

Perceptual Set

by James Van Pelt

The interpretation of indirect evidence may say as much about the observer as about the observed.

Margo said, "If you really want to know how a man will treat you, watch how he eats his cheesecake."

Janet poked at her dessert. "That's ridiculous." The second shift filled the cafeteria. From their table near the wall, the narrow room curved up to the other end as it followed the mining and processing ship's long arc, but Janet's attention was on Crew Chief Alec Maier. She noted he'd chosen the cheesecake too, but he ignored it as he listened to a pair of his miners arguing about relief time and compensation for lost work. He never glanced her way.

Janet put her fork down in disgust. "You can't make a decent cheesecake with rehydrated dairy products. I should have had lunch in my quarters."

"Did you get new scans on the Gargoyle?"

"Where did you get that name?" Janet whispered. "A Strieberist will hear you, and I'll be fending off missionaries again."

"Nut cases. If they had their way, we'd give up on the whole ark project and wait for rescue instead."

Janet remembered how the recruiters sold her on graphic presentations of the ark ships heading for the stars, fleeing the mutagen-wracked Earth, packed from end to end with everything necessary to colonize distant distant planets. Without the asteroid-mining projects, the arks would never be built. They had needed her cartography skills, and now she was the go-to person in the department.

"Maybe, but they see alien fingerprints on everything. I don't care what the company says about hiring diversity. They make my life miserable. You're not supposed to know anything about it anyway. It's secret," Janet said.

Margo dipped a piece of bread into her coffee cup, then popped it into her mouth. "People talk to me. I'm the therapist." Like most of the crew, she'd long ago given up on the regulation work clothes, wearing instead a loose tee shirt and shorts. Her hair was a close-cropped brown that matched her dark eyes. She grinned while chewing. The only time Janet saw her with a serious expression was when she studied psychiatric profiles. Then, her brow would wrinkle and she'd push her fingers into her cheeks as if trying to squeeze understanding out of herself. "So, is it an alien space station?"

Janet thought about not answering, but Margo's security clearance was higher than hers, and if she really wanted to know, there'd be little Janet could do to stop her. "No, but it's darned weird. The clearer the scan, the more it looks like a head to me, just like the Ceres flyby recorded." The first clear photos showed a face on the asteroid. At first it seemed as if it was all face, but later shots showed it was more like a cameo carved into a larger surface. She'd enhanced the images, then turned in her report.

Margo snorted. "Head, my foot. It's your perceptual set. Giovanni Schiaparelli thought he saw water channels on Mars in the 1800's. He was prepared to see evidence of life, and he found it. It's like that head on Mars obsession at the end of the twentieth century. Put three dots and a line on anything, and people turn it into a portrait. That's called 'feature extraction,' taking info you're familiar with and ignoring the rest. A water stain sits on a wall long enough; someone sees the Virgin Mary. Do you ever notice the Virgin Mary doesn't show up on walls in Buddhist countries? This asteroid is no different from the rest, an odd-shaped rock we can run through the mill for metals, fuel and chemicals. The Ceres flyby takes a long-range shot by accident, and third-rate administrators with more imagination than good sense turn shadows and a jagged protrusion into an alien artifact. We're taking a tedious trip for nothing, and I'll be dealing with disappointed alien-hunters for months." "The main office doesn't think it's nothing. You don't divert an entire mining

operation on a whim."

Margo said, "Maybe not, but you're on a deadline. If you don't figure out exactly what it is before we get there, the radicals will get the upper hand. There's more than one Strieberist in administration."

Janet watched as Alec pushed his dessert to the side and started sketching on his napkin. The workers leaned over his shoulder so they could see what he was doing. She admired the way he concentrated while writing on the small surface.

"He's monofocused," said Margo.

Janet turned away. "You're the monofocused one-I'm not watching him. The probe should be within ten kilometers in an hour. We'll get even better pictures then."

"Sheesh, it's a half a kilometer long. How close do you need to get before you see it's an ordinary object?"

"That's another thing. The Gargoyle has almost no albedo. I mean, most asteroids are darned dark anyway, .03 or so, but this one's a lump of coal. If it hadn't occluded Ceres, we would have never seen it. That's not natural." Margo shrugged her shoulders. "A black asteroid, big deal. There, now look at that one." She lifted her chin toward a miner at a near table. He wore his coveralls with a strap down. Sweat marked his shirt in a pattern mirroring his work suit's pressure points.

"What about him?"

"Watch the cheesecake."

Janet thought the man had a rugged competence. Like most miners, he carried the ship's spin-induced gravity carefully, as if he wasn't sure that anything he set down wouldn't drift off. He pulled the plate with the cheesecake toward him. Then keeping one hand on the plate, he trimmed a third of the slice off with his fork, lifted, swallowed, took the second third, lifted, swallowed and finished the last third, all in fifteen seconds.

"Whew!" Margo said. "That was businesslike."

"What does it tell you about him?"

Margo raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it obvious? He doesn't take time for the finer things in life. A woman would be wise to steer clear of him."

"Maybe it means he was hungry. You're a loon." "And you think a football stadium-sized rock has been shaped into a head. So how did Alec eat his?"

Janet turned to look back at the crew chief, but he and the two miners who'd been arguing with him were gone. His cheesecake sat untouched.

Margo said, "You work with him all the time. Why you have to turn it into such a big deal now that you've decided you're interested is beyond me. What do you guys talk about on those long jaunts in the jalopy?"

"That's business. He's thinking about where the operation will anchor. I'm thinking about navigating and mapping. There's nothing romantic about riding the jalopy from the ship to the next mining site."

"You can't read clues into his every behavior..."

"You just told me to look at how he eats his cheesecake, for crying out loud!"

Margo went on, ignoring the interruption. "Yesterday he asked you to pass the salt, and you spent the next two hours deciding what it meant. Tell him you think he's cute."

"I'm thirty, not sixteen. Maybe you could tell him."

Margo laughed. "Oh, that's very thirty. If you give me a note, I'll pass it to him." Janet looked at her suspiciously. "Does he ever talk about me?"

Margo shrugged. "Maybe."

"I should have never kissed him," said Janet. "He doesn't like surprises."

"He saved your life!"

"Yeah, and there's that, too."

* * *

In the cartography lab, Janet shuffled through the new prints. Chief Cartographer Lindsey London held one in her lap, biting her lip.

"It's difficult to ascribe these formations to natural forces."

Janet put a half dozen scans on the table end to end, each one revealing a different look at the asteroid as the probe passed. "Those aren't formations, they're features. It's a face. Two faces, actually, one on each side." Lindsey stood so she could see the entire set. She was a severe woman in her fifties, rigorous in habit and demanding. She cleared her throat, then rubbed her forehead. Like many on the ship, she suffered from sinus infections. "I suppose it would be hard not to draw that conclusion. They do look like faces." She moved a print closer to her. "Darned ugly ones too." With enhancements, the asteroid's edges were clear, the shadows and highlights easy to distinguish. Janet turned the photo so the orientation made sense to her. On the asteroid's edges, jagged spikes jammed so tightly there appeared to be no space between them. They crossed each other in random arrangement. With the probe close, details stood out. Janet estimated each spike might be ten or fifteen meters in diameter at the base, although she couldn't see where they anchored, and none were shorter than fifty meters as they tapered to blunt points. Were they crystal structures? What could cause this? If the entire surface was covered with the spikes, it would be difficult to land. There was no place a ship could put its legs down for a secure anchor. In the spike field's middle, however, the face filled a third of the surface. It rose from the pointy surface, a nearly perfect ovoid.

Janet turned the photo again, squinting at the new angle. "I don't know about ugly. It looks scared."

Lindsey glanced again. "If it is an alien face, how would we recognize its emotion?"

"How else would you describe that?"

The mouth was reptilian and gaping, stretching across the ovoid's bottom, a dark, crooked gap. A slit where the nose would be, and the eyes thrust wide open, like two almonds far apart, pupils dug into the spherical surfaces. Janet squinted at the photo, trying to see it without the starry background. "I don't know what makes me think it, but this is a frightened expression. Whoever carved it knew what fear looked like."

"It's not the same on the other side." Lindsey handed her another scan. Here the mouth bared huge, stone teeth. The eyes were narrower. Janet shivered. It reminded her of a dog she'd tried to pet once, until its lips curled back and the snout became all fangs and a shuddery growl. Janet said, "So, are you still going to argue this isn't a manufactured object?"

"I'm not telling the company we've found an Easter Island head in the asteroid belt, but I'm willing to say it's anomalous and deserves further study. Until then, no one Earthside knows about this."

Janet raised an eyebrow.

"Not my decision," said Lindsey. "Word from upstairs. Even on board there aren't a dozen people who know why we've changed our schedule."

Janet started an accelerated animation of the odd object on her computer. It revolved so the two faces alternated. The fearful expression rotated past, the shadows stretched across the stone skin, darkening the mouth, shifting shadows across the eyes so for a moment, they seemed to move. Then the spiny border filled the screen. The fearful face's profile cut across the stars as the second face rotated into view.

"It's a solid hunk," said Lindsey. "Not a rubble pile."

"That's my guess. I read the light bouncing off it--there's darned little-and it comes up nickel-iron. No magnesium. Some iron-silicates."

"Nickel-iron should be brighter. Why's it so dark?"

The second face came into view. As frightened as the first one looked, this one threatened. The same alien features. A different emotion.

"Maybe it's painted."

Lindsey didn't laugh. "Send the probe down to get a sample from the surface of a face. Keep it away from the spiky areas. There might be a coating, or it could be just a dark ore, a type of asteroid we haven't observed. If there are others with this little reflectivity, we might never see them. While we're

waiting, get a complete map worked up. We're going to want to anchor the drills and mill." "Has anyone considered the asteroid might be a message?" Janet swallowed dryly. Lindsey didn't like her orders questioned. "If it is artificial, whoever put it there didn't want it to be seen, and if it was seen, they didn't want it to look attractive. Maybe we should leave it alone."

Janet sent the photo probe's data into the mapping programs. She watched the asteroid continue its rotation on the screen. Fearful, angry, fearful, angry. "Not with Strieberists in upper management." Lindsey stood behind her, her hands on the back of Janet's chair. "Are you going to be able to concentrate on this?"

Janet tore her attention from the Gargoyle. Lindsey's question didn't make sense. "Excuse me?"

"Are you going to be sharp? Everything here has to be perfect. Our reports, perfect, when we send this to the company. There will be political ramifications if this turns out to be artificial. I can't have you mooning over the crew chief instead of doing your work."

"I am not thinking about that man!"

Lindsey shrugged. "So you say."

"I do say!" Janet's face flushed. She bent over the keyboard, tapping the instructions that would separate the sampler probe from the mapper and send it to the surface.

* * *

Janet jogged up the ship's long curve, enjoying the track's yielding surface as it cushioned her bare feet. Behind her, footsteps approached, so she moved to the side, her shoulder nearly brushing the wall to her left until the runner passed. Here the ceiling was low, cutting off the view of the passage sixty meters ahead. She could never shake the feeling she was running uphill. At least, it appeared that way, a steady climb in front, and if she looked behind, a steady climb the other way. Running in the circular station was like perpetually hitting the bottom of a rounded valley. Across the broad sidewalk to her right, she passed doors, hallways and windows. The infirmary, a long section marked with red crosses at either end, rolled by for the third time. Once more would make a five-kilometer workout, her required aerobic ration. Without the kiss, Alec wouldn't be a problem. It happened a week ago. He'd been reading an asteroid's assay numbers and a mathematical map that showed stress lines, faults, and probabilities of mass shifts once they began operations. The top sheet of papers on a pile near the edge of his desk slid off, fluttering to the floor. They'd both reached for it, her hand on his shoulder as they bent down, and when she looked up, he was there, an inch away. It must have been something in his eyes, or maybe she could feel his muscles tense under his shirt, or maybe it was just a short circuit in all her thinking processes, but she leaned the slightest bit, pressed her lips to his, and then the moment was gone. He bolted straight up, knocking the remaining papers into the air. She fell back, banging her elbow on the chair's edge, and as she grabbed the sore spot, she saw his expression, eyes wide in fear (or disgust?). He spluttered something incoherent, face red, then fled the room. She blushed to think about it.

More footfalls behind her. She moved to the side again, slowing in thought. The maps showed the Gargoyle was an almost perfect sphere, varying no more than a few centimeters in diameter measured through the poles or the equator, another good argument it was artificial. Bodies this small didn't have enough gravity to pull them into round shapes. Most asteroids were rugged, irregular, nearly solid nickel-iron chunks, or jumbled carbonaceous chondrite rubble piles. The only way she could think to form a small, spherical body in space would be to heat the entire mass to a liquid state, and like a water drop floating in a no-gravity chamber, it would pull itself into a perfect globe. But the Gargoyle wasn't a smooth, spinning bowling ball; it was a designed object. Still, there was a blessing in the shape: figuring orbits around it would be easier. The last asteroid she'd sent a probe to was shaped like a

four-kilometer long dog bone with an eccentric wobble, and the gravity going around the long end was three times that of circling the narrow middle. She'd used a lot of the probe's fuel keeping a consistent distance away from it while she mapped.

Alec spoke almost in her ear, "When I run toward the spin I feel faster." Janet stumbled, then recovered her stride. She tried to speak, but what came out instead was a cross between a cough and an exclamation that sounded like "Gack!"

"It's a funny thing," he said, as if she'd made no sound at all. "I know it doesn't make a difference which direction I go, but when I jog into the spin, it's like the ship rotates beneath me. Going the other way is like trying to catch up, and my strides seem shorter." He had a pleasant speaking voice.

"Have you tried timing it?" she asked finally.

"Same time both ways. Doesn't change how it feels, though."

They ran side by side for a minute without speaking. Janet thought of a dozen things to say, but nothing sounded natural. She almost said, "How do you like cheesecake?" The thought made her smile. Margo would be pleased if she had. When another jogger approached, going the other direction, Alec dropped behind to let him pass. On his chest, the jogger wore the familiar green and white Strieberist button that read, "They are waiting."

The infirmary slid by again on her right. Janet stayed in her rhythm. Why was he talking to her? Had he come behind her on the track by coincidence, or did he want to be with her? Was he just a nice guy who talked to anyone? What was she supposed to read into this encounter?

And he had saved her life. Of course anyone might have noticed the flaw in her space suit before they'd gone on that mission, but he was the one who caught it. How could she date a man who'd saved her life? It was too corny. Knight in shining armor stuff. It put them on unequal footing.

She cleared her throat and said, "This makes me think of a hamster in an exercise wheel."

He didn't answer.

She said, "Where the wheel goes round and round, and the hamster works like crazy to go nowhere."

Without slowing, she glanced over her shoulder. He was gone. She sighed. Just as well. The probe would be near the Gargoyle now, and she wanted to be there when it touched down. It would take several hours to start sending back its analysis, but she felt more in control if she was in the lab while the probe worked.

* * *

For a while, the mapper tracked the sampler on its way, showing the tiny craft approaching the Gargoyle, puffing out compressed air to control the descent and to match the slowly revolving asteroid's spin, but the orbiting mapper would be on the other side when the sampler made contact. Sweat tickled Janet's forehead. Landing a probe on an asteroid was tricky business, even with automated routines and computer assistance. There was almost no gravity, so the asteroid didn't help orient the probe, and the probe's kinetic energy remained the same, so a percentage point miscalculation would slam it into the solid surface, and also, she'd chosen the angry face to land on. Now that the probe was within a few hundred meters, all the details were clear. There were lines in the expression, taut skin pulling away from its mouth, a tension in the cheek area, all in black and grey relief. The lifeless pupils seemed to track the probe in as it approached. Dark pocks scarred the surface, as if the face had been disease-ravaged. Watching the expression grow larger was unnerving.

"You're closing a little fast," said Lindsey.

"I've got to anchor the probe or it'll just bounce off. If you were standing on the surface there and twitched your toes, you might achieve escape velocity."

The face swelled until there were no discernable features, just the pocked skin. Then the probe's shadow, its spiderlike feet reaching closer and closer.

Touchdown. Janet sent the signal to fire the anchor bolts in case they didn't deploy on their own. She took half a breath in relief. The probe continued. The feet broke through. Shards flew toward the camera, then nothing. No image. Lindsey coughed. "That's expensive equipment. What happened?"

Telemetry came in fine. The machine's little nuclear heart still beat. Janet ran through a handful of tests. The internals looked green, but there was no video, and she couldn't tell what the probes' attitude was. "The face must have been a shell. If it's spikes underneath, the probe could be wedged between a couple. The arms are stuck. I can get the sampler to deploy, but it's not reaching anything. For all I can tell, it might be pointing straight up and be nowhere near the surface."

"Can you shake it loose? Take it up and bring it down again?"

Janet shrugged. "I can't tell which way we're facing. Without the video, I can't see, and with all the metal around it, radar orientation won't work. It could wedge in deeper. We'll have to wait for the mapper to come around so we can see it. I can bring it in close for a good look, but it won't be in position for several hours."

Later, after she'd made the adjustments in the mapper's orbit, she leaned back in her chair and watched numbers march down the screen. Lindsey had gone to a management meeting, leaving Janet alone in the cartography cartography lab. She tapped her fingers on the table edge. Above the monitor hung the Gargoyle's two clearest images. Fearful and angry.

Was this first contact? The long-sought evidence that mankind wasn't alone in the Universe? She knew they were on the edge of something tremendous, but a voice kept creeping into her thoughts, coming from just behind her, not out of breath at all, saying, "When I run toward the spin, I feel faster." She wondered if Madame Curie thought about laundry while she was discovering radiation, or if Buzz Aldrin found himself contemplating a crabgrass problem in his lawn while the Eagle was going down. This would be so much easier if she just knew what he thought of her, but the messages were enigmatic. One day he ignored her, the next he went out of his way to say hello.

She shook her head and studied the mapper's data. Some measurements didn't make much sense. The Gargoyle's magnetic field was what she expected for a body of its size, but there was a ghost image underneath the main one, as if there were a second magnetic source within the asteroid. Deep radar imaging didn't help either, although there were four tiny bright spots on the surface: one on each face and at the poles. She programmed the mapper to take close-ups of one of the spots when it made its nearest pass.

The intercom crackled. "Hey, roomie. Cracked the mystery yet?"

Janet said, "Hi, Margo. Nope, and we've just a few hours before the Gargoyle will be at eyeball distance. Some Strieberist working outside's going to catch a glimpse, and we'll have a riot. And you know what's funny? They were right all along. The Gargoyle is alien. Lindsey is confabbing with the upper mucky-mucks about what it might be and what to do about it."

"What's your guess?"

"Maybe it has religious significance." Janet thought about the Sphinx and the pyramids, ancient structures from a long-gone civilization. It was hard to imagine why an advanced, technological society would build such an inaccessible shrine. "I lost the sampler probe. It's as if whoever designed it didn't want anyone to land on it. I don't know what the ship's going to do when we get there. We won't be able to anchor easily, and it's too big for a controlled melt. We could set up every mirror on board, and it would still take a hundred years to heat it enough."

"When administration says 'jump,' we're not supposed supposed to ask why. Maybe their interest is scientific."

Janet laughed. "Not a chance. If it isn't profitable, they won't do it. They must figure the Gargoyle is a treasure chest."

"Why the faces?"

"To scare off the superstitious?"

On the monitor, video from the mapper streamed by as the asteroid grew in

size. Closest approach would be in a few minutes. Janet shivered. No matter how she looked at it, the effect was creepy, like a hedgehog wearing a lizard mask. "Whoever made this was more advanced than us, and it was a tremendous effort. There's some practical purpose here."

"Could it be a tomb like for the pharaohs?"

Janet started at Margo's echoing her thought. "We're going to have to find out. Lindsey will insist on a complete investigation. I'll take the jalopy over for a personal touch. Standard procedure is to pull the ship within ten kilometers, but I'll bet we won't get closer than a hundred on this one. It'll be a long flight."

The mapper's monitor began spitting out images as it gradually swept past the asteroid. "Gotta go," Janet said and broke the connection. First, she looked for the probe. Underneath the face's left eye was a new, dark blemish. What sunlight there was dropped straight into the hole, and she could see the probe canted to one side. A tough angle, but now that she knew, she could get it out on its own power, assuming the jets weren't bent. She rubbed her chin, then directed the camera at what she'd thought were pock marks. They were all holes. They must be from smaller asteroids colliding with the Gargoyle. How long had it been tucked into this orbit? Why weren't there any large meteor strikes? Every asteroid they'd surveyed showed a long, violent past, filled with collisions, but other than these small holes, the Gargoyle was unmarked. She wondered if Texas-sized Ceres, which led the Gargoyle in its long route around the Sun, absorbed most of the rocks that should have pummeled the smaller body.

The mapper continued across the surface until it was over a shiny spot the radar had picked up. An image assembled itself on her screen. She enhanced it, then sat back, shaking her head. It was a couple of meters wide by a meter high and appeared to be made from polished rock or metal. Even with the monitor's fuzzy resolution she could see illustrations and writing. She contacted Lindsey to tell her the Gargoyle had a plaque.

* * *

The jalopy was an awkward-looking rhomboid assembly of tubes, compressed air jets for propulsion and maneuvering, and several tool chests loaded with prospecting and mapping equipment. Inserted in the middle were two lightly shielded pods for the pilot and passenger. Alec and an equipment handler were already in the launch bay checking the supplies when Janet walked in. Alec said, "This doesn't look like a mining operation to me. They ought to be sending an archaeologist." He scowled as he inventoried a locker and then slapped it shut.

"Probably," said Janet, raising her eyebrows. Rather than risk upsetting him more, she moved to where her suit was stored. What's wrong with him? she wondered. Soon, though, she was into the rhythm of getting ready for the mission. Every new asteroid required an initial human survey. There were too many variables in hooking the mining operation up to rely on robot reports. Asteroid composition could vary from one spot to another. A seemingly solid rock could be deeply cracked, or might be a dozen loosely-melded pieces. Many turned out not to be suitable for easy mining. Too many silicates, not enough clean ore, not a clear site to base operations. For every five or six asteroids they visited, the ship would pause at one, but tons of usable metal could then be extracted, milled, smelted and shaped, then sent on the long, elliptical path that ended in lunar orbit for assembly into the ark ships. At the same time, chemical processes produced fuels and other usable products. Mining the asteroids reminded her of the Eskimos who used every part of a slaughtered sea lion.

Janet and Alec had worked as a team for three years. It was possible to do the whole job without talking, but they never had. She worked her way into her suit. Next to her, Alec pushed his arms into the thick, clumsy sleeves, his face just as dark and angry as it had been when she walked in.

"Ready," he said a few minutes later. Janet nodded. An assistant hooked her onto the hoist that lifted her over the jalopy and into her pod. Soon they

were alone in the launch bay as the engineers left, closing the airlock doors behind them. Her suit stiffened as the chamber was evacuated, then the launch doors opened beneath them. The ship's spin provided the initial velocity. All that was necessary was to orient the ship and time their release, work that didn't need their input. Although launching was routine, it was a team effort, with dozens of others making the trip as smooth and safe as possible. Janet triggered a private communication line as soon as the vacuum was established.

"What's wrong with Alec?" she asked.

Margo answered. "I thought you'd never get back to me. I've got his med readouts. Elevated pulse and respiration. He's scared. Xenophobia."

Alec's shadow moved in his pod's translucent shell as he checked the instrumentation. Beneath them, the stars scrolled past. "What's our transit time?" he asked.

Janet flipped to his frequency. "Twenty minutes. They pulled us closer than I thought they would." She clicked back to Margo. "Scared? I thought he was mad. You should have seen his expression." Her finger rested on the manual releases as she watched the launch countdown. She'd press her button at the correct time as a backup to the computer. "If he's that bothered, should he be going? I can't have him making judgement errors." "He's not that scared. Check your own readouts."

Above her head, among a plethora of information, were her numbers, all elevated.

The countdown reached zero, and Janet pressed the button, dropping the jalopy from the mining vessel. Her stomach did the familiar lurch from the 1G environment to weightlessness. She rotated her pod so she faced their target, almost invisible in the fathomless black. During the trip, she stayed busy directing the craft to the Gargoyle's surface. In the few jobless moments she had to contemplate their mission, she listened to space's sound, which wasn't silent at all. Her suit hummed and whirred. Air hissed in the helmet's close confines. Behind it, her pulse throbbed. From the unmarked distance, the Gargoyle appeared, grew large, and soon filled the sky.

To anchor, she chose a spot in the spike field to the angry face's side. Unlike the probe, it wasn't her intention to fire explosive bolts into the surface. Instead, she would allow the craft to settle onto the spikes. Up close, they didn't appear as regular as they had in the vids. Micrometeor strikes had scarred them. Some were broken or cracked. Others bore smaller blemishes, like bullet holes. The distant Sun's light through the spike forest cast awkward, impenetrable shadows, hiding the base structures.

The jalopy glided a few meters over the spikes until the edge of the angry face appeared on the horizon. Janet slowed the exploration craft until the spikes beneath them matched their speed. They descended onto two blunt tips, and the ship canted to rest on the shattered end of a third.

"We're here," she said. Not a quote for the history books, she thought.

Alec let loose a long, relieved breath. "You wouldn't believe what I've been thinking."

Janet powered the jalopy down, unbuckled herself, hooked a safety line to her belt, and pushed herself from the pod. "Try me."

"It's so obviously artificial. I thought it would open fire. I'm a little jumpy."

"It's dead, Alec." Janet laughed to herself. Odd thoughts had crossed her mind too.

Alec hooked himself in and floated to a tool locker in the Gargoyle's minuscule gravity where he equipped himself with a specimen hammer and sample sacks. "I'll get pieces from these spike tops, then move down to the base." Janet nodded, then remembered to say, "Yes," as she jetted toward the face's edge, twenty meters away. From this angle she could see it was a thin plate resting on the spikes. She braced herself between two stone spears to examine the material. A hand's-width in thickness, it didn't appear to be either stone or metal. More like black porcelain than anything else. She smacked the top

with her hand, but the leverage was bad, and all she succeeded in doing was losing her grip. For a second she floated, unanchored, then she grabbed the edge again, this time to hoist herself to the surface. At this angle, she couldn't tell it was a face. Every few meters, a hole marked the smooth surface, and her light revealed the spikes below. She glanced back to see Alec stuffing something into a sample sack. He waved, then attached his safety rope to a different spot. His voice crackled in her radio. "Looks like typical nickel-iron to me, a dark deposit on top, lighter underneath."

"So they made it from an asteroid."

"Would appear so."

"OK. I'm going to the forehead to check out the plaque."

Alec grunted, a preoccupied sound. He chipped a bit from one spot, played out the slender safety cable, then glided to the next.

The Gargoyle's gravity was negligible. If she dropped a hammer, it would take minutes to complete its fall, so she drove an anchor bolt into a spike, attached her original line to it so there was now a path from the jalopy to the face's edge. When she reached the plaque, she'd place another bolt. Some asteroids had so many safety lines running across them, they looked like they'd been netted.

A gentle push from her back unit slid her across the Gargoyle's face, past its twisted mouth filled with spiky teeth, past the deep gashes that were its nose, across an eye's smooth bulge, to a knee-high platform on the forehead's edge.

"I'm moving toward the surface," said Alec. His breathing sounded regular, his voice clipped. Janet guessed if she could take his pulse now, it would be normal, while her own heart pounded in her ears. This was an alien artifact, concrete proof there were other sentient beings in the Universe. She twisted her hand control to emit gas in a tiny puff that slowed her.

It was a plaque, just as the probes' flyby had shown, packed with symbols, illustrations, and hieroglyphics. The largest illustration dominated the plaque's middle: at the top, a diagram of the Gargoyle. Next, a cutaway view showing the asteroid's interior with an odd symbol at the center. She thought about the funny magnetic readings. Was it a storage chamber? Then, a larger circle around the Gargoyle without the cutaway view. A planet? An orbit? The last illustration showed the circle fragmented into broken lines and a series of intersecting lines where the Gargoyle had been. An explosion? She clicked pictures from several angles, then crouched to see how it was fastened onto the platform.

Her gaze was on the horizon.

A screech in her helmet.

Alec shot up from the asteroid's surface, maneuvering jets on full, pushing him away from the asteroid. The safety cable, which was anchored sixty meters from him, snapped taut, pulling him into a parabola. First up, then parallel to the surface, then just as quickly, straight down. He disappeared into the spike field. Too fast.

"Alec?" she transmitted. She'd already detached her safety line, pushed hard away from the plaque toward where he'd gone in, and without thinking, made the corrections that killed a spin she'd picked up. She slapped the emergency "come hither" button, sending an automatic call for help, while flipping through displays until she found his suit telemetry. Pulse, fine. Breathing, fine. Air pressure, fine. She took a few deep breaths of her own. Suit temperature, fine, but falling. Partial system failure.

Questions from the ship. Nothing they could do now. She shut communications down. Concentrated on maneuvering. If she overshot, she'd waste too much time slowing, reversing direction, accelerating, then slowing again. A man in an unheated suit in shadow would freeze. She tried to remember how much time he might have. Couldn't come up with it. Too long since the refresher course. Most suit accidents were instantly fatal.

It wasn't until she paused over the spikes where he'd vanished, that she wondered what had thrown him off the surface in the first place. She directed

a light down. His lower torso was visible, feet up, the rest was caught between two spikes as thick as tree trunks. No movement. He'd yelled, a frightened yip. And his jets had been on, so he hadn't been tossed up, he'd jumped and then blasted. What scared him? His safety cable pulled at the suit's side, as tight as a piano wire. She unsnapped it carefully, keeping her hand and head clear as it whipped from sight. Working by her helmet light, she inspected the damage. Alec's momentum had jammed him into the space between two spikes. The cover to the power unit on his back was cracked and bent. Whatever was broken inside, she wouldn't be able to repair it from here. The quicker she could extricate him and get him back to the ship, the better. She pulled herself around so she could look into his faceplate. In the middle was a blood spot matching a welt on his forehead. His eyes were partially open, with white slivers showing. He didn't react to the light in his face or to shaking.

The asteroid's surface, where the spikes were anchored, was a couple meters below them, but too far for her to push him. She tried bracing her feet on the spikes' steep sides, but there wasn't enough grip and her feet slipped on every effort. Her breathing sounded harsh in her ears. "Damn it, Alec." She rested for a second, her head down.

This deep in the spike forest, the Sun didn't penetrate. For the first time, she looked around her. Black, heavy columns leaning every way, marked by shadows that barely showed on their charcoal-like surfaces. She scanned part way around before she saw it.

A scream stuck in her throat. By reflex, her legs pushed. If she'd been touching, she too would have flown straight up, but she'd drifted just enough that she kicked against nothing.

It was an alien figure, face like the one on the surface, peering around a spike, angry as hell, arms raised, claws extended.

By the time she'd scrambled to the other side of the columns that held Alec, she realized it couldn't be alive, but it took a long minute for her to approach, heart thudding, mouth dry.

The alien was a statue made from the same material as the asteroid. Its skin was polished, details sharp, like finely worked obsidian, her height, heavy in the chest, a short, hairless tail. Beyond it, others crouched behind spikes; some charged, carved in attack. Their frightening forms filled the forest. Janet guessed there was more statuary on the reverse side, mirroring the fright of that face. Angry or frightened. Nothing in between. She took pictures by habit. Putting the camera away, she pushed herself above the spikes, then jettied to the jalopy. If she could free Alec, she could plug his suit into the exploration craft's power system and get around the break in his own.

It took a few frantic minutes to unanchor and lift off. She tried to eyeball where he was, then realized she hadn't marked the spot. The spikes' tops all looked the same, uniform in their randomness. She started the jalopy forward in the general direction while she tracked down his suit's signal. Soon she was above him. With the jalopy anchored again, she fastened a cable to the sturdy frame, then dove down where he was still stuck and unmoving. Not looking at the statue reaching toward her took willpower. Getting Alec off the asteroid was a solvable problem, immediate, without the ambiguity of the message the statues sent. Were they alien gods, represented in stone? Were they art? Were they important at all? It didn't matter now. She fastened the cable to Alec's suit, then measured several meters of slack. Using the jalopy to pull him out by a straight pull wouldn't work. The compressed air jets didn't generate enough thrust. She'd need to use the jalopy's weight and momentum to jerk him out. She played out more cable, cinched it, then headed up. The jalopy moved away from the spikes. Janet watched her speed and orientation so she didn't drift. It had to be a vertical lift off or she risked pulling the unconscious man across the spikes instead of up. Acceleration was slow. Return trips always took longer than going out. One meter, two, three, four. How much cable had she left? Five, six. A gentle

jolt shook the jalopy. Slowly, Alec rose from the spikes. Janet hit the auto-routines to get them back to the mining ship, then reeled him in. Soon he sat in his pod, plugged into the jalopy's power. His suit temperature rose. She stayed beside him, directing her light at this faceplate, waiting for the frost inside his helmet to melt.

He coughed, a sudden sound in her radio. His eyes opened, then squeezed back shut.

"How do you feel?" she asked. Her hands shook a little. Post emergency shock, she thought. Margo would explain it to her later.

"I saw a monster," he said thickly. He closed his eyes, and lolled his head against the helmet's side.

* * *

Medics hustled Alec away from the dock, and Janet had just removed her suit when she was summoned to Lindsey London's office. Lindsey waited inside, a tissue in hand and wearing a pained expression. Behind her were two upper-management types she barely recognized. One, an older man whose hair had gone pure silver around his ears, mirrored Lindsey's discomfort, though Janet doubted a sinus infection caused his; the other, wearing a Strieberist button, smiled widely.

"Oh, you are so lucky," he said, "to be the first person to land on an alien artifact. Let me shake your hand." He squeezed hard, and for a second Janet thought he was going to hug her too. "Your life is in for a change. When the media gets hold of this, you'll be the most famous person in the solar system."

"We can't jump to conclusions," said the older one. "It may not be alien." Janet looked at him in disbelief.

Lindsey said, "I did a calculation based on meteor strike frequency on its surface. The Gargoyle's been in space at least three million years." She blew her nose. "Give or take a million."

"Even if it is ... extraterrestrial, whoever left it certainly isn't around now," said silver hair. "This find shouldn't impact our basic mission. We'll leave it to scientists who are better equipped." The Strieberist shook his head. "No, no, no. Don't you understand that this removes the need for our mission? The aliens left this for us to discover. It's their invitation to us. What else could it be? We should find out where the Gargoyle came from, and then bend our efforts to contacting them. It's mankind's most heroic quest yet."

"That's a scientific question. We are a business operation," said silver hair. "We have neither the expertise to investigate the artifact nor the authority to abandon our mining efforts."

"What are you talking about? Investigating? I've never seen a more uninviting spot in my life." Janet looked from one to the other. "Did you see the pictures of the statues on the surface? Have you looked at the plaque?" Silver hair cleared his throat. "There's some argument about what the plaque means. There appear to be several kinds of writing and diagrams. Our analysts compared it to the messages we attached to our deep space probes early in the space program."

"Which we included to introduce ourselves to other intelligences." The Strieberist sat on the edge of Lindsey's desk. "I agree with that analogy." Lindsey called up the plaque on the wall monitor. "You saw it close, Janet. What were your impressions?"

"I didn't get to look at it long." She moved to where she could study it closer. The marks made no sense. She thought there would be little chance she could decipher the plaque's intent if it was written in Chinese, and that was a heck of a lot closer culturally to her than this communiqué. "The only thing I recognize is the diagram in the middle, with the Gargoyle, but I don't think we need the plaque to understand the big message, which is to stay away. I've never seen a clearer no-trespassing sign in my life."

The Strieberist bristled. "There is a message here, and it's a welcoming one to an intelligent race. The expressions might represent their smiles. Our

evolution is obviously different. What makes you think we could recognize facial expressions in whatever they descended from? When we decipher the plaques, you'll see. There will be formulas for super-science. Maybe faster-than-light technology, or bio-breakthroughs that will revolutionize human life. See there?" He pointed to the cutaway diagram of the Gargoyle. "They've buried something for us. Why else would they show the asteroid's interior unless they wanted us to get it?"

Janet thought about perceptual set. The Strieberist saw what he expected to see. "In New Mexico there's a radioactive waste dump in the salt deposits. When the government chose the site, they had two worries: one, how to keep the waste from leaking out, and two, how to keep people, generations down the road, maybe long after any record of what was buried there had been lost, from digging it up. The problem was any monument they left could be misinterpreted. It's like the pharaohs' tombs. They were all looted. You can't trust that anything left over great stretches of time won't eventually be disturbed." She pointed to the diagram. "You know what I think that is? Something deadly. The circle around it in the next diagram is the Sun. The last diagram shows the Sun exploding. Maybe they had a war and made a sun killer that couldn't be destroyed. Maybe it's their toxic waste. The faces are angry and fearful. Maybe those emotions and expressions are universal. Run away and be afraid." Lindsey nodded. "If there is something in the Gargoyle, we'd want to study it much longer before opening opening it up. I'm including a recommendation in my report to quarantine the site."

"That will be my suggestion too," said silver hair.

The Strieberist slapped the desk. "My people won't put up with this. We have a right to know what is inside this artifact."

Janet looked from Lindsey to the older man to the Strieberist. It was a political struggle, and they weren't going to listen to her now. Whatever happened, it might take years to resolve. She remembered the statues at the surface, how they scowled and grimaced, how their hands were poised to rend, and she shivered. If they believed her theory, there was no way they could ever know what was inside the asteroid. She thought about Pandora and Bluebeard's wives.

"I would like to go check on Alec," she said.

Lindsey nodded, then turned back to the argument. As Janet left, they were shouting at each other.

* * *

Thick bandages wrapped Alec's hands, and a slimy ointment had been smeared on his ears and nose.

"It's frostbite," Alec said. "Another ten minutes, the doctor tells me, and I'd have been frozen to the core." Janet pulled a chair next to him, not sure what to say.

"They showed me your pictures from the Gargoyle. It was a statue I saw, wasn't it?" His face reddened slightly.

"Anyone might have reacted the same way, Alec. I'm just glad I was there to get you back." She put her hand on his arm.

"You saved my life. That's a pretty big deal."

She shrugged. "It just makes us even."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "What are they saying about it?"

"I think they're going to haggle for a while, and then somebody will open it up."

Alec shook his head. "If I put one of those statues in the conference room, it would change a few minds. We need to do something to stop them."

"Some day we can, but not today. Today you need to get better. There'll be a lot of arguing among folk with a bunch more pull than we have before anyone makes a decision." Janet was already imagining the report she would turn in. If the Strieberist was right, she and Alec were famous now, the first humans to land on an alien artifact. Their voices might be louder than they would be otherwise. She smiled. There was reason to hope.

A technician wheeled in a cart with a food tray. "Time to eat," he said. "We

got you stuff from the cafeteria. No dietary restrictions for you, so dig in." He put the tray across Alec's lap before he left. For a minute Alec looked at the meal, then at his wrapped hands. He laughed. "I can't hold anything. I don't suppose you could feed me?" Janet reached across Alec to pick up the fork. On the tray was meatloaf, corn, a roll and a piece of cheesecake. He kept his eyes on hers through each bite, and he never tried to move the arm she held. His face fascinated her, how his mouth worked, how he swallowed. Once she wiped his chin and he nodded his thanks. When she got to the dessert, she cut a fork full off and held it out for him. He shook his head. "Too big," he said. "Cheesecake has to be eaten in small bites." Janet smiled. Maybe she was seeing what she wanted to see. Maybe this was her perceptual set, but she didn't think so. It was all she could do not to say, "You know what this means, don't you? We're not alone." She trimmed the piece and fed it to him delicately.

Copyright © 2001 by James Van Pelt.