create a platform that was carpeted with more of the same debris we had just found on the forest floor, and about 7 or 8 heads seemed to peak over and watch us with malevolence and fear as we stared back with curiosity and trepidation. As we stood under the nest, a stream of white liquid rained down and landed directly on the helmet bubble of my suit. The nature of the bubble kept the foul fluid from sticking to the material, but it did not flow off the suit itself. We all stepped back from under the nest as one of the scientists broke out a kit and began to collect samples of the effluent. One of the other baby sitters broke out a contamination kit and began to help me clean the suit off, but I suspect that the ever-present rain did more to remove the noxious sewage than any of the efforts of my fellow adventurers.

The machetes did help to clear a small stand in the trees near where the nest was, and some of the scientists used the stand to set up cameras to watch the harpys remotely. Until I saw the first videos, I had not gotten a good look at these creatures, and they have a different official scientific classification, but to me, they looked like what the mythical creatures are supposed to be, so that is what I call them. The best way that I can describe these creatures is to say that they range in size from a small domestic turkey to the size of a large border collie. The young and juveniles are smaller, of course. The heads of these creatures remind me of a caricature of a vulture with large eyes set on either side of a narrow skull. The beak is large and curved like a toucan, but while the lower beak is smooth, the upper beak is wickedly serrated. The lower beak fits inside the upper beak and is almost invisible when the full beak is closed. The neck is short but quite flexible, allowing nearly 360 degrees of rotation. The creature's chest looks like a junior-petite human female's breast on the male, and like the fully engorged dugs on a nursing bitch or the udders of a cow for the female harpy. I watched as a harpy female nursed one of her young on the video, and the infant harpy took the entire gland into its beak and seemed to nearly chew it off in its enthusiasm. When the young one got too

enthusiastic, its mother started to peck on its head to abate its eagerness. The beak of the young harpy is not serrated as is the adult and juvenile. It is somewhat wavy, and one can see how it will become serrated as it matures. After a few minutes, the mother harpy gave her young a series of sharp raps on top of the skull with her beak, and the young one sat in front of her with its mouth open. The mother then seemed to vomit in the young harpy's mouth, and the infant then seemed satisfied for the moment.

Under the breast, the rib cage looked like that of a starving dog. The abdomen on the harpys seemed to range from about the look and shape of half a soft ball, to about the size of a basketball. The haunches were about the size and shape of a piglet's or small sow, and the feet were splayed with three digits toward the front with nearly the same shape and dexterity of human fingers with a spur to the back about the size of a human thumb. The flesh of the harpy is like hardened leather. It has dimples that remind me of ostrich skin boots, but there are no feathers. The flesh tone is reddish and reminds me of the pictures used to represent the Devil. There is a tail of sorts that looked like the little stub on the Thanksgiving turkey my parents used to serve as the holiday centerpiece, and the arms of the harpy resembled something like the velociraptor's arms I saw in the Museum of Natural History back on Earth. The main exception is in the upper extremity's digits. There are two large, fleshy digits that act in a claw-like fashion. The thickest one seems to be an extension of the arm, while the narrower one is longer and more flexible with three joints. Each digit on the harpy is tipped with a formidable claw that is liberally used to rend prey and other harpys without prejudice.

I speak of prey, but the harpy seems to prefer carrion to live prey. It only seems to eat fresh flesh when it has no other option. It litters its nest with the corpses of fresh kills, and dines on the carrion of older kills while it waits for the fresh kill to decay. This, I think, denotes intelligence more than any other act that I have witnessed. The harpy plans for its future meal instead of just waiting to find a corpse. The intelligence is malevolent, however, in

that it will eat anything including its own kind. In fact, it seems to prefer the flesh of other harpys more than any other, and will rend its own young if it cannot find a non-related harpy to feast on. The harpy young are born live in litters of about 4 to 6, but by the time they reach juvenile stage, often only one of the litter has survived the cannibalistic natures of his siblings. The males are generally stronger, but mature slower than the females. The females are more vicious than the males overall, but the males defend their harems with alacrity. There is literally a pecking order in the flock with the bull at the top, and then the alpha female (usually the largest harpy female) directly after the bull. Occasionally, two or three beta females will team up to take down an alpha female, but the team breaks up quickly once the "queen harpy" is deposed. The co-conspirators begin to fight among themselves until a new alpha female emerges. Meanwhile, the bull usually spirits the corpse of his former queen off for leisurely consumption at a later time. The new queen gets the privilege of consuming the offspring of the former queen that is unable to defend itself. Harpy females seem to be perpetually pregnant, and drop a litter about once every four months or so. It is good for the species that they are so prolific in reproduction, because their rapacity needs rapid and copious reproduction just to maintain their numbers.

Male harpys rarely hunt for themselves, but forage among the harem for sustenance. The bull spends most of his time fighting off rival males from other harems or young adult males freshly fledged from their home roost. These young males are forced to roam independently until they can form a harem of their own, or take over an established harem from an old or injured bull. These rogue harpy males often cuckold the established bull of a harem, but if they are caught doing so, will be severely maimed or killed. Female juveniles are rarely fledged from the nest, but are instead taken by the bull as mates. The most likely source for genetic diversity among the harpys is the young rogue adult males cuckolding, the acquisition of a harem by a young male, or the acquisition of an established harem and its addition to another by a stronger mature bull.

Harpys propel themselves through their environment by grasping limbs and creepers with their arm digits and flinging themselves over open spaces. Once upon a new branch, they use their lower digits to grasp the smaller branches, or splay their toes for balance on branches too large to grasp. They rarely travel on the forest floor, for reasons not readily apparent to us at first. A few rogue males, and newly adult females keep vigil on the outer fringe of the forest to await for prey that haplessly wanders to the edge of the jungle searching for sustenance. It was one of those young females that we witnessed snatching up the Liz-Stick that wandered too close. She was back into the forest faster than we could watch.

There is good reason for the harpys' avoidance of the forest floor.

On one of our excursions into the forest to watch the harpys, the jungle became suddenly silent. Not only the harem's hissing and bickering stopped, but all the insect noises and other creatures' sounds stopped as well. The scientists were clueless, but I became wary. I cast about looking for whatever was causing the silence, but visibility on the forest floor is extremely limited. I radioed the other security members to keep an eye out for danger, but we were unable to see the dragon as it slithered its way through the boles on the forest floor. In a flash, specialist Denham disappeared in a spray of blood and body fluids. We tracked the dragon to its den and killed it when it emerged to attack us. It looked like the parade floats I have seen in the old movies that depict celebrations in Old China Town in New York and San Francisco. The body was long and sinuously slender. The head looked like an alligator's and was about the same size. It had a skin fringe that surrounded the head like a lion's mane. There were vestigial wings behind the head and above the joints of the front legs. The dragon was mottled tan and orange and seemed to blend in well with the surroundings. The torso seemed to be about 10 feet long and about the size of one of the storage drums we keep in the hold. The tail was about 20 feet long and tapered to a point. The females from local harem came down from the trees for a short time to rend parts from the corpse of the dragon and then quickly retreated to the roost to await the dragon flesh's decay. We

entered the dragon's den to search for the body of our crew-mate.

We found the enviro-suit shredded and covered in blood. We found Denham's head encased in the suit's helmet and his feet in the boots. The rest of his body was consumed by the dragon. There were bones from a wide assortment of creatures that we could not identify, and there was a clutch of what looked like unhatched eggs.

I carried Denham's head back with me, while a couple of the other security personnel carried some of the eggs back to the ship. The scientists would not be happy if we did not bring back the eggs, and the head of the dragon for them to study. This is how I have come to be called before this inquest. Denham is recovering, but likely will never be the same without rehabilitation. Oxygen starvation of the brain cells and cryogenic storage of his head require extensive repair, and his cerebral anagrams will need to be reloaded for him to regain full function. Thankfully, he will never remember the attack since his last download was from the night before the incident.

