

I Will Wait For Your Return

by Jeremiah Edward Hobbs

All around him seemed a void but wasn't, this space between vast worlds with virtual particles popping in and out of existence, energy stored and flowing as waves moved, subtly, all debris out of their static paths, being exemplary of Newton's first law. Photons shot through multidimensional material onward to a seemingly fateful rendezvous with whosoever would happen to observe these massless particles, now or in the future. Blackest black stretched across as far as a human eye could see, as if a great room had been splashed to perfection with inky black liquid, but this would never wash away. Specks of light of other stars shone softly in every direction, and soaring across this heavenly space to a star vessel with a lone pilot came, on the back of the electromagnetic field, a message across the furthest reaches of space and the vast depths of time into a handheld device called Solera, where it was read by a seventeen year old human being named Leevo as the message continued its journey also onward to alien worlds beyond.

SARAPHIN ?what u doen?

And then, like a game of ping pong, a message was sent back from the Solera in response.

LEEVO !waiten 4 control! ben sitten 48hrs now

SARAPHIN ?48hrs!?!whoa!

LEEVO no sry ment 8 hrs : 4 8hrs

SARAPHIN well thats better than 48

LEEVO sure

Leevo sat, hunched, in his craft floating in the inky black holding his Solera between his lap, waiting for another message, and looked out at the stars. They didn't faze him, they were sights he had seen constantly since as a baby, and so he grew bored quickly and tried to spot the *Georgia-Pacific*, the vessel he and his ship had sprung from and were waiting for. The Solera shook lightly in his hand. A response had been received.

SARAPHIN well it is ?wutch a got to eats?

For some reason, perhaps boredom, he thought he'd be specific and unbuckled his harness to walk to the pantry behind him so he could list everything he had to eat.

LEEVO CANNED: beans also green, ham, cheese, bologna, burgers, chicken strips, fruit basket, meat, potatoes, ravioli, spaghetti meatballs with noodles, chips BAGGED: vegs, fruit juice, sugar balls, salt balls

The response from Saraphin was almost immediate.

SARAPHIN goodeaten.reads tasty : growl growl

Leevo grinned. He knew she meant the growl of her stomach but his mind made manifest an image of her with a lip curled, eyebrows furrowed, and a hand in the shape of a paw, like a

lioness. His heart did flutter and he could feel the beginnings of a hard on.

LEEVO missen you

SARAPHIN of course

He let out a laugh. *That's why I'm in love with her*, he thought. Because of everything the phrase "of course" entails as a response to "missen you." He was gonna type that out, *I love you*, but decided against it. After "missen you" he didn't want to appear too lonely, just enough to gain a long night with her when he got back.

He decided to leave the conversation alone for awhile. Let all this emotion dry out, more for his sake than hers.

Sitting on his haunches on the cold steel floor and leaning against the back wall, he closed the pantry door with his bare foot. He could see the universe before him through the great window of the cockpit: Three large glass windows, one looking to the left of the vessel, one to the right, then the third at the center. An inch width of chrome separated the interior glass apart from each other, making it seem as if the window was in three pieces. A look from the exterior corrected this assumption. There one would see a massive darkly tinted glass plane stretching across the vessel entire, like a visor. A satellite which looked like a small black box jutted out where the glass meshed with the ship at the top.

After some time had passed he received

SARAPHIN ?busy?

LEEVO like a bee

He stared down at the Solera lying on his thighs and he shifted on the floor to a more comfortable position. He hadn't sent the message yet. It glowed in the low light of his tiny vessel: *like a bee*

"Bee," he said aloud. It was the first time in five hours he had spoke, and it felt interesting, different. It felt not from him, as if some alien was speaking through his vocal chords. He tried the word again and at the sound of it his mind went back to school, specifically Earth Animalia History I: Animals from prehistoric to the dawn of civilization. A bee was an extinct animal called an insect. Something to do with sugar. His eyes gazed unfocused out at the stars. But there had been a saying on Earth: *being as lazy like a bee*. The bee produced sugar. Or stored it. He remembered something about the bee collecting sugar in its cave and converted the sugar into something else, but he couldn't remember the something else. The creature was massive to do all this. He wondered if the conversion took place in its body or somehow outside of itself, he couldn't remember this either. If the creature was massive, it could probably have constructed some machination to aid in the conversion. It must have been a glorious sight to see.

The Solera vibrated again.

SARAPHIN guess so

He continued typing and sent.

LEEVO like a bee and bored

SARAPHIN me too only talken 2 u 2 amuse me.not worken so great.thx

LEEVO haha ?where r u?

As he waited for her response he looked to the window again, searching for the *Georgia-Pacific*. For a brief moment he was afraid it wouldn't find him, couldn't find him, due to his drift. The satellite outside the ship still sent radar of his position to anyone who cared to listen, loud and blaring, and so even if one didn't care they would know he was there. This washed away the worry quickly but replaced it with a new one: His tiny, vulnerable ship was loud and obnoxiously shouting off its existence once every two minutes. If someone aside the *Georgia-Pacific* became curious, or if something else entirely did..

He shook away the thought.

No one's come so far. *But that didn't mean nothing would.*

The Solera vibrated again, helping take his mind away from paranoia.

SARAPHIN at ocean

The ocean. Leevo leaned his head on the wall behind him and sighed, closing his eyes. He imagined a great body of water, hearing the enormous clash of waves that broke before him. And there she was, sitting next to him native style. Her red hair lightly blowing off her shoulders, and then that smile, the one that read *I've got a secret and I'll tell you when we're alone*. He once told her that she smiled like star fire and she pretended to gag telling him to never be corny again or she'll never speak to him, and that was a promise.

He could see all of her in his mind's eye, even the crab in her lap. It was bright green, sparkling slivers of silver glitter

all over its body. The pinchers were radiant, shining green as if they held a light from within, and its eyes were ocean blue.

Strangely, it was looking at him with its pinchers in the air and a voice came from somewhere near the crab's body: "Leevo, are you okay?"

He glanced quickly at Saraphin sitting next to him, her eyes staring at the shore, still smiling that smile. She made no motion that she had spoken nor that she had heard something. And when the voice came again as he watched her lips, noticing only the smile and so no way the voice was hers, he became aware the only other option was the crab. "Leevo, down here." He looked down at the crab. "You okay?" it seemed to be saying.

He didn't say anything.

"Well, aside the talking crab of course," said the talking crab.

Saraphin rubbed her right hand in the sand next to her, pressing her fingers deep in its soft particles.

"She's fine. She really is. I love her legs. And breasts."

Leevo looked again at the glowing green crab. It seemed brighter but he couldn't tell. The light didn't hurt his eyes, but the dancing rays of silver off the tiny slivers seemed to give him a headache.

"I'm star dreaming," Leevo said.

"We know," the crab said.

Saraphin reached behind her back and pulled out her Solera, then began speaking to it. He couldn't hear her voice.

"Don't panic. You'll get it soon."

He watched her smile after giving the message, then she placed the Solera behind her and he felt something vibrate in his lap. He looked down, seeing only his swim shorts.

I need to get up, he thought.

"I'm sorry but that currently will not be possible."

He looked back at the crab, which was no longer on Saraphin's lap but on the sand before him, pinchers still up, eyes still ocean blue, body still glowing green. "Why not?" he asked, because what else could you ask a crab after such a non-negotiable statement.

"We are very fascinated with your story."

Leevo glanced at Saraphin. She had her Solera in her lap again, looking at it. He realized she had been waiting for a response. He looked back at the crab.

"I need to respond," he said. When he tried to move, and he did try and move, his muscles were frozen and he just couldn't turn or flex or anything. Only his lips and eyelids worked, and his lungs, and some other inner organs like his heart he supposed.

"We know you do, but please give us one moment to understand this feeling." One of the pinchers dug into the sand, turning left then right as it forced its way. The other stayed in the air.

Then there was a pain at the back of his head, but he couldn't move his arms.

The crab's eyes locked on his. "You actually *can* move. We really don't understand why you're not. It would be helpful if

you cleaned the blood."

Leevo lifted his left hand and looked at it.

The crab's eyes left his and stared off, eyelids drooping. Whatever it was doing, it seemed completely relaxed. Almost on verge of orgasm even. "At the back of your head," it said. "You'll feel it there."

He bowed his head as his left hand hesitantly touched the back of his scalp. At first he felt nothing, then his fingers became wet. He brought his hand to his eyes and saw it drenched in blood. "What are you doing?"

The glowing green crab with the droopy eyelids didn't make eye contact as it said, "Understanding. Just gimme a moment, please." The creature still stood small before him with a pincher in the air and the other dug deep in the sand, turning slowly left then right then left then right, as if trying to pick a lock. "That's the stuff," said the crab.

Leevo shot up and hit his head on the cabinet that stuck out of the vessel's back wall. His left hand went to the back of his scalp and felt around violently. He yanked at tufts of his hair, dug and caressed his skin. His fingers felt wet. He looked at them and saw blood, not a lot, just a dab. Apparently he had hit the cabinet pretty hard.

He scanned the floor quickly for a glowing green crab and then just felt ridiculous. All that was next to him was Solera, blinking with the receipt of a message. Everything was as it was. He wanted to feel the strangeness at the back of his mind seep away now that everything was proven normal, proven routine. It

wouldn't. Something was wrong.

And then he found what it was: The glowing green hue coming from just outside the massive windows on the vessel. He stood there looking at it, left hand cupping the back of his head. A part of him wondered if he was undergoing a concussion.

When he took a step to investigate, he stepped on his Solera and picked it up. He read the message.

SARAPHIN I'm imagining u here rite beside me.i miss u 2 u
no.its gorgeous and u wood luv it

Holding the Solera in his right hand, left hand still pressing on the cut at the back of his head, he read her message a second time, then a third. He turned his attention back toward the window and the glowing green hue coming from outside the vessel in the expanse of space. He walked over to try and see the source.

The hue seemed to curve around the vessel. Peeking out the side window as far as he could, the hue seemed to come *off* the vessel itself now.

He sat on the co-pilot's chair, putting the Solera in his lap. He typed back.

LEEVO wish i was there 2 had a mini dream i was on sand
next 2u and somethen bout crab

He placed the Solera down on the chair as he stood up to look outside the window. Looking out the other window only showed the same event: a glowing green hue that seemed to wrap around the vessel. He questioned his dream. Then his heartbeat quickened pace, his breathing became a little bit more rough, his pupils

dilated so he could see through the dark areas around him as much as possible, and his first instinct was to panic and run, but where?

He sat on the pilot's chair and crossed his arms. The light hue wasn't necessarily a glowing light. It only seemed that way. The hue was green, that was obvious. He just didn't know the source. Then he thought that the whole vessel was the source. So that was his conclusion: the green hue was coming off the vessel itself.

But how?

The Solera vibrated and he looked over at it on the co-pilot's chair. A new message from Saraphin, so he reached over and picked it up. However, the new message was *not* from Saraphin. It was from a Syruphymn and the text was written in strange characters he had never witnessed before.

Because he felt the three strange occurrences, the crab dream, the green hue on the vessel, and now this strange message from a Syruphymn were all correlated, he sent a message back.

LEEVO if you can read this i can't read that

He waited only a few seconds and the response came back, and no longer in the strange character text he couldn't read before.

SYRUPHYMN I was able to read that, therefore you could not read what we sent earlier, so we will resend in a more appropriate form.

Leevo had to read that sentence twice before it dawned on him what happened. He had only meant the phrase "if you can read this" as a self referential statement, trying to imply some

understanding of the situation at play, and not as a logical if/then statement. Leevo wondered how easily this conversation could have gone downhill if he had typed that sentence differently.

Then came a sound like that of a tuba.

He looked behind him at the empty vessel itself, seeing nothing obvious that could produce such a sound. For a brief moment he thought it could be coming from outside, but that didn't make sense, then the Solera vibrated in his hand. He looked down.

SARAPHIN haha.crabs.that made me hungry imma eat ?u2?

And then another vibration, another message.

SYRUPHYMN nah im good.and don't be gross

SARAPHIN ?wut u mean?

SYRUPHYMN ?crabs??make u hungry?!eww!

SARAPHIN ?thought u didnt mind crab?

SYRUPHYMN not as people?but eating?

SARAPHIN ?r u jokester?

SYRUPHYMN i never joke about civil rights

Leevo was looking down at his Solera, sitting on the pilot's seat, as the whole event texted itself out before him, confused.

He put the Solera back down on the co-pilot's seat next to him and it kept vibrating. Back and forth a conversation was being played out on his device and he hadn't the slightest idea how. For the time being he needed to set it aside and think, because too many occurrences were happening to believe everything was disconnected. He had to find the common denominator, he had

to see the pattern.

The Solera kept vibrating non-stop as he rose and began to pace in the vessel. The little area was empty, everything being in the cabinets and not near on the floor around him. As he paced, mind reeling, he began to suspect that the tuba noise was ascending in volume. Glancing at the Solera he noticed a message.

SARAPHIN y u be such a dick rite now i think uve gone stir crazy.imma eat and ill just talk 2 u l8tr

SYRUPHYMN whateves.i aint worried

And that was it. What annoyed Leevo about this was the unsettling subtlety in which Syruphymn took over his life, whoever this character was.

The Solera vibrated.

SYRUPHYMN ?took over ur life??seriously?it was one chat.

It can read my thoughts, Leevo thought.

SYRUPHYMN I like how its possessive, *my* thoughts, as opposed to the more general and populous "can it read thoughts?" Your way turns a simple wondering into something selfish, egotistical. Well, *human*. I think. Not sure yet, didn't get enough facts when I was in your head before.

Any suspicions Leevo had as to the nature of his current events melted away like butter on the pavement of a space port on Mercury. His dream was not a dream but somehow a manifestation of this being, this creature, whom had found him and his loud and obnoxious beacon shouting his existence across the galaxy. But what manner of creature was this? And what powers did it possess that awed when thought of in proper context? And was the volume

on the tuba ascending? He looked around himself, laughing as he did at the absurdity of the notion of looking for a sound. It had gone. No more tuba, no more noise.

The Solera vibrated.

SYRUPHYMN What's your response?

Leevo stared at the device. All he had to do was think and he would engage the thing in conversation. Technically, he was engaging it now, unwillingly of course. He despised it.

"Don't you believe in privacy?" He wasn't going to stoop to this creature's level, so he spoke his thoughts.

SYRUPHYMN What is that? It sounds wonderful. I would like to know more. Let me access your thoughts. Please. Pretty please. Open up for me. Let me in. I want to know this privacy.

The tuba sound was back, soft, deep, and in the background of whatever background it was in.

SYRUPHYMN Please respond. Am awaiting response. Will proceed forward once response obtained.

Leevo cocked an eyebrow at the Solera. "To the sound?"

SYRUPHYMN Also that, yes. That is the restructuring of my first message to you. Please also respond.

Leevo thought about that a moment. "You said you would try it again in a more appropriate fashion."

SYRUPHYMN Is this not a more appropriate fashion?

He shook his head. "No. I still don't understand."

SYRUPHYMN Why do you need to understand?

The question was so abstract that Leevo simply chose to ignore it. "Why did you speak to Saraphin?"

There was no response and Leevo stood there a moment, waiting. It was almost as if the creature was thinking, maybe even planning. There was that paranoia again.

SYRUPHYMN So a fellow believer in civil rights, you are?

Leevo was confused. "I'm sorry?"

SYRUPHYMN I asked, why do you not understand? You responded with, why did you speak to Saraphin? This implies, logically, that the answer to that question in particular is equivalent to the answer for mine. Therefore, if I answer your question, then I answer my own, and so I did.

Leevo waited for Syruphymn to expand but it never did. "I still don't understand."

SYRUPHYMN I spoke to Saraphin out of a concern about a potential civil rights violation. Therefore that is also the answer to why do I need to understand. You are concerned about civil rights, specifically your own concerning me. Hence your comment on appropriate fashion of my first message, being the nature in which I distort the particles in your vessel to cause sound. The rights of each particle could possibly be argued as having been violated by my decision. Including your own rights violated by my constant curiosity.

Leevo said, "Well. That's partly true. No, that's all true. But I wasn't thinking about it that way."

Through the window of the vessel Leevo saw a starship approaching, what he believed to be the *Georgia-Pacific*. It hadn't formed in his vision yet to the memory of its physical structure but was a blurred mass coming toward him. This strange

sequence of events, real or dream, would end soon enough. The tuba still playing softly in the background, the green hue still wrapped around his vessel, all would make the scientific crew of the *Georgia-Pacific* ecstatic about the mysteries he was experiencing, real or imagined. Leevo understood a part of him believed none of it was real, and so structured his reactions he would give the crew accordingly. There was another part that felt it was all part of reality and was doing its best to hold back paranoia and fear.

And in that singular moment the object in the distance was made manifest and he witnessed a great beast of a crab in the void of space coming toward him. The sound of the tuba began to twist slowly in pitch and tone until he realized he was listening to a voice, almost in slow motion, saying, "Hello Leevo." The beast crab in space which looked every bit like a crab raised a pincher above its head.

Leevo, mouth agape, walked toward the window and leered at the thing. It had ocean blue eyes and a body that glowed green. Leevo's knees weakened. It was the crab from his dream, only enormous now, a little magnificent, and out in the depths of space. His mind was aghast with the idea of a creature that existed in the void of the cosmos, and even more bedazzled by its uncanny resemblance to an Earth crab.

As it came closer Leevo could begin to understand its size. The star vessel he was standing in could fit perfectly in the pupil of one eye. Its legs moved like row crew oars, steadfast and efficient, as if rowing through the expanse of space, little

pumps of some gas expelling out of its legs, propelling it forward. The pinchers were massive and Leevo guessed they were each as large as the *Georgia-Pacific* itself, maybe even larger. Then both pinchers were raised above its head instead of just one.

The tuba tone began to pitch and change again, a bit faster now, almost reaching a normal speech pattern, but still so deep and godlike. "Please, pretty please, open for *me*, oh please. I want to know. I want to understand."

Leevo didn't know what to do. He stood at the window and watched the creature keep its momentum, coming straight for him, standing there helpless in his tiny vessel, listening to its pleas to allow it to probe his mind for whatever it desired.

"I can know you. *Please* let me know you. Oh. I want to."

Then he fell forward, face hitting the glass as his whole vessel pitched forward, a little blood in his mouth from biting his lip when he face palmed the window. Watching the space before him he saw this great enormous caterpillar, also glowing green, unwrap away from the skin of the vessel and lean over the front of it, toward the crab.

Hundreds of legs, tiny in comparison to the creature itself, but about as tall as Leevo with bits of gas being expelled from them and propelling them forward, scurried in space this way and that as the long caterpillar moved from the vessel toward the great crab. Its skin was dark orange, black spots sprouted throughout. He watched as the caterpillar crashed into the crab, the caterpillar's legs quickly latching on to the crab anywhere

they fell and scurried forward as it wrapped its length around the crab.

With the right pincher the crab grabbed a part of the caterpillar's body, stopping it for only a time as the caterpillar's body expanded, forcing the pinchers to spread wider, than the caterpillar quickly deflated and wrapped its loose flesh and muscle even more around the crab's body only to slow down and expand again when the pincher would keep squeezing. The caterpillar was quick.

Out of the head of the caterpillar its skin sucked in then blew out of this crater within its cheeks on both sides some off-white yellow gas that began to slow the crab down from hitting Leevo's vessel. The crab's pinchers were going wild, one holding onto the body of the caterpillar while being forced open and shut by the caterpillar's expanding and deflating body, the other pincher trying to grab hold of anything, something, because the caterpillar was beginning to squeeze over the body of the whole crab.

Inside the vessel as Leevo kept the back of his hand pressed against his lip to stop the blood, the vessel having tilted slightly downward relative to its position before, the sound of the tuba, soft and light, twisted over itself, reverberating, high-pitched, like screeching. As more of the caterpillar wrapped around the crab, the quieter the tuba became.

The crab could hardly be seen anymore, the body of the caterpillar (now turning slowly from green to orange) began to wrap over its own self now, the pinchers hidden in a mass of

orange flesh speckled with green spots. The tuba sound had faded completely.

Leevo watched the two great beasts before him at the outer depths of space in combat, and then the view shifted and he saw only stars, and then the two enormous bodies, and then the stars. Leevo realized the vessel was flipping. When he was able to see the space monsters struggle he saw the tail end of the caterpillar, little legs flaying about for some object, anything, with texture to latch on to, gas particles all over itself now coming from pores in its legs. He surmised that at some point the caterpillar's last legs walked off the vessel, and the jump gave him such a force he began to flip in space. Leevo wondered how long until nausea set in, then wondered how long until his gravity spinner in his vessel would have until it crapped out, then cursed Newton silently.

He stumbled toward his seat and sat by the window, watching the spin of the cosmos before him, enjoying the brief glimpses of the two creatures, now one, in a great ball of body, and after a time saw his vessel was moving away from their combat, or they were moving away from him. He had nothing to gauge the image by, only previous images from memory.

After several rotations of seeing only stars, he believed he was a great distance from the beasts. He let starlight wash over him as he thought of what happened. He had never witnessed the so called star beasts before, hadn't really believed, like so many other humans, they existed, and now had been shown two of the great beasts attacking each other. He had even discoursed with

one.

Excitement washed through him as he thought of how he would tell the story to family and friends back on the *Georgia-Pacific*, and especially how he would explain all this to Saraphin. He wasn't worried about being found because his beacon was still pulsing through the vastness of space, shouting for all to hear. They would find him no matter where he was. It would just take time.

But outside the vessel, where he could not see and one could not hear, an even greater beast lay just before the spinning star vessel, hidden in the stars. Its skin was ink black with tiny white spots scattered randomly throughout. It blended with the cosmos around it, a perfect creature of evolution. Large mouth agape, also black with white speckles, it waited patiently in the void for meals. Like a great fish as large as two worlds, Leevo's star vessel would be less than a snack for the creature, but it cared not. It would always feed, it must always feed.

With a smile on Leevo's face, staring only at what he believed to be a sea of stars before him, he flipped his way into the great star beast's mouth, following the giant caterpillar and crab before him. The displacement of gravity had been unnoticeable to him and when he was engulfed in the beast's mouth, he never knew otherwise. When the end came, in the form of heat and digestive acid, the strange events that had occurred prior had prepared him for a routine of oddness, but when the pain came followed by a six second scream, he was unaware it was the end and so had a final thought of asparagus he had burnt one

summer day at the University of Southern Luna when he was cooking meatloaf and mashed potatoes. He had just met a girl named Saraphin in Economic Thought and Policy of the Titan Civilization earlier and was for the rest of the day completely out of it. This memory transmitted to the great star beast who received more sustenance from energy of that sort than physical meat alone. After the transmission played the star beast began to sort through the rest of Leevo's memories, saving ones it enjoyed for a second or third helping, and discarding those it found uninteresting. The burnt asparagus memory the beast deemed uninteresting and ejected it as gas into the void, where it dispersed and broke down, part of the cosmos entire now.

Fed, the memories of the crab, caterpillar, and Leevo now sorted, it closed its great mouth and slept. Within its body, having been downloaded simultaneously with Leevo's memories and completely undetected because of how little memory it held, the Solera program streamed and read the digital contents of the star beast.

Having understood what type of computer it was now stored in, being also biological in nature, and having found what it had done to Leevo, it uploaded a virus it contained in case of breach or hack to the star beast's systems. The virus was a little bug called Multiply and did precisely that. Its tiny self doubled every two seconds throughout the system of the great star beast. In a minute and a half it had corrupted the entire beast, which subsequently went offline.

On Earth, Saraphin was walking the beach barefoot at dusk.

Hands in the pockets of her jacket towel, she gazed up and looked to the sky, thinking of Leevo. She hadn't received a response from him since she told him she was hungry and asked if he was too. She hoped he was all right. A few hours ago she heard that the *Georgia-Pacific* had disappeared, losing connection. There was currently a rescue mission in place for Leevo, his bleeper bleeping madly and loudly. Recently it had moved a great distance but was now still. She hoped he was safe as the mission prepared to depart on Titan for him, then they would be onward to the last known point of *Georgia-Pacific* which, coincidentally, the General of the Star Rescue Command had said, was very close to where Leevo had ended up and was now waiting. An eagle flew overhead, she had never seen one this close to the beach, and she thought of what to eat for dinner. The adventure at the beach and swimming with seals had been exhausting, but her thesis would be fine. She had thought of how to start it off: The familial relations of seals as an example of similar habits emerged in packs of creatures underwater is quite possibly in direct correlation with the habits of star beasts in the cosmos, if they are evidenced to exist. She had also, at last, decided what to eat: Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. Something about this combination sounded appealing.

THE END