

THE SEQUEL TO THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

HELIX

WARS



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Stephen Baxter on *Helix*.

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Praise for Eric Brown

“A classic concept – a built world to dwarf Rama and Ringworld – a setting for a hugely imaginative adventure. *Helix* is the very DNA of true SF. This is the rediscovery of wonder.”

Stephen Baxter on *Helix*

“Essentially a romp – a gloriously old-fashioned slice of science fiction... What gives the novel a unique spin is its intertwining parallel plots. It’s smart, fun, page-turning stuff, with an engaging cast and plenty of twists... A hugely entertaining read.”

SFX Magazine on *Helix*

“Equal parts adventure, drama and wonder. Sometimes they work alone, providing a raw dose of science fiction. Other times, Brown uses them in concert to spin an irresistible blend that pulls the narrative along almost faster than you can keep up. However it’s served, *Helix* is a delightful read and is an excellent reminder of why we read science fiction: it’s fun!”

SF Signal on *Helix*

“A thoughtful, provocative book that sets up a bigger story than it has a chance to tell... A surprising calm and fluid read, gracefully skimming over the years with the same detachment displayed by its immortal protagonist. If my regret is that this book was not longer, it is a very good book indeed.”

Pornokitsch on *The Kings of Eternity*

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The Speculative Scotsman on *The Kings of Eternity*

“So very fast as to speed past, and feisty enough to excite... Sets the scene for a strange world where anything and everything science-fictional can happen.”

Tor.com on *Weird Space: The Devil’s Nebula*

“Spot-on... It delivers a good story, introduces the premise of the setting and the threats and dangers posed within it, but also works well as a stand-alone... With Eric Brown already signed up for another book, I know that it’ll be a series worth following.”

Walker of Worlds on *Weird Space: The Devil’s Nebula*

“Brown’s spectacular creativity creates a constantly compelling read... a memorable addition to the genre.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Brown concentrates on stunning landscapes and in the way he conveys the conflicting points of view between races... No matter how familiar each character becomes, they continue to appear completely alien when viewed through the opposing set of eyes.”

Interzone

“There is always something strikingly probable about the futures that Eric Brown writes... No matter

how dark the future that Eric Brown imagines, the hope of redemption is always present. No matter how alien the world he describes, there is always something hauntingly familiar about the situations that unfold there.”

Tony Ballantyne

“Eric Brown joins the ranks of Graham Joyce, Christopher Priest and Robert Holdstock as a master fabulist.”

Paul di Filippo

“SF infused with a cosmopolitan and literary sensibility... accomplished and affecting.”

Paul J. McAuley

“Eric Brown is *the* name to watch in SF.”

Peter F. Hamilton

Also by Eric Brown

NOVELS

Weird Space: The Devil's Nebula

The Kings of Eternity

Guardians of the Phoenix

Xenopath

Necropath

Cosmopath

Kéthani

Helix

New York Dreams

New York Blues

New York Nights

Penumbra

Engineman

Meridian Days

NOVELLAS

Starship Summer

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The Extraordinary Voyage of Jules Verne

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COLLECTIONS

The Angels of Life and Death

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Threshold Shift

The Fall of Tartarus

Deep Future

Parallax View (with Keith Brooke)

Blue Shifting

The Time-Lapsed Man

AS EDITOR

The Mammoth Book of New Jules Verne Adventures (with Mike Ashley)

ERIC BROWN

**HELIX
WARS**





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*For Phillip Vine, Patrick Mahon,
and Mark Chitty
– Champions all –
with thanks*

AFTER THE ROW with Maria, which left him feeling sick and wishing he could retroactively edit his words, Ellis strapped himself into the shuttle's couch and prepared to take off from Carrelliville spaceport.

For the next thirty minutes he lost himself in the anaesthetic of routine, running through the pre-flight systems check with his controller in the terminal tower. Soon, thankfully, he would be leaving New Earth and heading for D'rayni, seven worlds further along this circuit of the Helix.

"You're ready to go, Jeff. Initiate in ten, nine..."

Ellis handed over to the smartcore, and seconds later the main drive ignited and the shuttle eased itself from the gantry. He closed his eyes as the pressure forced him back into the couch. The shuttle rose slowly, then gained speed, and in his mind's eye he saw Maria's pursed expression of barely suppressed hatred.

He opened his eyes and concentrated on the view.

He'd piloted shuttles for almost ten years now, and he knew he would never cease to feel the thrill of taking off and looking down on the misty green expanse of New Earth and its neighbouring worlds curving away beneath him.

He wondered what it must have been like for shuttle pilots back on Old Earth, over a thousand years ago. The thought of inhabiting a single planet, a spherical world floating alone in space, was a concept he understood intellectually but found hard to envisage.

On the Helix, things were very different.

The vast curving length of the fourth circuit looped away before him. Directly below, New Earth was an expanse of green parks dotted with small cities and townships, linked by arterial roads and monorails. In the distance, the blue expanse of the sea separated New Earth from the next barrel-shaped world along the chain. Beyond that was the next world, as yet uninhabited, an even hazier stretch of verdure separated from its neighbour by yet another sea. And so it went, world after sea after world, on and on – ten thousand of them in total, wound around the light of the G-type sun.

As a child he'd continually called the circuits 'tiers'. But, as his father had never tired of telling him, how could you have a 'tier' in a continuous spiral? One tier phased into another, and who was to say when one tier became the next? He smiled at the memory of his father's exasperation when trying to drum the concept into him. He'd finally cut the bottom from a plastic bottle and placed it over a lighted candle; then he'd wound a length of plastic-coated wire around the bulbous bottle in a creditable facsimile of the Helix.

"This is the Helix," his father had said. "Now do you see? There are no tiers or levels as such, just one continuous spiral: four circuits below the sun, and four above, from circuit one at the top down to circuit eight at the bottom. It's lazy to call these circuits 'tiers,' though that's what a lot of people do call them."

And to better illustrate the place where humankind now lived, his father had meticulously painted tiny sections of the wire blue and green, to denote the many worlds and seas that were laced on the spiral like rotating beads on a thread. "Not that this is to scale," Ellis senior had pointed out. "There are thousands of worlds on the Helix, and only a few hundred on this."

But Ellis had finally understood, and began questioning his father about the Helix, its construction and provenance, right up until his death twenty years ago, when Jeff had been fifteen.

His father – an administrator in local government – had never lived to see his only child join the Peacekeepers as a pilot. He would have been proud, curious as he was about the Helix and frustrated by the humdrum nature of his own chosen profession.

Ten thousand worlds, Ellis thought to himself now in wonder. *And six thousand of them inhabited by as many alien species.*

Most of those species were off-limits to the more technologically advanced races of the Helix, the Mahkan and the Jantisars and others who had attained spaceflight alongside humankind. The Builder in their wisdom, had proscribed contact between the less developed races and those more advanced: the former had to find their own way on the long path of species evolution, with no influence from outside forces.

Ellis had come into contact with around a dozen alien races, but for the most part – with one exception – that contact had been fleeting and visual only. The exception was when he'd come to the aid of a Mahkanian vessel stranded between the circuits three years ago, an event which had led to the frequent reunions with the alien engineer whose life he'd saved that day.

And his contact with the Mahkanian had made him even more curious about the thousands of other races which dwelled on the Helix. He realised that he was probably just as frustrated in his own profession as his father had been in his.

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft tap on the door between the cockpit and the passenger lounge. The hatch opened and a small faced peeked through.

“Jeff! I thought it was you – saw you through the viewscreen when we were crossing the tarmac. Mind if I join you?”

His heart skipped and he tried to wipe the grin from his face. In the company of Abi Ajemba he was a schoolboy again.

He gestured to the vacant co-pilot's couch and she slipped into it. She was about five feet tall, as slim as a twelve-year-old schoolboy, and as black as a ripe nightfruit. She'd once told him that her forebears, way back, had hailed from a country in Africa called Ghana. She was in her early thirties, but looked much younger.

“Had to get away from Doc Travers back there. Boring? Arrogant?” She laughed.

“I'll try not to bore you too much, then.”

“Sif you could do that,” she said with a shy smile, and looked through the side panel at New Earth passing far below.

He had first met her five years ago while ferrying peacekeeping officials around the Helix, and for some reason they'd hit it off. Conversation flowed with Abi; they had things in common – strict, conservative fathers, and a curiosity about the world their kind had left behind.

Now she glanced at him, smiling. “Still dreaming about Old Earth?”

“Not so much these days. That said... you know, it's never far away.”

“I wish we had more history files,” Abi said. “Just more information about the place.”

So much had been lost when the colony ship crash-landed on the lowest circuit of the Helix over two hundred years ago. As well as losing a thousand colonists in the impact, countless com-caches and files had been destroyed, irretrievable information about all aspects of the planet they had left. Fortunately, the ship's vast cache of deep-frozen animal embryos had survived the impact, enabling the colony to populate New Earth with many of the species that had once roamed Old Earth.

Abi screwed her lips into a tight loop. “And I'll tell you what's so difficult. Not only not knowing what Earth was like way back – but not knowing what became of it.”

He wanted to reach out and take the tiny woman's hand, but stopped himself. He was more than just

platonically attracted to her, but as ever found himself reluctant to escalate the terms of their relationship.

She went on, hugging herself. "I mean, what happened on Old Earth? Did the rest of humanity die out? Do they still exist – and if so, then in what conditions?"

He looked at her. "You feel guilty?"

She laughed and playfully jabbed his upper arm. "Of course not. Guilt's your thing, Jeff. Not mine!"

He had confided this to her during one of their post-flight drinks in the terminal bar. He'd got a little drunk and found himself admitting that his default emotion these days – and, if he were to be truthful with himself, in the past too – was guilt. Guilt at not being at his father's bedside when he died; guilt at the thought that he was living a good life here on the Helix while, for all he knew, the remnants of humankind were scraping an existence on an Earth barely able to sustain life. And guilt, he'd finished drunkenly, at the state of his marriage.

And Abi had reached out and taken his hand, raised it to her lips and kissed it.

Then the guilt had kicked in again and he'd withdrawn his hand, made excuses and fled.

"Just curious," she said now. "I want to know what's happening on Old Earth. Whether humanity survived, and in what condition. I mean, it was a hell of a long time ago. Humanity might have recovered, prospered."

"Or we... they... might have perished."

She fell silent, watching him, and he busied himself needlessly with the controls.

At last she said, "You're an odd person, Jeff Ellis. Why all this pessimism?"

He shook his head. He was often surprised at other people's assessment of him. He did not think of himself as a pessimist.

She said, "We've known each other... how long, now?"

"Five years, a little more?"

"Five years, three months and two days, to be precise."

He looked at her, surprised.

"I was thinking about you the other day, thinking back... It's a long time." She paused, then said, "And you know, in all that time you've never mentioned Ben. Or rather you have, once, when you were drunk."

Something closed up in his chest, tightened around the knot of pain in there. He said, "I don't recall that."

She reached out and touched his hand, her fingers hot. "You were very, very drunk, Jeff. Otherwise, I would never have known."

He had no desire to talk about his son, to Abi or to anyone. He'd never even discussed with Maria what had happened that day.

Abi's hand still connected them, warming. The seconds ticked by as they raced above the surface of New Earth. Her thumb moved across the back of his hand, stroking with an insistent, urgent rhythm.

She said, "Things still bad with Maria?"

He swallowed, made himself look at her. He nodded, and wondered if, with that single gesture, he was enabling a course of events which would eventually cause him to feel an even greater burden of guilt.

She almost whispered, "Just to say, I'm always there, Jeff. You know where I am if you need someone, okay?"

He looked away, stared through the viewscreen, at once apprehensive but, he had to admit, also excited. He nodded for a long time, until he realised that the action must look foolish, and forced himself to smile and reply, "Thanks. Yes. I know where you are."

He wondered if, once the flight was over and they returned to Carrelliville, he would be able to go

through with it and call on Abi... or if he'd attempt yet again to make things better with Maria, for all the good that would do.

She stretched, and with that simple gesture broke the tension in the cabin. He glanced at her chest, at the outline of her small breasts beneath the red material of her Peacekeepers' uniform, and then looked away quickly as she said, "I'm looking forward to getting some furlough. I seem to have been doing nothing but work for the past month."

"Busy time?" he said for want of anything better to say.

"When I'm not on a routine field trip, and there have been plenty of those these days, I'm sitting in front of a com making reports that no one will ever read. The files are shunted up to head office, where some fat-cat bureaucrat will ignore whatever recommendations I've made."

"Tough. Ever thought of quitting?"

She grinned. "What? And miss travelling the Helix, seeing planets I'd never normally see, meeting bizarre and exotic life-forms? You kidding? I might gripe, but allow a girl a little gripe time, okay?"

He smiled.

"You know what?" she said. "I don't know how most of the people dirtside can bear it. I mean, to see all the worlds stacked up there, swirling away above their heads, and know that they'll never visit them. Must be so frustrating."

"You're lucky."

"And you too, Mr Shuttle Pilot."

He shrugged. "I'm no more than a glorified taxi driver. I ferry VIPs like you all over the place, and then I end up in a dull terminal building... That's if I'm even allowed off the shuttle."

She cocked her head, regarding him. "Maybe one day I'll be able to get you along as my aide."

He laughed. "Well, if you could..."

"I'll consider it a mission, Jeff. Of course, chances are it'd be an overnight stay..."

He felt himself colouring and he covered his embarrassment with, "And today? D'rayni? I've heard it's not that pleasant: cold, icy, ugly..."

"I've never been there before. This is a contact follow-up mission. The D'rayni are pre-spaceflight, but five years ago they contacted us. We made an initial peacekeeping mission to D'rayni then, letting them know who we are, what we're doing here."

"Do you know if the D'rayni recall their arrival on the Helix?"

She shook her head. "It happened over five thousand years ago, Jeff. They were stone age-equivalent. They had a lot of nature-god myths, but evolved out of them. And just a few years ago they learned the truth, from us, for the first time."

He smiled. "Some responsibility you have."

"And I'm very aware of that responsibility every minute of every day."

"What's the world like geographically?"

"Mountainous, oxygen-rich, and heavy in metals, which is how the D'rayni succeeded with such a rapid industrial revolution. Had their world been one along – Phandra, which is metal-light – they would still be hunter-gatherers, or at least pre-industrial."

"What do they look like?"

"Squat, thuggish-looking humanoids. Quite threatening the first time you set eyes on them, but as gentle as lambs."

"They sound interesting."

She nodded. "They petitioned to expand their territory down-spiral – or at least asked our original peacekeeping mission if they might occupy an uninhabited neighbouring world. Of course we said we'd consult the Builders."

"Even though the Builders have been incommunicado for almost two hundred years..."

She smiled. “The D’rayni don’t know that. The line we’re taking is that expansion is frowned upon, as who knows when any neighbouring world might be needed.”

Ellis was silent for a time, then said, “I wonder why the Builders clammed up after their initial contact with us?”

She shrugged her slight shoulders. “Who knows. They’re a law unto themselves. They’re almost...”

He glanced at her. “Go on. Almost?”

“I was going to say almost godlike.”

He laughed. “Don’t tell me that you’re a cultist!”

She feigned to punch him. “No way. I’m a hardened rationalist, and you know that. But it’s easy to see the Builders’ superior science as supernatural.”

There had been a fad, a few years ago among the youth of Carrelliville and beyond, which promulgated the belief that the Builders were deities who not only brought ailing species to the Helix but had created them in the first place. The notion had soon been quashed, though Ellis knew that some people privately harboured not dissimilar beliefs.

Abi said, “Doesn’t your wife work for the Builder Liaison Team?”

He nodded. “She’s a doctor. Every few months they make a field-trip to the coast and tap on the side of the Builders’ ziggurat.”

“A pretty sophisticated tap, by all accounts.”

“Okay, the Liaison Team analyses microwaves and radio waves emanating from the ziggurat, or some such.”

“What’s her take on the Builders’ silence?”

Ellis stared through the viewscreen, seeing Maria turn away from him, reluctant to discuss the Liaison Team’s work. “She’s tight-lipped about the whole affair. Official secrets and so on.” He fell silent and Abi, watching him with her big brown eyes, nodded her understanding.

After a while he said, “Doesn’t it make your job more difficult? I mean, with the Builders giving nothing away?”

“It does and it doesn’t. In one way it gives us latitude, allows us to make our own decisions, based on what we think the Builders would desire. In another, it makes us realise that we have to be very, very careful when we make those decisions. It’s humbling, in a way.” She smiled at him. “As is the whole thing about being the Builders’ representatives. I mean, our race screwed up the running of our own planet to the point where we had to leave Earth in order to survive. And then the Builders in their infinite wisdom set us up as Peacekeepers. In a way, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Who are we to fathom the motives of the Builders?”

“Exactly.”

He pointed through the viewscreen. “Look.”

Abi peered down, her shaveskull head touching his shoulder. “Beautiful,” she said.

He magnified the image, and the string of worlds sprang into view, a string of blue and green strips sequencing along the chain. Much of the circuit below was covered in cloud, but here and there great sweeps of land showed through, veined by rivers and marked by great mountain ranges mantled with snow.

Abi said, “How long before touchdown?”

Ellis glanced at the chronometer. “Just over two hours.”

She sighed. “I really should go and compare notes with Dr Travers before we land.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“But I’d rather be here, chatting with you.”

“Good. Then leave the good doctor to his own devices. If you’d like a coffee...” He gestured to the unit. “And if you’re making one, I wouldn’t say no.”

They drank hot rich coffee and for the next hour chatted about nothing in particular, and Ellis relished the ease with which he could trade smalltalk with Abi. Any conversation these days with Maria was forced, and more often than not escalated into an argument. The only occasions when they didn't argue was when Ellis forestalled his wife's acrimony by terminating the conversation and walking away – a tactic which only served to infuriate Maria even more.

He blinked, irritated at himself for thinking about his wife while Abi was speaking. "I'm sorry?"

"I was just saying," she said, pointing through the viewscreen, "what's that?"

He looked down, following the direction of her small forefinger.

Mountain and ravines showed through a rent in the cloud, marked by the brilliant white of snow peaks and glacial flows.

"I don't see..." he began.

"To the right."

He made out what looked like a blur of dirty cloud, but when he increased the magnification he could see that the pewter-grey pall was a drift of smoke. Through it, colourful against the monochrome grey and white of mountain rock and snow, orange flame flickered.

"What's happening down there?" she said.

"Can't make it out for the cloud cover."

The cloud parted briefly, and he glimpsed a small town or village. Dwellings were wrecked, some burnt out and charred, others still burning.

"Natural, or hostile?" she asked.

"Impossible to tell."

Seconds later they had left the conflagration in their wake.

He tapped at his com-console and routed the images of the burning township to the console screen. They watched again in silence.

"I'll send this back to New Earth," he said, "and see what they make of it."

He squirted the package back to headquarters, then brought up a schematic of the fourth circuit on the screen. The shuttle's position appeared as a flashing dot, passing over a world labelled *Phandra*.

"The world is positioned between D'rayni and Sporell," Abi said. "It's non-industrial, its civilisation comparable to Earth circa 1200, or thereabouts. But very, very different."

He looked at her. "How so?"

"The Phandrans are tiny humanoids, around a metre tall on average."

He couldn't help the dig: "Like you, then?"

"Very funny. Not like me at all. Among them, I'd be a giant. They're elfin, and... sensitive."

"Sensitive?"

"That's their official designation on our files," she said. "It means they have a certain telepathic, or empathetic, capability. They were brought to the Helix over fifteen thousand years ago, but interestingly they retained the knowledge of where they came from, their origins. That's rare: among the races brought here so long ago, creation myths supplant the truth, especially among pre-industrial peoples who have limited means of recording history."

"But not among the Phandrans? How come?"

She shrugged her narrow shoulders. "Some ethnographers have postulated that it's to do with their 'sensitivity' – that it's some kind of race memory, handed down from generation to generation. Another odd thing about them is their longevity – or rather their lack of. They live for an average of just twenty New Earth years."

"Strange." He would read up on these people when he returned to Carrelliville. "How is it, if they're pre-industrial, that we've had any contact with them at all?"

She looked at him. "You must have heard of what happened to Friday Olembe?"

He opened his mouth in a silent 'Ah' of understanding. "Of course. That's where he washed up."

~~"A hundred and ninety years ago, when Carrellville was established and Olembe was getting itchy feet. He didn't want to join the nascent Peacekeepers, so he set off in his own ship to explore."~~

Ellis had read – first as a child in an old story book, and then in a more detailed account years later – that Olembe's shuttle had suffered a mechanical failure and he'd ditched into the sea between Phandra and D'rayni. He washed ashore, badly injured, only to be found and nursed back to health by the elfin humanoids.

Days later a rescue mission had been mounted from New Earth, and further contact between humans and Phandrans had been inevitable.

"But since then?" Ellis asked.

"I think the last contact was around fifty years ago, a routine follow up mission to ensure all was well on Phandra. The contact was limited, and brief."

They flew on in silence for a while, and he considered Abi and what she'd said earlier. Two or three times in the past year he'd thought about leaving Maria, but always he'd shied away from walking out. Three years ago, after their son's death, he'd gone through a painful period of intermingled grief and a strange sense of liberation – because a part of him knew that now he had no reason to stay with the woman who, since the birth of their son, had withdrawn into herself and treated him with cold contempt.

In the months after Ben's death, however, they'd come a little closer, and the thought of leaving her had filled him with yet more guilt.

But now... Now, three years later, they'd weathered their grief and the idea of leaving Maria filled him with an odd surge of hope.

He reached out and laid a hand over hers, his white flesh eclipsing her black, and he was about to say that he'd very much like to see her next week when the communicating hatch flew open.

He didn't have time to withdraw his hand before Dr Travers inserted his leonine head and stared at them, his gaze lingering on their intertwined fingers.

Ellis quickly removed his hand.

The doctor said, "I was wondering, when you've quite finished your tryst in here, if you'd care to discuss work, Ajemba?"

Abi gave Ellis a dazzling smile, then said to Travers, "I was just on my way, Doctor." She slipped from the couch. "See you later, Jeff."

He smiled at her, aware of the thumping of his heart and his burning face.

AS THE HATCH clicked shut behind her, Ellis glanced through the viewscreen. What he saw made him sit up and reach out to magnify the view.

The stark geography presented an arabesque of mountain ridges, and winding through them a wide track. It was not the track that was of interest, however, but what was progressing along it at a snail's pace.

He counted a dozen small black shapes, alien in design but even so recognisable as military vehicles bristling with gun barrels of various gauges.

So what was a caravan of tanks, he asked himself, doing in the high sierra of a pre-industrial civilisation?

He recalled the burning township and belatedly made the connection.

He opened communications to the lounge. "I think you'd better get in here, Abi, Doctor Travers."

The shuttle bucked in the thermals as the mountains raced by beneath. Abi appeared at the hatch, holding onto the sides as the shuttle pitched back and forth. She steadied herself, staggered to the co-pilot's couch, and fell into it.

Travers appeared in the hatch behind her, gripping the frame and looking displeased at the summons. "Well?"

Ellis pointed at the military convoy on the viewscreen. "I thought Phandra was pre-industrial, Abi?" He stared at her as she bit at her bottom lip. He went on, "I think we have the cause of the destruction back there."

Travers moved from the hatch and braced himself between the couches, staring at the image of the crawling tanks.

Abi explained about the burning township they'd seen earlier. Travers said, "Okay. Right. We have this cached, I take it? Let's get out of here and beam it to New Earth."

Ellis nodded. "I've already –" he began.

He never finished the sentence.

Something exploded to the right of the shuttle. He saw an actinic flash which lingered on his retina. The shuttle pitched as if swatted by a giant hand and his ears rang with the deafening cannonade of the explosion. Before he could take evasive action, a missile struck the shuttle. He heard a crunch to his rear and the craft lifted twenty metres as if rammed from below.

Ellis read the com-screen before him: system failure. An alarm blared, shrill and insistent, filling the cabin and deafening him.

"What is it?" Abi yelled.

"Com's down," Ellis said.

"Can't you control this thing?" Travers shouted.

Ellis didn't waste his breath replying. A peak loomed a couple of hundred metres before them. He leaned back, pulling the column towards him, and the spire of rock flashed beneath the shuttle with metres to spare. Abi sobbed, pulling herself into a foetal ball on the couch.

"What's happening, Ellis?" Travers called out.

"Limited manoeuvrability, even on manual," he said. "I'm going for an emergency landing."

But not in the mountains, he thought. That would be suicide. If he could maintain the shuttle on an even keel, leave the mountains in their wake and find a plain... He recalled the view of the terrain from

earlier, how the mountain range petered out to the west, the very direction in which they were heading.

~~“Travers, there’s a couch behind you. Strap yourself in.”~~

The doctor crawled across the cabin and hauled himself into the seat. Abi reached across the gap and squeezed Ellis’s thigh, the gesture more desperate than affectionate. She smiled at him, quickly, and he felt a sudden welling of indescribable sadness.

The shuttle was not responding. He tried to ease the craft to the right, to put more space between themselves and a nearby mountain peak, but the lateral control was compromised. The shuttle flew on as straight as an arrow, missing the peak by fifty metres.

A vast valley opened out before them and Ellis saw that they had left the snow behind and entered a region where vegetation grew – strange trees with tall, thick boles and a tangle of cloud-like foliage that intermeshed with that of their neighbours to create a canopy kilometres wide.

He laughed aloud at the idea of dying in paradise.

“What?” Abi asked with desperation.

He glanced at her. “I’m sorry,” he managed. “I just wanted to say...”

He wanted to say that he would very much like to kiss her, but, before he could articulate the phrase, the shuttle sliced through the haywire tangle of alien foliage and a split-second later impacted with the ground. The cabin was torn apart and something struck Ellis in the chest. He had time to wonder, with surreal curiosity, if he’d suffered a heart attack, and then blackness consumed him.

HE OPENED HIS eyes.

His first reaction was amazement that he was still alive, his second that he must have suffered severe injuries. If the impact hadn't killed him, then surely his injuries would...

He blinked. Where was the shuttle? He expected to see the wreckage of the cockpit all around him, expected to find himself entangled – embedded, even – in its torn and twisted metal. But he was lying on his back on something very soft and staring up into a mellow twilight. The scene above him was so idyllic that he could only smile in wonder. The sun was going down over distant jagged peaks. The fiery orange ball set the cloud cover ablaze and ignited a silver filigree mist high above his head. The he knew what the spun silver was: the cloud-like foliage of the trees he'd seen while descending.

He tried to move, to roll onto his side. Instantly, pain attacked him with a thousand talons. He caught his breath, not daring to let it out. He fell onto his back, the wind expelled painfully from his lungs, and lay panting. He must have passed out; the next thing he knew he was staring through the gaps in the silver foliage at the twinkling points of distant stars.

He drew a breath without causing his ribs to explode. "Abi?" he called.

He willed her to respond. A silence greeted his call – no, not silence: wind soughed through the forest canopy, and somewhere far off an animal, or bird, called a low, achingly poignant, oboe tremolo.

"Abi!" he shouted again, with increasing desperation. He wanted to hug the tiny woman to him.

His vision faded a few moments later and he passed out again.

It was daybreak when he next came to his senses.

He stared up, shocked. Maria was standing over him, staring down. Her face was a mask of undisguised contempt. He tried to reach out to her, wanting nothing but her comforting embrace. His stretching hand fell well short.

"How dare you?" she shouted.

He blinked, and realised that he was crying. Tears flooded his eyes, distorting Maria's image. "I'm sorry?"

"I wanted you more than just someone who'd give me a son!" she cried. "How dare you accuse me of such selfishness?"

Had he ever made such an accusation – or was it his guilty conscience, conjuring this apparition?

He tried to recall the content of their last – their final? – argument.

Something about the fact that she would not be at home when he returned. She would be on a fifteen-day field-trip to the coast, working with her team at the Builders' ziggurat.

"And no doubt you'll be spending all your free time with Director Stewart?"

Her icy gaze had frightened him with its intensity. "And what do you mean by that?"

"I've seen how he looks at you. That party we attended –"

She cut him off: "Dan's a good friend. Nothing more. We're colleagues, we share theories, ideas."

"As if that's all you share."

She had lashed out then, slapped him across the face, and left him standing in the lounge while she stormed from the house. Later Ellis had made his way to Carrelliville spaceport, feeling sick at his

stupidity and wishing he could go back and un-say what he'd said.

He blinked, and Maria was gone.

“Abi!” he called out again, sobbing.

The day warmed. The sun shone through the gossamer foliage. A distant bird gave a sad, prolonged call.

He raised a hand to his face and felt his flesh. It moved like slit blubber beneath his finger-tips, and when he lifted his hand away he saw dried blood. His face had been lacerated in the impact, had suffered a dozen cuts. He smiled, then laughed. Well, he'd never been all that handsome.

What about his limbs?

Both arms appeared to function reasonably well, though they too had been sliced here and there.

He moved his right leg, bending it, and he felt no pain. But when he tried to move his left leg, bringing it up to mirror his right, a vicious stabbing pain lanced up his femur. The material of his right legging was ripped, blood-soaked. He decided not to look too closely at the wound beneath the fabric.

“Abi! Abi, answer me! Travers!”

He moved his head, squinted. To his left he made out a sward of red grass embroidered with a million tiny, polychromatic blooms. He really was, he thought, in paradise.

He turned his head the other way and saw, for the first time, what was left of the shuttle.

Only its nose cone had survived, buried in the loam of this alien world. Beyond the cone, in a long trail that receded into the distance and defied his vision, was a confetti of metallic fragments. How the hell, he wondered, had he survived the crash-landing?

He closed his eyes, opened them, and stared at something twenty metres away. “Abi?”

She was lying on her back, but something about her posture told him that she could not be alive. Her right leg was twisted, bent back on itself. Her red Peacekeepers' uniform was slit like a Chinese lantern.

He moaned to himself and determined to reach her remains. He wanted to straighten her twisted leg. It was undignified, the way death had dealt with her posture. She was a beautiful woman, and it was not fair.

He would... he would reach her, rearrange her leg, set her head straight, and kiss those lips for the first and last time.

He propped himself up on his elbows, trying to ignore the pain. He might not be able to walk, but he could drag himself along, backwards, towards where Abi lay. He set off, digging his elbows into the soft loam, humping himself along, stopping for frequent deep breaths when the effort and the pain became too much.

Fifteen minutes later, soaked with sweat and shaking with the exertion, he reached Abi.

He sat up beside her, staring at her remains. Something had scored a deep incision across her torso, opening her up from shoulder to pelvis, revealing the bloody slick surfaces of her internal organs. Her right leg was bent at the knee, so that the toe of her boot was inserted into the space between her thighs.

Ellis wept as he reached out and, gritting his teeth against the pain, took hold of her heel and pulled. He straightened her leg, and in doing so it came away at the knee, held together now only by the thin material of her slacks. Weeping, he set her right leg parallel with her left, and then straightened her head.

Her face was unmarked, perfect. She seemed at peace, her eyes open and staring up at the beautiful canopy above them.

He reached out and closed her eyes, and then, with difficulty, leaned forward and kissed her lips.

Exhausted, he fell onto his back beside her and passed out.

When he came to his senses, much later, the sun was directly overhead. He could not bring himself

to look at Abi's body, preferring to recall her in the shuttle when he had been so close to agreeing to visit her back at Carrelliville. She had been small and perfect then, and wonderfully alive.

He stared past Abi, towards the wreckage, and wondered if the com had managed to emit a distress signal, if right now a rescue team was on its way. Or had the com malfunction prevented the activation of the signal? There was no way of knowing, until the team turned up, or failed to.

Among the wreckage he saw Dr Travers' body. A fragment of the shuttle's superstructure had sliced his torso and opened up his chest like a clamshell. Ellis looked away, gagging.

He lay back and thought through the last few minutes of their descent. He told himself that there had been nothing he could have done to prevent the crash-landing, but even so he felt the first stirrings of guilt.

He had a sudden vision of Abi laughing and telling him that guilt was *his* thing.

It was not his fault that Abi and Travers were dead, but the fault of whoever was responsible for the razing of the Phandran township; the operators of the military vehicles he had seen winding their way up the mountain track.

What had Abi said about the Phandrans? That they were a pre-industrial, peace-loving people? So it was unlikely that they were responsible for the attack on the township and his shuttle. But the thought of an invader from another world was almost as impossible to contemplate.

He felt a sudden stab of anger at the unknown assailants, followed by a sense of incredulity. In the two hundred years humankind had dwelled on the Helix, peace had reigned. No race had thought it necessary to attack another. Now, that had changed. Now, for whatever reasons, an alien race had set about another.

He shook his head at his reaction: he wanted to smash to pieces whoever had done this, annihilate the people responsible.

So much for reasoned pacifism, he thought.

He was distracted by the sound of something buzzing nearby. When he turned his head he saw a tiny tornado of flies – or their Phandran equivalent – swarming over Abi's body. They landed, invading her, and he wept and propelled himself away.

Later, exhausted, he passed out again.

THIS TIME WHEN he came to his senses he was aware of another sound. It seemed to be close by, and he wondered how he had failed to notice it earlier.

The soft splash and play of flowing water.

Suddenly he realised how thirsty he was. He raised himself and looked around. Directly behind him, glinting between the boles of two trees, he made out a stream. He drew a deep breath and dragged himself towards it, grimacing with the effort.

It took an age for him to reach the stream's bank, but when he finally lowered his head to the silver water and drank, the relief was worth the effort. He laughed aloud at the sensation of the cold cut of the liquid down his parched throat. Water had never, ever, tasted so wonderful.

He drank his fill and lay back on the bank, warmed luxuriously by a patch of sunlight. There had been rations aboard the shuttle, but how to find them among all the mangled wreckage? It would be an impossible task. Better, he thought, to seek fruit or other food in the forest.

But how to tell if they were poisonous?

He sat up carefully and looked around. Bushes grew nearby, and on them hung clusters of pale pink berries. He propelled himself away from the stream towards the bushes, and ten minutes later arrived exhausted, before the shrub. The berries looked tantalising, mouth-watering – too good to be true. And when he tasted one, tentatively, he instantly spat it out, and then the tainted saliva that remained. If taste denoted poison, then the bitter berries were surely toxic.

A few metres beyond the bush he saw a low shrub bearing a hundred golden globes. He shuffled towards it and plucked a fruit – the size of a pear and similarly shaped. It smelled ripe and sweet, and he took a small bite. The soft flesh flooded his mouth with nectar, and he reasoned that a fruit so wonderfully tasty could surely not be poisonous. He ate one, then another and another, then lay down beneath the bush and closed his eyes against a wave of pain from his leg.

Seconds later he heard something move in the undergrowth beyond the shuttle's wreckage.

He sat up, startled, and stared across the sward.

His first thought was that the military responsible for bringing the shuttle down had, finally, traced him. It was a measure of his mental confusion that until now he had not thought of getting away from the site of the crash. But how to do that, with an injured leg and cracked or broken ribs?

He dragged himself into the cover of the golden-fruit bush and peered out.

Something moved among the still steaming wreckage. He expected to see an invader, or a Phandran, but what he saw, shuffling its way through the debris, was certainly no elfin native. Was this the invader, then? He stared, trying to make sense of the thing. It resembled a cross between an overgrown seed-pod and a giant crimson caterpillar, three metres long, with an open-ended orifice surrounded by what looked like tendril feelers that quested across the ground as it pulled itself along.

Only when it emerged from behind a smoking engine cowling did Ellis see that its back end was connected to a long stalk or vine. He followed the course of the vine and traced it back to the trunk of a gossamer-cloud tree. The vine coiled around the trunk and vanished into the foliage.

He wondered why the pod had descended from the tree, and what it was doing probing through the wreckage.

Absently he plucked another golden fruit and ate it as he watched.

Five minutes later, his question was answered.

The shuffling pod approached Abi's body. At first Ellis assumed it would caress the corpse with its tendrils in the same way it had felt all other obstacles in its path, before moving around them. But not this time.

The pod's orifice opened slowly, a rheumy sphincter strung with drools of saliva like harp-strings. The pod shuffled forward and, as Ellis watched with mounting revulsion, eased first Abi's feet into its maw, then her legs.

He wanted to cry out, distract the creature so that it would leave Abi in peace. But he quelled the impulse, fearful of the thing's attention.

He watched as, little by little, the pod drew Abi into its maw like a snake ingesting a rat. Ten minutes later Abi's head disappeared through the orifice, which slowly closed. She was now encapsulated within the pod as if it were a body bag.

As he stared, the tendril that connected the pod to the tree tightened, and the pod was dragged slowly backwards along the ground. Minutes later the pod bearing Abi's mortal remains tilted upright and was drawn into the tree-top. There the pod hung, spinning slowly, as its digestive juices set about breaking down Abi's flesh.

He saw movement beneath the tree. Yet another pod was moving through the wreckage, approaching Travers' shattered corpse.

He heard a sound to his right and turned in alarm.

Five metres away, a pod was shuffling towards him. He swore out loud and backed towards the stream. The pod changed its course, fractionally, to compensate for its prey's evasion, and came towards him with stoic, unhurried persistence.

He looked around for a branch with which to club the thing, but saw none. Very well, then; he would lash out with his feet when it came within range. He was moving as fast as he was able, towards the stream, but the pod was shuffling a little faster. He wondered if he would make it to the water before the pod reached him. Then, he thought with sudden relief, he would pitch himself into the river and, despite the pain, swim downstream and evade the vegetable monster.

The pod was a couple of metres from his trailing feet, its crimson tentacles questing blindly after him. He wondered how it had detected him, and with what senses it now charted his progress.

A metre from the river, a thought struck him. What if the water, mid-stream, was not deep enough to allow him to swim, and he was in effect stranded there? He wondered if the pod would come in after him.

As if sensing his intentions, the pod reacted.

Something lashed out at him from the wrinkled skin on the upper side of its orifice. Ellis had time to see a flash of crimson tentacle – then cried aloud as it stung his lower leg. He looked down. A small hole showed in the material of his jumpsuit.

Alarmingly, the pod had ceased its remorseless shuffling.

It was waiting.

He took a breath, attempting to quell his fright, and dug his elbows into the ground. He tried to drag himself backwards, away from the patient pod. He felt as if all his strength had left him. Numbness crept up his body, radiating from the pod's sting. Seconds later he was unable to move his arms and he collapsed onto his back.

At least, staring up into the gossamer cloud of the trees, he would be spared the sight of the pod's hungry approach. He hoped he would be unconscious before it swallowed him whole.

He realised he was weeping: the one physical ability he could perform. What a stupid, stupid way to die. He wondered if the authorities would ever find his body, a scatter of desiccated bones spat out across the meadow's floor when the pod-tree had sucked out all his goodness.

He wanted to cry out when something touched his booted feet. He felt his legs rise, as if cushioned

on something soft and warm. Slowly, the pod drew him into its maw. He lolled this way and that, paralysed, unable to do a thing to prevent himself from being swallowed alive.

He felt a sudden resentment at the thought of how Maria might take the news of his death. There was something almost dignified about dying in a shuttle accident, at least when compared with being eaten whole by an ambulatory vegetable. In time, Maria would see the funny side of his end, would comment scathingly at dinner parties...

The spongy lips of the creature's mouth had reached his chest now. He felt a circle of wet warmth around his upper torso. He closed his eyes and wept as the monstrous lips sucked themselves around his neck and head like oversize slugs.

He felt the skin of the pod constrict around his body. He was rapidly losing sensation in his limbs now, for which he was thankful. Perhaps he would be totally insensate when the digestive juices got to work. He opened his eyes, but all he could see was the puckered skin of the pod's interior, tight across his face, glowing crimson with filtered sunlight.

He moaned as the pod moved, dragging him across the ground towards its parent tree. On the way he hit rocks and bits of wreckage, but whatever had paralysed him had also anaesthetised him to the blows.

Minutes later the pod came to a halt, and he was tipped slowly until he was hanging upside-down. Then, slowly, he was hauled high into the tree-tops, spinning lazily as he went.

At last the ascent came to a halt, and the spinning worked itself out until the only movement was a gentle, side-to-side rocking in the breeze.

He was still weeping, minutes later, when unconsciousness came.

THEY WERE HAVING trouble with the sea bordering an unnamed world, three along from Kranda's homeworld of Mahkana.

She stood on the edge of the cliff and stared out across the storm-tossed ocean. The Mahkan monitoring agency had reported severe storms lasting almost thirty days, storms which should not have happened and which if they continued were in danger of eroding parts of the world's western coastline. The agency had brought in a team of meteorologists, and then climatologists, in a bid to solve the problem, but they had reported that the storm's cause was neither meteorological nor climatological. As a last resort, Kranda's engineers had been called in to assist.

There was an almost surreal contrast between the condition of the sea, a whipped-up frenzy of troughs and peaks, and the clement weather which prevailed along the coastline. At her back, the monotonously flat plain stretched away for thousands of kilometres, above which a blue sky was unmarked by the slightest cloud. The sky over the sea was clear, too, which made the raging waves below all the more odd.

She knew the ocean's activity, which initial observers had termed a storm, was nothing of the kind. Storms were the result of weather conditions, and conditions along the coast were fine. The activity of the waves, the surging plunge of grey ocean, was the manifestation of a more fundamental problem. Kranda had her theories, but she was keeping quiet about them until she knew a little more about the situation. There were those in her team, beneath her, who would be eager to capitalise on her slightest error or misjudgement.

Kranda had recently made the transition from male to female, and was still adjusting to the metabolic and mental changes this entailed. She was still negotiating the subtle changes in relationship between herself and the members of her team; it didn't help that some of her closest rivals had undergone male-female transformation at around the same time. There was too much rivalry, even hostility, in the air at the moment, and there were times when Kranda wished she could just walk away from it all and return to her homeworld.

But that was the cowardly residue of male hormones lingering in her system, she knew. The period immediately after transition was always like this, with old ways of thought and feeling laying their treacherous palimpsest over her new psychological persona. In time, male equivocation and uncertainty would fade, usurped by female certitude and strength.

She could already feel the hormonal aggression at work within her. She had been overly critical of a clerk's report the other day, and had questioned a colleague's finding in a way she would never had done as a male. Also, her thoughts of late had been turning with nostalgia and poignancy to her childhood, specifically to the five years of her girlhood, and the long coyti hunts she had undertaken with her hive-mother. She loved the life of an engineer, but always, immediately after undergoing the male-female transition, she longed for the mountains of her homeworld, the familiarity of the hunt, the simple, more aggressive ways of her old female life.

As she stared out to sea, she detected movement other than the chaotic surge of the waves. Something as grey as the ocean emerged from the morass, a streamlined craft that for a second resembled a teardrop flung from the highest wave-crest. Then the vehicle gained solidity as it

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