GENIUS LOCI

Interactive fieldwork.

BY S. R. ALGERNON

At first, I mistook the skittering footfalls outside my tent for thunder. I jammed my pillow over my ears and returned my attention to the geosurvey data on my phone. After two weeks on this backwater planet, I didn't have even half the data I needed. I had timed my visit to coincide with an alignment of the planet's three moons. According to Dr Feldman, that would set the atmosphere abuzz and be the perfect test of my hypothesis that the crystalline formations on the planet's surface were a product of the planet's mesmerizing storms.

Nobody told me that, for the locals, this was Synergy Month. The whole village was full of clanging and the squealing of pupae. The weather had cut me off from the orbital communications hub, so I couldn't even watch through the orbiting satellites. Worst of all, the locals who were supposed to help me carry equipment up to the mountains turned me away, even when I doubled the price. *We cannot, they said. The Spirit-Storm gathers. The Queenling beckons.*

Explain that to my thesis committee.

With only a few more days on-planet, I found a tent and set off for the mountains myself. I couldn't carry a full complement of scanners, but I could make do with the apps on my phone and hope to clean up the data afterwards.

Outside, lightning struck close enough to cast shadows of exoskeletons and segmented limbs against the walls of my tent. A spiny leg tore through its fabric and impaled a corner of my sleeping bag.

I wriggled free, stuffed my phone into a trash bag and managed an insectoid version of running with the bulls until I lunged onto the rocks by the roadside.

That was close. I recalled a quip from Dr Soto's Xeno-archaeology class. *Out on the frontier, the bugs step on you.*

The insectoid that had ruined my tent extricated its leg and weaved through the crowd towards me.

"Apologies," it said. "I hope I did not injure you."

"Just a scratch or two."

"You should join the procession. The Spirit-Catcher will find a spirit that will heal your wounds."

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"I'd rather take my chances with the clinic at the spaceport," I said, as I dusted myself off.

"Spaceports come and go. The Spirits will always be with us," said the insectoid pilgrim as it rejoined the procession. "Have a safe journey."

I climbed up the hillside and watched the storm. Now free from the distracting footfalls and echoes down below, I noticed that most of the lightning arced towards a ridge in the distance. I trudged to the top of the ridge, and it turned out to be the weathered edge of an impact crater. Lightning had scorched and melted the rock, leaving it alternately pockmarked and slick.

I photographed the crater surface. Three more strikes etched a radiating network of lines onto my vision through my closed eyelids. My skin tingled. My ears rang. The lightning pooled or collected somehow in the crater. *Why would lightning seek low ground? Was something catching it?*

Maybe I could get a dissertation out of that Spirit-Catcher nonsense after all.

I aimed my phone at the glowing spot in my field of vision and stepped forwards. The slope was steeper than I thought, but I held my ground. I felt eerily calm. All my training told me to get clear, but the crater drew the energy to its centre. After recording a dozen more strikes, I turned to walk back to the trail.

The mud slipped underfoot. I fell to one knee and pushed off with my hands. As I regained my footing, strands like spider silk clung to my palms and fingertips.

Lightning flashed once more. The

strands glowed. Every muscle in my body convulsed and I tumbled backwards. As my head struck the ground, pain sent me into a nauseated daze. As I fell, fibres gathered into a cocoon around me — a shimmering, silvered Faraday cage.

I awoke at the bottom of the crater, hanging from a web by strands that spanned the crater floor. They supported my weight like marionette strings. The cocoon enveloped each leg, arm and finger individually, so it did not encumber my movement.

Lightning struck. The strands of the thick web above me glowed as the current passed overhead.

A rustling sound caught my ear, and I turned to see a twelve-legged arachnoid shape emerge from an alcove in the shadows. As it approached, my arms pulled tight against my chest in a dead-Pharaoh pose. The strands connecting me to the web pulled taut, lifting me off the ground.

"You must be the Spirit-Catcher," I said, grateful that the cocoon permitted me to speak.

"When the others arrive," said the Spirit-Catcher, "do as I instruct you and do not say a word." The cocoon tightened around my neck and then released. "I will know if you try to deceive me."

The Spirit-Catcher inspected the corners of the web, which held hundreds of battered machines and dozens of non-human skeletons.

The web that confined me disgorged a dented, blood-flecked medi-bot, which rolled towards me.

"You can use this, yes?"

I nodded. All the field researchers had to learn as part of their training.

The Spirit-Catcher seemed satisfied and scuttled back to the alcove. The lightning stopped. I heard a regal voice echo through the chamber.

"All praise the Spirit-Catcher. Bring forth the injured and infirm."

I told myself they would let me go once the procession had left, but the pilgrim's words stuck with me.

"Spaceports come and go. The Spirits will always be with us." ■

S. R. Algernon studied fiction writing and biology, among other things, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He currently lives in Singapore.

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