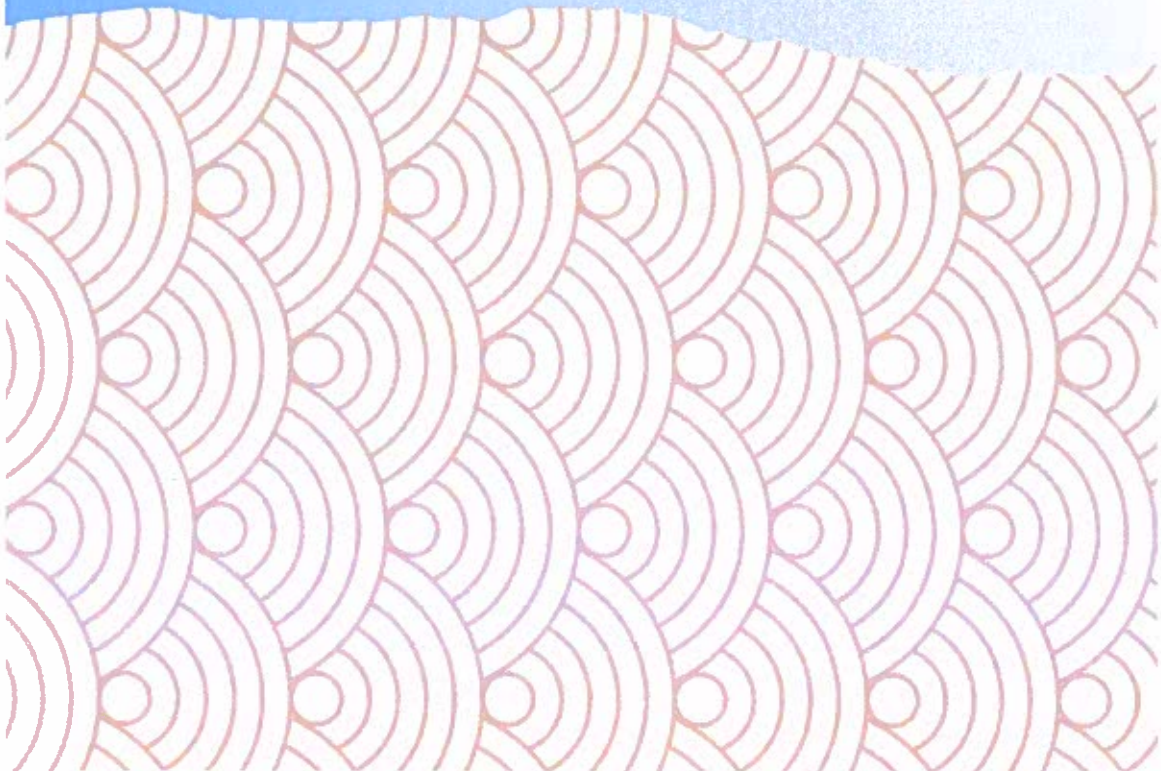




Water



Water

i

Captain Mrdrk cautiously studied the phantom elongated, cylindrical space station from the anticipated safety of the bridge of her starship. The long-sought-for station was of unknown origin and appeared to remain in a relatively stationery galactic position. It was greater in circumference at one end, presumably the base, than at the other. It exhibited no belligerence upon her approach, nor at her current visual and electronic surveillance.

Mrdrk could see there were arrays of wave generators mounted atop the station. Her ship's sensors indicated the energy they generated moved through a 360° field, in a semicircular motion. The waves moved from 0° down through 90° and to the 180° mark. From there the process repeated in the inverse, back up and past 0° through to 270° and down to 180°. Then back up and halfway around the circuit again. At the end of one sweep at 180° a signal burst forth in the electro-magnetic band of visible light. On the next, at 0°, the signal burst emitted gamma rays. The overall effect was that of a sphere of energy centered on the space station and bisected by a far reaching, straight line of light burst in one direction, alternating with photon pulses in the other direction, both sent out across the universe from this starting point. Mrdrk realized one more critical aspect of the signals. They were not geared to attract attention to the station, as they would have been if their movement swept around the full 360°. No. These were meant to direct attention to the points at the far reaches of the signals—along the 0° and the 180° vectors.

But toward which direction were attracted voyagers, she and her crew, to follow? The answer—she knew and feared—was only to be found aboard the station itself.

ii

Mrdrk made her way from their vessel into the elongated, cylindrical space station. To her satisfaction, her ship's materializer worked flawlessly. Even after such a deep space journey, it functioned properly to transport her. She wanted to know more about this station—the origin of the signal beam they were tracking—before getting the males out of suspension in their hydrochambers.

The cylinder's axial rotation was slow enough to allow her balanced movement, while still sufficient to create and preserve the station's interior gravity. With effort, Mrdrk made her way up the spiral stairs. The station's attitude tilted the walkway ever so slightly, so it wasn't precisely a vertical climb. At occasional intervals there were landings which addressed viewports out toward space. Then the spiral continued. She rested at these landings. The climb was exhausting.

Mrdrk stood in the center of the room at the top of the stairs and let her head revolve a full 360° to take in what she intuited was the station's nerve center, located directly beneath the signal arrays outside. The only non-symmetric item to be seen in the spherical room was the rectangular plaque above the arc point inscribed in the ceiling. It was at the top of the design, at 0°. Her gills began to quiver. It was much larger but identical in detail to that on the space probe that had enticed them to undertake this search. Here were the same two bipeds. The engravings. And the long-familiar icon of the third planet of some distant sun. Now she knew the way. Mrdrk's nostrils flared. She awoke her two most trusted aides telepathically and urged them to join her when they could. She gave the order for them to start the process of waking the entire crew.

Staring down from the top of the spiral, Mrdrk noticed the lower, wider section of the cylinder had portals to enter. The stairs had been difficult enough to climb up, even with the help of the slanted orientation and polished shiny rails. But going down them would be impossible. They had been designed by, and for, the bipeds from the third planet. Mrdrk saw the long, vertical central structural support rail. It was also the shiny amber color and it ran the entire height of the station. Near these narrower heights where she leaned the pole was within her reach. At the base it would be too far from the stairs to grab. She extended the webbed ends of her back legs and wrapped the prehensile mid-joints around the pole. Secure for the moment, Mrdrk timed the rotation of the station so its momentum would help her. At just the right time, when she was above the pole, she swung her forelegs, webs completely splayed to facilitate her grip. Mrdrk held tightly and achieved equilibrium in this unfamiliar setting, which required her to look straight ahead. She would have to remember to add this regimen to the "captain's exercises" she assigned her landing parties for later in their mission. As she peered forward, Mrdrk could see her face reflected in the pole's polished convex surface. It was distorting her exhilaration into a look she almost couldn't recognize. The image slid down the pole with her until she landed at the base, on the level of the portals she had seen from above.

She licked her dry lips with both tips of her tongue, envying the males whose hydrochambers were slowly recycling the hydrous into storage tanks. She yearned for the misters in her ship's cabin. The bipeds must be dry-skinned, she mused. Mrdrk stood on her hind legs and rested one foreleg against the wall for balance. She placed her other splayed forefoot across the face of the low-lit orb adjacent to one of the portals. As she had hoped, it was a sensor. The portal cover slid aside with a hissing of air.

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Ardrk and Emtap materialized on each side of her as she looked into the opening. Emtap touched her shoulder and replaced her throat collar with a fresh, hydro-filled one. It was invigorating. Together the trio ambled into the cabin, reaching for the grip rails to aid moving in this unaccustomed upright fashion. Ardrk thought gratefully of their cycles of training for these new and challenging skills, required by their species-saving mission. The others agreed.

The circular cabin was nothing like they expected. There were no portals to the exterior of the station. There were no viewports to the stars. In the center of the room was an elevated stand that held a dim light source. Suspended just above that was an outer casing. Ardrk thought it could be lowered to cover the stand, with the light source inside. Emtap and Mrdrk agreed. Emtap thought he saw a means to lower it, with a chain on some pulleys. He thought it was amazingly primitive and the others concurred.

It was primitive. But it was definitely designed for the bipeds' upper body dexterity that Emtap's webbed forefoot could not easily match. He labored to lower the casing. It was made of clear material, translucent; with concentric, beveled surfaces that formed a cylinder with an open bottom, held together by a sturdy framework of the same shiny, polished amber metal used throughout the station.

A low sound emitted from the stand as the casing came to rest. The sound increased in volume and frequency, so they thought together that it was some sort of warning and tried to back away. But it was too new and awkward a movement for them, and they couldn't move fast enough. The light on the stand became magnified by the beveled translucence to an intensity beyond anything they had seen this closely before. They could feel its heat. Panic set in. Here and on their ship. The heat was already beginning to dry out their skin. They would immediately need their hydrochambers to survive if this kept up. Frantic telepathy echoed from the station to their ship, in both directions, to get materializers working to affect an emergency transport.

Ardrk and Emtap dematerialized. Left alone, in their cherished tradition of captain first and last, Mrdrk awaited her rescue. But as soon as the others were gone, the heat dissipated, and the light went out. The casing stayed in place, unthreateningly. The urgent sounds were replaced by another.

It was soothing. It was familiar. So familiar, in fact, that Mrdrk thought she had ceased. If she had, no telepathy would be possible. So, she signaled to see if she could contact the others. She could. She thought she'd stay. On her order, they halted her dematerializer. Almost no time elapsed while all this took place. It happened quicker than her clear dust lids took to slip down over her eyes when she used to emerge from water and rise into the air back home.

iv

The soothing sound was there. It was a hydrous sound. Lapping, like it did against a surface obstruction or a floating vessel back home. How did the bipeds know this sound? How could they reproduce it here? Her thoughts received scrambled responses of exhilaration from her crew. Ardrk and Emtap rematerialized, shaking with equal parts of fear and excitement. Just the familiar sound, unheard for almost two full cycles of their journey, cooled their skins. Again, they gave Mrdrk a hydro collar and four leg bands as

well. Remoistened, she made her way around the crystal, which bore a shiny amber metal plaque inscribed with the symbols: FRESNAL. FRANCE. EARTH.

The crew cryptologists let them know the last segment of the inscription was the name the bipeds used for the third planet. The golden disk attached to a second deep space probe had conveyed this information, and much more yet to decipher and understand.

On the walls of the cabin, air hissed and panels retracted, revealing rectangles with inset images. The images riveted their attention. There were seven in all, one at each 45° mark along the cylindrical cabin. The portal occupied the eighth equidistant position. There were variations in the images, but they were fairly similar. Each image contained a cylindrical tower. Some were free standing. Some were attached to other structures. The crew architects identified these as “dwellings.” Crew research specialists were now awake and at their stations. They had information about this third planet discerned over many cycles from the data aboard the probe that carried the bipeds’ medallion.

Atop each tower was a source of light. Mrdrk’s and Emtap’s and Ardrk’s eyes darted from rectangle to rectangle, to each other’s faces, and then to cabin’s center and the cylindrical case that had almost blinded and incinerated them. The top of each cylinder in the seven walled images bore one of the same cases. From each shone a beacon of light and heat, but none projected light or heat into their cabin space. These were two dimensional images only. Safe to look at and be near.

But the flutter of their gills and the palpitations of every three-chambered heart aboard the ship—even of the awakened crew exiting their hydrochambers—were stimulated by a different feature of the images. Near the base of the towers were hydrous expanses. Some were calm. Some were turbulent. But each tower was at a place that brought precious tears to their eyes.

Could it be, Ardrk thought, that out on this third planet there were cylindrical towers like this one in deep space, anchored not in the air but firmly, and near hydrous?

Emtap thought in unison. Look at them. Places of dry and places of hydrous. But come here and look. They gathered in response to his seductive thoughts. They stood before one of the rectangles. There were two of the bipeds’ dwellings raised up on vertical poles. The poles rose from the hydrous. Another set of poles stood, but the dwelling was missing. Off away, to the fin side, stood one of the towers, with hydrous right up to its base. The tower stood at a 75° angle. Emtap was excited by the implication. They all listened to his most private longings, gills aquiver: *On the third planet. The hydrous is winning the struggle. The bipeds are losing their foundation of dry. Back on our home, the dry is on the rise; hydrous declines, as our sun gets hotter. The bipeds’ sun is more stable. And their hydrous is on the rise. Just listen to those lapping sounds. These could be lapping sounds of a new home. Ours.* He could no longer stand erect. He was too agitated by the thoughts he projected on the whole mission. He set down on all fours on the deck. When he did, he saw two more sensors, similar to those that opened the portal. He covered them with his splayed webs and rested, emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

The lapping sounds stopped. A low hissing sound replaced it. From slits in the overhead slowly, but certainly, seven new, white, rectangular objects descended and stopped, just above eye level for Mrdrk and Ardrk, who still managed to stand erect.

There were too many images. Too many sounds. They could not absorb it all. These bipeds must be most remarkably, even explosively, multisensory they thought. Each white rectangle became a surface alive with more two-dimensional fixed and moving images from what they could only fathom was the third planet. Bipeds of all sizes and colors, adorned in so many different ways, filled their view. They were not all like the images on the plaque. They were on, and in, areas of the dry. Spaces filled with assorted structures and organic growth. The crew culturalist indicated these were “parks” and “cities,” where bipeds sought recreation and lived. The scenes shifted away from the occupants of the third planet and to vistas of the natural features of their home.

Ardrk fixed on one of these moving images. One of the towers of light stood at the very edge of a tall stand of the dry. Hydrous surges of blue and white swept against the brown face of the dry. A monstrous surge of hydrous crashed the dry. The dry began to slide down into the hydrous. The tower shook. The dry fell out from under the foundation of the tower. In an instant, the tower toppled. The light tipping over the edge slid top first and exploded into a burst of light and fire. It slid straight down the broken, disintegrating face of the dry and struck the hydrous at the bottom. Steam rose from the spot as the hydrous quenched the fire and mixed its turbulent foam spray with the steam until they were indistinguishably one.

Ardrk lost control. He fell to the floor. All the cycles of training to stand erect were for naught. He collapsed and thrashed with all four webs in a frenzy. The transporter commander sensed his fear and before Mrdrk could stagger to his assistance, Ardrk was dematerialized. Mrdrk waited, looking at the metal grating where he fell. The image above the spot changed. Dangerously, she held her breath. Then relieved, she exhaled as she heard his thoughts, now that he was restoring himself in his hydrochamber. It was perilous to transport directly into the chambers without decompression time—as dangerous as it was to hold one’s breath when out of hydrous and exposed in the air. But his excitement had dried Ardrk out. The transporter commander’s extreme gambit had kept Ardrk from ceasing.

Mrdrk lifted her eyes and saw the new image. Two huge rushing channels of hydrous approached an arc shaped chasm. At the edge, the hydrous tumbled over and fell from an incredible height, thundering through the spray and mist to form a combined hydrous pool larger and more magnificent than she’d ever dreamed possible. Along a semicircular railing on the dry, like that atop some of the towers of light, she saw bipeds. They were standing, set off in groups of two. Each pair made contact with their upper limbs either wrapped around the other, or held together at the extremity. The segmented ends of the extremities were singular, not webbed; and one of the ten was ringed with shiny metal. One pair of bipeds had their faces touching each other. No one from the technical sections on board conveyed any knowledge of the significance of these activities.

Emtap had crawled over to watch with Mrdrk. He was making mating sounds. Mrdrk looked down at her exposed underside. They stared at each other; eyes locked. All her reproductive organs were in full, stimulated array, even her scent pods were spent. Emtap was agitated. His sex was aroused and dripping. She *spoke*.

“Regardless of what my mind has in it, Emtap, we must not mate. We must wait until we are in our new home. Spawning aboard would threaten our entire mission.”

Emtap thought in response that the images of the hydrous were so overpowering that involuntary hyperstimulation was overtaking them both. They would have to be careful. She urged them to look at the images of the dry.

They turned to a different set of rectangular images. One showed an immense stretch of blue sky over serene portions of the third planet. Tall structures of the dry, worn away by the wind, stood as monumental shapes and precipices. Flat topped and standing alone. Pinnacled and connected by graceful arcs. Mrdrk’s and Emtap’s intrigue returned, focused on these strange and unexpected phenomena. Emtap was able to stand again on his hind legs and examined the images at eye level.

The image shifted. A long and narrow opening in the dry appeared. It reminded them of the trenches in the hydrous floor back home. But on the third planet the trench was filled with air, not hydrous. Bursts of brilliant colors speckled the trench floor and sides. On the floor were shades of green. Some were low to the floor. Some were higher. Some looked like hydrous carpet that ran along the solid dry back home. Others looked like roots and tentacles of hydrous weed that floated on their homeland currents. But here, on the third planet, the wind moved the tentacles, and they looked more solid and brown and black, out of which green patches grew. On one stretch of low flat green expanse, bipeds sat upon quadrupeds moving along a brown line on the trench floor. At the very bottom of the trench there was a winding, blue sparkling line of hydrous.

The view adjusted to show the sides of a different the trench. Great mounds of dry looked down, lining the sides, forming the edges, and towering into the sky. These were not of soft dry, to blow in the wind. These were of hard dry. Solid. Bipeds climbed, clinging to the side, of one of the steepest. Another was shaped like a giant dome, but it was split in half, recalling to their quieted minds a half of one of the huge bivalves they hunted and forced open for food back home.

The image moved uptrench. These images of dry continued to have a calming effect on their automatic physical responses from earlier. They were relaxed. Suddenly, Mrdrk and Emtap were caught off guard when the moving images swung across the trench and displayed, in all their glory, no fewer than four ribbons of hydrous cascading over the top edges of the trench and falling the spectacular distances all the way down to the trench floor. A roar of cascading hydrous resonated and filled the chamber. Images displayed mists and sprays that split into the full spectrum of visible light in arcs criss-crossing the air, across the entire scenic width between the heights.

Mrdrk's egg sacs exploded and spilled out onto the metal grating. At the sight, Emtap could hardly help himself. His sex ejected and sprayed wildly onto the images and the FRESNEL in the center of the room—as he desperately managed to turn away, so as not to fertilize any of the floor-strewn ova.

As they stood shaken and thinking they could take no more, the sounds of the falling hydrous yielded to a complete silence. A smooth transition swiped the seven images aside and replaced them with one new image hovering identically on all seven surfaces. It was inescapable. It was everywhere they looked. Suspended in the dark of space was a satellite. A sun must have been shining on it because the hemisphere of it they could see was all of the dry, a dull grey in color. In full light and casting shadows, craters marked the impact of what they knew must have been meteor strikes eons old. They had seen the same remnants of worlds transiting throughout all the galaxies they had journeyed across.

They were frightened. Is this what had become of this “earth?” Was this the end of a story in which they would never take part? Would there be no home for them here after all? They stared, shaking.

And then, in all seven of the identical moving images there was a glimmer of light. It first traced the arced top half of the satellite's circumference. They gasped. From behind the dry arc, a new disk was rising into view. There were swirling white mists that highlighted the browns and blues of the third planet. It rose right before their eyes from crescent to half orb to its full magnificence—a bright blue globe against the stark black of space.

Emtap collapsed to the deck, unable to control neither his emotions nor his lower body in this upright position any longer. Mrdrk fell back against the FRESNEL, grateful for its support.

Both travelers were exhausted. They agreed they were thankful that the images went blank. Once more the seven surfaces were plain white. They ascended slowly and were pneumatically drawn back into the ceiling of the chamber. The room went quiet.

They could take no more. They requested materializer transport and were brought back to their ship.

At Grand Council, convened before she retired to her hydrochamber, Mrdrk exerted her authority and issued orders that every crew member, in teams of three, segregated by gender, could have a limited time of transport leave to the space station to see the images of the third planet for themselves. Mating on the station or back on their starship upon return was strictly forbidden; with permanent exile from the third planet—if they ever reached it—as punishment for transgressors.

After resting, and having restored order to the mission, Mrdrk was on her first watch of the resumed flight. She checked her star patterns with the space station's continuous signal. She knew they were on course for the blue planet. No one aboard could guess how long it would take, but it did not stop them from speculating.

She captained the bridge again alone, as she had for most of their search. Mrdrk relished all the electricity of the telepathic images with which her ship and crew were energized. Crew members in hydrochambers—regaling each other with images of species survival as they gradually fell off into suspension—would keep her accompanied for the early remaining cycles of the mission.

Mrdrk had debriefed the technical translators of the golden disk after their visits to the space station. From them she learned that this EARTH'S temperature must be rising and would soon melt the remaining hydrous at each pole. If that hadn't happened already. She wondered as they hurtled toward the third planet, whether the messenger probe they had launched back toward home would arrive with the news of their mission's success before their sun evaporated the hydrous and left their ancestral world dry, parched, and barren.