

Here There Be Humans

Ken Rand

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“As with ‘The Henry and the Martha’ (Aeon Three), this story is told in an alien point of view. Curiosity must be a universal conceit, maybe the dominant motive for going to the stars. What if aliens come to Earth and find humans extinct? An alien, endowed with a surfeit of all-too-human curiosity, might face a challenge when confronted with evidence that humans may still be Out There. Somewhere. Waiting.”

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WHEN ADMINISTRATOR FIRST SLON M’LAY disappeared, his comrades blamed extinct humans. A joke, of course. “Maybe he ruptured his throat pouch calling one in his dreams,” they said, laughing.

Two days later, M’lay was still missing in the jungle, the Bureau sent investigators from orbital, and the laughter stopped.

“No nestlings’ tale,” Chief Detective Sula A’com said. “Whatever happened to your First, it wasn’t phantom humans.”

Animals, then? Or outlaws?

Everyone had heard stories about escaped convicts out there in the dense, alien Brazilian jungle, using stolen and makeshift breathers, no exosuits, existing like savages. Gone native. If they could kidnap the Administrator then they were near, and they could take anybody from the Bureau’s South America main research base on the Amazon River. Anybody. Any time.

Security at the base was cursory. Perimeter smartwire kept undergrowth, insects, pests, and the infrequent carnivore out. Other threats—outlaws bent on murder?—had been ill considered. But M’lay had gone afield, past the wire.

Reading the First’s personnel record, A’com learned the First had spent more time on his hobby—finding live humans—than on his real job. Admin Second Julas D’fif had been defacto Admin First for months, handling daily business while the First looked for signs of the extinct species.

He went afield often, but always with proximity monitors and med implants active, standard procedure. Two days ago, both went suddenly silent.

A’com looked around the conference room at D’fif and the dozen managers

and techs gathered for the emergency meeting. He saw it in their eyes and quivering pouches: if the First can be kidnapped or murdered—what about us? What about the field teams? The outposts upriver and in the Andes? The plantations scattered around the continent where convicts outnumber people ten to one?

Many had mates and birth-kin afield, A'com knew.

“Then there'll be a ransom demand,” Admin Second, now Acting Admin First, Julas D'fif said, “will there not, milord?” His throat pouch quivered and he drummed inner thumbs on the table. An annoying habit, that drumming, A'com thought.

“If so, shouldn't we—” D'fif stammered to a halt.

A'com glared and puffed his throat pouch in mute threat and D'fif plopped back in his seat, blinking, drumming, quivering. D'fif's neckfins had extended, dissipating nervous body heat.

Base atmosphere conditioning seemed normal. A'com's neckfins lay flaccid on his shoulders and he breathed the filtered air easily. Alarm gauges read colorless and the cooled air was toxin-free.

He felt comfortable, despite having just arrived from orbital with his team, but the dozen others in the room, all downwell vets, seemed tense. A'com saw furtive glances exchanged among the twitchy bunch.

What in L'hoc's name is going on? Are they just nervous about the potential threat to them, or am I seeing conspiracy?

“Security's being puffed up.” A'com hoped his smile and full color might ease tensions. “There's no cause for alarm.”

A'com could have cut the tension with a dull bondknife.

Curiosity piqued, he shifted color, adopted a different tact. He sat still, face neutral, pouch slack, and waited for somebody to break the heavy silence. After a moment, a female began to weep in muted sobs, saggy pouch a livid purple. Her comrades studied the walls, the floors, their thumbs. Neckfins sprouted and the conditioner whined.

What's going on?

A'com sighed, stood, and ended the meeting. “My people will interview each of you, and your techs. Separately.”

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“They’re worried about outlaws, Sula,” tech Dor K’rou said. He waved a hand slate, his enhancer-probe interview transcripts, just finished.

A’com nodded as he sipped a bulb of fresh ground thusea, savoring the bitter tang. He sat in the Admin First’s private office, at the First’s desk in his cushy, high-backed chair. Search headquarters now. With him sat or stood his team chiefs making their first report and conducting their first strategy session since planetfall.

On the walls and around the room, glass cases displayed artifacts from the local flora and fauna. A stuffed bird here, an odd-shaped rock there, a colorful pelt from a furred creature in another case. Detritus all lovingly preserved and labeled. A private museum.

A’com had heard of the artifact on the First’s desk, a thumb-sized flat stone, pointed at one end with sharp, serrated edges. A human hunting implement. Proof, M’lay had written in a report, of recent human activity in the area. Maybe human, but recent? M’lay couldn’t prove it.

A’com barely listened, turned away from his people, staring out the huge window in the wall behind the desk.

Jungle dominated the view. A wall of slender trees rose into thick leafy canopies from tangled vines and dense, bushy undergrowth. Birds, insects and odd small creatures flittered among the varied foliage. Deep green shades dominated lesser greens, speckled by bright many-hued flowers.

“Nothing else, Dor?”

A’com found the view—*interesting*.

“Petty theft, falsified maintenance logs, a little graft and a puffy sexual dalliance, but no kidnap or murder suspects.”

The others laughed. A’com liked his team casual. No titles or rank on the job. It made for good morale, efficiency. Better working conditions, better results, but the casualness never extended outside the tight-knit group into the less tolerant bureaucracy at large.

Yes, an interesting view.

“Not our business,” A’com waved a dismissive thumb. “What about D’fif? Jealousy?”

“Negative,” prime tech Dev F’rar said. F’rar was assigned to question D’fif for such an intrigue. “He’s loyal to M’lay and the Bureau. Believe it or not, Sula, he

really likes Earth.”

No, not just interesting. Something more.

“Pardon?”

“He tried to hide it, but I saw his true colors.”

The view—it was, was—

“Tried to hide it?”

“Ashamed.” Dev barked a cynical laugh. “What would they think in orbital if they found he likes Earth?” Others joined his light chuckle. A’com did not.

Distracting. Fascinating.

“Hm. The search? Any new clues?”

“Nothing,” search chief Car Y’lor said. “Orbital and hover can’t penetrate the foliage and our search mechs can’t handle the terrain. We’ve sent teams on foot, but we’ve found no more than the base security staff did before we came down.”

M’lay had left two days ago with breather and shielded exosuit on another walkabout, his on-going and fruitless search for humans. Tracks led along a narrow trail to a point five hundred meters into the jungle where his proximity monitor and med implants shut down.

“No readings?”

A’com wondered what the jungle felt like, what it smelled like.

“None.”

As well as keeping animals and insects out, smartwire twenty meters out kept the intense foliage from engulfing the base. Still, seeds drifted through the invisible energy wall somehow, and A’com saw green stalks near the compound.

“Speculation?”

“Wild animal ate him, Sula.”

“Hm. Continue.”

“Implants are hard to remove. Painful, even fatal. If he’d taken it out somehow, it would still signal. We’d have found it. Even if it had been pulverized,

say in a fall, we'd have still found it. You can't fragment the device so it can't signal." He shrugged. "But we keep finding new life forms—"

"Be careful your search people don't get eaten, Car."

More chuckles. *They're all in their colors today.*

"What about outlaws? Ryal?"

Agent Ryal O'lai cleared her throat pouch. "In the two generations we've been on Earth, there've been a hundred and five reports of escaped or disappeared convicts. In South America. I didn't check other reserves."

"Official?"

"What other kind is there?"

"I'm just marking all the colors."

"The Bureau tracks population diligently. Prox monitors and implants are hard to lose. Less than three thousand people live in the South America reserve, mostly convicts. Accounted for. The only way a disappearance could be unofficial is if, if—"

"If the reporting agency lies."

"I suppose it could happen. Sir, the outlaw myth is nothing more than—a myth. It's possible to live out there with a makeshift breather and no exosuit, but who'd want to try?"

The scene beyond the window made A'com dizzy and he swiveled in the chair to face his team. "Theory. Ryal, Check it. See if you can find record of downwell officials hiding disappearance numbers. Check for sightings of escaped cons or encounters with them. Maybe it's more than a myth. Maybe a few went native and got organized. Maybe there're more outlaws than we've been led to believe."

"Why, Sula?" Dor K'rou said.

"I know, no ransom note yet, but—"

"If there *are* escaped cons, why would officials lie about it and risk dismissal? They'd still have to meet quotas but with fewer workers. Everyone would have to pick up the load and they'd resent it. No, Sula, I see no incentive for a cover-up."

"More," Dev F'rar said. "Administrators who lose staff in accident and error

get reassigned. And disappearances? Even cons, that's a trip to a Homeworld gulag."

"A prison cell on Homeworld," Dor said, "is better than a shift downwell on Earth."

More chuckles. *Really in their colors.*

Something nagged at A'com and he held up a thumb for silence as he thought aloud. "Julas D'fif skips offworld rotation because he's loyal to his First and the Bureau. Slon M'lay refuses reassignment after two local years' duty downwell because he's obsessed with finding humans. The techs and managers we interviewed are all on extended tours. They seem nervous."

"I see no connections, Sula," Dor said. "I probed them."

"Did you ask the right questions?"

"Pardon?"

"Dor, the enhancer-probe gives literal indicators, yes?"

"Yes, the questions must be literal for quantifiable results, but I'm trained to extrapolate."

"Your interview subjects—did they seem nervous?"

"At first, but after we got started, they relaxed. I got good results then."

"Did you ask if they liked their jobs?"

"I asked if they liked their First, or if they resented—wait a minute. What are you saying? You think M'lay's gone native?"

"Absurd," Dev said. "Who'd want to stay here? *On Earth?*"

A'com stood. "No matter. Check it all. Dor, re-examine everyone. If you find some like it here, we may have to conclude the First may have had similar thoughts—"

"Desertion," O'lai said, rising with the others. "Gods."

"—and somebody may know about it, maybe even have helped. Let's get answers."

"I still don't see how he could've scuttled his implants," Y'lor said.

“Assume he found a way. Same for the prox box. Put your people on it. Dismissed. Report back at sunset local.”

Amid excited chatter, the team leaders left to carry out their assignments.

“Dev,” A’com intercepted the agent as he reached the door. Dev F’rar turned.

“Let’s walk,” A’com said. He tilted a thumb at the window.

Dev looked through the big window and blinked, pouch fluttering. “You mean—*out there*?”

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“You don’t like it down the well, do you, Dev?” A’com asked.

They walked away from the base on the same trail Slon M’lay had walked on when he disappeared. They wore breathers and shielded exosuits, proximity monitors active. They walked single file on the narrow, muddy trail, A’com in front, brushing aside tendrils of undergrowth.

Dev snorted. “Dirt, gravity, humidity, heat—radioactivity, toxins, bad air—”

“Radioactivity is tolerable here. It’s concentrated in the old human cities up north. Toxins are filtered. So’s the air.”

“If you stay suited all the time. Or inside. It’s—it’s too much, Sula, all this growth. Makes me dizzy.”

“Is it? Too much?”

If First M’lay had gone native, then M’lay hadn’t thought it was too much. He had the window made; not standard issue. He liked the view. Why did D’fif and the local staff and techs renew their tours?

“Don’t flash false color at me, Sula. In two generations, we’ve found few resources, scarce. Too toxic to colonize, the gravity well’s too deep, tourism is nil. All you see are rich types who can afford to travel this far outsystem and who like to rough it. Few of those. All this planet’s good for is a prison colony. Or do you *like* the native food the farms send up to orbital to supplement hydroponics?”

“And the humans?”

“Right, don’t forget your romantic archaeologists who get fluttery over fused metal lumps and cryptic symbols in stone and city-sized radioactive slag heaps

and—”

“You don’t like humans?”

“No pouches, no color, too many fingers, too few thumbs—”

“They built cities everywhere—”

“They destroyed it all. A dead end. I don’t understand M’lay’s obsession.”
He added quietly: “Or yours.”

They arrived at the point in the jungle where M’lay’s last signal had come from. A’com knelt, tried to see past the evidence markers Y’lor’s forensics people had placed. Markers stood between footprints, a flag marked the last footprint, and a thin string extended into the undergrowth in the direction M’lay would have gone had he taken another step—which he hadn’t.

“He just disappeared,” A’com said. “How could he just—” his pouch fluttered in frustration, “—disappear?”

“Don’t go mystical, Sula. Fey-winged Greids didn’t whisk him off to the Cosmic Nest. I favor Car’s idea.”

“Animals? No tracks.”

“Look at the overhang.”

A’com stood and contemplated the twisted branches of at least four tree types, all within an arms reach. Gnarled vines snaked up into the dark canopy that blotted out the sun. The narrow muddy trail took footprints well, but the jungle floor around it, composed of mosses, grasses, dead leaves and mulch, would hide tracks easily.

“An animal grabs the First from overhead—” Dev started.

“—and the jungle grows so fast and thick,” A’com finished, “any ground tracks are covered. I see your point.”

“They find new species every day. Nobody knows what’s out here. An animal got M’lay, knew how to sneak up on him.”

“He had a prox box. Why didn’t it trigger? And no signals from his implants—”

“L’hoc’s sake, Sula, look at this mess. Could be anything out here. We finally found a species that can digest a prox box, signal and all.”

A'com didn't hear. His eyes grew unfocused looking at the dense, living panorama.

He shut his eyes, fought dizziness, and listened. In the cacophonous din he picked out a melodic hoot overhead echoed by another from deeper in the thick treescape. A staccato chatter interrupted itself as if the animal making it stopped to listen for response. On a nearby branch, two tiny blood-yellow birds sat side by side, chattering. Around the birds, bulbous purple fruit hung in clusters.

Sula wanted to smell the fruit. To taste it.

“Sula?”

He opened his breather and reached out.

“Sula, what are you doing?” Dev grabbed A'com's extended arm, thumbs pinching the tender scales inside the elbow. A'com turned to him and blinked as if coming out of a drunken stupor.

“I—I—”

Dev released his arm. “You took off your breather.” He frowned concern as he adjusted the breather back over A'com's nose. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I—” A'com hesitated. *What happened?* “I wanted to taste—” He looked at the fruit, the birds. “—to eat—”

“Base, are you getting this?” Dev addressed the air.

“Prox monitors function, milord,” a thin, disembodied voice replied. “We're recording.”

“We're coming back. I want diagnostic on Detective A'com's exosuit and breather.”

Wordless and grim-pouched, Dev led A'com back inside. A'com frowned, deep in thought, but followed meekly.

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“Not the plants,” A'com told his staff in the afternoon meeting, thumbing the report on the slate before him. “My breather and exosuit test on-color, and we've checked the entire system. No malfunctions.”

“We don't have M'lay's breather or suit to test,” Y'lor said. “The others test

out, but maybe his was defective.”

“If we had his suit,” A’com said, “we’d have him. Y’lor?”

“We learned how to disable a prox box,” he said. “Simple. No wonder it’s been overlooked. After all, who’d want to do it?”

“The implants?”

“Must be a way, but we haven’t found it yet.”

“Search?”

Y’lor shook his pouch. “I’ve got teams out—I’ve gone out myself, but the jungle’s so dense—it looks hopeless. Still, I’d like to continue.”

“Do it. Ryal, the outlaw question?”

“I don’t know.” A shrug. “Outlaws out there, no exosuits, living off the land? I need time. May I go to the plantations and prison camps, do some on-site?”

“I thought you didn’t like to fly,” A’com said. “Can’t you check by com?”

“I don’t like hovers, but this is important, and I—I want to supervise and it must be on-site, because, well—”

“Do as you think best, Ryal.” O’lai’s flustered demeanor puzzled A’com. *Her colors are erratic. Nerves?*

“Anything else?” A’com looked around the room. Everyone seemed—what? Tense, yes, but there was something else he couldn’t quite put his thumb on. *What’s going on?*

“With your permission, Sula,” K’rou said, “I’d like to accompany some the locals into the field.”

“Oh?”

“They’ve sucked in their pouches. Evasive. I need to learn more. Maybe something about being outside, something in the air, I don’t know—but if I can study them in the environment—” he ended with a shrug.

“All right. Be careful.” *Remember what happened to me.*

“And you, Dev?”

Dev F'rar cleared his throat pouch. "I have an idea." He didn't meet Sula's eyes. "I'd rather not discuss it yet."

A'com nodded, mute, and dismissed the meeting. *Is Dev comparing my psyche profile with M'lay's? My lapse out there. Does he think M'lay may have had a similar lapse? Something in the psyche makeup predisposes insanity?*

A'com shook his pouch to dismiss the thought. *Just a guess. Dev is a good detective, bright, if stiff-finned. If he's on to something, so be it. Initiative counts. Sycophants make poor investigators.*

Something else: the others are excited—that's what I see in them. Into their colors.

A'com felt excited too, certain an answer to Administrator First Slon M'lay's mysterious disappearance would be found soon. Smiling, pouch yellow, he swiveled the First's chair to face the jungle view behind the base.

He froze, sat forward. A movement. For an eye blink, A'com thought he saw, deep in the shifting, vibrant undergrowth, a human face. Then it disappeared.

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"We've been recalled." A'com pointed thumbs upward, toward orbital. Fifteen days had passed since the First disappeared. "I asked for an extension. Denied. Budget. I'm to file a final report tonight. We leave tomorrow."

His people's disappointment was palpable. Fins stiffened, pouches fluttered and colored dismay.

Y'lor stood. "A few more days, Sula. We've just begun."

O'lai slapped thumbs on the table. "I need to get to the Playa plantation. There are rumors of a band of convicts—a *band*, organized—down there."

K'rou started to speak. Instead, he pursed thin lips and shook his head. Sadness colored his drooped pouch.

Dev F'rar, pouch flaccid and color neutral, sat silent.

"We've learned nothing," A'com said.

"But, Sula—"

"Nothing."

Silence.

“Have your reports to me by mid-day. I’ll take it from there. Pack up. Dismissed.”

They shuffled out. Their discontent reinforced for A’com the theory he’d harbored since his walk in the jungle with Dev F’rar, when he’d taken off his breather to smell and taste the fruit near where M’lay had vanished.

The First went native. Not kidnapped or murdered.

The downwell locals feared the investigation might force them to be transferred. They liked Earth.

As his own people now did.

Car Y’lor had become fanatical, leading search parties afield. He got lots of volunteers. Ryal O’lai forgot her fear of hovers in her continent-wide search for runaways. Dor K’rou found excuses to go outside often.

Going native. His whole crew. Just as Slon M’lay had.

As A’com almost had.

Only Dev F’rar had remained aloof.

A thumbtap at the door. “Come.”

Dev entered. “A word, Sula?”

A’com tipped a thumb at a chair deskside. Dev sat.

“Sula, you know I—”

“No, Dev, I don’t resent your checking my psyche profile.”

Dev looked surprised, then nodded. A relieved sigh. “You knew I’d check your file. You’re *you*.”

“I lost it out there. Don’t know what would’ve happened.”

“I’m still concerned. It looks like everybody has gone native, or wants to.”

“Hm. Some are so adapted to routine, they daren’t do what they want to. They’re afraid M’lay’s defection will upset the thusea cart, jeopardize their jobs, yet they don’t want to leave Earth. And the outlaws? Maybe hundreds out there, helped

by those inside the base too afraid to join them or who chose to stay in to keep up the subterfuge?”

“They like it here,” Dev mused. “Imagine.”

“Now, our crew. Everyone wants to go native. Except you.”

Dev leaned forward, whispered. “Sula, about your report—”

“The truth won’t do, Dev. Think. Earth is marginal. A problem like this—could it prompt the Bureau to pull out? What would it do to those who like it here? However bizarre—and given our own people’s attraction to the place, it’s not so bizarre—it’s not our place to ruin their lives.”

“You intend to lie to the Bureau. I thought so. *That’s* what concerns me.”

“Think, Dev. To betray our own? Ryal likes it here, as does Car and Dor. You’ve seen. It could ruin careers.”

“And you?”

“I won’t lie. I’ll report we’ve found no evidence of what happened to M’lay. I’ll suggest theories. Wild animals, chemical dementia, equipment failure, the ‘gone-native’ idea, outlaws. No stress on anything in particular. No conclusions.”

“It’ll still hurt the team.”

“I’ll take it in the pouch. My responsibility, my fall. Does that answer your concern?”

Dev swallowed, pouch purple. “Our failure here shouldn’t have to hurt you—”

“My responsibility. Goes with the job.”

Dev nodded, silent.

“Your own report, Dev, on my behavior out there, even inconclusive, will help focus away from the team.”

Dev nodded again and stood. “It’ll be a hard report to write. I don’t envy you.” He left.

Alone again, A’com swiveled the chair around and looked out the window into the jungle. The face he’d seen—or thought he’d seen—hadn’t returned, though he’d looked for it.

Had M'lay seen the face? *Where is he?*

He sighed and, with reluctance, turned away from the view, back to face the desk. Automatically, he reached for M'lay's human hunting artifact. Gone, of course. Someone took it four days ago. A'com hadn't asked about it since. He understood.

He keyed on his slate.

Rather than begin his final report on the failed search for Administrator First Slon M'lay, he opened his own file. Time left till retirement. Reserved assets. Off-duty time accrued.

Planning a little vacation.

He shut off the slate, distracted again, and turned to look out the window. He put thumbs in his pocket, fondling the human-worked stone he'd found in the jungle the day before. He hadn't told anyone about it. He didn't intend to.

Yes, a vacation. Later. First, maybe a little stroll.