

The Third Planet

“Goodnight, Caroline, please thank your mother again for me. It was a lovely dinner.”

She smiled, shyly at him. “But, of course, Phillip, mother, and father both dearly enjoyed your company.”

Phillip could hardly contain himself. He really wanted to lean in and kiss her cheek softly, but dared not; it was only their third date together. “May I call on you this Saturday, Caroline, perhaps for tea in the courtyard?”

“I would like that. Very much,” Caroline replied, blushing slightly.

He nodded his head slightly as a silly grin began to develop on the corner of his lips. Phillip turned quickly and stepped down the gray stones to the street walk. Turning to his right, he looked back up the steps for her. Pulling on his worn, thin leather gloves, Phillip nodded and waved gently to her as she smiled back for him. Caroline stepped back inside the confines of the yellow brick home. Shutting the massive oak door safely behind her.

The summer night breeze, weighed down with the scent of sea-salts, was beginning to cool around him. Forming an opaque mist, the wet air was already hanging heavy on the streets. Perhaps it was the moss-laden mustiness that stirred deep wheezing in his chest. He barely noticed it at first. The tall, cast, gas-lit street lamps, flames wavering in height, provided just enough light to see clearly. His comfortable brown leather shoes, Phillips’ left foot shuffling slightly, carried him along the brick sidewalks. The sounds of worn leather scuffing, along with the clack of his brass tipped walking cane, gave cadence to his stride.

His mind, at ease from maybe, a little too much wine, filled with thoughts of Caroline. She was so beautiful, in a fresh, homely way, to him. With her long, light brown hair, framing her soft features, she had deep blue eyes that seemed to sparkle continually whenever he spoke. Maybe it was the third goblet of wine that gave him notice. Softly a low-pitched humming began to dwell in his mind. Perhaps it was real. Maybe he was just confused. But no, he slowed his steps and turned to peer behind him. Nothing from the white wall of spinning mist glared back at him. Phillip hurried his gait slightly. Thoughts of a bright green bow and cream-colored gown that Caroline had worn this night, should have given him a reason to grin.

Sweeping a gloved hand across his brow, Phillip squeezed his forehead just enough to change his thoughts. Already, he was looking forward to this coming Saturday. Bravery was not one of his strong suits. But if he could muster just enough, and her escort was not paying attention, Phillip would steal the kiss that filled his dreams. He was positive that Caroline would not object.

Hungry street dogs barking, perhaps at each other, filled the air around him. Almost to the point of distraction, the lonely yips and howls filled his ears. They could not, though, stop him from hearing the vibrating tone, pulsing deep in his mind. A cup of water and aspirin was what he needed, he decided. Warm red wine never seemed to agree with him.

The sound was real to him now. He could not deny it. He increased his pace even more. The hemmed cuffs of his wool pants, now wet, slapped against his sock-covered ankles. Water collecting under the

arches of his feet. The humming was not a trick his foggy mind was playing. Phillip could really hear it now. Disconcerting on this darkened starless night. Part of his mind hoped that a bicycle tire, singing against the now wet street pavement, was his adversary. Over his shoulder, he dared to look back, just a quick glance. Another few blocks of this night, and Phillip would be safe in his sparse home. On an accountants' salary, he made a comfortable living. He just didn't see the need for more than the basics of life. A chair or two, a table and a desk, along with a comfortable bed, was plenty. Decorating, a women's touch, was something to be left up to his future wife.

Phillip loosened his blue-checked tie slightly. His chest heaved from his hurried steps. His breath, visible now, exhaled in spurts. He wasn't a man of the streets and feared he might not hold his own should a confrontation occur. His mind hurt. The pain seemed constant now from the ringing in his ears. An aeroplane, yes, that was it, he thought. High in the night sky above, disguising its intentions. But no, aeroplane's could not fly at night, he told himself.

Peering through the fog of his breathing, he felt confused. Phillip reeled slightly from the pain centered behind his temples. His hands instinctively reached to cover his ears, as the blind humming attacked his mind. He leaned forward, reaching for the black iron street light, something for support, something real to hold onto. Gasping, his mind was jogging, a textured whirlwind, dizzy to the point of passing out from the pain in his ears; he stumbled on the uneven moist red bricks.

Phillip, unable to protect himself, fell awkwardly, spiraling down upon the clay bricks. His jaw, an ugly jagged cut, spewed bright red blood against his face. A thin stream shot out, trickling down, wetting his shirt collar. The depth of Phillip's pain was so deep, inside of him, an unbearable sensation that he had never experienced in his short life. Phillip's hazel eyes squeezed shut, so tightly, tears formed, streaming down the side of his now pale features.

Motionless, he lay there, struggling to inhale. Five. Maybe ten minutes passed before he gathered enough strength to turn over. Enough power to face his assailant. His body, fear now firmly in control, could no longer contain his bodily function. He felt the wetness seep across his legs. His mind refused to acknowledge anything except the noise inside Phillip's brain, crushing his will, just so. Phillip pushed with his left hand against the cold city light pole. Painfully he bent, twisting onto his back. His wool jacket with the tweed accents ripped at the seam. Phillip had purchased this handsome jacket solely to impress his love, Caroline.

As Phillip slowly opened his eyes, the bright, blinding, white light struck with such an intense force. Phillip's head snapped back against the cold, bloodstained city street. His lips moved to form her name. No sounds escaped his throat as his world turned black.

Khalid reviewed and double-checked the life support system connections. He had lost a sample once before, early in his career. His superiors were not pleased with the rotting, liquefied corpse they found. Soon he would key in the instructions for his vessel's journey to his home planet, Serane, this mission complete. Khalid looked forward to time with his mate. Possibly producing a few more offspring. From the third planet in the Roglandaro system, he had collected a perfect biped specimen for scientific study.