

Strood

NEAL ASHER

Like a Greek harp standing four meters tall and three wide, its center-curtain body rippling in some unseen wind, the strood shimmered across the park, tendrils groping for me, their stinging pods shiny and bloated. Its voice was the sound of some bedlam ghost in a big empty house: muttering, then bellowing guttural nonsense. Almost instinctively, I ran toward the nearest pathun, with the monster close behind me. The pathun's curiol matrix reacted with a nacreous flash, displacing us both into a holding cell. I was burned—red skin visible through holes in my shirt—but whether from the strood or the pathun, I don't know. The strood, its own curiol matrix cut by that of the pathun, lay nearby like a pile of bloody seaweed. I stared about myself at the ten-by-ten box with its floor littered with stones, bones, and pieces of carapace. I really wanted to cry.

"Love! Eat you!" the strood had bellowed. "Eat you! Pain!"

It could have been another of those damned translator problems. The gilst—slapped onto the base of my skull and growing its spines into my brain with agonizing precision—made the latest Pentium Synaptic look like an abacus with most of its beads missing. Unfortunately, with us humans, the gilst is a lot brighter than its host. Mine initially loaded all English on the assumption that I knew the whole of that language, and translating something from say, a pathun, produced stuff from all sorts of obscure vocabularies: scientific, philosophic, sociological, political. All of them. What had that dyspeptic newt with its five ruby eyes and exterior mobile intestine said to me shortly after my arrival?

"Translocate fifteen degrees sub-axial to hemispherical concrescence of poly-carbon interface."

I'd asked where the orientating machine was, and it could have just pointed to the lump on the nearby wall and said, "Over there."

After forty-six hours in the space station, I was managing, by the feedback techniques that load into your mind like an instruction manual the moment the spines begin to dig in, to limit the gilst's vocabulary to my feeble one, and thought I'd got a handle on it, until my encounter with the strood. I'd even managed to stop it translating what the occasional patronizing mugull would ask me every time I stopped to gape at some extraordinary sight, as "Is one's discombobulation requiring pellucidity?" I knew the words, but couldn't shake the feeling that either the translator or the mugull was having a joke at my expense. All not too good when really I had no time to spare for being lost on the station—I wanted to see so much before I died.

The odds of survival, before the pathun lander set down on the Antarctic, had been one-in-ten for surviving more than five years. My lung cancer, lodged in both lungs, considerably reduced those odds for me. By the time pathun technology started filtering out, my cancer had metastasized, sending out scouts to inspect other real estate in my body. And when I finally began to receive any benefits of that technology, my cancer had established a burgeoning population in my liver and colonies in other places too numerous to mention.

"We cannot help you," the mugull doctor had told me, as it floated a meter off the ground in the pathun hospital on the Isle of Wight. Hospitals like this one were springing up all over Earth, like *Medicins Sans Frontières* establishments in some Third World backwater. Mostly run by mugulls meticulously explaining to our witchdoctors where they were going wrong. To the more worshipful of the population, that name might as well have stood for, "alien angels like translucent manta rays." But the contraction of "mucus gull" that became their name is more apposite for the majority, and their patronizing attitude comes hard from something that looks like a floating sheet of veined snot with two beaks, black button eyes, and a

transparent nematode body smelling of burning bacon.

“Pardon?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing: they were miracle workers who had crossed mind-numbing distances to come here to employ their magical technologies. This mugull explained it to me in perfect English, without a translator. It, and others like it, had managed to create those nanofactories that sat in the liver pumping out DNA repair nanomachines. Now this was okay if you got your nactor before your DNA was damaged. It meant eternal youth, so long as you avoided stepping in front of a truck. But, for me, there was just too much damage already, so my nactor couldn’t distinguish patient from disease.

“But...you will be able to cure me?” I still couldn’t quite take it in.

“No.” A flat reply. And with that, I began to understand, began to put together facts I had thus far chosen to ignore.

People were still dying in huge numbers all across Earth, and the alien doctors had to prioritize. In Britain, it’s mainly the wonderful bugs tenderly nurtured by our national health system to be resistant to just about every antibiotic going. In fact, the mugulls had some problems getting people into their hospitals in the British Isles, because over the last decade, hospitals had become more dangerous to the sick than anywhere else. Go in to have an ingrown toenail removed; MRSA or a variant later, and you’re down the road in a hermetically sealed plastic coffin. However, most alien resources were going into the same countries as Frontières’ went to: to battle a daily death rate, numbered in tens of thousands, from new air-transmitted HIVs, rampant Ebola, and that new tuberculosis that can eat your lungs in about four days. And I don’t know if they are winning.

“Please...you’ve got to help me.”

No good. I knew the statistics, and, like so many, had been an avid student of all things alien ever since their arrival. Even by stopping to talk to me as its curiol matrix wafted it from research ward to ward, the mugull might be sacrificing other lives. Resources again. They had down to an art what our own crippled health service had not been able to apply in fact without outcry: if three people have a terminal disease and you have the resources to save only two of them, that’s what you do, you don’t ruin it in a futile attempt to save them all. This mugull, applying all its skill and available technologies, could certainly save me, it could take my body apart and rebuild it cell by cell if necessary, but meanwhile, ten, twenty, a thousand other people with less serious, but no less terminal conditions, would die.

“Here is your ticket,” it said, and something spat out of its curiol matrix to land on my bed as it wafted away.

I stared down at the yellow ten-centimeter disk. Thousands of these had been issued, and governments had tried to control whom to, and why. Mattered not a damn to any of the aliens; they gave them to those they considered fit, and only the people they were intended for could use them...to travel offworld. I guess it was my consolation prize.

A mugull autosurgeon implanted a cybernetic assister frame. This enabled me to get out of bed and head for the shuttle platform moored off the Kent coast. There wasn’t any pain at first, as the surgeon had used a nerve-block that took its time to wear off, but I felt about as together as rotten lace. As the nerve-block wore off, I went back onto my inhalers, and patches where the bone cancer was worst, and a cornucopia of pills.

On the shuttle, which basically looked like a train carriage, I attempted to concentrate on some of the alien identification charts I’d loaded into my notescreen, but the nagging pain and perpetual weariness made it difficult for me to concentrate. There was as odd a mix of people around me as you’d find on any

aircraft: some woman with a baby in a papoose; a couple of suited heavies who could have been government, Mafia, or stockbrokers; and others. Just ahead of me was a group of two women and three men who, with plummy voices and scruffy-bordering-on-punk clothing—that upper-middle-class lefty look favored by most students—had to be the BBC documentary team I'd heard about. This was confirmed for me when one of the men removed a prominently labeled vidcam to film the non-human passengers. These were two mugulls and a pathun—the latter a creature like a two-meter woodlouse, front section folded upright with a massively complex head capable of revolving three-sixty, and a flat back onto which a second row of multiple limbs folded. As far as tool-using went, nature had provided pathuns with a work surface, clamping hands with the strength of a hydraulic vice, and other hands with digits fine as hairs. The guy with the vidcam lowered it after a while and turned to look around. Then he focused on me.

“Hi, I'm Nigel,” he held out a hand, which I reluctantly shook. “What are you up for?”

I considered telling him to mind his own business, but then thought I could do with all the help I could get. “I'm going to the system base to die.”

Within seconds, Nigel had his vidcam in my face, and one of his companions, Julia, had exchanged places with the passenger in the seat adjacent to me, and was pumping me with ersatz sincerity about how it felt to be dying, then attempting to stir some shit about the mugulls being unable to treat me on Earth. The interview lasted nearly an hour, and I knew they would cut and shape it to say whatever they wanted it to say.

When it was over, I returned my attention to the pathun, who I was sure had turned its head slightly to watch and listen in, though why I couldn't imagine. Perhaps it was interested in the primitive equipment the crew used. Apparently, one of these HG (heavy gravity) creatures, while being shown around Silicon Valley, accidentally rested its full weight on someone's laptop computer—think about dropping a barbell on a matchbox and you get the idea—then, without tools, repaired it in under an hour. And as if that wasn't miraculous enough, the computer's owner had discovered that the laptop's hard disk storage had risen from four hundred gigabytes to four terabytes. I would have said the story was apocryphal, but the laptop is now in the Smithsonian.

The shuttle docked at Eulogy Station, and the pathun disembarked first, which is just the way it is. Equality is a fine notion; the reality is that they've been knocking around the galaxy for half a million years. Pathuns are as far in advance of the other aliens as we are in advance of jellyfish, which makes you wonder where humans rate on their scale. As the alien went past me, heading for the door, I felt the slight air shift caused by its curiol matrix—that technology enabling other aliens, like mugulls, creatures whose home environment is an interstellar gas cloud not far above absolute zero, to live on the surface of Earth and easily manipulate their surroundings. Call it a force field, but it's much more than that. Another story about pathuns demonstrates some of what they can do with their curiol matrices:

All sorts of religious fanatic lunatic idiotic groups immediately, of course, considered superior aliens the cause of their woes, and valid targets, so it was only a week into the first alien walkabout that the first suicide bomber tried to take out a pathun amid a crowd. He detonated his device, but an invisible cylinder enclosed him and the plastique slow-burned—not a pretty sight. Other assassination attempts met with various suitable responses. The sharpshooter with his scoped rifle got the bullet he fired back through the scope and into his head. The bomber in Spain just disappeared along with his car, only to reappear, still behind the wheel, traveling at mach four down on top of the farmhouse his fellow Basque terrorists had made their base. Thereafter, attempts started to drop off, not because of any reduction in terrorist lunacy, but because of a huge increase in security when a balek (those floating LGAs that look like great big apple cores) off-handedly mentioned what incredible restraint the pathuns—beings capable

of translocating planet Earth into its own sun—were showing.

From Eulogy Station, it was, in both alien and my own terms, just a short step to the system base. The gate was just a big ring in one of the plazas of Eulogy, and you just stepped through it and you were there. The base, a giant stack of different-sized disks nine hundred and forty kilometers from top to bottom, orbited Jupiter. After translocating from some system eighty light-years away to our Oort Cloud, it had traveled to here at half the speed of light while the contact ships headed to Earth. Apparently, we had been ripe for contact: bright enough to understand what was happening, but stupid enough for our civilization not to end up imploding when confronted by such omnipotence.

In the system base, I began to find my way around, guided by an orientation download to my notescreen, and it was only then that I began to notice stroods everywhere. I had only ever seen pictures before, and, as far as I knew, none had ever been to Earth. But why were there so many thousands here, now? Then, of course, I allowed myself a hollow laugh. What the hell did it matter to me? Still, I asked Julia and Nigel when I ran into them again.

“According to our researcher, they’re pretty low on the species scale and only space-faring because of pathun intervention.” Julia studied her note screen—uncomfortable being the interviewee. Nigel was leaning over the rail behind her, filming down an immense metallic slope on which large limpetlike creatures clung sleeping in their thousands: stroods in their somnolent form.

Julia continued, “Some of the other races regard stroods as pathun pets, but then, we’re not regarded much higher by many of them.”

“But why so many thousands here?” I asked.

Angrily, she gestured at the slope. “I’ve asked, and every time, I’ve been told to go and ask the pathuns. They ignore us, you know—far too busy about their important tasks.”

I resisted the impulse to point out that creatures capable of crossing the galaxy perhaps did not rank the endless creation of media pap very high. I succumbed then to one more “brief” interview before managing to slip away, and then, losing my way to my designated hotel, ended up in one of the parks, aware that a strood was following me....

Sitting in the holding cell, I eyed the monster and hoped that its curiol matrix wouldn’t start up again, as in here I had nowhere to run, and, being the contacted species, no curiol matrix of my own. The environment of a system station is that of the system species, us, so we didn’t need the matrix for survival, and anyway, you don’t give the kiddies sharp objects to play with right away. I was beginning to wonder if maybe running at that pathun had been such a bright idea, when I was abruptly translocated again, and found myself stumbling into the lobby of an apparently ordinary-looking hotel. I did a double take, then turned round and walked out through the revolving doors and looked around. Yep, an apparently normal city street—except for Jupiter in the sky. This was the area I’d been trying to find before my confrontation with the strood: the human section, a nice homey, normal-seeming base for us so we wouldn’t get too confused or frightened. I went back into the hotel, limping a bit now, despite the assister frame, and wheezing because I’d lost my inhaler, and the patches and pills were beginning to wear off.

“David Hall,” I said at the front desk. “I have a reservation.”

The automaton dipped its polished chrome ant’s head and eyed my damaged clothing, then it checked its screen, and after a moment it handed—or rather, clawed—over a key card. I headed for the elevator and soon found myself in the kind of room I’d never been able to afford on Earth, my luggage already stacked beside my bed, and a welcome pack on a nearby table. I opened the half bottle of champagne

and began chugging it down as I walked out onto the balcony. Now what?

Prior to my brief exchange with the mugull doctor, I'd been told that my life expectancy was about four weeks, but that, "I'm sure the aliens will be able to do something!" Well, they had. The drugs and the assister frame enabled me to actually move about and take some pleasure in my remaining existence. The time limit, unfortunately, had not changed. So, I would see as much of this miraculous place as possible...but I'd avoid that damned park. I thought then about what had happened.

The park was fifteen kilometers across, with Earthly meadows, and forests of cycads like purple pineapples tall as trees. There were aliens everywhere, a lot of them strood. And one, which I was sure had been following me before freezing and standing like a monument in a field of daisies, started drifting toward me. I stepped politely aside, but it followed me and started making strange moaning sounds. I got scared then, but controlled myself, and stood still when it reached one of its tendrils out to me. Maybe it was just saying hello. The stinging cells clacked like maracas and my arm felt as if someone had whipped it, before turning numb as a brick. The monster started shaking then, as if this had got it all excited.

"Eat you!"

Damned thing. I don't mind being the primitive poor relation, but not the main course.

I turned round and went back into my room, opened my suitcase, found my spare inhaler and patches, and headed for the bathroom. An hour later, I was clean, and the pain in my body had receded to a distant ache I attempted to drive farther away with the contents of the minibar. I slept for the usual three hours, woke feeling sick, out of breath, and once again in pain. A few pulls from one inhaler opened up my lungs, and the other inhaler took away the feeling that someone was sandpapering the inside of my chest, then more pills gave me a further two hours sleep, and that, I knew, was as much as I was going to get.

I dressed, buttoning up my shirt while standing on the balcony and watching the street. No day or night here, just the changing face of Jupiter in an orange-blue sky. Standing there, gazing at the orb, I decided that I must have got it all wrong somehow. The aliens had only ever killed humans in self-defense, so somehow there had been a misunderstanding. Maybe, with the strood being pathun "pets," what had happened had been no more than the equivalent of someone being snapped at by a terrier in a park. I truly believed this. But that didn't stop me suddenly feeling very scared when I heard that same bedlam ghost muttering and bellowing along below. I stared down and saw the strood—it had to be the same one—rippling across the street and pausing there. I was sure it was looking up at me, though it had no eyes.

The strood was still waiting as I peered out of the hotel lobby. For a second, I wished I had a gun or some other weapon to hand, but that would only have made me feel better, not be any safer. I went back inside and walked up to the automaton behind the hotel desk.

Without any ado, I said, "I was translocated here from a holding cell, to which I was translocated after running straight into a pathun's personal space."

"Yes," it replied.

"This happened because I was running away from a strood that wants to eat me."

"Yes," it replied.

"Who must I inform about this...assault?"

“If your attack upon the pathun had been deliberate, you would not have been released from the holding cell,” it buzzed at me.

“I’m talking about the strood’s assault on me.”

Glancing aside, I saw that the creature was now looming outside the revolving doors. They were probably all that was preventing it from entering the hotel. I could hear it moaning.

“Strood do not attack other creatures.”

“It stung me!”

“Yes.”

“It wants to eat me!”

“Yes.”

“It said ‘eat you, eat you,’” I said, before I realized what the automaton had just said. “Yes!” I squeaked.

“Not enough to feed strood, here,” the automaton told me. “Though Earth will be a good feeding ground for them.”

I thought of the thousands of these creatures I had seen here. No, I just didn’t believe this! My skin began to crawl as I heard the revolving doors turning, all of them.

“Please summon help,” I said.

“None is required.” The insectile head swung toward the strood. “Though you are making it ill, you know.”

Right then, I think my adrenaline ran down, because suddenly I was hurting more than usual. I turned with my back against the desk to see the strood coming toward me across the lobby. It seemed somehow ragged to me, disreputable, tatty. The pictures of them I’d seen showed larger and more glittering creatures.

“What do you want with me?”

“Eat...need...eat,” were the only words I could discern from the muttering bellow. I pushed away from the desk and set out in a stumbling run for the elevator. No way was I going to be able to manage the stairs. I hit the button just as the strood surged after me. Yeah, great, you’re going to die waiting for an elevator. It reached me just as the doors opened behind me. One of its stinging tendrils caught me across the chest, knocking me back into the elevator. This seemed to confuse the creature, and it held back long enough for the doors to draw closed. My chest grew numb and my breathing difficult as I stabbed buttons, then the elevator lurched into progress, and I collapsed to the floor.

“Technical Acquisitions” was a huge disc-shaped building, like the bridge of the starship Enterprise mounted on top of a squat skyscraper. Nigel kept Julia, Lincoln, and myself constantly on camera, while Pierce kept panning across and up and down—getting as much of our surroundings as possible. I’d learned that quantity was what they were aiming for; all the artwork was carried out on computer afterward. Pierce—an Asian woman with rings through her lip connected by a chain to rings through her ear, and a blockish stud through her tongue—was the one who suggested it, and Julia immediately loved the idea. I was just glad, after Julia and Nigel dragged me out of the elevator, for the roof taxi to get me out of the hotel without my having to go back through the lobby. Of course, none of them took my story

about stroods wanting to eat people seriously; they were just excited about the chance of some real in-your-face documentary making.

“Dawson’s got a direct line to the head honchos here in the system station,” Lincoln explained to me. For “head honchos,” read pathuns, who, after their initial show-and-tell on Earth, took no interest in all the consequent political furor. They were physicists, engineers, biologists, and pursued their own interests to the exclusion of all else. It drove human politicians nuts that the ones who had the power to convert Earth into a swiftly dispersing smoke cloud might spend hours watching a slug devouring a cabbage leaf, but have no time to spare to discuss issues with the president or prime minister. Human scientists, though, were a different matter, for pathuns definitely leaned toward didacticism. I guess it all comes down to the fact that modern politicians don’t really change very much, that the inventor of the vacuum cleaner changed more people’s lives than any number of Thatchers or Blairs. Dawson was the chief of the team of human scientists aboard the system base, learning at the numerous feet of the pathuns.

“We get to him, and we should be able to get a statement from one of the pathuns—he’s their blue-eyed boy, and they let him get up to all sorts of stuff,” Lincoln continued. “According to our researchers, he’s even allowed access to curiol matrix tech.”

In the lobby of the building, Lincoln shmoozed the insectile receptionist with his spiel about the documentary he was doing for the Einstein channel, then spoke to a bearded individual on a large phone screen. I recognized Dawson right away, because my own viewing had always leaned toward that channel Lincoln and Julia had denigrated on our way out here. He was a short plump individual, with a big gray beard, gray hair, and very odd-looking orangish eyes. He’s the kind of physicist who pisses off many of his fellows by being better at pure research than they, and then making it worse by being able to turn his research to practical and profitable ends. While many of them had walked away from CERN with wonderfully obscure papers to their names, he’d walked away with the same, plus a very real contribution to make to quantum computing. I didn’t hear the conversation, but I was interested to see Dawson gazing past Lincoln’s shoulder directly at me, before giving the go-ahead for us to come up.

How to describe the inside of the disk? There were benches, computers, and big plasma screens, macrotech that looked right out of CERN, people walking, talking, waving light pens, people gutting alien technology, scanning circuit boards under electron microscopes, running mass spectrometer tests on fragments of exotic metal. . . . On Earth, there was a lot of alien technology knocking about, and a lot of it turned to smoking goo the moment anyone tried to open it up. It’s not that they don’t want us to learn; it’s just that they don’t want us to depopulate the planet in the process. Here, though, things were different: under direct pathun supervision, the scientists were having a great time.

Lincoln and Julia began by asking Dawson for an overview on everything that he and his people were working on. My interest was held for a while as he described materials light as polystyrene and tough as steel, a micro tome capable of slicing diamonds, and nanotech self-repairing computer chips, but, after a while, I began to feel really sick, and without my assister frame, I’d have been on the floor. Finally, he was standing before pillars with hooked-over tops, gesturing at something subliminal between them. When I realized he was talking about curiol matrices, my interest perked up, but it was then that Lincoln and Julia went in for the kill.

“So, obviously the pathuns trust you implicitly, or are you treated like a strood?” asked Julia.

I stared at the subliminal flicker, and through it to the other side of the room, where it seemed a work bench was sneaking away while no one was watching—until I realized that I was seeing a pathun sauntering across, all sorts of equipment on its back.

“Strood?” Dawson asked.

“Yes, their pets,” interjected Lincoln. “Ones whose particularly carnivorous tastes the pathuns seem to be pandering to.”

I tracked the pathun past the pillars to a big equipment elevator. Took a couple of pulls on one of my inhalers—not sure which one, but it seemed to help. I thought that I was imagining the bedlam moaning. Everything seemed to be getting a little fuzzy around the edges.

“Pets?” said Dawson, staring at Lincoln as if he’d just discovered a heretofore-undiscovered variety of idiot.

“But then I suppose it’s all right,” said Julia, “if the kind of people fed to them are going to die anyway.”

Dawson shook his head, then said, “I was curious to see what your angle would be—that’s why I let you come up.” Now he turned to me. “Running into a pathun’s curiol matrix wasn’t the best idea—it reacted to you rather than the strood.”

It came up on the equipment elevator, shimmering and flowing out before the observing pathun. The strood came round the room toward me. There were benches to my left, so the quickest escape route for me was ahead and left to the normal elevators. I hardly comprehended what Dawson was saying. You see, it’s all right to be brave and sensible when you’re whole and nothing hurts, but when you live with pain shadowing your every step, and the big guy with the scythe is just around the corner, your perspective changes.

“It bonded and you broke away,” he said. “Didn’t you study your orientation? Can’t you see it’s in love?”

I ran, and slammed straight into an invisible web between the two pillars—a curiol matrix Dawson had been studying. Energies shorted through my assister frame, and something almost alive connected to my gilst and into my brain. Exo-skeletal energy, huge frames of reference, translocation, reality displayed as formulae...there is no adequate description. Panicked, I just saw where I didn’t want to be, and strove to put myself somewhere else. The huge system base opened around me, up and down in lines and surfaces and intersection points. Twisting them into a new pattern, I put myself on the roof of the world. My curiol retained air around me, retained heat, but did not defend me from harsh and beautiful reality; in fact, it amplified perception. Standing on the steel plain, I saw that Jupiter was truly vast but finite, and that through vacuum the stars did not waver, and that there was no way to deny the depths they burned in. I gasped, twisted to a new pattern, found myself tumbling through a massive swarm of mugulls, curiols reacting all around me and hurling me out.

It’s in love.

Something snatched me down, and, sprawled on an icy platform, I observed a pathun, linked in ways I could not quite comprehend to vast machines rearing around me to forge energies of creation. The curiol gave me a glimpse of what it meant to have been in a technical civilization for more than half a million years. Then I understood about huge restraint. And amusement. The pathun did something then, its merest touch shaking blocks of logic into order, and something went click in my head.

Eat you! Eat you!

Of course, everything I had been told was the truth. No translator problem; just an existential one. What need did pathuns have for lies? I folded away from the platform and stumbled out from the other side of the pillars, shedding the curiol behind me. Momentarily doubt nearly had me stepping back into the matrix as the strood flowed round and reared up before me: a raggedy and bloody curtain.

“Eat,” I said.

The strood surged forward, stinging cells clacking. The pain was mercifully brief as the creature engulfed me, and the black tide swamped me to the sound of Julia shouting, “Are you getting this! Are you getting this!”

Three days passed, I think, then I woke in a field of daisies. I was about six kilos lighter, which was unsurprising. One of those kilos was pieces of the cybernetic assister frame scattered in the grass all around me. Nearby the strood stood tall and glittering in artificial sunlight: grown strong on the cancer it had first fallen in love with then eaten out of my body, as was its nature. It’s like pilot fish eating the parasites of bigger fish—that kind of existence: mutualism. I had been sent as a kind of test case, by the mugulls who were struggling with human sickness, and, after me, the go-ahead was given. The strood are now flocking in their thousands to Earth: come to dine on our diseases.