FACE IN THE DARK

Those who came before.

BY DEBORAH WALKER

Conglomerate time ticked. In the 24-hour regime of the habitat, the automated lights faded to simulated night. The night blinds shuttered into place. Throughout the Conglomerate colonies, time is unified and indifferent to the rotation of local suns.

Dan lay in the darkness counting the deep, slow breaths of his wife, drifting towards the pull of sleep, until ... he saw it. He shuddered.

"What's the matter?" Arrelle whispered.

"I thought you were asleep."

"No."

The bed was small, but she seemed too far away. Dan slipped closer and felt the warmth of her body.

"Do you see one?" she asked.

"It's by the window." Dan pointed to the shadows, at the figure resolved out of darkness. The indistinct, small shape walked with jerky movements like a worn recording made on an antiquated device.

"I see it," said Arrelle, her voice devoid of inflection. "The doctor ran the tests again, today. He says that the air's clean. There's no trace of hallucinogens."

The shadow figure moved a few centimetres.

"I'm beginning to think that we've all gone mad," said Arrelle.

Dan said nothing.

"Did you hear me, Dan?"

Dan hesitated before saying: "Father McConnell will try another exorcism tomorrow."

Arrelle sighed. "It won't do any good."

McConnell, the colony's trans-faith priest, had read the *Conglomerate Book of Devotion* blank trying different exorcisms. All human things have value. Faith was levelled into a matter of equality. A Catholic exorcism was equal to a Voodoo prayer chant or to a Vedic mantra. This had proved to be the case. Each of McConnell's expulsions had had the same result: failure.

"What do you think it wants, Dan?"

"I ... don't know." Can the dead want anything? "Perhaps it's just a *restligeist*." That

was the most popular theory in the mining labs. "It's just an echo. Something that's ingrained into the air

or the stones of this planet."

"The Stone Tape theory? You think they're alien memories somehow imprinted onto the wall. A psychic echo?" asked Arrelle. She looked at the shadow creeping over the wall. "How can that be true? It doesn't make any sense. The Conglomerate doesn't recognize psychic phenomena."

"I know," said Dan. "But they've run the tests. There's no electromagnetic disturbances, or changes in ionization, or changes in the radiation levels. There's nothing we can detect."

Arrelle touched Dan's arm. "Why can't you do something? You work in the labs. Why don't you do something?"

"I'm a *geologist*, Arrelle," said Dan. "The medical and the physics teams are doing everything they can." In fact, it seemed that most of the conversations in the mining labs were devoted to speculations about the night visitors. The labs were lagging behind the Conglomerate's schedules. Dan was a supervisor, but he had no idea how he could motivate his team. The colony was slowly falling apart because of these night shadows.

Arrelle pulled the sheets around her neck. "I'm so cold."

"It's all in your imagination." Dan tapped a command into his wrist-bracelet. He held the small screen towards her, lighting her face with flickering chiaroscuro fluorescence. "Look," he said. "Look. There's no change in temperature."

"Then why am I so cold?"

The shadow figure slowly turned. It raised its three arms above its head and slowly sketched out an incomprehensible gesture.

"I read the Conglomerate's first contact protocols again," said Arrelle.

"How can we make first contact with that?"

"I want to try, Dan. We can't live like this."

"And what would you say?"

"I'd say that we were sorry."

A small oval of red light formed in the shadow's face. "Its eye is open," said Dan. "That means that it'll be gone soon." Its red eye hung in the sky of its face like an accusation.

Dan and Arrelle watched as the shadow moved along the wall. When it reached the corner it faded out of sight.

"I wish we could leave," said Arrelle. She curled lower into the sheets, folding her body, knees tight to her chest.

"You know that we can't," said Dan. It was impossible to leave a Conglomerate colony. Once the seed ship had deposited its frozen bodies, it moved on, following the scout ships along the path of Conglomerate expansion. Conglomerate colonization was an efficient, automated process. The colonists slowly melted

into re-life, awakening to a colony made safe and habitable by the soldier and construction auto-drones.

Dan sighed. He got out of bed, reaching for his robe. Whatever the computer said, it was cold in this room. He walked over to the window and touched a button to iris open the blinds. Next time he saw the thing, he'd keep quiet. Talking about it with Arrelle was only making things worse. Whatever the shadow was, there was nothing Dan could do about it.

The low red-eye sun, slung in the sky, cast long shadows. In the distance, against the rose-red light, the towers of the ruined city were bone white needles, extending towards the horizon. It must have once been marvellous. Dan saw a discarded Conglomerate Humvee buggy. He saw the remains of a soldier auto-drone. He saw the fields of three armed skeletons, bones large and small, slowly dissolving in the acid atmosphere.

"It's not our fault," whispered Dan. "We didn't know."

"We never asked," said Arrelle. "We just accepted the Conglomerate's offer."

Across the horizon the shadows moved, remnants of the evicted dead who were loathe to leave their home. ■

Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration.