

*Isle of the Dead presented a universe in which godlike terraformers reshape worlds to their clients' bidding. In Nina Kiriki Hoffman's tale of ghosts and science, a new player takes a hand in the process.*

## **THE SOMEHOW NOT YET DEAD**

### **NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN**

"I KNOW IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE," SAID CRANSTON. HE peered into the bottom of his glass, then glanced up at me from under bushy dark brows. He looked like a man who should be smoking a pipe—weathered, squint-eyed from sun-staring, contemplative.

"And ironic," I said. "A consummation devoutly to be wished by most of the people I know, I bet." I picked up my glass for the first time since he had set it in front of me. He stared. I smiled at him and said, "Explain that!"

"Uh," he said. He opened and closed his mouth a couple times. Ghosts weren't supposed to be able to pick things up, I was pretty sure. "Jake, I'm not saying I'm an expert on death. I really don't know much about it. All I know is I watched them bury you three days ago, so I don't know what you're doing here now."

I looked out the view window in the back of Cranston's apartment at green-edged sunlight touching green-brown sand and an ice-green stream swollen with spring rain. The forest beyond looked like black ink trees on wet green paper. On Emery, the soil was greenish tan or greenish brown or greenish red, the sky was greenish blue, and the water various shades of green; the plants here were reddish purple, magenta, lavender, or purple-black, though the flowers came in a lot of colors.

I was the first human to die on Emery since we had started the colony three years earlier.

You would think death would be pretty much the same everywhere, but apparently it wasn't.

I sipped my drink. It tasted different. Brighter, wider, with strange edges to it. It sparkled against the back of my throat.

"Uh," Cranston said again, "Jake? Were you . . . well, were you

experimenting on yourself before you died?”

I glared at him with narrowed eyes. I had been gradually retrofitting the colonists to match the planet—that was my job. First you picked a planet that was a pretty close match for the colonists, then you tinkered. Incorporate local molecules into our food, tailor messenger RNA to accomplish specific intracellular tiny tasks, that sort of thing, all baby steps so people wouldn't be too startled when they woke up in the morning and looked in their mirrors.

I tried everything on myself first. Animal testing and computer modeling could only take you so far.

Besides, since Diane had moved out of my apartment and in with Roy, who was there to care what became of me?

This was not adequate colonial thinking. Cranston had already pointed out to me that everyone cared, because, although others had bits and pieces of the same training I had, I was the ablest organism engineer the colony had. I was needed, whether anyone liked me or not.

I guess I took a pretty big hit with that last modification. I had thought it would give me the power to eat the local fruit without risk. I mean, those peach things had been ripening every year on the spoonleaf trees, sitting there in all their red, orange, and yellow glory, smelling more inviting than anything the synthesizers could come up with, ripening and dropping to the ground, where rabbit-squirrels feasted on them and got drunk. Dragon-birds ate them and flew erratically, if at all.

Getting drunk had seemed like a good idea.

I had analyzed the peaches the first year after we landed, mapped everything that made them dangerous and incompatible with human digestive systems. Plotted the adjustments we would need in our physiologies so the native peaches and other local fruits and vegetables would be nutrition instead of poison, planned carefully so no one step would be too giant a leap. Initiated the series of modifications in the general population, slow shifts across weeks and months, with downtime in between for acclimation and acceptance.

The last step was too big; I should have broken it down into three; but I wasn't feeling patient. The peaches were ripe now. I could smell them. What was I waiting for?

So I'd leapt.

Some leaps fail.

The fruit did get me drunk fast, though. And it had sure tasted good.

"Who decided to bury me? It's not like we have an unlimited amount of Terran material around," I said. Nag-ging everyone to recycle our resources was another cru-sade of mine. True, I was shifting everyone around so that we would be as close to indigenous as possible, but it was early yet in our Emeryforming, and I still had enough Terran in me to be rare, maybe even precious here.

"I don't know," said Cranston.

"And for that matter, how did I die? My memory goes dark for a while, and then I wake up underground."

"You do? You did?" Cranston leaned closer and studied my clothes. Standard colony issue shirt and trousers in my color, silver, the cloth designed to repel all kinds of dirt and stains. My clothes were clean. I scratched my head and shed a sprinkle of dry green dirt on his table.

"Under some dirt, anyway, though fortunately not in a coffin," I said. "Who pronounced me dead?"

"Roy," he said.

"Where were *you* when all this was going on?" Cranston and I played chess every Fourday evening. He was one of the colony scouts; he went out every week to map new areas, locate resources, and search for and record new species. It gave him an expanded perspective. He was one of the few people in the colony I could spend time with who didn't get annoyed with me right away.

"Roy's the G.P. It never occurred to me to question his judgment."

"What about the burial? You know I would rather donate my parts wherever they might be needed, in whatever form. At least I could have been fertilizer. For that matter, what about preserving my work? Did anybody check to see what I was working on when I died, and whether an autopsy was indicated? What if I had just discovered some key thing?"

"There was an autopsy," Cranston said. "Eva said—" He stared at me

and shook his head. "I don't understand this at all. I thought you had been autopsied and harvested in accordance with your wishes. So naturally I still think you're a ghost."

"What did Eva say?"

"She said you didn't leave notes on the last phase of your work, and that she couldn't figure out what you had done to yourself even after she examined you."

Not enough notes? I took detailed notes with every modification! Maybe she hadn't looked in the right file. Possibly I had called them eccentric filenames. Possibly I had locked or hidden them. "Cause of death?" I asked Cranston. "Did she mention one?"

"Your gut was full of half-digested fermented peaches. She ruled it a suicide. Jeez, Jake. You're the one who told everyone not to eat those things. And it was pretty inconsiderate of you leaving the rest of us half fish, half fowl."

Eva knew I had eaten peaches. Therefore she had actu-ally done the autopsy. Feeling strange, I opened the stiktites on my shirt and studied my belly. I couldn't detect the marks of laser surgery at all. I patted my gut. No gaping wounds or even any soreness.

"You saw them bury me three days ago?" I said.

"Yeah."

"How long have I been dead?"

"You died on Oneday, they buried you on Twoday, and today is Fiveday," he said. He sighed and shook his head. "Theory number two: this is a very vivid dream."

"I'm not that anxious to be a figment of your imagination."

"I'm not that anxious for you to be my figment either," said Cranston, frowning. "I'd like to stick with the ghost hypothesis, but I don't believe in them. So what are you, why are you here, and what do you want?"

"You know me," I said. "You know who I am."

"I don't think so," he said. "And even if I did know who you were, I lost

track of what you want a long time ago. Enlighten me.”

What if he were right? What if I wasn't even myself? I drank the rest of my drink. It didn't taste like any drink I'd ever had, though as far as I knew, Cranston had poured me my usual bourbon.

“I've got a theory,” I said. “You're a figment in *my* dream.”

He pinched himself, shook his head. “I'm awake.” He reached over and pinched the back of my hand.

“I'm awake,” I said.

Cranston stared at his hand, at my hand. His mouth opened and closed again.

“Yeah,” I said. “We're both awake, and you touched me. Who's a figment now?”

He stood up and paced away, then came back. “Jake, you look kind of green, and you smell funny—not bad, but not normal either. Would you check your pulse for me?”

Guess he didn't want to touch me again.

I glanced at his wall chrono, put my fingers on the pulse at my wrist, counted heartbeats for half a minute. “Normal,” I said.

He shook his head, paced away, came back.

“Why'd you come here, anyway? To my apartment, I mean? Is this the first place you came after you woke up?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Why?”

“You're—you're my friend. You used to be my friend. Has that changed?”

“I don't know.”

“Since you don't think I'm myself. Okay, guess I can sit with that for now. Do you want me to leave?”

“No. No. I just want you to tell me the truth. What were you working on when you died?”

So I told him about the peaches and the three-in-one jump I had made.

He licked his lips. “The first year, I thought they stank,” he said, “I hated when they were ripe. Such a stench, and it was everywhere! But yeah, this year I really wanted to try one.” He glanced out the window. No spoonleaf trees in view, but there were some along the stream a little way. “So you can eat them now?”

“Well,” I said. I realized I was a little hungry. I guessed I hadn’t eaten in four days, but maybe being dead didn’t take much energy. “I don’t know. What if Eva was right, and that’s what killed me?”

“Half digested, she said. So the first part of digestion went all right.”

“I could eat now,” I said.

“Let’s go.”

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When we first arrived on Emery, everyone had to wear breathing masks. Too many allergens in the atmosphere. People could exhaust themselves with sneezing and scratching, and a few people couldn’t even breathe without the masks. My first modifications had taken care of those problems, and I had done a nice job; lots of individual tailoring involved.

While I was working on people, Dreena Alexander, the botany engineer, was working on the Terran plants we had brought with us, and studying the local plants. We had coordinated efforts, though we didn’t get along very well.

It would have been fun to leave Dreena with some kind of little allergy just to irritate her, but she was smart, if irritable and prickly. She would have figured it out and complained to the colonial council. They had a number of effective policing powers.

Dreena was in the spoonleaf grove when Cranston and I arrived. She squatted in sunlight with a peach in one hand and a portable analyzer in the other. She had thick dark hair that she bound into a lump at the back of her

neck, pale skin, high Slovak cheekbones, and a single bar of eyebrow that crossed above both eyes and the bridge of her nose, which made her frowns look emphatic. She always reminded me of a frog, not because she was shaped like one, but because every pose she took seemed like one a frog might take. Now, for instance, squatting on her heels, her knees up, her torso leaning forward as she stared down at the peach in her right hand. The tip of her tongue touched her upper lip and lingered.

“Hi, Dreen,” I said. I stooped, picked up a fallen peach, brushed green-tan dirt off it and bit. My mouth filled with an array of flavors and textures—mango, persimmon, peach ice cream, cinnamon applesauce; firm juicy flesh inside an envelope of fuzzy skin. The faint fizzy afterbite of an intoxicant. “Oh, god. You can’t believe how good this tastes, Cranston.”

Dreena licked her lips. The peach she was holding moved closer to her mouth.

“Stop that!” Cranston said, knocking her hand away.

“What?” She shook her head, stared at the peach in her hand, dropped it.

I took another bite of mine. I could already feel the ease working its way through me, telling me to smile and relax. I wondered how many of these I had eaten on Oneday. Maybe I had relaxed to death?

“He’s eating one,” Dreena said to Cranston.

“He’s modified.”

She stood and studied me. “Wait a minute. I thought he was dead.”

“That too,” said Cranston.

“Wait a minute! You *were* dead! Eva even cut you open!”

I finished the peach and licked my fingers. These peaches didn’t have pits. I wasn’t sure how the spoonleaf trees propagated—that was Dreena’s department. I looked at the other fruits on the ground. They all looked delectable. I craved another, but figured I better quit.

“Well, I don’t feel sick, not even a little bit. Just happy. Maybe we should go back to the lab and check this out,” I said.

“Maybe we should tell the council that something strange is going on with you, Jake!” said Dreena. “I think the fact that you’re not dead is fairly significant.”

“She has a point,” Cranston said. “I wonder why I didn’t think of that.”

She stepped closer to me, stared at my face, then my hands. I glanced at my hands. My skin did look greener than it had before.

“I want that mod,” Dreena said. She licked her lips again.

“So do I,” said Cranston.

“I have to restructure it.”

“Why?”

“You guys said I died. I don’t think killing everybody else is a good idea.”

“Let’s go to the lab first,” Dreena said.

I grabbed a peach as we left the grove. “What do these things do, anyway, besides ripen, drop, and ferment?” I asked Dreena. “Do they have anything to do with reproduction?”

“No,” said Dreena. “The spoonleaf trees reproduce in nodules underground; they’re cross-fertilized by bee-shrews. I haven’t been able to figure out a function for the peaches, aside from making animals drunk out of their gourds, which I also haven’t figured out. Where’s the pay-off for the trees?”

“The first year we got here, the peaches did stink, didn’t they?” I sniffed the peach I held. Nectar. Ambrosia. I remembered analyzing one the first year. It was one analysis among many, but Cranston was right; initially, I had found the peaches repellent. In fact, we had called them urine fruit. How odd.

“I assumed you modified our tastes,” Cranston said.

“Not on purpose,” I said. “Can I borrow your analyzer, Dreena?”

She handed it to me and I scanned the peach. Its profile was similar to the one I had gotten when I first analyzed a peach right after we arrived.



Similar, but some of the spikes looked different, I thought. I couldn't be sure until I checked my records.

I began to have strange thoughts. I was a skillful organ-ism engineer, true, but how skillful could I be? Emery was unlike any other world ever documented, and I had been inventing everything as I went along.

Well, that was my job. But the modifications had been going extremely well. None of the usual missteps you read about in case studies of other colonies. We could chalk this up to Dreena's and my expertise, or we could figure there was something else in the mix.

I saved the peach profile on Dreena's analyzer and handed it back to her as we walked. The forest ended and the colony began; the dividing line seemed unnecessarily sharp to me for the first time, though all our buildings, made from a combination of local soil and insta-hard foam, were different colors of local green.

Doors opened along the etched glass streets. People brought tables and chairs onto the front patios of apartment houses and office buildings. Others carried baskets of bread and pastries or trays with pots of tea, cups, napkins, sugar bowls, and cream pitchers on them. Tea time, a mandatory break in routine that had always irritated me. What if you were in the middle of a flare of inspiration and you had to stop for tea? Then again, lunch irritated me too.

Heck. Sleep irritated me most of all. What a waste of time.

"Jake?" said someone. We were headed toward the entrance to the medical building. Eva stood on the patio.

Eva and I had been involved for a while that first year, until little niggles every day added up to huge irritations we couldn't resolve or ignore. She still looked good to me, dark-skinned and soft-edged, and she smelled good too, though not the way she used to smell. Right now she smelled like spicy red peppers frying in hot olive oil. Odd.

She had a powder-blue teapot in her hand, for a couple seconds, anyway. She dropped it. It bounced, the lid flew off, and tea splashed everywhere.

I licked my fingers, realized I had finished the peach I had been carrying. Mild intoxication warmed me. I smiled, feeling like an idiot, though a relaxed and happy one. "Hi there," I said.

“You were dead,” she said.

“So I’ve heard.”

“I had my hands inside your body. I took sections. ...”

“Strange way to restart a relationship,” I said. “I thought you didn’t like me anymore.”

“I don’t.”

“So how much testing did you do? Did you stop looking for cause of death after you decided I had committed suicide?”

She nodded slowly. “Is this real?”

I glanced at Cranston. We had already been all through this.

“That’s the hypothesis we’re working with,” Cranston said.

“Jake is going to show me his notes on his last modification,” said Dreena, poking me in the back to get me moving toward the entrance.

“I want to see too,” Eva said.

I grabbed the basket of scones from the table as we went into the building. I bit into one. Like everything else, the scone tasted different, more like dusty clay and less like bread. Hard to swallow. I hoped it wouldn’t make me sick.

In my lab I went to my terminal. I pressed my thumb on the recognition plate, then accessed my work files.

“It knows you,” said Cranston.

I waggled my eyebrows at him. “Better than you do.” I selected and opened a file named “Uric.” Schematics of mRNA, catalytic sites in various cell organelles, chemical formulae, computer-modeled 3-D molecule maps; I flicked through the frames, checked to see if they were in a format people without my background could follow. As far as I could tell, they were accessible enough. “What’s wrong with this file, Eva? Why couldn’t you find it? Or did you just not understand it?”

“Why’d you call it ‘Uric’?” she asked.

“Why not? You should have been able to pick it by the date stamp if nothing else.”

“Stand away and I’ll show you.”

I stood up. She took my seat and pressed her thumb to the recognition pad, and the computer shut down and re-started. My filenames came up. More than half were miss-ing; “Uric” wasn’t there, for instance. “Why’d you hide it?” asked Eva.

No good explanation came to mind. I couldn’t even remember doing it. Though I’ve never been fond of people snooping through my work. I’m not much of a team player.

Or maybe I’d hidden it because it was too revolutionary. If we still had the activities checks and balances we had had when we first got to Emery, every step of my work would have been evaluated by two other scientists before implementation. Those were bad old days, all right. People always looking over my shoulder. I had hated that.

They’d stopped after the first year. They trusted me. Everything I did worked, after all.

I opened the computer again myself and selected “Uric,” then stood up to let Eva take a look at it. I watched as she paged through. Pretty elegant, really, but too much at once, for sure.

“Some of the best work you’ve done, Jake,” she said after studying it. “I still don’t see what killed you.”

“Whose idea was it to bury me?”

“Mine,” said Dreena.

“Why? Wasting me that way? Why?”

She shook her head. “It makes no sense to me now. At the time, it seemed vital. I argued in front of the whole council that we should establish a cemetery in the shade of the spoonleaf groove, as we’d be needing one sooner or later, and that you should be the first to be buried— just easy-to-break-down body, not closed up in a coffin— as some kind of offering to the planet.”

“It made sense to me at the time too,” Eva said. “Right now I can’t imagine why. Obviously you belonged in rec-lamation. Dreena’s thinking was muddled!”

“Muddled by what, though?”

“You think everyone’s thinking is muddled,” Dreena said to me.

“Well, sure,” I said, “but in this case I believe some-thing else was operating. Operating on everyone. Aston-ishing. Elegant.”

“Something else?” asked Cranston.

I still couldn’t figure out what I had died of. It seemed like maybe the most important thing had been to get me in the dirt somehow. “What exactly are bee-shrews, anyway?”

“Underground hive animals,” said Dreena. “Pollina-tors. Gifton’s going to study them when he finishes with the tree-grazers.”

“Roy pronounced me dead. . . .” Roy had a better reason than most to want me dead.

“You *were* dead, Jake,” said Eva. “You were abso-lutely dead. Your body had cooled to ambient temperature. There was no breathing, no brain or heart activity. And if you weren’t dead before I started the autopsy, you were during and after.” She stood up. “Come to my lab. I want to check this. It’s too much.”

I shut down my terminal and we all followed Eva to the lab in the basement where she cut up and examined and tested a lot of dead things. It was cold in her lab. She got a diagnosdoc out and pressed it against my neck. It monitored heart, lungs, temperature, and brain activity, and it could do blood panels if she asked it to. Which she did.

She looked at the readout. She swallowed. “Well, you’re not dead anymore,” she said.

“And the good news is?”

“I don’t think you’re human anymore either. Temperature is low, blood gases are different, and some of these other readings ...”

I edged the diagnosdoc away from my neck and nodded.

“This isn’t consistent with that last mod, Jake,” Eva said. “It couldn’t have changed you this much.”

“It didn’t,” I said.

\* \* \* \*

We came. We saw. We were seen. We were helped.

Dreena volunteered to try my final modification next. I didn’t always like her, but I had to admire her, even though it turned out that the hardest part of the modifica-tion was shoveling her under the dirt and waiting three days, wondering if she would come back or not. She had really been dead, all right; her sojourn underground both-ered us a lot more than it bothered her.

We don’t know what it is the planet is doing to us, exactly. Roy wants to examine me more than I feel like being examined, especially by him. And people are taking their time about accepting this modification, so he doesn’t have that many people to study.

If what I suspect is true, I’ll have plenty of time to do everything / want, including things I wish I didn’t have to do, like sleep. I don’t seem to need as much sleep as I used to, though.

What I like doing the most right now is sitting around and thinking about how long I’ll have to get on everybody else’s nerves. It might just be forever.

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## AFTERWORD

I first met Roger Zelazny at Norwescon, where he was guest of honor in the early eighties. He was one of my favorite writers, and I stopped him on a staircase and asked him to sign my copy of *Doorways in the Sand*, one of my favorite books.

Roger was very gracious to a fan who had probably interrupted a conversation. (I was so star-struck I don’t remember who he was with.) He gave me his autograph, and said *Doorways in the Sand* was a book he quite liked, too.

One of the last times I saw Roger was at Moscon, a small regional convention in Moscow, Idaho, where he was guest of honor shortly before his death.

Roger and Jane Lindskold and M. J. Engh and some others and I had dinner in the hotel coffee shop. I had just discovered temporary tattoos and I was passing them out. I remember Jane put a blue lightning bolt on her cheek, and I think Roger put a small blue star on his hand.

He was still gracious and shy and kind, a delight to be with.

Have you read *A Night in the Lonesome October*!

Roger is still one of my favorite writers, too.