

## Covenant

by Lavie Tidhar

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*“And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Giants, which come of the Nephilim: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”*

In the Desert, 13:33

Ya’el had been gone for the length of nearly fifteen cigarettes and Miriam was getting worried. No—it was fifteen cigarettes now, exactly. Her breathing had been getting short for the past few hours, and she felt the familiar feeling of helplessness that always combined with that strange feeling of calm when blood flowed slower. With shaking hands—she had really left it too long again—she adjusted the yarmulke on her bald head, feeling the little beast resist as it moved. The tingling sensation in her scalp was not a good thing; it meant the yarmulke was getting hungry, was beginning to sink feelers deeper into her head.

As always when she had been gone too long without smoking, hallucinations started to occlude her vision; impossibly tall creatures with countenances of pure light seemed to walk around her, through her, passing with an inhuman grace through shining streets that had never existed, through broad avenues and past gigantic buildings that never were.

She abandoned the struggle with the yarmulke and with careful, slow movements unwrapped the small wooden box and took out a cigarette. With a feeling of distaste she had never been able to be rid of, she put the grey, organic tube in her mouth and lit it, throwing the match on the sand as soon as the flame touched the fungal material.

Where was Ya’el?

The smoke poured into her body; in an instant, the alien feeling at the top of her head disappeared and her breath returned. She sucked on the cigarette, the way she had been taught since childhood at the cheder, trying to get as much of the smoke in as possible with each breath. The visions slowly receded.

It was her sixteenth now since Ya'el had gone. Almost a week of planetary rotation, and really she should have been smoking more. She had to stop fighting it.

She finished the cigarette down to the stub. Only after making sure there was nothing left in it, nothing at all, did she throw it on the sand, where it joined the burnt match in a single testament to human life. The desert air calmed her, and she scanned the horizon with hooded eyes, unable to stop the feeling of exhilaration that momentarily overcame her, as it did after each hit of the fungus.

As long as she kept smoking, she would live.

She looked back to where the city of New Jerusalem squatted uncomfortably in the oasis, and then forward again at the never-ending expanse of the desert. Migdal lay over seven cigarettes in that direction, if you walked. But Ya'el had a vehicle, and knew the terrain, and had done that journey before. She should have been back by now.

Miriam wished they didn't have that fight before Ya'el left. It made her absence all the more painful, and in her dreams, Miriam was forced to re-enact that fight again and again, with the smoke-induced vividness she had found offensive since childhood.

It was only a silly argument; they had been through it enough times before, but this time Ya'el was particularly upset, and when she called Miriam an atheist bitch and slammed the door as she rushed outside, Miriam was left unable to speak, unsure how this particular argument could have gone so wrong.

They were sitting together at Miriam's apartment in the Old Quarter, built, as tradition demanded it, of stone; built when the Tikvah first arrived on the planet and when the machines still worked. When cutting stones from the remote quarries of newly-named Har Even—Mountain of Stone—was still possible. That, at least—as Ya'el was fond of arguing—was the prevailing theory. No one really knew when the city was built; no one really knew why the machines had died.

They had just finished making love; Ya'el was smoking a cigarette (her own

body time had always been much faster than Miriam's) and they watched the people below as they made their way through the streets. The sun was setting behind the temple, and the movement of people had a purpose in it, a singular direction. They looked the same, from above, men and women and children all wearing the grey, shapeless yarmulkes.

"I don't see how you can say that," Ya'el said. Smoke covered her face like a grey mask. "I just don't understand how you can come up with those things sometimes."

Miriam shrugged, tracing a finger on Ya'el's smooth inner leg. "I don't understand why you're so positive they had any form of religion. I mean, I don't, and I have to conclude that, therefore, religion is not a natural state of being. I don't see it being any different for an alien species." She withdrew her hand as Ya'el's muscles tightened. "In fact, since the only species we have studied is the human race, it's quite likely we're alone in having developed religion."

Ya'el almost threw her cigarette down. Miriam saw, not for the first time, the anger in her eyes, and felt bitterness rise in her. Lovemaking was definitely over.

"You utter, utter..." Ya'el struggled for words. "Atheist bitch." The yarmulke on her head pulsed, as if feeding on the turmoil in Ya'el. Miriam didn't need to look at a mirror to know her own beast was doing the same. She knew where this was heading even before Ya'el silently got up, put out her unfinished cigarette, and began to dress. The words left her mouth all the same, knowing she would regret saying them later, yet saying them anyway. "You have no proof. None. And you want to know what I think? I think the Nephilim were fucking sensible. They didn't have any superstitions. Like you."

Then, as Miriam had known would happen, Ya'el called her that thing again and put away the half-smoked cigarette in her metallic case, and left, slamming the door to the flat behind her.

"You want proof?" Ya'el had shouted at her when she reached the street. "Come with me to Migdal and you'll have proof. Or better still, wait right here in your cushy little apartment, writing your angsty little poems, until I come back."

People's heads were turning. Miriam realised suddenly that she was leaning over the balcony completely naked and that this confrontation would most likely be in the gossip columns the next day. **NAKED POET FIGHTS LEADING ARCHAEOLOGIST.** She opened her mouth to shout to Ya'el, to call her back, but

there was a new look on Ya'el's face, a victorious look fused with the angry one, and Miriam, not knowing what to say anymore, didn't say anything.

Come with me to Migdal and you'll have proof, Ya'el had said. But Miriam hadn't gone, and now Ya'el was missing, and no one seemed to care.

She had tried. When Ya'el hadn't come back, Miriam went to the Archaeology Department, but in that imposing building where the ruins of the Nephilim lay on display like an incomprehensible alphabet, no one was willing to help.

"You're the..." Professor Yagil said curiously, then checked himself. "The poet, right? I read some of your stuff." His tone was cautious, neither complimentary nor negative. Despite the recent return of democratic life, many people—especially those employed by the civil, rather than Rabbinic, authorities—still stepped cautiously. And Miriam's work made them uncomfortable. "Look," he said when she asked him directly about Ya'el, "don't worry about her. She knows the desert like the back of her hand, and she's been to Migdal dozens of times. To tell you the truth, I have no idea why she went there this time. We've been through the place with a comb. If there was anything there, we would have found it by now."

"Maybe it's not something obvious," Miriam had argued, desperate to break the man's unconcerned mask. "Maybe it's something she just realised, something you've overlooked."

"Don't worry." Yagil smiled at her, his grey teeth, like Ya'el's, showing he was a heavy smoker, something that characterised the archaeologists and the rare traders, the people who spent most of their time outside, away from the cities. "She'll be back before you know it."

His expression made it clear he thought Ya'el was just wasting time, probably thinking she had wanted to get away from Miriam for a while. She had no doubt that Yagil read the articles that inevitably appeared after their fights.

The police were not much help either. "If she doesn't show up in a month, let us know and we'll send someone over there," the inspector had said. "But I don't see what could have gone wrong. It's not as if the Nephilim got her, eh?" He laughed as he walked off.

If it had been up to her, Miriam would have blamed the Nephilim. Their artefacts were scattered haphazardly across the planet like broken toys left by

unruly children. Large unruly children. While no skeleton was ever found of that vanished race, their buildings towered over humans. Their few dwellings had become places of industry, the commerce centres of the planet's small population. Not for the artefacts, though a trade in those curiosities did go on, but for the fungus. That grey, moist substance grew wherever the Nephilim once lived. It grew like moss, like weeds, on the sides of buildings and inside them and in the avenues of abandoned towns.

And the fungus provided the planet's new occupants with life.

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Miriam felt the rush of euphoria ease; the cigarette's initial overwhelming effect had passed. She looked again toward New Jerusalem, and again at the desert's horizon. Seven cigarettes to go.

She hoisted her small pack onto her back and began to walk toward Migdal.

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The road to Migdal was cut through the desert in the early years of settlement. That, at least, was what the legends said. The crew that first arrived on the planet was many generations removed from the ones who first left the Israeli colony on Mars on their uncertain way to the stars. Current debate ranged over whether the crew still had technological capabilities on crash landing. Those in favour cited the roads, ruler-straight and cut through the desert the way a scalpel cuts through skin. Those against only had to point at contemporary life.

Miriam thought of the debates with a feeling of bitterness. Ya'el was so involved in them, her cheeks flushing when she got excited, her voice growing louder, more confident.

"Does it matter?" Miriam had pleaded with her one night. "What difference does it make if they had technology or not?"

Ya'el was looking at her, impatience simmering behind her eyes. "The question," she said, "is not whether they still retained control of the technology they brought with them. The question is what happened."

"What happened..." Miriam prompted her.

"To bring us to our current level of technology," Ya'el completed the

sentence for her. “You may have noticed, it’s not exactly of a star-faring level.”

“Don’t you dare use sarcasm on me,” Miriam said, making Ya’el smile.

No records were left, and that had frustrated Ya’el, Miriam knew, more than she was willing to admit. There was no record left of the first years of settlement, nothing to indicate what had happened, not even who the people who first reached the planet were. The words “Israel” and “Mars” had gained an almost mythical resonance amongst the settlers; of their physical presence remained only intangible names.

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Miriam’s pace was measured. She walked the way she wrote the rebellious poems that had made her name, with care and not a little wariness. The sun was level on the horizon, a red globe blinking like a sore eye. She opened her senses to the silence around her, mentally cataloguing every detail.

The silence, first and always. The utter, invasive quiet of the desert where nothing lived, where nothing moved. So different from the city, where the press of people always provided noise, conversation, a reassuring background hum to her life. Ya’el loved the desert and the quiet, but Miriam found it almost offensive, as if the world was mocking her with its total lack of life. At least New Jerusalem has birds, she thought, cats, even, amazingly, those strange animals called horses that somehow came with the Tikvah and which only the very rich ever kept.

But nothing lived on the planet that wasn’t brought. It was as if, Miriam had written in one of her early poems, they were trespassers on holy ground, squatters in a morgue. The visions she always saw when not smoking enough seemed to reinforce that in her, as if what she was seeing was not exactly a hallucination but an alien memory of the planet as it was before the Nephilim disappeared.

But few enough people saw them. Most simply became weak and sluggish, dull-witted until they smoked again and were revived.

She abandoned this train of thought with difficulty and returned to cataloguing. She might have a poem of this trip yet, she thought with sudden, icy guilt. Don’t think about it, she warned herself, don’t think about Ya’el until you get to Migdal. Don’t fall apart now.

She took a deep breath. A clean, warm air, like liquid oxygen. Almost clinical

in its purity. She hated that, the lack of life in that scent. Nothing alive, no plants, no animals—only the smell of stone and sand and silence.

“It’s not natural,” Ya’el had insisted in one of their many, tempestuous arguments.

They had been sitting on the balcony of the Temple, the stone cool against their backs, whispering. Below, the Rabbis performed the evening prayers of Ma’ariv, their yarmulkes seeming to absorb the fading light into their grey bodies. A woman sitting above them shushed loudly.

Ya’el ignored her. “There should be life on this planet, love,” she said. “Plants, animals, forests. Something to produce enough oxygen for us to be able to breathe. The whole ecosystem of this place is missing, and yet we are able to live here quite comfortably.”

“I don’t know about comfortably,” Miriam said as the woman behind shushed again. “Though it’s a living, I’ll grant you that. Still,” she added, “for all you know there are whole continents filled with forests and trees and flowers and, and—” her imagination abandoned her for a moment, “and shrubs and stuff.”

They both smiled, and for a moment, Miriam felt they were united again, spiritually entwined in shared laughter. Below, the Rabbis finished the song and were parading the effigy of a life-sized Nephilim around the altar. Its body was covered in the grey lichen of the smoke.

The Rabbis then dispersed to the four corners of the enclosure below and cast more of the grey fungus onto burning braziers; the pungent aroma of the burning weed circled lazily upward, engulfing the crowd of worshippers.

Ya’el took a deep, shuddering breath as the smoke reached them. All around them, the crowd sighed, inhaling smoke. The woman who shushed them before lay back with eyes closed, a lazy smile playing on her podgy face.

Miriam remembered that smile. Complacent, she deemed it then, and so it still seemed to her, especially here in the aloneness of the desert. She and Ya’el had never been complacent; that, probably, was part of the problem.

She walked throughout the day, stopping only occasionally, in those rare moments her body rebelled and she had to eat or to relive herself, which she did with a sort of angry impatience.

She stopped when the sun was low on the horizon and settled down to camp beside the road in a makeshift crater of sand. She had heard stories that the word desert, originally, had signified strange shifts in temperature; they were places burning hot during the day, freezing cold at night. She wondered briefly what it was like, to experience such climatic shifts and whether there was a poem in that, then abandoned the thought.

She felt lethargic, weakened by the walk, then realised she had not smoked since the morning, outside of New Jerusalem. She knew she should light up, knew she should reach for the box, but the lethargy took her, and she lay back and stared at the world as it shifted around her.

Once more, she saw the beings of light walking about her, sometimes going through her as if she were not there. There were buildings, now, great yet delicate things that resembled nothing she knew; and everywhere the light, pouring out of everything around her.

With shaking hands, Miriam reached for the box and opened it. She ran her tongue along her dry lips and with an effort put a cigarette in her mouth. She tried to ignore the vision around her, just as she tried to ignore the pain in her head as the yarmulke hungrily moved.

She fumbled for the matches, lit one on the second try, and quickly inhaled. She hated the ritual, and yet her body could not deny its need. She felt her head clear, the power coming back into her limbs.

The hallucinations receded.

Miriam prepared herself a light meal, washing the bread and cheese down with a few mouthfuls of water. She thought again of Ya'el and of their plans together, the dream of moving one day to one of the small farms around Har Even to grow sheep and make cheese and make love every night. She wondered if they were ever to do that again—dream together, make love—then berated herself for her pessimism.

She fell asleep still thinking of Ya'el.

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Morning, Miriam felt, had sprung on her unfairly.



She woke up and for a moment was unable to move. Slowly, with cautious, careful movements, she began stretching her arms, then her legs, until she was able to stand up. Her whole body ached; she felt as if an army of tiny people had worked on her during the night, hitting her again and again with small metal hammers.

She swallowed a mouthful of water again, then lit up a cigarette and waited as the pain ebbed from her body.

The second day's walk was harder. She stopped frequently, smoking a new cigarette during each break. In the evening she sank, exhausted, against the sand, smoked a last cigarette and was immediately asleep.

On the eve of the third day, Miriam reached Migdal. The huge, sand-coloured buildings towered over the horizon like gigantic statues. She walked in their shadow for a long while before reaching the outskirts of the city.

Miriam's heart pounded as she neared the first buildings. Even from afar, they looked somehow broken, lifeless. Up close, she could see the chinks in the walls, the broken masonry that had fallen off and was lying haphazardly on the ground. She passed between two buildings, her mouth dry at the thought of Ya'el lying somewhere, dead or dying. She followed the wide avenue inward, into Migdal. The town remained unused, devoid somehow of the fungus and of the shapeless animals they called yarmulkes that lived on the fungus until they were harvested and used. It was but another mystery.

She began calling out, shouting Ya'el's name, her voice arid and small in the emptiness of the place. But there was no answer, and the sun had completely disappeared over the horizon. There was an inky, total darkness. Overhead, the stars glistened with a cold light that illuminated nothing.

Miriam found the thought of going into one of the buildings unnerving; as dark as it was outside, it was not as dark as inside one of the windowless buildings, and she found the idea of being enclosed in one of them too much like being inside a cave.

No, she decided. She would remain in open space.

She camped by the wall of one of the buildings, finding the way by touch, feeling the panic she had tried to stomach all evening rise. Where was Ya'el?

She pictured her lover lying nearby, unable to speak or move, and nearly

got up again to look for her. But it was no use. She would have to remain where she was until daylight returned, and hope.

And pray, she decided, knowing as she did that it was her last measure, a desperate childhood instinct she had been able to suppress until now. Prayer, she once wrote, was hope's unsightly cousin. One she now desperately held onto.

She lit two small candles from her pack; their illumination seemed to reflect her mood, desperate and fragile in the great abandoned space. She knelt on the ground, her knees sinking into soft sand, and carefully made a small crater in front of her, which she filled up with the grey fungus of a cigarette.

She lit a match, edged it close to the weed until it began to catch fire, then leaned close, inhaling the smoke. She closed her eyes.

Why she prayed with her eyes closed she didn't know. The words, when at last they came, were a jumble of broken sentences, of flickering images, dull and ragged, nothing like the poetry for which she was known. She prayed—to whom, also, she didn't quite know—asking only for Ya'el to be alive, to be well, to be back with her.

But prayer brought her no relief, and as the last vestiges of smoke faded away she remained empty, crouching in the darkness, eyes still closed against the world.

She fell asleep at last, curled against an ancient wall the Nephilim built. She didn't dream.

Morning rose about her like a temple. She woke at first light and sat with her back to the wall as the sun came up, lighting the buildings around her at a measured pace, from the foundations up to the skies. They towered over her, those monuments of a vanished race, and her heart caught with the twined beauty and futility of it, and the sudden conviction, like a rush of blood to the head, that they were responsible for the vanishing of her beloved.

She stood up abruptly, pain flaring in her legs, numb from her uncomfortable slumber. Not waiting for the blood to circulate, not waiting to light a cigarette from her diminishing box, not waiting for anything but driven by an urgency she now sensed in everything about her, Miriam began to walk away.

She shouted Ya'el's name over and over as she walked, her eyes moving across the alien landscape as if starved of anything but that which she was looking

for. The silence oppressed her. The shadows gradually shortened until it was midday, the sun high in the sky. Still there was no sign of Ya'el.

Miriam became dizzy with hunger and the pangs of not smoking. On her head, the yarmulke moved restlessly, sending shocks of pain through her scalp.

Still, she wouldn't stop.

She began to see the visions again: the movement of light coalesced into living beings; they occluded her vision, their movements like the drifting of leaves, their buildings strangely real, unchanged.

The buildings were the same, she realised. Unlike in the desert, where the phantoms of habitation rose around her. Here, the buildings were the same, sand-coloured and broken. Why did she not hallucinate buildings? she wondered, then a bark of laughter escaped her, sudden and unwelcome. What did it matter?

She had to find Ya'el.

She searched all throughout the day, getting lost in the identical-seeming avenues of Migdal, seeking her beloved. At last, when the shadows again lengthened and the brilliance of the day subsided, Miriam reached—by accident or design, she couldn't later say—the seeming heart of Migdal. The tall tower that gave the place its name rose above her, disappearing into the darkness above.

“Ya'el!”

She was huddled against two boulders, looking like a rag doll thrown aside in a fit of pique. Blood was coming out of her head, her nose, her mouth, and for a moment Miriam was unable to identify the source of the wrongness about Ya'el's shape, a wrongness she felt immediately was there.

She knelt besides her lover, running shaking hands over her inert body.  
“Ya'el?”

Then realization hit her and unseated deep-buried fear. Ya'el's yarmulke was gone, and in its place was an eroded, bleeding crater.

“Can you hear me? Are you okay?” She was shouting, her voice echoing weakly against the tower.

Ya'el's head turned, and her open eyes—and only now did Miriam realise

that Ya'el's eyes had been open throughout—stared at Miriam. There was something terrifying about her features, a look of terrible victory etched in her face, yet also, Miriam thought, one of a desperate longing.

“What happened to you?” Miriam said, tears burning her face with salt. The air was still, the sun growing lower on the horizon. “Oh, shit.” She frantically searched for her box of cigarettes, trying to extract one, light it, and shove it into Ya'el's mouth all at once.

“Don't.” Ya'el's voice was a distant murmur.

“You don't know what you're saying,” Miriam said, trying to hold the cigarette in Ya'el's unresponsive mouth and strike a match at the same time. She changed tack, put the cigarette in her own mouth and lit it, then pressed it into Ya'el's mouth and held her nose closed, forcing her to smoke.

“I know exactly what I'm saying.”

Some of the smoke must have gone through, Miriam thought, as Ya'el's voice rang with sudden anger in the still air. Her eyes lost their intensity, and Miriam felt that for the first time they were really looking at her and were seeing her there.

“What happened?”

“Can't you see them?” Ya'el's face set in a grimace as she attempted to smile. “But of course you can.” She coughed, and blood spattered Miriam's front. “You always could.”

“See what?” Miriam asked. There was a sudden sensation of falling inside her head, as of an inevitable but unwanted outcome finally materialising.

“Them.” Ya'el pointed in the air, before energy abandoned her and her hand dropped back to her side.

Miriam reluctantly looked around her. The space around the tower was thronging with beings of light; they shimmered and flickered in and out of her field of vision, gliding past them and through them, moving between the gigantic buildings like ghosts.

“You're hallucinating.”

Ya'el laughed, and before Miriam could stop her, she buried the cigarette in the sand, extinguishing it.

“Not anymore.”

A silence fell between them. Miriam felt her anger flare. To have come all this way, and to be helpless—that, she couldn't stomach. She held Ya'el's hand in hers and tried not to think of the meaning behind Ya'el's words.

“What happened to you?” She didn't know how she meant it, but the words came out choked and coated in bitterness, like wrongly-inhaled smoke.

“I wanted to know the truth,” Ya'el said. The effect of the smoke Miriam had forced on her seemed to have dissipated. She looked bright and feverish, her pupils moons swimming in a milky sky.

“What truth?” Miriam demanded. She felt a sudden, irrational urge take her, to slap Ya'el and bring her to her senses. Ya'el's words hovered at the back of her head; she refused to understand them.

“For a poet,” Ya'el said, “you have a remarkable ability to ignore what your eyes tell you.” Her eyes tracked the moving beings of light and her face relaxed into a childish mask of pure fascination. “Their truth,” she said at last.

Miriam didn't answer.

Darkness fell. The ghostly figures of the Nephilim shimmered in the blackness, illuminating Ya'el's fragile, dying body. At last Miriam spoke, and when she did, bitterness again threatened to overwhelm her, making her voice quaver, disobedient to her wants. “Why Migdal?” she demanded at last. “Why come here to kill yourself?”

She remembered Professor Yagil's vague smile, his assurance there was nothing left in Migdal of any worth.

Ya'el coughed. On Miriam's head, the yarmulke squirmed, hurting her.

“Because this is where we landed.”

It came out as a whisper.

“Miri...” Ya'el held her arms out, shaking as she did so. There were no

words left. Miriam stooped down to her and held Ya'el in her arms, holding onto her tightly, trying to cover her, to protect her from the world. Miriam's face searched Ya'el's, inhaling her aroma, the mixture of sweat, smoke, and blood. Ya'el's lips, in a last physical act, found Miriam's and they kissed, lips dry and wordless.

Miriam felt Ya'el let go as their lips touched. She kissed her nevertheless, praying uselessly, and when she laid the body of her lover back on the sand, there was nothing of Ya'el but that. A body.

Miriam found she couldn't cry.

She sat cross-legged in the sand, holding the hand of her lover entwined in hers. As she watched, she knew her own body could not be deprived much longer, that she herself would soon die if she did not feed the yarmulke, if she did not let smoke enter her body. And still she resisted.

Her mind, unable to stop working, was composing a poem, and as she sat in the darkness of Migdal she knew that, had she but written it down, it would have been her greatest work. It was a narrative poem she was writing in her head, the story of a ship arriving at a far and strange planet after crossing space itself; the story of those first people, landing here in this alien city, consumed by excitement, curiosity, and a confidence in themselves that was overwhelming.

There are some things we are not meant to see, she thought. It was a line of Talmudic scripture, written a generation after landing. It was drummed into her in the cheder every day for years. She tried to construct that first meeting, between people and those who were more than people.

It must have seemed a lush planet to the people of the Tikvah. They brought hope with them, and hope was what they saw. And that hope, she thought as her hands—independently, it seemed, of her conscious mind—began searching for the cigarette box, that hope was not a futile one.

She put a cigarette in her mouth and, with shaking hands, struck a match.

They were allowed to live, after all. They settled and raised children and worked and prayed. They wondered at the curious artefacts that littered the small space of their habitation, asked themselves why the machines stopped working, why no records remained, and they formed scholastic societies and played with archaeology and raised furious debates.

She lit the cigarette and inhaled, and inhaled again, until her eyes filled with tears.

The burning figures of the Nephilim receded, as if they never were.

Her head cleared. The world around her was once again the world she knew, silent and peaceful and empty. She knew grief would come, later, and that she might be ready for it then, and she wondered again at the contracts one makes, the bonds between lovers and the pacts between a woman and a God she no longer believed in. And she wondered, also, at the covenant that must have been struck all those years ago, on landing, and at the way that which is commonplace might live with that which is truly alien.

She sat holding Ya'el's hand in hers and waited for the sun to rise and end the long night.