

The Door That Does Not Close by Carl Frederick

Assumptions are easy to make, and hard to refine....

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Illustrated by Tom Kidd

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As he walked closer, the ancient stone structure looked more like a bunker than a Roman temple. Thorvald felt a twinge of collective guilt. If the guidebook was to be believed, that squat monstrosity had been designed by a scientist like himself.

"Sure is ugly," said Roger, walking alongside.

Roger appeared to be about twelve years old. He had blue eyes, blond hair, and wore a polo shirt, shorts, and sneakers. He looked more like a stereotype than a kid. Thorvald had to remind himself yet again that the boy was not of this Earth--or indeed not of any Earth.

"Ugly it may be." Thorvald paused to swat at a mosquito. "But speaking as a physicist rather than an amateur archeologist, this building is impressive. It's survived intact for almost two millennia." He shook his head. "But I've never seen a Roman building like this. It seems ugly on purpose."

"It doesn't look big enough for many hiding places." Roger swatted at a mosquito as well--even though the insect didn't seem interested in him. "You really think the codex is inside?"

"Yes." Thorvald sighed. "I'm afraid so," he added without intending to. Roger, although he could bleed and feel, was actually an android. But the creature that controlled him through telepresence was indeed a child. And although that child was an alien, far off on a spacecraft hovering above Earth, Thorvald had grown fond of him--or it. And once the codex had been recovered, Roger's mission on Earth would end.

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"You know," said Thorvald, "I've been your tutor for about six months now. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too, sir." Roger shuffled a foot. "I wish I didn't have to go."

Thorvald tousled the boy's hair. He'd done that simple act so often, he no longer felt self-conscious about it.

Roger leaned in like a cat wanting to be scratched.

Embarrassed by the show of affection, Thorvald reverted to his role as a teacher.

"Do you know where we are?" he said.

"Of course." Roger padded a few steps ahead. "Constanta, Romania."

"Ah. But the ancient Romans called it Tomis. This was an important town in the Roman province of Dacia."

"Doesn't look very important, now."

Thorvald gazed around at the desolate countryside and nodded. "Dacia Felix, they called it. Happy Dacia. And the region stayed happy until the Visigoths and Carps overran it."

With Roger at his side, Thorvald trudged up to the front of the temple. He carried a flashlight and gestured with it. "The Romans simply abandoned the place. Hard to know why. Some say the evacuation of Dacia marked the start of the disintegration of the Roman Empire."

INTRAREA OPRITA, read the sign hammered into the heavy wooden door.

"No admittance," said Roger, "but of course we're not expected to know Romanian. So let's go in."

"You certainly seemed to know Romanian back when we were renting the car."

Roger shrugged. "Kids learn languages easily."

"Very funny."

Roger giggled. "Okay. I've got translation software."

Thorvald wrinkled his nose--a sign that he was puzzled. "Are you saying your people have done translation software for every language on Earth?"

"No. But yours have." Roger laughed again. "It's neat having Internet access."

Roger bounded up the stone steps. Thorvald followed the boy inside.

The temple, though reasonably intact, still had sufficient gaps in the stonework that they could see their way by the sunlight pouring through the holes. Thorvald tucked the flashlight under his belt.

The central chamber, dank and smelling of animal habitation, had the usual assortment of divine statuary scattered around the periphery. The domed ceiling, like an ancient planetarium, depicted the sky at late twilight. Timeworn blues as well as faded reds and ochres served as background to dots of white representing the visible planets and the brighter stars. A massive stone pillar stood in the center of the room. Jutting from the middle of each wall, mythical animals, each clearly representing a point of the compass, stood on smaller versions of the central pillar.

"Boy, it stinks in here," said Roger.

"Strange," said Thorvald, running his hands along the rough stonework. "The proportions are all wrong. The pillar is too massive." He walked around the fluted column. "Must be over five feet thick. And this chapel is so small, there doesn't seem to be a need for a pillar to hold up the building."

"Maybe the building is holding up the pillar."

Thorvald chuckled. "Interesting notion." He circled the pillar again, looking for cracks that might indicate a doorway. "No secret entrance, I'm afraid." He stepped back and looked up at the juncture of the pillar with the top of the temple and then down at the stone floor.

"Now this is odd." Thorvald sank to his knees. "This pillar has no stylobate, no real base; it seems to just extend down into the ground." Crawling around the column, he followed a crack in the floor that completely encircled it. He pulled a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and, using it as a chisel, tried to worry some of the grime out of the crack. But instead of coming out, the dirt fell deeper into the narrow fissure.

"You know, Roger, you might be right." Thorvald looked up at the boy. "I think the building *is* holding up the pillar." He got to his feet and brushed the dust from the knees of his pants.

"This is really neat," said Roger.

Thorvald smiled. "Yes, it really is." He pointed to the top of the column. "The pillar exudes a sense of permanence. But look how those lintels are pinioned. If you could rotate them, I think the pillar would slide into the ground."

"Wow!" Roger patted the massive stonework, then gazed up at the marble ornaments that jutted against the upper lip of the column. "If I stood on your shoulders, I could reach those."

"And, if you could?"

"I might be able to turn them."

"Fat chance."

"Well," said Roger. "I could try."

Thorvald nodded. "Fine." He made a stirrup from his hands and Roger used it to climb onto Thorvald's shoulders. Roger seized one of the lintels and, grunting from the effort, he twisted it. Creaking and scraping against its support, the lintel turned.

"Unbelievable," said Thorvald.

"I'm stronger than I look."

Thorvald stepped a third around the pillar's circumference, and Roger released the second lintel. At the final latch, Roger had trouble.

"What's wrong?" Thorvald gasped out the words. He bore not only Roger's weight, which was slight, but also the surprisingly intense force of the boy pushing against the ancient marble.

"It's the last one."

"Can you do it?"

Roger grunted as he threw his weight into the task. After half a minute or so, he stopped.

"No. I can't."

Thorvald helped the boy to the ground. "It was a good try." He wriggled his shoulders. "I think I'm getting too old for this kind of work."

"I could do it if I had a hammer."

"Well, we don't have one." Thorvald paused. "But there's a tire iron in the car."

"Hey, great!" Roger ran toward the door. "Come on. Let's get it."

Thorvald chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm. "I don't know. If I'm wrong about this, we'll have damaged an important archeological site for nothing."

Roger watched him with an expectant look--like a dog waiting for a stick to be thrown.

"Okay, okay," said Thorvald. "We'll get the tire iron."

"You know," said Thorvald, as they walked the half mile or so back to the car, "it's going to be a little lonely for me when you go home. I've always been a scientist and never bothered with family." He sighed. "I really should have married and had a family. You make me realize how important that is."

"Why don't you come with us?"

Thorvald chuckled, then patted Roger on the shoulder. "I wish it were that easy."

They walked in silence for a while, and then Roger said, "There's a colony of Earth people on my planet."

"What?" Thorvald froze in surprise for a moment, then lengthened his stride to catch up to the boy. "People from Earth? Really?"

Roger kicked at a flat stone and sent it spinning along their path. "I was taught that when my kind first visited Earth, we had a large study team. The Romans thought we were gods or something." He kicked at another rock. "Then they thought we were too immature to be gods." He kicked at yet one more stone. "They should talk; Roman gods act really silly." Roger looked up at Thorvald. "Anyway, they finally decided we were demons. Our expedition had gotten into so much trouble here that when it left, they had to take a lot of Earth people with them."

"Why?"

"Those people helped us. And if we hadn't taken them with us, they'd have been in really, really deep trouble."

"Yes." Thorvald nodded. "They probably would have been."

"My home isn't so different from Earth." Roger jumped to swing on the branch of a tree. "The Earth people are pretty happy there. In fact, there are two of them on the ship. You'll like them. They speak Latin."

"You could have told me this before."

"Yeah. I guess I should have." Roger lowered his head. He looked contrite. "After the last visit here, my people made it a rule not to interfere."

"So that's why this expedition is a secret," said Thorvald, "and only consists of one person--a kid, with an invisible ship hovering above."

"The ships of our first expedition couldn't hover." Roger dropped to the ground. "Back then, we didn't know how to stop gravitational energy from being converted to kinetic energy."

"How *do* you do that?" Thorvald hoped that finally, after months of asking, he'd learn something about the alien's science.

"I don't know," said Roger. "I'm not a physicist."

"Well, do you know how come your ship isn't visible to us?"

"No. Something to do with bending the light so light coming in on one side is moved so it comes out the other side."

Thorvald sighed. "Look, I *am* a physicist. I've got to know. Are black holes actually wormholes? Is the multi-world interpretation of quantum mechanics valid? Is general relativity correct?"

Roger balled his fists. "I told you before," he said in a quavering voice, "I'm not allowed to talk about that. Even if I knew, I couldn't tell you." Roger looked down at the ground. "I'm sorry."

"Okay, okay," said Thorvald. "It's all right."

At the car, Thorvald took the tire iron from the trunk and then he and Roger headed back.

"You know," said Thorvald, after they'd been walking for a few minutes, "I never quite understood why the codex was so important to you that you'd come all the way back to Earth to find it."

"The main purpose of the trip," said Roger, kicking now at some scraggly undergrowth, "is observation of your culture. But now that Earth is so advanced, we can do that just by watching your television programs. We didn't have to land."

"But you did."

"The other purpose was archeology--archeology of our culture. We wanted to see if there were any surviving artifacts from our first expedition."

Thorvald chuckled. "As an amateur archeologist, I can understand that."

"And we wanted to know if the codex was real or just a legend."

They walked in silence for a while.

"Sometimes," said Thorvald as they came in sight of the temple, "you seem considerably more mature than your appearance would suggest."

"Oh?"

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At the temple, Thorvald noticed that it was not as they'd left it. A slab had fallen from the domed roof and lay, one end buried in the earth, near the entrance door.

"What happened?" Roger circled the fallen block, tracing a finger around its perimeter.

"I'm not sure. Probably with only one support point for the pillar, the center of force shifted off-axis." Thorvald darted into the temple; it seemed dark after his walk in the sunlight. "We've no choice now. We've got to free the last lintel--to take the stress off the roof." As Roger ran in behind him, Thorvald added, "But at the first sound of the building shifting, we get out fast. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

They went to the pillar.

Thorvald handed the tire iron to Roger and then, already sweating from his hike to the car, hefted the boy to his shoulders.

Holding the iron like a baseball bat, Roger took a swing at the lintel. "The building seems okay," he said after the reverberation faded.

"I think it is." Thorvald listened and felt for vibrations in the structure. "Give it a few more whacks."

Roger complied and gradually, accompanied by the low rumble of brickwork grinding against marble, the lintel shifted to its home position. Roger leapt from Thorvald's shoulders to the ground.

A loud crack followed by a moaning sound filled the chamber. Thorvald pushed himself back against the wall. Instinctively, he put a protective arm around the boy.

The pillar slowly, very slowly, sank into the floor. As it did so, the compass figures emitted wailing tones and plumes of ancient dust puffed from their mouths.

"Wow!" said Roger.

"Pneumatics," said Thorvald. "The Romans were known for it."

The pillar receded until its upper lip became flush with the ground. The rumbling stopped and all was silent.

Thorvald listened hard. "It's okay," he said after a few moments. "I think the building's safe." He looked to the center of the temple. It seemed larger now, with no column in the middle. Glancing down, he saw that the top of the pillar outlined a disk of blackness--a hole. The pillar was hollow.

"Wow!" said Roger, rushing forward to peer into the opening

"Careful!" Thorvald approached the hole and switched on his flashlight. Directing the beam into the cylinder, he could make out a series of brass rungs--a narrow ladder built into the inner wall of the pillar. "Wow, indeed!" Then he saw an inscription chiseled in the upper lip of the column:

IANUA QUI NON CLAUDEAT

"The Door That Does Not Close." Thorvald played his light over the two-inch high lettering. "I wonder what it means."

"Maybe it means that we can't raise the pillar again."

"The Romans were a solemn people--at least where inscriptions are concerned. I assume there's a deeper meaning." Thorvald leaned over the rim and scanned the ladder with the flashlight. "Looks sturdy enough." He stepped gingerly onto the top rung. "It's firm. Let's go down."

"This is really exciting," said Roger.

"Yes." Thorvald chuckled. "It really is."

Thorvald saw that the lower rim of the pillar rested on a lip of stone, and the hole extended farther down. A second ladder stretched another ten or so feet to the bottom. In the beam of the flashlight, he could see the hint of a vaulted passageway at the bottom.

"I'll go first," said Thorvald. "This might not be safe."

"What are you talking about?" Roger glanced down into the hole. "I'm in a telepresence vat up in my ship. I'm much more safe than you are."

"Still," said Thorvald, knowing he was being irrational, "I'll go first."

He climbed down and shined his light into the passageway. Then he called for Roger to follow.

Waiting for Roger to descend, Thorvald shivered in the chill of the cave; his sweat-soaked shirt now bathed him in a clammy coolness.

As Roger hopped from the last rung to the floor, Thorvald pressed forward into the passageway. The tunnel went straight for about fifteen feet and terminated at a chamber cut into the bedrock. The grotto was roughly square. Thorvald estimated the dimensions at about seven feet on a side and, as he had to stoop, just barely over six feet in height. Against the back wall, an unadorned shelf had been carved into the stone. On it, covered in dust, sat a rectangular leather container some seven or eight inches on a side, and about an inch and a half thick. It was secured by a thin leather thong attached to a flap.

Thorvald picked up the case and blew off the ancient dust, coughing as he breathed some of it. Carefully, he untied the thong and eased open the flap. "The leather is amazingly supple, considering its age." He pulled out a book. The pages were thick and rough--parchment made from a cured animal hide. He returned the volume to the shelf and examined its container. The leather was tooled with engravings of toga-shrouded deities, and also of something that might very well be a spaceship.

"The codex!" Roger took a few small jumps in obvious excitement. "It must be the codex."

"It must be."

Roger picked up the little book, opened it, and glanced at the text. "Gee. I didn't think I'd need *Latin* software." He passed the codex to Thorvald. "The colonists' Latin sure doesn't look anything like this."

"After eighteen hundred years, I'm not surprised." Thorvald handed Roger the container, then shined the light onto the text: late imperial dialect, but a Latin he could read. "They knew about you guys," he said. "They understood your capabilities."

Standing on tiptoes, Roger watched Thorvald pore over the text. "Could you read it to me?"

"Um," said Thorvald, engrossed in the codex.

"Please."

Thorvald nodded. "'The visitors are not gods.'" He ran a finger lightly over the parchment, translating as he went. "'They are worse than gods. They are a civilization far more advanced than Rome. We are not their equals. We can never be. No longer can we consider ourselves the masters of all peoples. And it is senseless to continue acting as if we were. This knowledge, I have sealed. But once revealed, it can never be called back. The door, once opened, cannot be closed. Because of a sense of history, I feel compelled to chronicle these events. I leave it to whomever finds this document to think well before revealing it. I leave it to your conscience as a Roman. Myself, I can no longer pursue science. To do so would make me feel ...'" Thorvald looked up from the manuscript. "I'm not sure of this word. 'Ridiculous,' I think."

Thorvald rubbed a hand across his eyes. "That's the beginning of it, anyway." Carefully, he closed the ancient book. "The rest is mainly a journal." He aimed his light down the tunnel. "I think we should get out of here. I don't think the flashlight batteries are particularly fresh. And I'm getting cold."

Cradling the codex, Thorvald turned and led the way back to the ladders. "It's sad, really," he said. "When your people arrived, his belief in the inherent superiority of the Romans was crushed." Thorvald looked back over his shoulder. "Can you understand how he felt?"

"Our presence destroyed his world." Roger shook his head, and the weariness of the gesture made him seem ageless--ancient. He stroked the container's leather engravings. "We vowed never to let that happen again."

Thorvald nodded. "That must have been how the Neanderthals felt when the Cro-Magnon arrived." He glanced at the codex. "There was no turning back that knowledge. The door, once opened, could not be closed."

"Can you go back and pursue science?" asked Roger, when they'd reached the base of the ladder.

"What?" Thorvald, taken aback by the abruptness of the question, spun around.

"Can you be a physicist again?" said Roger.

"What a question. Yes. Of course, I can. Physics has been my life--*is* my life. And..." Thorvald paused, then looked away into the darkness. He gave a short bark of a laugh. "Who am I trying to fool?" He sighed. "You know," he said, turning to Roger, "for months now, I've been evading that question." He balled his free hand into a fist, his fingernails digging into his palm. "Yes, I'd like to learn the physics your people know. But the real joy of physics for me is the discovery. Not necessarily *my* discovery, but just being part of the community of scientists that are in the hunt."

Thorvald smiled. "This sounds like gibberish to you, doesn't it?"

"No."

"Actually," said Thorvald, "I'm not sure I could return to science now. At least not for a while, and not with the same passion. Your people know physics that I could never hope to discover. And if I did make discoveries, I'd feel as if I were just reinventing the wheel."

"I *hate* that," said Roger with vehemence. "I'm really sorry."

Even in the dim reflected light from the flashlight, Thorvald could see the deep sadness in Roger's eyes.

"Roger. It's okay."

Thorvald idly opened the codex and played the light over the pages.

"Oh," he said, both from the surprise at what he saw, and as a ploy to divert Roger from his melancholy--and perhaps to escape his own sadness as well. "There's a second section."

Concentrating more on the mechanics of translation than on meaning, Thorvald began reading:

"Section II--The Scientific Knowledge of the ... the Sky-dwellers.

I write not what I understand, for I understand not at all. I write what I've been told. And I write with sadness knowing that once I was a scientist, but now I am merely a scribe.

Subsection I--The Sky-dwellers' Understanding of Time.

Time is a structure that--"

"Stop," shouted Roger. He pushed the flashlight so its beam left the page. "Don't read it! Please, don't read it."

Surprised by the level of the outburst, Thorvald looked up from the codex. "Why? Will this get you in

trouble?"

"Please, don't read it," Roger screamed. "Do you want to be merely a scribe?"

"Okay, okay," said Thorvald, softly. "We'll discuss this outside." He took the case from Roger. "Look," he said as he popped the book into its container, "I'm putting the codex away."

Thorvald patted Roger on the shoulder, then urged him to start climbing the lower ladder. After tucking the codex under his shirt, Thorvald followed.

About halfway up, Thorvald heard a rumble like distant thunder. Odd, he thought, because the sky had been cloudless. Then he heard the roar of heavy rocks in motion.

"Jump down!" Thorvald shouted. "Quickly!"

Thorvald sprang off the ladder but fell as he landed. Roger tumbled down on top of him.

Looking up, Thorvald saw the blurred shape of a huge chunk of masonry hurtling through the hollow pillar toward him. He tried to push Roger free and squirm out of the path, but there was no time. He had barely time to close his eyes before the stone struck.

Roger shrieked.

Thorvald felt an instant of shame, knowing that Roger had taken the brunt of the hit. But then, as the jagged piece of brickwork sheared across his own body, he screamed, his cry mixing with Roger's as the huge stone rumbled to rest against the wall of the passageway.

Thorvald fought to keep from passing out from the agony; he was all too aware of his skin being ripped from his flesh. Eyes closed and gritting his teeth, he held his breath as the searing pain subsided and was replaced by a tingling numbness. Forcing open his eyes, he saw the flashlight casting a wedge of yellow-white brightness against the rough, stone floor. He reached for it and, as his arm intersected the beam, saw that he was dripping blood.

With a grunt, he forced himself to a sitting position and, hearing a moan, he grasped the flashlight and examined Roger in its light. He gasped as he saw that Roger's chest was no longer symmetric; ribs on one side were snapped, and one protruded through the skin.

"Roger," said Thorvald, more loudly than he'd intended. The sound of his voice reverberated in the otherwise silent passageway.

Roger did not respond.

Thorvald bent in to listen for a heartbeat and the codex fell from his shirt, just missing hitting the boy. Thorvald ignored it. He felt an instant of relief as he saw the rise and fall of breathing--but that breathing was exceedingly shallow. And there was blood. Not much, though. And that was good, since Thorvald couldn't stanch it without putting pressure on the boy's chest.

"Roger," he said again, aware of the pleading tone in his voice. "Can you hear me?"

Roger opened his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

"I'll go and get help." Thorvald lifted the boy's head and slid the codex under as a pillow. "I hate to leave, but I don't think I can safely move you."

"I think I'm dying." Roger spoke in whispered gasps.

"No. Don't say that. Hold on."

Roger gave an unconvincing smile. "Just the body. Not really me." He lifted his head, but then let it fall back. "But it hurts so much."

"Can't you disconnect?"

Roger didn't answer for a moment, and then said, "I don't want to leave you."

Thorvald bent and kissed the boy on the forehead, then quickly drew back, uncomfortable with his uncharacteristic display of emotion; he'd always distrusted emotion.

"What about you?" said Roger, weakly. "Shine the light."

"Just lacerations, I think." Thorvald examined his body with the flashlight. "My god! A lot of lacerations." He realized he'd been in shock, but now a renewed pain took its place. He struggled to keep his voice from showing it. "And it seems I'm leaking more than I'd like--and from more places than I could bandage with a shirt."

"You'd better go for help," whispered Roger. "You could die from loss of blood." He took a few labored breaths. "It would take hours before the ship could get help to us. So go."

"Yes," said Thorvald, forcing himself to clarity. "I'll get help." He struggled to his feet and, though shaky, he found he could walk.

At the base of the lower ladder, he looked up through the hollow pillar and saw sunlight. But in that light, he saw that something blocked much of the hole. Even so, there was nothing to do except climb.

He started up. Every half dozen or so rungs, he rested, leaning his back against the rear of the cylinder. At length he reached the top and, with feet braced on a rung and his back pressed to the rear wall, he pushed against the obstruction--a massive stone slab. He groaned from exertion and pain as he forced his shoulder upward, but the slab would not budge. Then, dizzy and exhausted, he abandoned the effort and looked longingly at the hole. Although Roger might have been able to squirm through, Thorvald knew there was no way he himself could.

He called through the opening for help, but knew it was hopeless--the temple lay in the middle of nowhere. The chances of anyone hearing his shouts were all but nil.

After a few minutes of shouting and then listening for a response, Thorvald gave up and climbed down.

He dropped to the ground next to Roger. "How are you holding up?" he said with effort.

"What's wrong?"

"We'll have to wait for your friends," said Thorvald. "There's a stone blocking the hole."

"All of it?" whispered Roger.

"What?" Thorvald wondered why Roger wanted to know, but felt glad that the boy was able to talk. "No. You'd be able to fit, but not me." He tried to sound unconcerned but, in truth, he was afraid for both their lives--he was losing a lot of blood.

"You've got to get out," said Roger.

"I can't."

"Maybe you can." Roger seemed to be breathing and speaking more easily now. "My body is organic--except for the brain-case. That's where the telepresence module is."

Thorvald felt distinctly uncomfortable with the description of Roger as just a piece of hardware. "You don't have to talk about this."

"No, listen." Roger lifted his head a few inches, then let it thud back down. "We didn't want any Earth people to know about this, so when this body dies, we can command the brain case to explode--to eliminate all traces of electronics."

"Roger, no. We can talk about this some other time."

"Please listen to me." Roger took a few quick breaths. "So if you wedge my head into the pillar opening, and then take cover down here, I'll trigger the explosion."

"I couldn't do that."

"You have to try," said Roger. "I'm not that heavy."

"No, I mean, it's not right."

Roger started a laugh that ended in a cough. "I thought you were a scientist. Be rational. Do it."

"No."

"You've got to," whispered Roger.

"No!" The word echoed through the underground complex. "I told you, I'm not doing it."

Roger turned his head away.

"What's the matter?" said Thorvald.

"You've never shouted at me before."

"I'm sorry." Thorvald sighed. "I *am* worried about losing blood." He stood. "All right. But I don't like it."

He lifted Roger in his arms and carried him toward the base of the ladder. With Roger's head against his shoulder and cheek, Thorvald felt a growing tide of what he assumed was parental affection. He stopped and turned away from the pit. "I can't do this." He wanted to hold the boy tight, but resisted for fear of doing injury. "I ... I love you, Roger. You may be an alien, but to me, you're the son I've never had. I just can't do it. We'll have to wait for your people."

Roger began to cry and the sound both surprised and anguished Thorvald; he'd never heard Roger cry and hadn't even known he was capable of it.

"What about me?" said Roger through labored sobs. "I don't want you to die. I couldn't stand that. I'm not a machine. I have feelings, too."

Thorvald felt his own eyes grow moist. "All right," he said, softly, turning and walking once more toward the ladder.

He began to climb and, resting every two rungs, eventually reached the top. He thought briefly about trying again to force the slab, but realized it was hopeless.

"We're at the top now," he whispered.

"I know," said Roger. "Do it."

Thorvald shook his head. "It's hard."

"Please," said Roger, through shallow coughs. "The telepresence is very faithful. This hurts a lot. But I won't disconnect until you do it."

Thorvald blew out a long breath. "Okay." Gently, he pushed Roger upward, until the boy's head disappeared into the opening. Then, using his belt, he tied Roger to a rung.

"Good-bye," whispered Thorvald, squeezing Roger's hand. He stroked the boy's hair, then climbed down the ladder.

Thorvald skirted the jagged slab and absently stooped to pick up the codex. Holding it gently, like an infant, he carried it back along the passageway.

To divert his thoughts, he considered reading it, but chose not to. It didn't seem fitting. Besides, once read, that door would never again close. Roger was right. He'd be merely a scribe. *Roger. What have I done?*

Continuing on to the far end of the grotto, he placed the codex back on its shelf and, while staring at the space ship engraving on the leather case, he waited.

The explosion came as a loud, low-pitched thud followed by a rain of debris, some of which sounded soft. Thorvald switched off his flashlight.

In the dark, he made his way to the ladders and looked up. Sunlight poured in through a ragged hole--and the hole looked big enough. Thorvald took a deep breath and wished he could hold it until he'd reached the top. Then, concentrating on the brightness from the opening and letting the sunlight dim his eyes to the horror on the walls, he began to climb.

Though not a religious man, nor even a believer, he nonetheless prayed that he'd be able to erase all memory of the climb ahead. When he got to a point about four feet down from the opening, he closed his eyes; he had to. But he couldn't block out the stench or the sticky feel of the rungs beneath his hands.

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Thorvald noticed first the crisp smell of clean sheets, and then the sound of someone calling his name. He forced open his eyes, then closed them again as stark, bright hospital lights flooded his vision. But finally, at the insistent calling of his name in a strange accent, he eased his eyes open.

"Professor Carpenter." The words, heavy with Romanian overtones, came from a woman in white. "How are you feeling?"

He moved to sit up but abandoned the idea as a stab of pain pierced his abdomen and left shoulder. With the pain came the memory of the subterranean passages beneath the temple. And with the memory came a profound sense of loss--an emptiness that fit with the sterile whiteness of the hospital room. He turned his head away, gazing blankly at the window through which he could only see a leaden-gray overcast sky.

"Perhaps," said the nurse as she pulled the bed covers up around his shoulders, "we should wait another day before allowing your son to see you."

"What?" Despite the pain, Thorvald forced himself to a sitting position, again rumpling the bedcovers. He saw that his left arm and torso were covered in bandages. "Please say that again." He suspected her accent had deceived him.

"He seems to be a very nice boy." The nurse smiled. "You should be proud. He's been waiting for a very long time."

"Send him in," said Thorvald in a voice filled with confusion.

"I'm not sure you're quite ready to--"

"Please."

The nurse nodded and left the room.

Thorvald locked his eyes shut and tried to fill the gaps in his memory. He opened them again when he heard the click of the door latch and footsteps.

"Your son, Professor." The nurse stepped aside, revealing the visitor.

"Roger!" Thorvald jerked forward, then, wincing at the pain of sudden movement, froze. "But ... But, you were...."

Roger sprang to the bedside. He wore the same clothes as when he'd first arrived on Earth.

"Hi, Dad."

"Roger?" Thorvald shook his head to clear his mind. "A spare?"

"Of course."

"Are you really Roger--my Roger?"

"Yes." Roger chuckled. "Don't you recognize me?"

Thorvald reached out his right arm, the one not covered in bandages. He pulled the boy to him and tousled his hair.

The nurse bustled to the door. "I'll leave you two alone." She left the little hospital room and closed the door behind her.

Thorvald wrinkled his nose. "Dad?"

"The only way they'd let me in to see you."

"I don't remember getting here."

"You made it to the car and apparently passed out. Someone found you and drove you to the hospital. The car's in the hospital parking lot." He wiped his hands on his shorts. "But boy, that temple is really a mess. I almost got stuck down there when I went back for the codex."

"You went back?" said Thorvald. "Alone? That was very dangerous."

Roger looked confused.

"All right, all right, maybe it wasn't dangerous. Not for you." He patted the boy's knee. "Roger. I'm

thrilled that you've come."

Roger lowered his head. "Our ship is preparing to leave."

Thorvald smiled, softly, trying to cover his sense of loss. Perhaps fate had done him no favor in bringing Roger back for a brief visit. For he knew the emptiness he'd felt before was just a foretaste of the long emptiness to come. He stared at Roger, trying to lock the boy's very essence into his memory. "I'll miss you very much."

Roger stood. "Come with us?"

"I'd like to," said Thorvald, "but..." He thought about it and suddenly realized there *was* no "but." Having lost his passion for science, there was really nothing left for him. Maybe he should consider the offer.

"Don't you have to ask an adult?"

Roger pawed the ground with the tip of his shoe. "Actually," he said, "I *am* an adult."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm the expedition's exosociologist, junior grade."

"Exosociologist." Thorvald struggled to catch up.

"Junior grade," said Roger. "You're very senior to me."

"You're an adult," said Thorvald, his eyes wide, "and have been all this time?"

"Well." Roger shrugged. "Yes."

"But you told me you were a kid."

"I don't think I did, exactly."

"Your appearance implied it."

"Maybe, but I didn't say it."

"That's a child's rationale." Thorvald threw a glance at the ceiling. "What am I saying?"

Roger looked hurt--like a kid about to cry. Thorvald didn't know whether to laugh or to feel betrayed.

"Why can't you still like me?" said Roger. "Is it because Earth males can only love adults if they're women?" He wrinkled his nose, a mannerism he'd picked up from Thorvald. "No. That can't be it. You told me you love cats and dogs." He looked forlornly down at his knees. "Then what's the difference?"

Thorvald softened. "I still like you." He wondered why Roger still talked like a child, but chalked it up to a limited vocabulary. Or maybe it was just the fact that Roger was an explorer; everything on Earth must seem new and exciting. Then another thought struck him. "But," he said, "but I hugged you--even kissed you."

"So?"

"Adult males do not go around hugging and kissing other adult males."

"Oh." Roger wrinkled his nose. "Well, what if I were a woman?"

"Well, that would be different, of course. Still inappropriate, probably but...." Thorvald stopped for a moment. "Are you?"

Roger hopped up and sat on the foot of Thorvald's bed. "Am I what?"

"A woman."

"The question doesn't mean anything. Our anatomies are very different from yours." Roger wiggled his fingers and stared at them as if he'd never quite gotten used to them. "And you Earth mammals have a very interesting method of reproduction. Once, I asked a few of the Earth colonists if I could watch. They said no."

Despite himself, Thorvald smiled. "I can well imagine." He rubbed a hand over his forehead and then blew out a breath. "Frankly, you still seem to act like a kid."

"When we first came here," said Roger, "we analyzed your species. And we found that we behave very much like your teenagers or your scientists. We're a very enthusiastic people." He looked at Thorvald with innocent eyes. "So it feels right to me that you treat me as if I were an Earthling kid."

"I can't now." Thorvald let his head sink back onto the pillow. "It's like the door that does not close."

"But how do you really know I'm *not* the boy you call Roger?"

Thorvald lifted his head and stared. "You told me."

"Pretend I didn't." Roger squinted. It looked as if he was thinking hard. "If you really want to," he said, "you can close that door again." Then he bit his lip. "You didn't read it, did you?"

"The codex?" Thorvald shook his head.

"Good." Roger looked thoughtful. "Anyway, I shouldn't have made a big scene back there. That's ancient science. A lot of it is probably wrong."

Thorvald smiled. "I think I'd like your world. And I'd learn one hell of a lot of physics there."

For an instant, he had a twinge of conscience about using strong language in front of a child. He resisted the urge to slap himself.

"Then come with us," said Roger. "As for theoretical physics, there's lots and lots of stuff to discover. You could be in on the hunt. Please come."

Thorvald thought deeply about it--as if he were evaluating a new theory. "You know..." he said after a half minute or so. "You know, I think I will."

"Great." Roger laughed--the bell-like laugh of a delighted child. "I really think you'll have fun."

Thorvald chuckled. He reached out a hand, hesitated, then patted Roger on a knee. "Yes," he said, "I really think I will."

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