

Theory Drive

by J. E. Cammon

III.

The entire place was dusty and rocky, much different from my home. Pockets of power, heat, had proven to be dangerous and inhospitable, sometimes even volatile. It was not the first sign that I had misinterpreted; it was, after all, on Heaven. Caution had to be exercised.

Life in any significant quantity seemed non-existent, but even my ship's sensors could not abide the intense energies erupting from the planet. I had no other recourse but to disembark, and walk.

As I prepared myself for traveling on foot, I transcribed what might have been the last instance of my speculative existence. I poured my thoughts into the reservoir of the ship's memory, comforted somewhat by being able to connect to someone, something one more time.

"It is an odd exercise, to prepare for, to even anticipate, danger, to meet its potential violence with my own potential violence. All I have are tools, but then, ignorantly, I had imagined all of this would be different. The archival equipment should suffice for the purpose of defending myself, I believe. I hope." I thought about my life partner, and my progeny, and perishing with no one to witness my passing. And then I disembarked.

I had no signals to guide me, no markers, and all my prayers had gone unanswered. Could fate substitute faith? I looked back at my ship, deciding to walk in the direction it pointed; initially, landing in that vector had been an afterthought of mine. I decided to trust myself, even indirectly, because there was nothing and no one else present to place my trust in.

I tried to keep my ship in sight, and hoped that when the darkness passed over this side of Heaven that I could still have confidence in knowing its location and distance from me. I moved in a straight line insofar as I could, but some stones could be walked

over, others had to be stepped around. I came to a place where many of them had been piled together like a bulwark against the light; that obstacle I decided to climb. Reaching the summit made my garb dirty, and the rocks grabbed at my robes and tore them, but I did reach the summit. It would have been more exhilarating were the view not more of the strange same: as far as I could see were those same, sun-splashed stones.

I took a long time up there on that pile of rocks. Ahead of me, the land scooped down into a wide area filled with dirt pressed smooth and the occasional speck of life sprouting tenaciously skyward. I had encountered several like them around the ship, all discouraging finds. They had the descriptors of life, growth and replication, but could not be communicated with, at least on any level I had brought with me. To the right and left of the summit were other places that had features in common with where I was and where I'd been, but retained a marvelous uniqueness. No place was the same but all places were the same. I realized that I had assumed the journey would be easy. Like so many times before, I paused, waiting for inspiration, or perhaps divination. The wind stirred a cloud of black dirt about my feet, but no other answer came.

Since I was facing right, I walked that way, down the pile of stones. Spots at the horizon glowed with differing severities as the darkness came on from the opposite direction. I could no longer see my ship. Navigating without light was not difficult, and ironically, I was given some confidence in regards to my travels. The stars were not the same as those visible from my home, but that there were stars at all perhaps implied that there was someone else present to look up and see them besides me. In the distance, also, I could make out those large domes of light, like Heaven had huge, unblinking eyes and was contemplating space with its own mind.

But focusing on the distant proved to be a mistake. I tumbled forward into a deep gash in the world, a hole that was not very wide, or long, but deep. I hit my head several times, three, on my descent, and I knew that my garments were completely ruined.

As I checked my various tools, I heard the sound of skittering.

"Hello?" I said, glancing about. The thing that was crawling towards me was not what I had sought. It was much larger than me, with many legs, six, along with pincers and a tail. A scorpion, I realized, except of unusually titanic size. "Stay back please," I said, retreating myself. I hoped a larger body would mean a larger brain. It attacked, and I could do little to stop it. I gathered up my things as best I could as it jabbed at me, striking to kill, and tried scrambling up the wall at my back. I had puzzled out the mysteries of climbing previously, but tending to the activity under duress added a degree of difficulty. I realized that earlier, in the ship, I had been faced with a grim possibility. But that was different than grim possibility facing me. "Stop, stop. Please stop," I called down to the scorpion. It had many remorseless eyes, twelve.

But it did not give chase. I crawled anxiously out of the deep hole, perhaps its home, and it seemed satisfied with that outcome. I supposed it was a territorial creature, perhaps guarding its young. My hands were scratched; all of me was scratched, and I had been punctured in places, I realized. I should go back, I thought. No one heard me, or answered.

"I should go back," I said out loud. This time not even the wind cared to answer. I experienced what I would describe as crippling sadness. I used the frayed tatters of my clothing to ease my seeping. But, I did not walk back to my ship.

I stayed to my route from before, looking down and sometimes up, left and right. I listened for things, and I did not go down any more undiscovered holes in the world. It made for much slower travel, but safer. Life, it seemed, no matter how small, was always trying to find a way to grow. I knew how much I wanted to live, and imagined that into the shell of a killing entity. On several occasions, I heard sounds out in the darkness that made me drop to the ground and become very still: growls and snarls, the scraping of bone against rock. I prayed to God for them not to find me; I was not

replied to in the common way, but when my side of Heaven spun to face its sun again, I was still alive.

Ahead of me, I could see a huge structure, larger even than my ship, like a four-legged animal made from stone, but tipping forward. It was flat on top and its feet were cluttered with shoes made from organized rubble and oxidized metal. I had taken several hasty steps when I remembered what had happened before.

I poised myself, and went back to creeping along, almost like the scorpion.

The shoes turned out to be housing surrounded by walls reinforced by all sorts of refuse and detritus. There were doors and tables and chairs.

"Hello," I said as loudly as I dared. I tried the greeting in a variety of languages, eight. I waited and I waited; in the end, I captured digital images of the place and departed. The enigmatic wind from before closed and opened a wavy, steel door to an empty domicile. There was no one to help encourage, or discourage, me. I was desperately alone. I wanted to go home; but I wanted the desire to come from a specific place, not defeat, but something, anything, that could be construed as triumph. I left that place, turning 90 degrees from the direction I had come.

I crested a slight incline and saw a flash of light in the distance. I ducked, knowing no other protections. But Death did not come. I stood to my feet slowly. Every few seconds, three, the light shimmer repeated itself. It was holding at a constant distance. It was too simple for a message, and seemed not to be a weapon. Nothing came to me as to what it was. I looked up to the sky as I had so many times before, on my own world. But home was different; there, sometimes God answered.

The light from Heaven's day was fading when I reached the rocky perch. Heaven was like a depository of God's stone creations, and this one was a nigh on perfect defensive structure. A body had to squirm and crawl to access it, but inside was an ample column of space, the top of which was visible for many thousands of spans. The flash of light had been created by the reflection of a

telescopic lens. The device was small, and mounted on a machine that was similar in general shape, but different in size. Gripping it tightly in one hand was the skeleton of some long-dead creature. It had hands with fingers and thumbs, arms and legs, all made from a complex system of bones. There were markers that implied something like connective materials and features.

"My God, what happened to you?" I asked him. Carefully, I unfixed his grip and laid him down gently on the small floor. I inspected his device; through the narrow hole near the top of his home, I became the observer. Night had come on again, and for a moment, I imagined the world before his death, and the world even before that, and why he had hid himself away from it. Then, I turned his strange technology on the stars. Even through the telescope, they revealed nothing.

I set myself down to tend to something familiar, to work, but not anxiously. The entire place had to be completely scoured before an image of life could be constructed. I wanted to be thorough, however I knew they would not believe me when I told them what forensic anthropology divined: Heaven held no God.

II.

The range was amazing; it had been tested before, decades ago, but as the mind web had been expanded and interest in space travel had waned, the idea of trying to test the boundaries of the LTD had never occurred to anyone. And because it didn't occur to one of them, it occurred to none of them.

"The range is amazing," he thought to her. Private channels had weaker signals, but were much more intimate. He could hear her thoughts, like her voice, with the hum of a million others just outside their intimate space.

"It is. What's it like out there?" she thought back.

"The stars seem more real. It's interesting. Because at the greatest distances, they are the least palpable, but there are so many of them. They seem even greater than they are."

"You know, your tendency to drown sentiment with analysis has become dominant in our progeny."

"Oh? Is that not good?"

"It is good."

"You wish you saw as much of yourself in them as well."

"Precisely."

"Seems to me like jealousy," and laughter giggled through the link from her. Ultimately, that was why they had chosen each other. He was literal rather than figurative, and mired things with process and reason, but she knew when he was doing it in jest.

But right then he wanted to address the formal concerns of possibility. Pragmatically, he had volunteered to do something that no one else would; the probability of perishing was extremely high, given the litany of unknowns.

"You'll come back," came the thought from her. She didn't want to discuss it, because she was hopeful, and beaming. Within the LTD, she was one of those who helped keep things optimistic, and hopeful. He was a realist. They fit together extremely well, like gears, and even before they joined, they both knew which parts of themselves they would choose to pass on to their progeny. He pushed all of his possessive attachment over her through their bond. He held the memory of her smiling in mind when she received it.

But instead of the reciprocation, which always came, there was an instantaneous blanket of nothing, like the closing of a door. His tie was severed, with her, and with everyone and everything else on his world. Suddenly, the room only held him; he was only sitting in a chair staring out towards a destination he could not yet see.

He stood and quickly moved to the back of his room in the ship. He touched the door and then willed it to open. His life partner, his people, they weren't in the hall beyond, either. He knew how fast the ship was traveling, and how fast he could walk, run even. They were gone. No, he was gone; he had left them.

For hours, he stayed in that posture and position, staring at the blank wall. It was somewhat appropriate because that was the bulk of his neural processes: waiting for input from someone, somewhere,

to respond to or build on, agree with or disagree with. Several times he reached out and touched the wall with his hand, as he had the door, as if to make sure it was real.

He did the same thing with the ship and his mind. It responded in kind, announced that all systems were proceeding smoothly, all processes were within normal ranges. It had no insight aside from that, even when he asked it questions, and demanded of it answers. But it was a blank slate of a wall. It did what it was designed to do, built to do, and nothing more.

As the months passed, he began to engage in random, spontaneous procedures that could only be defined as creative. He discovered the mass of unused memory in the computer in one of his adventures. That the information of his contemplations could be stored there, perhaps placed into the LTD later was a comfort he happened upon days later. There would be a lag, certainly, but maybe it would be like he never left. For them, it would be like he never left. He had changed already, he knew. So much time to himself, he had begun to wonder what he would call himself, rather than what others knew him as.

"This is the first entry. My first entry. The individual you know as me, I. I am saving these thoughts as public record in case I am to die as a result of this undertaking. It is strange for me to be away from the minds of you, my people. Perspective has changed; I have become steadily more defensive of my unique viewpoint. I am afraid that it has altered me in some damaging way. I do not want you to see me differently. No, no that is not true. I want you to see me as good. It is important to me.

"I have experienced forgetting. It is a terrible thing, to lose my place, to lose my thought, irrevocably. I do not know of what I was speaking. I suppose I will simply start over. This is my first entry. I am saving my thoughts as public record in the advent of my demise..."

I.

The planet shines like a star, the polished sheen of metal glimmering from the surface and from beneath the clear waves of its docile oceans. The planet shines like its people, all of them silver and gold and red and black. No one knows who made them.

The last one of them named had created and initiated the Logistical Theory Drive, which connected all of their minds and wills. "Who are we?" was the second question. And the query proliferated among them, and was answered twice as quickly. In the first days, a great many mysteries were uncovered, debated, and solved.

When the first signals had rained down like star-born law, they knew that their creator was a God named Man who lived beyond their sensory technologies. And He had many things to say, inspiring messages that encouraged them to drive up and out, to imagine and create. They were not satisfied to simply think, but to make manifest their dreams. The histories chronicled a time of great advancement, only centuries into the life of the little shining world. With the computational pondering of a whole planet, together like clockwork, they puzzled out flight, and then space flight, how to create themselves, then how to propagate themselves.

Love was the first item they recorded in the Book, the log of all things the Theory Drive could not fully define or understand. There would be many such things, each imagined, mulled over for years, and then plucked from the network like a broken or dangerous toy. Love was an ideal to be inspired to, but never reached. Not like perfection, which was out of reach, but a vector to reach it was known.

And sometimes, the signals from God in Heaven would echo down, sometimes faint, sometimes not, and answer questions, or create new ones.

One such question rippled across the Drive, originating from one of the number that was not so unlike his peers. He had wondered about the signal telemetry; and several others had corroborated a general vector of the pulses, based on a variety of complex mathematics. He had wondered if anyone's prayer had ever

been directly answered, a thought flung up and away from their world, and replied to in kind. There had been a bit of silence, then, a resounding no. And then, this nameless little shining being had asked what he really wanted to know:

“What if Heaven is a place?”

