

A City Older Than Time

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It was out on the Other Arm -- the one where Earth isn't -- that we found it (said Nicodemus Mayflower).

There were these two competing groups of archaeologists, and neither of them trusted the other, so they each hired some bodyguards to make sure that the other side's bodyguards didn't attack them.

(Yeah, I know, that made it more likely. But how are you going to talk any common sense to guys who like to travel halfway across the galaxy just to dig in the dirt?)

Anyway, we came to this binary system that wasn't on any star maps, and since I was the guy who first spotted it, they told me I could call it anything I wanted, so the brighter star became Alpha Nicodemus and the other one was Beta Mayflower -- and if you don't believe me just check any navigational computer that was programmed after 6519 G.E.

Well, for some reason, they decided that the third planet circling Beta Mayflower was the most likely to have whatever it was they were looking for, so we landed, and sure enough, there was this ancient city, filled with crystal spires and marble streets and quartz windows that acted as prisms and turned the sun's light into an endless series of rainbows.

We'd been there maybe two days when the other party of archaeologists showed up. Our leader told them that we'd already filed a claim, or claimed squatters' rights, or whatever it is you do when you're a scientist and you're not into sharing. The other guys said that was all well and good, but there was no legal authority they could appeal to since the world hadn't been mapped or claimed yet -- so they planned to stick around and do their digging and studying no matter what we said.

Tempers started heating up, and then suddenly we all heard a strange moaning sound. It seemed to be coming from the very center of the city, but when we all arrived there we couldn't find anything at all. One member of our group decided that it had been made by the wind whistling through the biggest building in town, and a member of the other group said that no, it was obviously caused by gas escaping from a fissure in the ground. Then one of our people said that the only gas escaping was coming from their group, and while all of us bodyguards stood around staring at our employers and wondering what made them act like that, they almost came to blows.

The only thing that stopped them was another moaning sound, this time from the north end of the city. We all traipsed over there as fast as we could, but when we got there we still couldn't find anything.

It was starting to get dark, so both sides decided to call it a day. My group went back to our camp on the east side of the city, and the other groups went off to set up their camp on the west side.

It was while I was lying on my cot, wondering what the hell I was doing here (and also trying to think of which of the girls I knew would be most impressed by knowing a man with a binary system named after him), that I suddenly seemed to hear a voice inside my head.

"Nicodemus Mayflower," it intoned.

I sat up and looked around to see if anyone else had heard anything, but my companions were all snoring peacefully.

"Nicodemus Mayflower," it repeated.

"I'm right here," I said softly. "What do you want?"

"The pain is almost unbearable."

"Maybe you should take a pill for it," I said. "And by the way, who are you and where are you?"

"I am Nesbudanne," said the voice.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, but that's no help at all."

"I am the city," said Nesbudanne.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You ask where I am," continued Nesbudanne. "I surround you. I am the delicate towers, the shining pavement, the glistening walls, the curving stairways, the highways, the walkways, the causeways. I am the sewer system beneath your feet. I am the mosaic tiles on the walls of the church, and the mural on its ceiling."

"All right, I get the picture," I said. "But why are you in such pain?"

"I was endowed by my creators, who have long since left me for more modern cities on distant worlds, with the gift of empathy. I can intuit your needs and react to them. Are you cold? I will warm the air. Are you hungry? I will activate my kitchens. Are you sleepy? I will dim my lights and play restful music." Nesbudanne paused, and I thought I could hear an almost-human sigh. "But empathy has a downside as well. Your scientists hate their rivals, who hate them right back -- and I have been bombarded with those emotions all afternoon and evening. I was never equipped to deal with such things. The agony is almost unendurable."

"I sympathize with you," I said, idly wondering if sympathizing was the same as empathizing. "But what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Beyond my northwestern border is a valley known as the Dreambasin," said Nesbudanne. "It is filled with hallucinogenic plants. Find some way to lead the parties there before I can stand the pain no longer."

"What happens when they get there?" I asked.

"They will inhale the scent from the flowers. Then, since friendship seems totally unknown to them, perhaps they will imagine that they enjoy each other's company and can work in concert toward a common goal."

"I suppose it's worth a try," I said.

I got up, woke my fellow bodyguards, and explained the city's plan to them. They all agreed, and then, still under cover of darkness, I gained the concurrence of our opposite numbers.

The next morning we marched both parties of scientists to the Dreambasin at gunpoint. We didn't go into the valley ourselves, but we made them go -- and within five minutes archaeologists who had hated each other for decades were throwing their arms around each other. They spent the day playing childlike games, and laughing happily, and swearing eternal fealty.

And then evening came, and we marched them back to the city -- and before we reached the central square five separate fist fights had broken out, and the battle lines were drawn again.

Then everything was interrupted by the moaning we had heard the day before, but this time I knew what

it was.

"Nesbudanne!" I cried out. "Are you all right?"

"You did your best, Nicodemus Mayflower," answered Nesbudanne sadly, and this time I saw that everyone could hear it speak. "But I cannot bear the hatred any longer."

The tallest spire in the city suddenly shattered and fell to the ground in a million pieces.

"I was built to serve you," said Nesbudanne regretfully. "I could not love you more if you were my own children -- and you could not hurt me more if you were my sworn enemy."

Another spire crumbled, and, two blocks away, a church began collapsing.

"Perhaps it is all for the best," continued Nesbudanne, its voice growing weaker with each passing second. "You are all scientists. You now have empirical evidence that empathy is not a survival trait. There will come a day when you can perform the most delicate microsurgery on a DNA molecule. When that day occurs, do not shackle your next generation with the curse of empathy."

Then buildings began collapsing wholesale, and long cracks split the pavement. We raced for safety beyond the city limits, and once there, stopped and turned to observe the results of our hatred.

There have been many days when I was proud to be a Man abroad in the galaxy.

That wasn't one of them.

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"Why didn't Nesbudanne's heart break when the people who built it left the planet?" asked Max, always the cynic.

"It didn't die of a broken heart," answered Nicodemus Mayflower. "Its sensitive psyche was shattered by all the hatred."

"Damned lucky it never went into politics," said Max.

"Or art," added Little Mike Picasso.

"Or sports," chimed in Big Red.

"Or any other endeavor where your excellence makes others aware of their shortcomings," concluded Willie the Bard.

"That's one of the reasons we hang out here, isn't it?" said the Gravedigger. "Because we're not jealous of each other in the Outpost."

"I don't know," said Sinderella, gesturing toward Silicon Carny. "I could be mighty jealous of her if I let myself."

"There's no reason to," said the Earth Mother. "You don't know where she stops and where the silicon begins."

"That's right," said Sahara del Rio. "No woman could possibly have a bustline like that."

"I knew a woman that had even a bigger one," offered Hurricane Smith.

Langtry Lily glared at him.

"This was before I met you, my dear," he continued. "Hell, they were _all_ before I met you."

"Bigger than Silicon Carny, you say?" asked the Reverend Billy Karma.

"That's right."

"What more proof does anyone need that God exists?" said Billy Karma triumphantly.

"I don't think God had much to do with it, Reverend," said Smith.

"That's blasphemy!" growled Billy Karma.

"You tell the story," said Catastrophe Baker, who was still toying with converting, "and we'll decide."

"Fair enough," said Smith.