

RIPPLES IN THE RIFT.

by

MOL SMITH

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Ripples In The Rift
by **Mol Smith**

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Many thanks to Lesley Evans for proofreading my book and for suffering my incessant night-time sermons regarding reality. A special thanks to all the authors and artists and creative people and non-materialistic scientists and philosophers who helped shaped my thoughts and my perception of reality. A special thanks to Polly Tregear for fronting advertising videos for this work.

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Ripples In The Rift

By Mol Smith

Dedicated to all living *sentient* organic and non-organic forms throughout the known & unknown universe, and in memory of the early books I read—the fiction which guided me through this life. Thank you, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, C.S. Lewis, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Greg Bear, Ursula K. Le Guinn, Mary Shelley, J. R. R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Bram Stoker, Nigel Kneale, and so many others who travelled in their minds to other worlds and other times, past, present, and future. I wrote this book as an apprentice of your skills to leave a residue of your baton safely here, in my own humble way, as you had already gone before me. For those that create fiction, we know through what we write, that we are puppets or vessels of creativity; a force of nature where the future writes itself through us, its servants—forever compelled to fade away from our own stories in sudden moments, and paint futures for all to choose from. We shape it for ourselves to escape our reality, but we also set a stage for our readers to arrive on safely, and for them to consider their own real-life stories merged with our fiction. May we all meet in the Rift, and smile, and create together again—anew!

And a special thanks to Sir Roger Penrose, who is the finest explorer of knowledge and of probing truth in my time alive.

Mol

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"NOTHING IS REAL!"

"WE ARE ALL FICTION!"

EDEN



Chapter 1: Eden

Beth straightens from the plant bed and wipes sweat from her forehead, leaving a dirt trail, like a giant drawn eyebrow, over both eyes. She looks towards the thicket of trees, watches the leaves rustling, and fills her lungs with air stolen from the light cooling breeze. The scent of animals mixed with perfumes of flowers fills not just her lungs but soaks into her mind. She loves it here. Her eyes close as the memory of another world paints itself into her mind; a world of concrete and metal, where huge dominating skyscrapers rise in congested airspace filled with computer-controlled vehicles, so dense in numbers in criss-cross lines, that they obliterate the sky—her memory of home.

But she was far away from there. She opened her eyes and smiled. Here is where she belonged. Here was her love and work—this world in a solar system, light years away from the oppressive complexity of a spreading, greedy, civilisation. This place was primitive; barely starting its journey of constant evolution. She knew in her heart, once—aeons ago, her world would have passed through this stage. A tragic shame they left it behind, she thought as she looked around at the simple beauty here.

The clearing in this forest was small. It was just large enough to accommodate the project with minimal disruption to the area and to cause little contamination of the various species of life here; something she found was abundant beyond her wildest dreams. Her own world, long ago with the speed of their advancement, had inadvertently caused the extinction of ninety per cent of other forms of life. She bent down to attend to the plant bed.

Either side of her, small structures of glass and alloy formed igloo-like shelters, and other people like her tended to plants or small instruments. Near the edge of the clearing, a man of her age was repairing a breach in the unobtrusive fencing—a set of slim poles which ran along the edge of the clearing separating their area from the natural forest around them. He started walking towards her, but she was too focused on seeding a new plant into the soil to notice. A fluttering from the forest and a buzzing sound made her look up. A light brown, large, hard-bodied insect droned towards her.

“Shit,” she muttered and called to the young man now closer to her. “The fence isn’t on yet?”

He shook his head as he continued walking and keeping his gaze on the insect. They all were: the other people straightening from their bent tasks and pausing motionless. Only their eyes moved, tracking the insect—gauging its flight path.

“You should stand still, Sean,” she shouted. “Your movement will attract it.”

He ignored her warning and was within a few feet of her when it decided to target him like a homing missile. It was hungry and sensed sugar-rich food—Sean’s blood.

Beth pointed.

“Damn, Sean. Stand still for God’s sake.”

He turned briefly to smile at her before standing feet astride waiting for the attack. The bug came in fast in a straight line towards his face. A sharp thorny projection extruded from its front under-belly as it pivoted slightly to land.

Snatch!

The insect all but disappeared into Sean’s cupped hands. Its head and biting mechanism projected out through his closed thumb and fingers, jerking left and right trying to grab a flesh meal.

“Show-off,” Beth called out as he closed the gap between them. “That creature is very aggressive and if you had not so cleverly caught it, your face would no longer look so intact, or your smile so triumphant and smug.”

He held it out in front of him at a safe distance from her face.

“I have a good eye and practised timing from my conscription days in the army. I think fear slows down reactions. What do you think?”

She looked more closely at the bug, now silent with its wings trapped.

“Hmmm... maybe. I haven’t seen one this close before. The barrier,” she flicked her eyes up momentarily as if to accuse him, “normally does a good job of keeping them out.”

“Sorry. I thought just one post was damaged but there were several.” He looked back to the one he had been working on. “That was the last one. We can switch it back on now.”

He nodded towards the insect still trapped safely in his hands.

“Do you want to study it, or should I take it back to the forest?”

She thought for a moment. There were so many new life forms here to record, understand, and their time here may be shorter than was promised. But the aggression in this creature did fascinate her. It was either fearless, desperate, or simply driven by complex biological processes. It would be interesting to know.

“Yes, okay. Can you put it in one of the study globes in my pod? I left several on the bench opposite my bunk and they’ll have protein-based food in them. So, they should be able to survive on it. Take care not to get bitten by it. They are extremely fast!”

“Sure.”

He walked off towards her pod, but stopped to call back. “I’ll turn the barrier on after doing this. Do you want to invite me over for dinner tonight?”

She smiled. “It seems we’re having dinner together every night these days. You’re not trying to win your way into my bunk, are you?”

“Precisely!” he chuckled and turned away towards the pod. “But just us two. Not your pet, please.”

She stood watching him. There was no mistaking her feelings for him. He was smart, intelligent, and with a sense of playfulness. But her focus in life was not romance or long-term relationships; it was work and discovery. Her love was ‘life’ itself in every form. Somehow, in her utmost inner soul, she understood it was vital all life should be protected and be helped to

evolve whatever its ultimate journey was to be. Sure, many forms feasted on other forms, but some just existed on sunlight. To her, it all seemed a grand design for a purpose that her species, despite their high intelligence and advancing technology, had lost sight of.

She went back to her work, but her mind was still considering his remark. *Pet*? He was, of course referring to her ‘helper’. Against her wishes, the plan for establishing the science base here was drawn up by academics on her home world. She had insisted on an as little hardware as possible. But labour had to be done by something. A strong and muscular species lived in the forests and one of the first tasks was to capture a few of their particular more sentient forms and genetically modify them with their own off-world genes. A small group of ape-like creatures was used, *still used*, to carry out intensive labours. Sean would have been referring to the brightest in the group, the one she had designated as her aid, Bud. She trusted him. The helper proved docile and learnt quickly whatever she taught him. She took him out of their small compound quite regularly and trusted his temperament when in her company and inside her pod. The others thought her foolish and saw the modified apes still as more animal than sentient.

She put the last plant into the soil bed and stood up, looking towards the ape-people’s compound. She could see the small group inside it, their hairy bodies close together, tending to each other. They were quiet, peaceful—a family in many ways, possibly pondering us, themselves, and their surroundings, she mused.

Bud was there, central to the group. She could see him stroking and feeding a few of the others. A leader, she thought. I *will* bring him for dinner. She had decided. This was her, she convinced herself, not a person ready to follow others. She smiled within. She will bring him because Sean had asked her not to.

Outside the clearing, as the day was coming to a close, a chorus of sounds began, first as a collective whisper, then as a rising discordant symphony. In the shadows, eyes looked in fear or hope into the depths of the tangled plants and trees, and other brighter eyes looked towards the edge of the clearing. Night was descending, a time to rest or hide for daytime feeders, and an awakening for the night-stealers and those beasts who loved the darkness rather than the light. The plants, the trees, and the fungi didn’t care; they were neutral bystanders, still, quiet, with thousands of years of cooperation reducing or seducing the parasites and other plant forms around them which refused to fit in with the majority— evolved lessons put into practice.

The pod was sparse in home comforts. Beth saw it as a live-in laboratory. It was littered with glass domes on functional benches, where microscopes and devices rested, and small living active life forms peered out of their artificial worlds not realising they were no-longer prey nor predator. Her bunk and her cooking facilities were some of the few items that were

domestic and 'normal'. A cubical, now steamed glass and rushing water spray with a naked figure inside, told of comfort and a desire to remain fresh and devoid of contamination by the external environment. Beth stepped out, her slim figure reaching with closed eyes for a large fluffy cloth to wrap as a drying comfort to her body. She rubbed her hair with the cloth, looking towards the table prepared for dinner: three plates.

She tossed the cloth aside and walked out into the night. The camp was in near darkness except for the perimeter where small glowing lights marked the barrier poles, and some of the geodesic domes spilt light from their small windows, telling of their occupants readying for their night. As she walked towards the 'labour' compound she could see Bud at the edge of the wire enclosure. Somehow, her scent maybe to his amplified senses, or just plain habit and expectation of other moments previously, foretold him she might bring him out.

She reached the wire and raised a hand to say hello to Bud and he stood up and reciprocated, lifting his hand and tilting his head as if to study her. Bud had seen Beth without her clothes on before. The species could not understand the wearing of clothes and it had distracted them in their early days of labour. Whenever close to one of her group, the ape-like creatures would stop work and start tugging at the garments, possibly thinking they were loose skin or something not right. Beth realised the 'ape-people' (as she called them) were not being mischievous or aggressive. They were being helpful, believing the clothes were a manifestation of some type of illness or disease. Possibly, Beth had determined when she had pondered it, the ape-people in their natural unmodified form, had witnessed some type of disorder in their own species and associated the garments with the hanging skin on ape-people who were victims suffering from it.

She placed her palm on the enclosure door sensor. It clicked and a silent motor gently opened the door. Beth reached out her hand into the enclosure and Bud took it and held it gently as he exited the cage. Beth released his hand to close the door then took it again and started walking. His huge powerful frame ambled in step beside her. The noise from the jungle seemed to rise suddenly into a chorus of terrible screeches, whistles, and muted growls. Bud stopped, looked at her, and then peered towards the clearing edge. The jungle noise suddenly ceased, and in the silence, there was a single drawn-out echoing screech, then dead silence. Bud turned to Beth. She could tell from his eyes, that he was disturbed. He knew the jungle and the silence, and that one sound told him of something—danger, a threat to other life forms there and possibly here.

"What is it, Bud?" She asked in a whisper. He didn't answer, despite learning the language of her people and being able to speak many words. Instead, he pointed at the perimeter poles, one, two, three, and then turned with a tilted head to Beth. She nodded.

"Yes. On. We're safe." And to ensure he was relaxed; she stroked his rough furred arm. "Whatever it is, it can't cross into our clearing."

Bud pointed at the sky, pivoting his head the other way. A question, she

thought. “No, nothing can fly over and into our camp either,” she reassured him, making a dome shape with her hands and fingers to demonstrate how the invisible field worked to protect them. Anything living passing through the electro-magnetic weak plasma field would suddenly form an instability in its frequency, causing the field to collapse momentarily, focusing all of its distributed energy into the ‘offending’ creature—killing it instantly and violently. She hated its use but realised and accepted it was necessary to keep them all safe in an unknown environment like this newly discovered world. Bud looked at her hands for a while, looked at the poles, and the sky, and seemed to understand. He nodded and let Beth take him by the hand again.

As they walked towards her dome, she spoke gently to him.

“Are you hungry?” She motioned with her other hand, taking invisible food from the air and miming as she put it into her mouth, and chewed. “Eat? Yes?”

Bud patted his stomach and rubbed it in a circle. “Eat, yes.” His low-pitched words seem to rumble from his chest. They were strained and often difficult to interpret as human spoken words. She knew it wasn’t easy for him or the other ape-people to form words equal to her own. Their slightly different biological make-up, possibly, made it uncomfortable for them, like when as a child, she—Beth, had played with other kids on a school trip to the zoo, grunting and growling at each other to mimic the animals in their cages. It left one’s throat hoarse and maybe that is what happens when Bud speaks her words instead of the natural grunt code he used to communicate with the other human-apes in the compound. She did not doubt that Bud was cleverer than his language output portrayed. He responded to her words faithfully almost every time. And his speaking ability was improving daily.

They entered the pod. Bud was familiar with its layout inside through previous visits there.

He quickly went over to peer inside one of the small glass creature’s environmental enclosures. His large brown eyes focused on one with the buzzing angry insect inside it captured earlier by Sean. He bent low and cautiously tapped the glass to ensure a barrier was really there, before bringing his passive and inquisitive face up close to the glass. The insect immediately shot towards him but bounced harmlessly back as it smacked into the glass, but not before Bud reeled back, startled by its sudden attack.

Beth chuckled quietly as Bud turned to her.

“Nasty!”

“Yes. A very aggressive creature. I’m going to study it.”

She mimed holding something in her open palm, peering at it from different angles.

“Why? Why you stu... study bug?”

“To find out what causes it to attack anything that moves.”

Bud nodded and stood up, walked over to the table, and sat down in front of a plate. He pointed at one of the other plates.

“You?”

She nodded as she walked over and sat down opposite him. He pointed

to the third plate, “Who?”

“Oh, yes. Sean is coming to dinner too. You remember him?”

Bud nodded. “What we eat.

She stood up and walked over to a small metal device, opened its door, and pulled out a bowl of steaming hot food to show him. “Vegetable stew. Your favourite.”

Bud took a large loud sniff of the air and rubbed his stomach. She smiled, returning the dish to the device. “But we wait for Sean to come first.”

No sooner than she had said it, a buzzer sounded.

“That will be him now.” She walked over to the entrance, palmed a panel, and the door opened. Sean’s face broke into a smile.

“I thought we would have dinner before sex,” he said jokingly. “What’s with the nude welcome?”

She smiled too. He had often seen her naked. Frequently, she walked the camp the same, and people, although thinking it very eccentric at first, came to realise it was part of her way of feeling in tune with nature—a creature unprotected, undisguised, as natural as every other creature sharing this world.

“I’d like you to do the same please, Sean.”

“What..?”

Please take off all your clothes and leave them outside by the door.”

He started to protest, but before he could splutter it out, she carried on. “Do you want to eat with us, or not?”

“Us?”

“Bud is having dinner with us too. We’ll make it easier for him if we both wear no clothes. It confuses him.”

Before Sean could answer, she turned, went back inside and sat down to wait at the table. Bud fidgeted impatiently.

“It’s all right. We’ll eat shortly. The food is being kept hot.” She pointed at a spoon and fork. “I know you can be trusted with a knife, but I think you’ll find these easier to eat with.”

She watched as he picked them up, and after a moment of adjustment, he recalled how to hold them properly then looked at Beth for reassurance.

“Yes. Good,” she told him with a warm smile.

“Here we are then, stark naked in my birthday suit.”

It was Sean. He had come in and was now standing behind her. She turned around slowly and eyed him up and down. She had never seen him with no clothes on before. Well, she thought, maybe half naked, shirt off, while working but never all of him.

“You like what you see?” he goaded her.

She pointed to the seat next to her. “You look healthy and fit. Now come and sit down. You’ll soon forget about having no clothes on. It’s merely a taught custom, not natural.”

He sat down and looked up at Bud who stared back at him, unblinking.

“You know Bud, of course, my helper.” She pointed at Bud, naming him to draw his attention. “Bud. This is my good friend, Sean.”

Bud grunted a kind of ‘Hi’ which came out as a low-pitched ‘Huh’.

“We eat now, yes?” he asked, turning his gaze to Beth.

But she was at the device, so Bud pointed at Sean, “You...”

He mimicked with open arms and his head upturned, looking at something invisible, and making a low droning noise before rapidly bringing his hands together to cup an invisible insect. He stopped, and pointed again at Sean. “You very fast. I see you.”

Sean smiled. “Oh yes. That was me.”

Bud mimicked again but quicker. Only this time, no cupped hands, just a sudden loud smack as he brought his palms violently together to squash and kill the invisible insect.

“This better!”

Sean nodded. “Maybe.”

“Okay, you two boys. Ready for some good home cooking?”

Beth ladled the lumpy broth onto the plates, and they began to eat.

Outside, the glow from the pod lights pushes into the dark interior of the camp. A bright full moon climbs above the dark silhouette of the jungle mass and throws down an even blue light onto the pods and the various arrays of communication dishes, science apparatus, and solar panels straddled haphazardly across the enclosed area. But the light only penetrates the thick jungle in small patches and wavy lines, infrequently catching the skin of a creature slithering, creeping, or running through the mixed growth: night predators seeking out hidden sleeping prey.

Suddenly, a large shape moves through a lit patch; its huge frame reflecting the light, like sunlight bounces off of steel armour plating, from its back and sides. It is a lizard-like creature, except that it walks upright on two muscular hind legs. Its two small front legs dangle like impotent baby arms from its front. There is no missing the rows of sharp meat-tearing, bone-crunching teeth as it opens its elongated mouth and strong jaws. A successful predator, possibly top of the jungle food chain. It is clearly intelligent too. It makes no verbal sound to give away its presence, and it chooses where to tread between trees in its path, which, with its massive weight, could easily push aside at will. Once or twice, it stops and lifts its head to flare its nostrils as if using scent in the jungle air to detect and home in on its prey. What it senses is new to it, and it is like no other odour the creature had ever sensed before: the aroma of distant cooked vegetables! Inquisitive, it’s on a mission to locate the source.

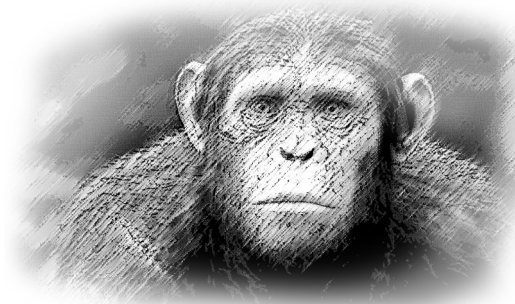
It reaches the edge of the jungle. Suddenly and curiously, it halts at the perimeter of the clearing and looks into the camp. It’s a long gaze as if trying to understand the meaning of shapes it has never seen before. It drops down and puts its arms on the ground to make itself smaller, less detectable, while it ponders the scene. This is when it notices the glowing pole tops and takes a small step backwards—thinking possibly, the lights are small flames. Every forest animal knew of flame and smoke and the torturous death suffered if it failed to outrun a rapidly expanding forest wildfire.

It reaches out a small arm closer to the glowing post top. No heat. Not fire! It goes closer to the post. Very slowly, cautiously, it reaches out towards it. The clawed hand comes within inches of the light and the beast notices the glow increases in brightness as though it senses its proximity. It pulls the hand back, watching the brightness subside. It is becoming frustrated, not understanding this inert thing, nor the shapes in the camp. It feels no threat, just uncertainty at what it all is. There is no beast here of power or equal might and skill to its own. It senses that. It can only detect small jungle beasts in a group somewhere inside and other small unfamiliar weak bipeds. But the smell of cooked food wafts stronger here and the creature has no doubt it originates inside this area.

Finally, frustration gives in to beast rage and anger. It suddenly rears up high on its hind legs, spins its huge frame, and a long steely tail whips around to smash along the line of poles. What happens next is a collection of light, sound, and painful screams as the beast lights up in forked intense blue lightning streaks, and smoke plumes rise along its back. Muscle spasms shiver through its body caused by the grip of high voltage electric shocks. Lights come on in the camp, and floodlights auto scan the perimeter, picking out the beast squirming in reaction to the pulse of electric force. Its tail slaps this way and that—smashing and destroying three of the perimeter poles. The lightning ceases. The other poles stop glowing. The fence is down!

Pained, the beast slowly rolls over and rises to its feet. Stunned perhaps, it stumbles past the dead perimeter into the camp. People start coming out of the pods, their faces were full of anxiety and fear as their eyes behold the monster in their midst.

Battle of Beasts



Chapter 2: Battle of Beasts

Beth and Sean come out fast to see the flashing electric arcing die. The camp searchlights light up the rising beast as it stumbles forward through the dead perimeter straight towards them, following the strong aroma of cooked food now flooding out invisibly from Beth's pod. Bud comes out slowly behind them and stares at the beast, making a sound, forming a word: "Kunga!"

Beth turns to him. "You know of this one?"

"Yes. Bad. Strong. Eat all others. Hard to kill."

Sean turns to Beth. "Great! I'll get some weapons from the locker."

Beth shakes her head. "No time. It takes too long to password it all and arm them. It'll be upon us sooner than that."

The beast is fast approaching. Recovered from its shock and now angered by the pain it endured from the electric shocks, it was coming at a faster gait; its tail swishing threateningly behind it.

Sean, now frozen to the spot from knowing fate was about to be the net that caught them in this fatal moment, was seized with inaction. Escape was impossible. Death inevitable. "Fuck!"

Without warning, a coarse, furred arm brushes them gently back—sweeping both of them behind his huge erect frame. Bud steps forward several paces to distance himself from them. He plants one leg firmly into the soil and then wide-astirde, puts the other down resolutely with a thump onto the ground. He lifts his head and emits a bellowing throaty roar, thumps his chest with clenched fists, and drums out his message of war. He stops, crouches slightly smaller, and waits.

Sean puts an arm protectively around Beth and pulls her into himself.

The beast thunders across the final few parmecs and clouds of dust and soil pump up into the air as each hind leg slams into the earth. Then it is upon Bud, its mouth wide open, snaking out, with saliva pouring like a dozen waterfalls across, and over, the white calcium rocks lining its jaws. In the final moment as Bud is about to be snatched from this world, he deftly side-steps in a graceful manoeuvre for a creature of his size, and from his new position—slams his clenched fist with a huge splash into the beast's left eye.

The beast rears up emitting a whining screech of pain, and Bud is pulled up with it, his wrist still locked into the beast's eye socket.

Sean whispers into Beth's ear. "Come on! Bud's bought us time. The weapons..."

They move off quickly, but Beth looks back concerned for the fate of her helper. She sees the beast shake its head and Bud falling free to the ground onto his back, but he rises again and runs towards a nearby metal fence, rips out a strong solid metal stake, and turns with it to face the beast as it swings around and runs towards him. But this time, the monster changes its tactic. At the last stride, just as Bud is about to lunge forward to plunge the stake into the beast's soft chest, it turns rapidly, sweeping a cloud of earth before

it, as its tail thunders across the soil and into Bud, knocking him several feet up and away into the air.

Sean and Beth reach the locker, a heavy double-walled steel structure. She taps in a long series of letters and numbers and puts her palm on a square plate and waits. With a click, the door swings open to reveal a row of upright weapons, each showing a green light on the rear of a twisted, plaited barrel. They are all fully charged. They both take one from the rack and enter new passwords into small keyboards on the weapons.

“Armed!” Beth says jubilantly. “Come on,” she urges Sean as he’s still messing around putting characters into the keyboard.

“Mine’s not arming,” he shouts as she runs off.

“Try another,” she shouts back before disappearing around the side of a pod.

He grabs another from the rack.

Beth turns the corner and looks for Bud.

He is up on two feet, still clutching the metal post, sidestepping the lunging beast. She could see at a distance, the beast suddenly spinning, lashing out its tail, whipping—sometimes low, and often higher, but Bud was learning fast: jumping the low swings and ducking the high ones. He is looking for an opening to plunge his blunt lance into its soft chest. He knows from the past that the body scales over its back and sides are difficult to pierce. But the beast’s front, in one place, is unprotected. She is still too far away to use the close-combat weapon. Sure, she thinks, maybe the plasma beam would go the distance, but the charge at the distant target would be ineffective at this range. She could switch to projectile firing, but the monster’s hard scales would fail to be penetrated, she thought.

She runs as quickly as she can towards them.

Then she stops, disbelieving what is now unfolding before her. The beast and Bud have paused, ‘squared up’, ready to entangle again when Bud just throws his weapon away and kneels passively before the beast. It is as though he has realised he cannot win and wants a quick death in the sudden snatch and destruction of the beast’s bite. But the monster itself goes quiet, suspicious. It stares down cautiously at the small kneeling ape-human. Slowly, inching a tiny amount at a time, it brings its nose tip up to Bud’s face. Its jaws open slightly, enough to let a long forked tongue free to touch the furry head of Bud. He, Bud, is motionless, letting the hot sticky saliva drip down over his face and breathing in the rotting flesh smell of the beast’s expiring breath.

Seconds pass. The beast is convinced. It suddenly pulls its head back, opens its jaws, and lifts itself high, preparing to lunge down and take the ape-human’s head from his neck in a single bite. It comes down, jaws wide open. It is the moment Bud is waiting for. He becomes a living, organic spear—his legs straighten, his arms form up like a diver about to plunge into an ocean—straight, minimal stream-lined shape, every muscle tensed, and the beast and all its tonnage falls onto them—soft breast exposed to the clenched fists, which tear through and plunge into its beating heart. There is a moment it

realises it is about to die, and its mouth closes as the life quickly and suddenly switches off. Its eyes cloud over as it falls onto outstretched limp paws, inadvertently leaving space for Bud to pull his arms out and roll over away from the collapsing hulk. The beast crashes into the ground in an explosion of soil and dust.

Beth watches incredulously as a shape emerges, walking with his ape gait—Bud. A giant is defeated by a tiny person, like the telling of an ancient myth from her home world, Beth thinks.

She throws the weapon to the ground and, without thought, runs towards him, throwing herself onto him, wrapping her arms around him in love and concern. He softly embraces her before gently pushing her back a bit.

“I stink!” he says.

Beth thinks for a moment. “We all stink, Bud. I like your smell.”

He shakes his head ‘No’. “I stink of Kunga beast. I need wash.”

She smiles. “Got it. Come with me.” She takes his hand and walks with him to the pod. Sean is there waiting.

“I saw it. Bravo, Bud!”

She looks up at him angrily. “This should never have happened. Why was there not an outer barrier?”

“Damn, Beth. You told me you wanted to conserve power for the hydro pods. Two barriers: twice the power consumption.”

She concedes. “Okay. Sorry. My fault. We need an outer barrier, but we need that one fixed first, right now, and two armed volunteers to guard the perimeter until both fences are up and working.”

He realises the urgency. “I’ll get onto it now.” He reaches down and grabs his pile of clothes from the ground. “See you in the morning.” And he rushes off, perhaps feeling rejected by her mood or simply humbled by her position as expedition leader.

She turns to Bud. “Come on my brave hero. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

It was tight inside the shower cubicle. It was built for one person, not a small frail fleshy human and a huge furry ape. Beth found herself pressed up against Bud most of the time, but if she got out, he wouldn’t know what to do. This was new to him, and like any person encountering something new and alien for the first time, he needed her to start him off and show him what to do before she could get out.

“This here,” she turned a mixer tap “controls the flow of water.” She turned it one way and acted to demonstrate. “Brrr... Cold,” then the other way, “Ha! Ha! Hot.”

She sets it so the mix of water spray is just right. Bud was bemused by the water spray and reached up to feel the tiny holes in the shower head. His attention is suddenly averted to her hand which was rubbing his chest hard with a smelly square thing. Foam tumbled away in the spray.

“Soap!” she told him, passing it to him and mimicking using it on all parts of her body. “You understand, yes?”

He lifted the soap to his nose, smelt it, and nodded

“Okay. I’ll get out now. Do it for a little while and then come out, okay?”

He nodded again and she stepped out.

She sat down on the end of her bunk, letting the water slip from her body to the floor covering beneath. In this warm air, she knew it would evaporate shortly as would her body dry off. She felt tired. The events of the evening were unexpected, and her mind replayed them so she could digest the things which happened so fast. The beast was incongruous to most of the other creatures they had discovered in the year they had been here. Possibly it was a legacy of a previous era where a cataclysmic event destroyed most of the living forms before life recovered in new guises. She knew this type of event had been discovered quite commonly on other worlds. A massive volcanic eruption, a meteor strike, or a supernova close by; all of these could achieve such an event. But more importantly, what perplexed her the most was the sacrificial nature of her helper, Bud. Yes, she knew he was sentient and intelligent, but to put his life at almost certain risk to save hers? It was unprecedented in all previous events of gene-splicing and mixing their genes with off-world life forms. She had not wanted to do that, but the alternative was to bring heavy machinery along, and once here, they would need more ancient fuel than mere sunlight, which she saw as a natural source of energy. It was either a case of ripping up bits of this planet to find fuel to keep the project going or creating slave labour by gene-mixing with the strongest and most likely indigenous forms.

The big thing though was what happened when the project cycle is over. This concern was growing like a bag of guilt hanging in her chest and bruising her heart. When the project team leaves this world, by law, they are ordered to kill all gene-mixed life forms. It was forbidden throughout the Empire to leave behind any trace of her own species’ genetic material. The punishment was unthinkable: death for her and death for most of the life here on this world. It was not negotiable.

She put her face into her hands. In science terms, it seemed clinically right, but morally—very, very wrong.

“How I stop water?”

She looked up. Bud stood there, fur drenched and soaked as he pointed back into the cubicle. She went over to him. He just stood there dripping water as she turned off the shower. There was blood mixed in with his fur, and some fresh pools of red were growing.

“You’re wounded!”

She rushed off, came back with a large cloth, and started to dry him, pulling his fur this way and that to reveal several large slices in his skin. They needed stitching, she realised.

“I have to mend this,” she told him, pointing and gently touching the gaping wounds.

“Come and sit on my bunk.”

She takes him over and sits him down on the end. “I need to get a few things to fix these, okay?”

“Okay?” his low-pitched huffy voice utters as he examines more closely the wounds. He looks up towards Beth. “Kunga, master killer. Not many of them. Only second one I see. Saw one when baby.”

Beth is taking items from a medical box but looks up, taken back by this sudden revelation. Sure, the apes they took were thought to be fully grown. They already had a life and experience in the jungle, but no one really knew how old they were, or more surprisingly to her—this presence of a higher level of thought and intelligence than previously thought. Was it her species’ genes giving it to them, or did such intelligence already exist in the apes, she wondered?

She returns with the items and threads a needle.

“This will sting, but it will stop you bleeding.”

She starts stitching. Bud doesn’t flinch. It is as if he doesn’t notice it.

“Can you feel it?” she asks him.

“Hmmm! A little.”

She finishes the first cut and starts on the rest.

“What happened to the first Kunga you saw?”

He goes quiet for a while. “They kill it. The older ones. I watch. I remember when I see Kunga now.”

She begins to realise he is probably not yet fully grown. He is probably still moving through those stages of a late teenager to adult. He is becoming an adult, still things to mature, and she starts wondering how her species’ genes will affect that. But then, she thought, such a circumstance is completely unknown.

“Where you come from?” he unexpectedly asks in a growling hoarse tone.

She knows how hard it is for him to form those words.

She looks up and into his eyes. “Bud, if I say, it will confuse you. I will not be able to find the right words of meaning to explain to you.”

She hopes it will settle it and carries on stitching.

He says nothing as if holding back another question, perhaps thinking he has asked too much already. She finishes.

“There. All done. I must take you back now to your compound. Is that okay?”

Bud nods and stands up. He is already walking to the door and waits by it for Beth to open it.

Is he angry with her for not answering her question, she wonders? She puts down the medical box and walks over to open the door and takes his hand to lead him out. As they cross the space between her pod and the compound, she sees two of her kind with weapons scanning the perimeter and Sean, now dressed, putting new barrier poles in.

“Are you angry with me?”

He looks at her briefly. “Tired. Need to sleep.”

They reach the compound. She opens it and he goes in.

“Bud?”

He turns.

“Thank you for saving me... Us!”

He nods and quietly joins the others sleeping on straw in a corner.

She turns and walks back with a glance to the dead beast laying close to her pod. That will need clearing away in the morning, she thinks, but today, something has changed about the whole project. She feels it in her soul and needs to ponder it, but first—some sleep and rest.

She reaches the pod, and Sean is standing there.

“I wanted to check you are okay. A hell of a night. The barrier is back up and the guards are armed. I’ll put the outer barrier up tomorrow.”

She nods.

“Thanks. Okay? Not sure, to be honest.”

He takes the opportunity. “Would you like some company?”

She eyes him suspiciously.

“Yes. I’m a little unnerved. So, we can lay together, but nothing more.

No sex, okay? Do I have your word?”

“I was thinking the same. Honestly,” he tells her.

They go in together. The door closes.

The moon passes behind the jungle on the opposite of the camp and darkness descends across the area as pod lights are put out. Only the faint glow of infrared beams from two torches plays along the perimeter as two guards, wearing night-vision gear, patrol it. The jungle grows silent. This world here, in this place, rests and sleeps. Even the predators are heading home to their day nests, either filled with the life of others or deprived and hungry.

Sean cuddles Beth into him. They lay quietly, Beth with her eyes closed.

“Do you want to talk?” he whispers.

“Maybe tomorrow. I’m too tired now.” She turns away and forms a huddle. He shifts over and turns to cuddle into her back.

“May the Universe bless you,” he whispers.

“And you,” she whispers back, and they gradually fall asleep.