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# Luna Incognita

by Mary Soon Lee

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*BE RESPECTFUL*, the elders told me over and over again on the long journey to Earth's moon. *Be courageous*, they said, and I twitched my antennae in assent, wishing the elders would explain what dangers lay ahead, but they did not elaborate. Perhaps even the elders were unsure: I would be the first of the People to study at a human university.

Ever since I'd been selected, I had found it hard to sleep. I would lie awake, surrounded by the sleep-rustlings of my fellow hatchlings, going over the day's lessons in my mind, hoping I would perform creditably when faced with human teachers. Of course I was proud of being chosen, but my pride shrank to a small, sad thing against my fear of disappointing the elders.

*Learn well and bring honor to your gene-line*, the elders said when the ship finally docked. I twitched my antennae and crawled through the airlock. It cycled shut behind me, like an eye closing.

I paused at the top of the ramp, sniffing. The air smelled empty. For the first time in my life, I couldn't scent any others of my kind.

A rumbling cry came from the bottom of the ramp, and the translator looped around my neck said "Hurry up!?"

A bright orange human stood waiting down below. The elders had shown me diagrams of humans, but it made my stomachs churn to see one so close. The human was about my length, but it had only four limbs, and it held itself vertical.

The orange human's upper limbs waved in a dance. "Can you understand me? Come down here.?"

"I understand and obey.?" The translator growled out the human words as I spoke. *Too heavy*, my legs grumbled at me, but I had exercised diligently on the ship in preparation for the higher gravity. Ignoring my legs' complaints, I ordered *Full speed!* and crawled down the ramp.

"Hello there. I'm Kurre Carlsson. I'm a sophomore, biology major. You're running late, and admin says you haven't even picked your courses yet.?"

Shame and confusion flooded me. I had thought seven hours remained before the first lecture, but I must have misunderstood. To have made a mistake before teaching even began! I lowered my front segments to the ground. "Abject apologies. I await punishment.?"

"Uh, that's okay. With luck I can rush you through the admissions process in time, but lectures start this afternoon. It's going to be tight. Follow me.?" The human Carlsson bounded over to a doorway.

I crawled at full speed, but Carlsson's arms were doing their waving dance by the time I reached the doorway. Through the opening, I saw a moving metal floor-strip, laden with boxes. A second human, this one a pale blue color, typed at a computer. After a moment I realized that the blue color was a wrapper, not part of the human at all. I looked at Carlsson: Yes, the bright orange was also a wrapper.

"This is Ms. Rochon,?" said Carlsson, gesturing at the second human. "She's in charge of immigration.?"

*She*. I made a note that the Ms. Rochon human was a female.

Ms. Rochon bared her teeth to me. "Welcome to Luna. Your entry has been preapproved, and since there are no known mutually contagious diseases between our species, this won't take a moment. What do you have to declare??"

A test? I should have anticipated this, should have prepared a speech. The honor not only of my gene-line, but of our whole species, rested on my segments. The elders should have picked a more worthy hatchling. I stumbled for words. "Deep regret for my late arrival. Greatly do I appreciate the chance to learn from human elders. Thank you. I will study as hard as I can.?"

Ms. Rochon covered her mouth with her hand, making an odd sound that the translator ignored. "I'm sure you will, but that wasn't quite what I meant. Did you bring anything with you from your ship??"

?My translator.? I tapped it.

?Anything else??

?No. Unless . . . My elders said they had already delivered my food processor and that they gave water for my tuition fee.?

?And so they did.? Ms. Rochon looked at Carlsson. ?I've never seen a ship ferry so much water. There must have been enough to fill the Mare Crisium.?

I had studied the Earth's moon, and I knew that the water shipment would fill scarcely one tenth of the feature referred to, but I knew better than to correct an elder.

?Since you have no luggage, let me just scan you, and then you can go with Kurre. He'll take you to your tutor.?

*He.* I looked from Ms. Rochon to Carlsson, but their wrappers hid most of their bodies. I wouldn't have been able to guess which was the male and which the female.

Ms. Rochon walked over to a gray arch on one side of the room. She pressed a button, and the arch made a terrible low-frequency grinding noise as if it were chewing on bones. ?Please walk through the scanner.?

I ordered my legs forward, but they refused to obey. I remembered horror stories whispered in the creche, the hundred ways an alien could kill. Evidently my legs remembered too. *Be sensible, I commanded my legs. Humans have never hurt the People. Forward!*

Still my legs refused to obey. Though they grumbled occasionally, as legs will, they hadn't disobeyed a direct command since I was newly hatched. *Be brave, I told them. The honor of the People depends on you.*

At last my legs edged forward. They crept over to the terrible grinding sound of the gray arch, hesitated, then plunged through. I checked myself over: no apparent damage. But though the human atmosphere held all the elemental gases I needed, still I tasted the emptiness in it once more. I thought of how many rotations of this strange moon must pass before I could see my fellow hatchlings again, of how ashamed I would be if I failed them. But we were of the same hatching; they would welcome me back into the sleep cluster no matter how poorly I performed.

?Excellent. You're cleared for Luna. Enjoy your stay.? Ms. Rochon pressed the button on the arch, and the terrible grinding noise stopped.

?Gratitude to the honored elder.?

?You're welcome.? Ms. Rochon bared her teeth again.

?Okay, let's go. Time's a-wasting.? Carlsson bounded over to the door.

I crawled after him at full speed, but by the time I reached the door, Carlsson was far down the corridor.

He ran back to me. ?Can you go any faster??

?Regrettably not. I fill with dismay to cause further inconvenience.?

?Never mind.? Carlsson matched my pace. ?It gives us a chance to chat. So what are you called? It sounds crazy, but I couldn't find your name in your records.?

?I am the eighteenth-hatched of the clutch of Theorem Prover by Boldness-in-the-Hunt.? I paused. Carlsson had clearly earned a name despite his youth, and that made it harder to admit that I still lacked one. ?The elders have not yet granted me a personal name.?

?Is it okay if I call you Eighteenth??

?I would be honored.? None but my fellow hatchlings had given me a use-name before this. My breathing chamber swelled to capacity. ?Thank you.?

?So which courses are you taking??

?I do not know. My study-time is at the discretion of the elders.? Human Carlsson had called himself a sophomore, a second-level student. That meant he was senior to me, but not an elder. As such I dared to add, ?I await the selection of my courses with considerable interest.?

?I bet you do.? Carlsson rubbed at his face. ?I think you're going to find the, uh, human elders, organize things a little differently than you're used to. They'll probably let you study whatever interests you.?

I thought I must have misheard, but when I queried the translator, it repeated Carlsson's statement. To be entrusted to direct my own learning?that was an honor I had never anticipated. I tried to stay calm: Carlsson had only said the elders would *probably* let me choose. But if they did?oh, what a delicious flavor that would be!

Geometry and topology, sprinkled with a little number theory, and then to leaven the abstract with the concrete?and to take better advantage of the opportunity given to me?perhaps courses in human biology and human culture. For the first time, I looked forward to the human university not because of the honor it represented, but because of all the rich flavors of learning I could absorb. There were so many things I yearned to know, and if I crouched quietly and patiently, the teachers would tell me the answers.

Carlsson described the available courses as we threaded our way through the tall corridors. Even my legs were so excited that they offered no complaints about our fast pace or the high gravity.

Carlsson led me into an office.

*Soft!* said my legs as they sank into a strange furry skin lying on the ground.

A human in a yellow and white striped wrapper stood up as we entered. ?Aah, Kurre, I'm glad to see you found our lost soul.? The human extended an upper limb toward me, then dropped it after a short pause. ?A pleasure to meet you. I'm Dr. Moseley, your mentor.?

?Honored mentor.? I twitched my antennae to show respectful attention.

?Well now, let's get the mundanities out of the way first, shall we? Why don't you begin by completing the admissions form?? Dr. Moseley pointed at a computer resting high up on a corner-table. ?We ordered translation software and a special entry-pad. Let me know when you're finished.?

Dr. Moseley turned away and began a discussion with Carlsson.

I crawled over to the corner-table, but the computer was too high up for me to reach. This must be the first test from my mentor. A second smaller table stood nearby. Perhaps if I climbed onto the second table, I could reach the computer. The table looked too narrow to balance on safely, but I saw that Carlsson had folded himself onto a similar object. Perhaps it was more stable than it appeared.

I pushed the second table over to the table with the computer. By balancing on my back legs, I managed to grasp the edge of the shorter table. My legs hauled themselves onto it, one by one, but there wasn't enough room for my last four legs. In the unfamiliar gravity, I scrambled for purchase.

*Unstable!* warned my legs, but too late. The table toppled forward, and I toppled with it. Flailing for support, I caught the edge of the computer-table, and it fell after us, the computer crashing down beside me.

I buried my head in the soft floor skin: disaster. I had failed the test. The humans would send me away from the university.

I heard footsteps approaching, but I could not look up. To have glimpsed the feast of learning that opened before me, and then to see it vanish in an instant's clumsiness: I could not bear it. I could not speak.

?Eighteenth, are you all right?? Carlsson's voice.

?Yes,? I muttered into the floor. The soft floor skin had protected me from physical injury, but the weight of my disgrace was worse by far.

?Thank God!? Dr. Moseley's voice. ?Why didn't you ask us to put the computer on the floor for you??

?You are an elder. My duty is to obey you, and through obedience to learn. Abject and sorrowing apologies for my failure??

?No,? said Dr. Moseley. ?The fault was mine. I was thoughtless and inconsiderate. Please forgive me. But next time you run into difficulty, ask for help. Agreed??

Slowly I raised my head. I pivoted one eye to look at Dr. Moseley. ?But you are an elder. I cannot interrupt you.?

?Yes, you can. I'm here to help you. Any questions??

I had never heard of such an idea: that a juvenile could question an elder, that an elder would encourage a juvenile in such behavior. The notion was intoxicating. Cautiously I ventured a half-question. ?It is permitted for me to ask you something.?

?Always,? said Dr. Moseley. ?Ask away.?

?Then, despite my failings, is it possible, might I be allowed to continue at the university??

?Yes, indeed, you may. Is there anything else you were wondering??

So very many questions to choose from. I fought for calm. ?Given a compass and a straight edge, can one construct a square and a circle of equal area? If so, how? If not, is there a counter-proof??

Dr. Moseley looked at Carlsson. ?I'm afraid my expertise lies in geology, not geometry, but perhaps you would like to take some mathematics classes.?

?Yes, oh yes, and thank you.?

\* \* \* \*

And that is why I am named Questioner. For though I learned many other things at the human university, none were as extraordinary and wonderful as the asking of questions. And I cannot shake the belief?may the elders forgive me?that this is a habit all the People should practice, no matter how young.

Does anyone have any questions?

**The End**

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