



DERVISH

458

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a short story

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**Author**

**Back Cover**

## DERVISH 458

They're gone. Dead, ripped apart, burst open, while I looked on. Marta, Blane, Dev. Four of us came here and now it's just me left, yet only hours ago we were chatting over coffee and discussing, with suppressed glee, the day ahead. Now I'm trading insults with a dying network that's refusing to get me off this infernal planet. I've watched my friends - more than friends - die screaming and alone, and I am so exhausted that I'm through to the other side. Utterly bereft. So much so that I can retain no more of their leaden dread, their gasping, grasping panic. It just slips through my mind's fingers, washed away by ever more egregious, numbing acts of horror. Their pain is now my sorrow and I have no capacity left to feel it. I am the last of us and I sense it in everything now. Even the lander is crumbling, failing, dying around me. I'll be lucky to even power up the EAV, as the link keeps crashing while I stab, in blind panic, at keys I can barely see, through tear-filled eyes. Bad Me keeps telling me that it's all for nothing anyway, so why even bother; that Dev's fate - of just moments ago - is about to become mine. But of course I have no choice. I am compelled, just as anyone would be.

Good Me agrees.

But we have some time; they built these things to take a beating and the patchy connection is choking the upload, so let me try to explain. I should probably report this anyway, so I may as well record my official log entry and send it off on the last datapacket outta here. Their - our - deaths, serving some greater blah, blah...

So... this will be the final entry from me, Moret Stent, planetologist, assistant xenogeologist, and friend and colleague to the others of this blighted exped. The main dish won't hold a viable connection to orbit much longer, so I'll keep it simple. This planet kills. And kills with a special kind of singleminded ambivalence, as if mild indifference were a peculiarly twisted kind of evil. Their deaths, their individual agonies, would be so much easier to process if only I could ascribe to each some justification, however meagre, but then that would be making it about Moret, and not Marta and Blane and especially Dev. Patience Moret, it'll be about you soon enough.

We didn't see it to begin with, not literally or figuratively. It took a while to manifest, to catch our ever fickle eye before gently pulling the rug of our conceit from under us. Us: brave, intelligent, adventurer, us. But it was always there, in the shadows, biding its time. Watching perhaps, although that may be imbuing it with anthropomorphic motivations that it simply cannot possess. This feels wantonly unintentional and entirely without premeditation.

I'm sorry, let me go back and start from the beginning - just this morning, in fact - when we woke and laughed, drank coffee and traded loving insults. I'm tired suddenly, a drained vessel, so forgive me; I'm trying to give voice to how our story ends while not-so-gently coaxing a network that's undergoing a cascade failure into firing off just one final sequence of ones and zeros.

They named it Dervish because of its great chimney stacks that strike out along the equatorial plane of the planet, putting me in mind of that old child's game involving marbles and brightly coloured, plastic cocktail sticks. Viewed from the grit of the planet's surface (the eye view of those first tiny robotic rovers that still scurry about) these looming towers reminded those earth-based observers of the swirling twisters that blew ever tighter, ever stronger until the wind, dust, water, whatever, was a whirling, wobbly tube of barely contained chaos and power, reaching down from the briny, stormy heavens to a blasted, barren earth. And so it was that that image of nature's cyclonic power - as brief and wild as it is at home - lives here as seventy kilometre high homages to that potency, set in the stone of prehistory and standing in permanence like statuesque monuments to those earthly acts of fleeting destruction. They stand majestic, remaining imperious to the mundanity of the goings-on below, oblivious even to *our* industrious tinkering. Their form and function only recently, and wrenchingly, becoming all too apparent.

Kerplunk. That was the child's game, I remember now. Funny what the mind can dredge up even in moments like these.

So, Dervish they named it and sent us to investigate this Earth-like world (if Earth had aged a few billion years), rolling about its old, puffy, dwarf sun, with its strange and intriguing chimneys, rising like fossilised tree trunks, as if birthed from the churning mantel itself.

It was known that a form of cooperative prokaryotic-based life existed here before we even set off, but that's not news these days. Organics more complex than these exist in our own system, so we weren't too awed by the prospect of new life, whatever its chemical baseline. We should have been, but it's our arrogant conceit that makes us such gifted meddlers, if not always successful ones.

No, the chimneys were the thing that we were sent to prod and to poke. The mystery to solve. And we tried we really did, but they reach so far into the glittering night of this small world, that our atmospheric drones couldn't heft themselves high enough. Our low-skimming satellites couldn't see deep enough for long enough, and probes fired from orbit went dark after just moments inside. We were at a loss. The chimneys' function was an enigma and stubbornly chose to remain so. Their form however, less so, with their hulking, layered, coral-like trunks being formed of an ancient metallised rock that's so dense and hard as to have diamond-esk qualities, but without the carbon base. Amazing properties, a detailed analysis of which has been mailed home already, such would be its likely commercial utility.

Then, one salmon-drenched afternoon (everything here is dusky pink or a variant thereof; a consequence of the brick-bleached hue caused by Dervish's arid, rocky surface being bathed in the waning light of an over-ripened red dwarf star) Blane made a breakthrough. The layers in the trunks of the chimneys were akin to the rings of a tree, denoting age, but unlike an organic that grows out, and as a consequence up, these were simply added to, like a printer extruding a layer of brick aggregate upon a wall. The chimneys were somehow being built *up*.

Blane dated the chimney rings and discovered that they were, like their terrestrial counterparts, each a local year older than the one directly beneath. A day on Dervish lasts around seventeen standard hours - playing havoc with our monkey brains and body-clocks - and a year is four hundred and fifty-eight days. So, every four and a half hundred days or so, the chimneys (at least those within the range of our crewed ground vehicles, so that we could confirm so with our prodding) get a little taller.

Blane handed the conundrum off to me and long story short - assuming the dwarf as the catalyst - I calculated that Dervish's elliptical orbit brought it to perigee with the dwarf, today. This rueful, awful day. When I announced this simple astral computation, we had a rare moment of collective, collegiate excitement. If heat really was the trigger then we would witness the chimneys going through their annual growth evolution before our departure window pressed us to leave. How wonderful. We generated wild theories to out-do one another for the most outrageous idea, which Marta, with her "mass excretion (by as yet undetected) microbes going through a super-rapid lifecycle," won. I actually quite liked that one. Seemed quite plausible to me. But scientists, no imagination.

So we prepared and then the day came.

It started off pretty much as most did, with coffee and banter and morning routines finely honed to each individual's needs. Dev was a morning chatterer, full of verbal energy and possessing an overpowering need to plug back in after a night of involuntary isolation. This quietly wound Blane up who would withdraw into his coffee mug, forcing Dev to switch-fire to another victim. Usually that was Marta, who was always generous with her personal time. I fell more into the Blane camp but could never quite extricate myself the same way that she could. This morning, Dev had yammered on, while Blane silently sank further into his stool as Marta offered gently encouraging - almost maternal - platitudes; all while I observed, as if *they* were my field of study.

So, like most days, we careered about one another, basking in the intimacy of human contact in our own small ways while masking our child-like joy for what lay ahead. We were scientists, explorers and humans, and all these aspects of our being played out over steaming coffee, streaming sensor data and half-headed conversations. At the time it was all so trivial, so banal. *So, today's the big day, right?* Dev would lob onto the breakfast table like a grenade, which Blane, after taking a moment to offer him his most deadpan expression, would then turn to Marta, as if throwing her onto the imminent explosion, forcing her, with a sweet smile, to reply with, *it certainly is, Dev, we're all very excited*. I miss those fleeting moments of familial affection more than I ever thought possible.

The surface of Dervish has been gently warming for some weeks (like Mars, the wispy atmosphere does little to retain heat), but today it would culminate and - so we collectively presumed - generate some hitherto unknowable event that would somehow add a layer to the chimneys. What fun! And we had a plan. Blane, as xenogeologist, would head out with Marta in the buggy. They would head over to "Big Bertha," the largest of the local chimneys, and

watch for, well, something, anything (we didn't really have a clue, what). The layer would appear, so we assumed, at the top of the chimney - in space, effectively - but nonetheless, it seemed sensible to have people on the ground. Blane could take soil samples and Marta could hit little rocks with a small hammer. All the useful stuff, no doubt. Dev would remain in the lander with me and together we would monitor the feeds from orbit and manage the data from our scattering of seismic sensors and wandering rovers. I silently groaned when the lots were drawn, but it made sense; Marta was our xenobiologist and would be on hand if microbes did suddenly try to make first contact. And anyway, Dev usually calmed down after basking in the coarse humanity of everyone else's not-really-morning-people morning routine.

While Blane had spent his days chipping away at the chimneys to reveal the secret of their impossible height, Marta had been bent over the second most interesting thing on Dervish: the local wildlife. The ragged planetary surface is smattered, splattered almost, by these thick, dark deposits - puddles, really - of organic-rich biota, much like the prehistoric soup of yesteryear back home, only this is dense and packed with heavy elements, particularly metals. Dervish is covered, like freckles, in these liver-spot blemishes, as if this mottled world is bruised and dying. As a result of their metallic density, these oily slicks didn't seem to do very much; their growth rate appeared steady but slow and like us, they're iron-based, but unlike us, the local goo possesses none of the nucleic markers one might expect. Still, alien life, bound to be different and Marta loved a challenge.

Marta did once confide in me how puzzled she was at the growth rate. Clearly, Dervish was old, even if only judged by the ancient sun and enormously high chimneys, yet the wildlife's growth rate, however ponderous, suggested that by now it should have completely shrouded the planet. Yet it didn't, even though it drew sustenance from the mineral-rich subsoil, the smelly atmosphere and the diminished sunlight. Something was controlling its growth, keeping it in check. I didn't think much of it when she told me at the time, but Marta obviously did.

We awoke early this morning, while the dry, gritty surface was still a deep, pre-dawn violet, but splashed with pools and great stripes of absolute night. We were excited and wanted to be at our stations and ready for Dervish's zenith; its midsummer's day. The buggy departed in a cloud of shadow and dust and we settled in for the wait. Dev chatted amiably as he wandered about the hab section trying to burn off nervous energy. Blane, rather unnecessarily, kept reporting their progress in the buggy while Marta chipped in as she kept a weather eye on the slowly purpling sky. Everyone was abuzz, waiting, chatting. Fizzing. What would this day bring? Would day four-five-eight, the last day of the Dervish year (if the local wildlife were to count from perigee to perigee, which seemed logical, if unlikely) be the day that would make the long, hazardous journey here (and back, we all blithely assumed) worth it? We were itching to find out. Dev made some tea. Blane and Marta drew up in the gloomy lea of Big Bertha, suited up and left the buggy. I imagined them laden with equipment, crunching across the

blanched soil as the bloated sun shone rosey across the chimney-tips, as it peeked above the all-too-close horizon, casting long, oblique shadows that sliced into the Martian-like regolith.

We waited.

I was soon bored, all my nervous energy had drained from me and now I felt flat and, irrationally, a little let down. Where was the excitement that I had been promised? The doddering old sun's rise was slow; interminably so. Violet turned sluggishly to magenta. Marta wondered if the sun's position or state was somehow linked to... to whatever we had convinced ourselves was about to happen. *The event*. So, our collective gaze turned sunward. Dev, the network whizz, pulled up orbital views and we aimed what sensors we had at the old girl. And we waited. If the secret lay there, it was not making itself known to us.

But patience is often rewarded, and to the blessed relief of my growing apathy, something did finally happen.

It wasn't much, at first. Dev caught it; an orbital view of the chimneys as each emerged from the (still beyond line-of-sight) eastern terminator - allowing their gaping, guppy-like mouths to be blasted by the sun's dawning crimson fire - they were belching black smoke, which seemed odd given how wisp-thin the atmosphere was at that elevation. Marta suggested that a tipping point in the thermal dynamics was triggering a chemical reaction internal to the chimneys. *Volcanic perhaps*, I suggested. *Unlikely*, returned Blane, *given the unnaturally narrow, straw-like, dimensions of the chimneys*. The smoke flowed successively down the sides of those mighty stacks, like the foamy head of a beer. The sight of the pitch, frothing shadow, taking over from the night's own darkness, was unsettling, and an ominous shiver ran down my spine. The shadow raced down and began to spread unevenly across the rocky surface, flowing almost organically. The resolution from orbit was poor, the detail difficult to make out. The black, boiling effect was progressing methodically from one chimney to the next, as each chimney-top was struck in turn by the radiating heat of the tumorous old sun. It reminded me of a virus spreading along a queue of docile people.

Soon it would be Big Bertha's turn.

Using a deliberately casual tone, Marta expressed a slight concern after reviewing the footage of the black smoke's pseudopods, as they reached out from the unnaturally narrow base of one of the affected columns (still some way off to the east), to smother great swaths of the dark-but-brightening surface. She and Blane had a chat about their safety protocols and decided to pack up and return to the safety of the buggy. The sun, previously frustratingly slow to rise and perform for me, was now hitting our local stacks with a seemingly renewed vigour, the tops appearing like beer bottles being opened, while the continent-long shadows receded like wraiths recoiling from the light. Dev suggested that the ground team hail the buggy, summoning it to them - he was getting nervous (all that energy looking for a new target to sate itself upon) but Blane seemed to want to convey a calm authority, which calling in the buggy in rising panic, when there was no identifiable threat, would not exhibit.

Then, all too quickly, the sun's pallid rays struck the lip of the first chimney in our local sub-group. I found myself holding my breath. I was quietly excited, if a little fearful for the

ground team, and I enjoyed the dark thrill of the feeling. Savoured it. But nothing happened and immediately I felt guilty, as disappointment washed over me, salted with a dash of shame.

Blane and Marta, still enveloped in the pre-dawn umbra, were nearly back to the buggy when it did finally occur. I was monitoring their locator beacons, Marta was a little ahead and when Dev gasped audibly she broke into a run. I could hear it in her voice. Dev's gasp had twanged the needle of my inner threat dial, as it had Marta's, so I wandered over to see what was suddenly so shocking to him. The high-res satellite imager in geo-orbit was now swivelled like Sauron's Eye onto those first pots and what boiled forth was no cloying smoke. A simple chemical reaction belched up from the planet's core, this was not.

Dev had the feed zoomed all the way in, overlaid with active analysis. The onyx smoke was in fact a dense swarm of a form of chrome-tipped dart. A sophisticated, complex form of life! Life, beyond the multi-celled goo, that the first probes had found. The analysis had selected a clean shot of one of them and was building up a diorama from extrapolated imagery. Blane could evidently see the oily stain flowing down a brightening chimney just a few along from Big Berta and was asking for an update, reassurance, anything to reinforce his stoic stance. The darts were small, I felt (difficult to gauge the scale) but sheathed, coiled with pent up momentum and fearful velocity. What presented as a narrow body appeared covered in shiny hooks, or maybe claws, it was hard to really tell. Barbs then, glinting, as if dipped in the pale blood of the midday sun.

*- end of sample -*

want to find out what happens next? you only have to ask: [me@markjsuddaby.com](mailto:me@markjsuddaby.com)  
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## mark j suddaby

Born in England, in the year of Apollo 13 and Luna 17, Mark grew up sitting in front of the telly, in his paisley pyjamas, staring wide-eyed as *Doctor Who* (Tom Baker), *Space 1999* and *Blake's 7* romped across wobbly sets in their terrible outfits and bad hair. Mark grew up in a large family, which conversely meant time spent playing alone, often within the confines of a boundless imagination.

At sixteen, Mark realised that he was unlikely to become a genuine space hero - and school hadn't been a huge triumph - so he joined the Army. After a modicum of mild success here and there, Mark left the military after 25 years having reached the dizzying heights of the sixth floor of the Ministry of Defence, where he worked as a staff officer, preparing papers for senior officers and wishing that he was anywhere else in the universe.

Mark now lives in the West Country where he spends most of his time trying to get his Lotus to think that it's a car and wondering what it would be like, if...

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## Dervish 458

This morning I woke with the rosey glow of someone pumped and aching to begin a day brimming with the promise of this world's strange nature being revealed at last.

By this evening everyone is dead, and I'm trying to get off this accursed planet.

And in between, a load of stuff happened; not all of which I'm especially proud of.

Isn't it funny how quickly a day can just skitter away from you?