

## Republic by Robert Onopa

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You know of course why we left, and what crews like ours were looking for. I said, *why we left*. I meant, of course, *why we had to leave*. Those years before *The Copernicus* began its passage seem like a dream to me now, the home world a green idyll, the night sky all white moon, the sunrise off the sea on the day we launched oranges and reds, a wild mango sky. Northward the mosquito coast shimmered silver in the rising sun.

I'm sorry. I'm already running on. I'm old now, three times old if you count cryo sleep. There's so much on my mind.

What I'm trying to say is, that day from docking orbit you could see the lower atmosphere smoldering with the first city fires. All through our training years we'd seen the slow, sad, entropic fall of things, rubble where there'd been buildings, a rabble and drum fires on streets where there'd been traffic and order. Less than a year after docking, we left the home system. We never saw what happened, never saw those images you've shown us now on the screen. They'll take some time to absorb.

I'll tell our story as concisely as I can. Captain Hess is dead. I don't know how much time we have to talk--we never expected to be in communication again, never really expected to make it back. I'm the linguist who was sent with the mission. You have to hear about what we've seen. There is another world.

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Arcturus Wormhole--56 on the Mauna Kea grid--spun us out in a region so dense with electromagnetic noise that we worried for our instruments. Our primary assignment was to plot the transit of the wormhole across a navigable sun, so we buried ourselves in the work until it was done. Only then did we really look around.

I've ported over all the recon data. You can judge for yourself. You can gauge the planetary masses, the orbits, the size of the star. The system is so like ours that we thought that, after sixty years of travel, we had arrived where we had begun. Our mission scientists were all either nav team or extraction geologists, like Captain Hess. After two days, *Copernicus's* SciCom decided the objects were mirror worlds, sets of shadow planets, something like that. Hess shrugged and dropped the question. An extraction geologist doesn't care where the minerals come from.

The fourth planet classified as tropical/marine. Its atmosphere? See the data stream, the lower atomic weights? You can imagine our excitement, our exhilaration, when that gas spectrometry came in. It's one of the things we--the first generation crews--were sent out to find. Tropical/marine with breathable atmosphere was the great good place, the golden fleece *The Copernicus* was looking for. Then X-ray spectrometry described parallel chemical and biological processes with Earth.

Yes, *biological*. Now look at the EXO screen.

An intelligent race.

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Geophysics had sent ahead an unmanned orbiter to collect data, and when we saw that EXO screen, we realized that a series of rectilinear surface features was a chain of settlements. Two hundred clicks apart,

each maybe ten clicks across. Nav was happy, we'd gotten good data on the transit, now planetary geophysics was ringing all its bells. Before we knew it, close probes produced the miracle of a language we could deal with. It was so much more than we'd expected.

I have to tell you right off that it was too much for our EXO to deal with, too much for the whole default EXO program to deal with. The original EXO had a stroke and died in cryo, so they gave the job to Lieutenant Grace, the backup shuttle pilot. Like I say, all the rest of our scientists were nav or geo; they would have had even less idea what to do.

Anyway, from orbit we could see that the settlements were socially complex but technologically primitive. Wheel, metals, sanitation, all of it on first glance preelectrical, and first glance had most of it right, except for some process through which they charged their weapons. But they're not savages. They have art, abstract processes.

And that language. From the first, the hard vowels, those inflections ... I told myself that since the phonemes were produced by similar cranial structures, the language had to sound that way. But there was the echo of something else, something structural. Have you ever heard of Linear B?

They are very much like us, more like us in some ways than ourselves, Grace liked to say. Not that you would mistake them for human, as you can see from the screen. Thin as rails, articulated trunks. But that fabric that group is swaddled in? All that geometrical body ornamentation?

Initially nav put *The Copernicus* in a parking orbit and we deliberated. Imagine rebreathing your own gasses for sixty years, the three hundred of us squeezed together, recycling fluids, solid wastes. The whole crew was fixated on the oxygen spike in the atmosphere. Adamowski, our Flight Surgeon, could see what was coming. Eventually, he wanted protocols the rest of us couldn't deliver. When Hess organized the first shuttle down, he had already locked himself in quarantine.

By then the marines were on high alert. I didn't like the run-up, the predation vids they immersed themselves in. I remember Sergeant Vrask hunched in her cubicle, submerged in the glow of a bloody hologame, her breath short and damp. It's true there was a lot of warlike activity on the surface. It's true that within hours of landing we saw spilled blood. Rust red, if you please. But they are civilized beings. I'm sure of it. It's in the language.

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I was with the first downshuttle. We slid through pink cumulus towers so beautiful that some of us wept. We landed ten clicks from a settlement, on a grassy plain away from dwellings--the far end of a farm, it turned out.

Perhaps they'd seen us in low orbit. At any rate, we were greeted--they touched their hands to their heads, and bowed, and kept back, then knelt, and touched their hands to their heads and bowed. That's when we saw those geometric patterns for the first time, in their body art, in their fabrics, in their personal effects.

There we stood in our bulky white suits. Our EXO--Lieutenant Grace--was waving through a series of contact gestures programmed by some bloody semioticist back on Earth a century before. Nobody knew what he was doing, not even Grace. You could see him tracking the manual on his helmet monitor. We were all a bit giddy, even Vrask. Captain Hess started laughing. While that was going on, Mercer, the chief scientist, knelt beside an alien, and the two of them started sorting out words with gestures and whispers--ship, sky, rock, hand. You could see Grace's frustration. The Arcturus probes hadn't even hinted at life. Hess had never given him time to train.

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Eventually, a larger group marched up from the settlement, marched in order, its hierarchy transparent. The dozen aliens who had been with us--local farmers, it turned out--touched their foreheads to the soil and scattered. The chiefs among the newcomers were wrapped in red and silver capes, the capes so intricately folded they brought to mind origami. There was also a language in the folds, a hieratic sequence, the same sequence that was conjugated in the rank words they used, a series of inflected long vowels, shifting from a to e, so half the time you thought they were chanting. A slow-moving elder whose cape was the most elaborate was the head of them all. The society was at least as hierarchical as ours--it was in the way they walked, in the way they stood, it was in their silver eyes. The language mirrored it all.

A group of ceremonial guards performed a whirling dance, slicing the air with those long rods, and then they pushed a deer-like animal into a circle. The rods functioned as weapons--they were javelins, swords, Kendo *shinai*, all in one. They slaughtered the animal. Our first sight of blood. It was a ritual act, so we tried not to draw conclusions. Still, I don't think we were prepared for the violence or for the sound of the animal's cry. As it died it sounded human.

Anyway, the rods. Their grips were so finely worked with that intricate geometry they seemed like jewelry, though what they were were personalized weapons. The aliens always had theirs at hand, used them in ceremonies, even charged them electrically in a way we never quite understood.

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Hess kept his distance. The marines made the first real contact, even while they respected basic quarantine. I mean they were the first to make any sort of connection, a kind of bonding. After a day we sent the bulky EVA suits back up orbit and traded them for hermetic jumps and light breathing helmets. The aliens were always nearby, and the marines were obsessed with them from the first deer. The marines showed up each dusk when the ritual animal was released. They tracked its run, they tracked the aliens' every move in pursuit, focused on the white knives with the same rapture you saw reflected in their eyes in the hologames. In just a day a camaraderie developed between them and the hunters, and they gestured in admiration narrating how the deer was brought down. They compared weapons, handled the rods as best they could while keeping quarantine with the breathing helmets and jumps. You could see them awkwardly stepping and swinging through the basic moves, as if they were learning a dance, a physical language.

After three days--*The Copernicus* in orbit, the lander and the cargo sled shuttling down to a base they'd laid out for us, quarantine holding--we were invited into the city. At midday we were led in a procession through narrow streets and stone buildings and across squat bridges over a series of canals and waterworks that ringed the city center. We finally reached an eight-sided plaza acres across at the river, at a fortified stone bank. A temple dominated the land side. We'd seen the river from orbit. It was so wide that from where we stood we couldn't see its opposite bank. The site had been developed with defense in mind: the temple was protected by the rainbow of canals at its back, and by the fortified stone bank along the river at its front.

We were so caught up in the alien architecture, the strange symbols, the high narrow doors, that most of us missed the obvious, missed what was happening with Hess, what *had been* happening with Hess. From the first the aliens had been deferential to him in the extreme; I wondered if I was misreading language from an unfamiliar body. But that afternoon, when we entered the city, the children ran ahead and paved the street with broad leaves for Hess to walk on. Several thousand aliens came out of their dwellings and chanted as he passed. They kept their distance and bowed, touched their foreheads to the soil.

The reality only became clear to me as I watched them bestow a cape on Hess's shoulders in the eight-sided plaza. They wouldn't look directly into his eyes. The cape was blue and gold, but it otherwise

matched the folds of a cape on a statue to one side of the temple door.

They had decided that Hess was something like a god.

The tall alien we had seen earlier made a speech from the foot of the central stairs of the temple, which the crew asked me to translate, so I made my guesses and said welcome, god from the sky. Hess still didn't quite get it. He asked me, *How much longer?* I told him he had to respond, and he just looked at me, annoyed and confused. It was an awkward moment.

That's when Grace stepped forward, reached around behind his neck and pulled off his breathing helmet.

So he was the one who broke our promise to Adamowski. Grace waved his arms in a wide circle, raised them to the sky and took a deep breath. The rest of us were transfixed at the breaking of quarantine.

Before anybody could stop him Grace stepped out of his jumps and started chanting a greeting he'd composed. You could tell he'd poured himself into it, thought it out as best he could, and rehearsed. He had their vocal range, for what it was worth, and his hand movements were a semiotic catalogue of compliance and interest. He knew Hess didn't quite get what was going on. Grace was trying to negotiate contact.

At what turned into the end of his performance, he touched the tall alien in the yellow and red cape, just touched him. Understand that that same alien had put his hands on Grace before he'd pulled his helmet off. He'd touched his suit, his faceplate, his gloved hand.

But when Grace touched him, the ceremonial guard surged forward. Grace was challenged with a weapon, one of those rods, but this one crackled with energy. Grace fell back with a burn on his shoulder.

The tall alien apparently was something like a god, too.

Grace pushed himself up, bent with pain. In slow motion, head lowered, hands open, he moved through a vocabulary of conciliatory body language. I thought he might be killed until Hess stepped forward. Hess had this flat, firm voice, and he gave a long speech about misunderstanding protocol as if he was lecturing to lab assistants. His confidence was a wonder--he still didn't know what was going on but to the aliens, anyway, he acted like a god. That's why we survived. We were all of us anxious from the bloody show we'd been seeing with the deer. That day it seemed like every hour you could hear one cry.

In the meantime, Vrask had moved to one side and slipped out of her helmet too, to protect Grace, I guess. You could hear her breathing hard. When she peeled off her jumps she was strapped with weapons, and the weapons distracted the ceremonial guard while Hess was speaking. By then Vrask's troops were shedding helmets and suits, too. And then when I looked, of all things, Vrask begins showing an alien her weapon, turning it in her hands, clearing its chamber, offering its stock to an alien elder. In a blink, the aliens visibly relaxed, and the marines were smiling, and they were comparing weapons with the aliens again, now the other way around. The tension dissolved between them, or maybe it was never there for the leaders to exploit. That's why I used the word "bonding."

Captain Hess read into the log that we "shook it off" once we were all of us out of our suits. The air smelled sharp and fresh, like cut grass--it was wonderful to take off that breathing helmet. But I didn't know what to think.

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The next day they presented me with the Codexes I've holocopied in the Appendix.

I've been working on them ever since. There are structural echoes of an ancient script, one of our protolanguages ... I could be wrong. Remember that Linear B I mentioned? There were so many echoes it seemed to me hallucinatory, like living out a parable or a dream. How to account for it? Earlier contact? Coincidence?

*Copernicus*/SciCom was no help. When they could be dragged away from either nav data or mineral samples they only shrugged. It wasn't clear if the way Hess was treated rubbed off on the rest of us. I've never really been able to translate the language--there's another level of coding in it, I'm certain. There was a lot of confusion that week. I suppose there still is.

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Ten days after we had first touched down, the aliens declared a citywide holiday in our honor. Their voices naturally produced an overtone, so their singing was particularly alien, aggressive and sad at once. We sat with them, tried their words, handled their tools, played with their pets. They taught our marines an exercise with the rods, then challenged them to ritual sports. Aside from the rods, they threw copper-like stars with sharpened points well enough to bring down a deer at thirty meters. Vrask and her people showed off their own skills, hand to hand stuff, target work with those compound crossbows they train with. The aliens loved the handheld hologames. They loved them. The remains of any shadow seemed to lift and we stopped thinking about the business with Grace. By then most of the crew got a turn downplanet, even the hydroponics team. In the end there was a dance. Those tubes are musical instruments, that moving line a dance. Can you see how it replicates the figure on the elder's cape? To tell you the truth, it felt wonderful to move in a natural gravity. Just being alive seemed a wonder.

I suppose SciCom had it right. The aliens thought of us as emissaries of one of their sky gods, his name all long vowels. The god, in person, they figured was Hess. Hess just grinned and took mineral samples. He ate the food. He was afraid of nothing. The only one who never broke quarantine was Adamowski. For all those weeks when the rest of us downplanet were feasting and basking in our kinship with a god, he was up there, locked in containment.

Grace was desperate to redeem himself. That's why he took them for trips in the cargo sled. That's why he showed them how the shuttle worked, how you could run anything, really, with just a keypad controller from the hologames and the right codes.

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I'll try to stick to the main things, to what happened. It's just that certain details seem preternaturally clear now--the human cry of the deer, the aliens' four-fingered hands, strong enough to crush a man's windpipe, their children's wooden toys, which seemed so human. Hess showed me a mineral once that changed color when he shattered it, exposed it to atmosphere, rainbow sand running through his fingers.

And I remember those pink clouds and the blue of the sky. Have you ever seen a robin's egg? When I looked up I squinted and I thought I saw heaven. But some nights I would look up and see only strange stars in alien constellations and I would feel lost beyond any recovering.

Have I told you what they did with the blood? About the ritual at the cave? To mark the end of their training, their ceremonial guards are taken, blindfolded, at night, to the scene of a fresh battle at the edge of their territory. That's how the planet's organized--one self-sufficient city against the next, shifting alliances, constant low-level war on their perimeters. In torchlight, the initiates kneel, cup their hand against a fresh wound. Then they are told to bring their hands to their mouth and drink the blood.

Did I tell you our marines were invited along? That some of the marines drank the blood as well? Some of them had reactions, but the others ... I think it kept them from being sick later. I believe they were being recruited. You know some of them stayed. The fresh battle to which they'd gone was a smoldering

fire. The planet was already destabilizing, the news of our arrival spreading like the rosy light of the sun. And now we were part of it, the marines, their weapons, even Grace was part of it, with the business in the cave.

That's where he was killed, three days after the first blood ceremony.

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We were never really sure who killed Grace. Captain Hess withdrew all but a skeleton crew up to *The Copernicus*. We reviewed our data, took inventory of our samples--geologists, planetary engineers, people like me. It was possible that Grace could have been killed by one of our own. He'd been strangled. Hess decided that we should ship back home.

We held a service for Grace and a ritual farewell with the aliens, who gave us no answers about Grace. We were happy enough to leave.

We hit our mark to the wormhole, initiated cryo sequence, and out of nowhere, our primary engine fell apart on us. The core blew out our water, blew out a side of tanks. You know how little water we carry, how we just loop it around. Well, if you lose half your holding tanks, you have a problem.

We had to return to the surface of the fourth planet to resupply. We jury rigged the cargo sled with a backup tank from hydroponics and used the lander for logistics.

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There was no welcoming committee this time. Even the farmers kept their distance.

We established a site beside a lake three clicks from our original base. There was trouble. First tools started to go missing, then materials, starting with pipe at the shoreline. Gloves, boots, then a rebreather. When Hess complained, one of the silver-and-red-caped elders gave him a sharp lecture I'd finally gotten familiar enough with the language to translate: we were taking something of theirs, their water. They had the right to take something in return.

I told you the planet was tropical/marine. It was awash. Still, in their language, the word for water was the word for life.

As the crew was squaring away the sled after topping off, the aliens decoupled the tank from the cargo sled's cab, the cab with the power unit, and three of them took the cab and lurched off across the lake.

Hess had been uporbit. He was livid. He dressed in his ceremonial blues and went down with the marines in full gear. The farmers led him up the shoreline on a false trail for three hours--it was a total waste of time, they'd convinced him to go on foot, it had turned hot, and he was tinder. He marched the squad through the stone buildings and into the square between the temple and the fortified bank, followed by a crowd. He made for the residence beside the temple.

His idea was to take an alien as hostage for the cargo sled's cab.

But the instant Captain Hess raised his arm to seize the elder, a guard ghosted up from behind and made a sharp, sideways move with his rod that made Hess's head snap forward. Weapons went off.... It was a real mess.

We took on the rest of the water under fire. Seven marines deserted, hooked up with the aliens who had hijacked the cab. We had it in mind to forcibly extract them but we had to leave when we realized that weapons had been pilfered along with the cab and that they were being trained on *The Copernicus*.

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We set course for home.

Adamowski had been right all along. Downplanet crew started turning up sick immediately. Adamowski guessed disease was wiping out the aliens, too. Even before we left parking orbit, the great elder was dead, though with the sled's weapons and the deserted marines for a time his group must have ruled the planet.

We saw the evidence that the marines and weapons had been a tipping point on our way out of the system; in the year it took us, we could see a transformation in the pattern of settlements, a consolidation, then what might have been a collapse.

Most of the crew died in that year before reinsertion.

If our journey out seems a dream, our journey back, those years on *The Copernicus*, seem dark sleep itself, dreamless sleep, the black night of cryo and faint stars as we crawled through the wormhole.

Adamowski died tending to the sick. That's why there are only eighteen of us left, that's why there are so few survivors listed on the manifest.

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It was a pleasure to talk with you yesterday. You're breaking up today as well. Of course it's a shame to have come so close, only to be made so certain that we could never land. You will forgive my attack of nostalgia--*nostos*, from the Greek, for home; *algia*, also from the Greek, for pain. Pain for home. We understand that there's no choice but for you to apply a strict quarantine. We understand the potential for severe measures if we approach. You will appreciate the irony. We came back willing to make do with what might be left, and we were worried that it might not be safe to land. Now that Earth is restored, a garden where there had been a smoldering wasteland, Earth has become the very place we can never land. Once we thought we were the lucky ones.

When we signed on with *The Copernicus*, we thought the trip would be the adventure of our lives. Now we know the trip *was* our lives.

*Is* our lives.

That's why the eighteen of us are turning *The Copernicus* back.

We've reinstalled and updated the original program. We still have plenty of reactor time to power the drive. We want to see those pink clouds again. We want to die off the ship. We're curious about what happened to Vrask and the six other marines. They didn't get sick, as maybe you've realized, because they're the ones who went through the alien initiation, they're the ones who drank the blood.

Have you also asked yourself why the eighteen of us survived? Why if all the other members of the crew died of disease, why we're still alive? I'm guessing that you have.

Yes, to be perfectly frank, yes, all eighteen of us drank the blood as well. I apologize for not telling you in the first place. We brought alien blood to our lips just after Grace had been killed. The communion transformed us. When we were forced to go back for the water, when the fighting started, when the rods began humming and they pulled the white knives from their sheathes, we could kill with an energy and indifference none of us had ever felt before. Maybe we're a little less human for that, but it kept us alive, you know, seemed like a vaccine against death itself. Maybe it means we belong to the place. And so we'll go back. There are still things hidden in the language to me and I'm curious to understand just what we've done.