

# THE PALIMPSEST PLANET

*A helping hand.*

BY S. R. ALGERNON

**T**he core of a world is more than magma, thought Raccoon, as she hunched over her scout craft's console. *It's what remains after you strip the rest away. It's the starting point of rebirth.*

A desiccated sphere of ash, glass and volcanic rock grew large in Raccoon's view-screen. The image blurred and wavered as the computer struggled to compensate for lingering radiation.

"What's your visual assessment, 8666?" asked Dispatch, a voice over the console speaker. The voice changed with each assignment. SEEK — the Space Exploration and Emergency Corps — no longer handled the Supernova Recovery Survey directly. Regional contractors dispatched local scouts — like Raccoon — and sent reports back to Earth.

Dispatch never called her Raccoon. A human captain had given her the name once, on account of her striped dorsal coloration. She had grown to like it.

"This planet must have taken a direct hit from a stellar fragment," said Raccoon. "The surface is barely holding together." She spoke in a squeaky, hatchling register so that a microphone designed for human speech could pick up her Lithian voice.

"There's no hope for life down there, 8666. Abort the search and blink out."

The blink drive operated outside the parameters of conventional space-time and — for safety's sake — outside the gravity wells of core human worlds. It could whisk Raccoon back to Lithia in a femtosecond or turn her into a microsingularity. It was — like SEEK itself — a choice of last resort for frontier worlds.

"I want to see the surface for myself first," said Raccoon, taking the shuttle into a dive.

"Fine. Just a single pass. Remember, even you Lithians have limitations."

*Even me.*

The joke among the local crews was that SEEK headquarters was climate controlled to suit human specifications and not a comfortable place for outliers. Extremophiles — to use the human word — tended to find work as scouts but not to rise much above that in the SEEK ranks.

"Warning," said the computer. "Radiation levels exceeding lethal levels. Cabin temperature now at 60°C and rising."

"Disengage climate control," said Raccoon. "Redirect power to engines."



The heat carried with it the harsh exhilaration of a midsummer's day. On Lithia, parents brought eggs out of the Shelter Caves on the twentieth day after they were laid. They set the eggs down on the sand at sunrise and retrieved them at sundown. The heat hardened the shells and toughened the hatchlings-to-be.

Raccoon flew low over a cracked plain, pockmarked with impact craters. Flickers of light caught her eye. They jumped on their own, flying like sparks from an anvil. They rolled across the flat expanse, writhed, and jumped again.

*Those are fresh lava flows. If the embers had simply fallen to the surface, the lava would have washed them away. Instead, the embers swim upstream.*

"Something is moving here," said Raccoon. "I think it might be alive."

"8666, I have the sensor logs in front of me. That's just debris from the stellar fragment. The xeno guys tell me that plasma can stay hot for a surprisingly long time. This is a dead world."

*I don't need the sensor logs, thought Raccoon. I can pick out the spectral signature with my own eyes.* The hotspots were evenly spread out over half of the planet, no doubt the half that had caught the stellar fragment head on, and somewhat sparser elsewhere. The only

exceptions were the deepest fissures and impact craters. There, the embers glowed like beacons.

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In the depths of the fissures, where the glow of lava merged with celestial white, the embers congregated by the thousands. They lined the surface of the lava, keeping it fluid. Here, their movements had a coordinated rhythm.

*They're shivering.* When sandstorms blocked out the sun on Lithia, everyone in the community, whether or not they had laid eggs that year, huddled over the eggs to keep them warm. Raccoon longed to comfort the embers, but with what?

She glanced over the console until a pattern in the warning lights caught her eye. She flew to the nearest fissure and dove deeper.

"What are you doing, 8666?" said Dispatch, now scratchy and synthetic. "I'm losing your signal. Pull up with thrusters or blink out before you wreck the shuttle."

Raccoon eyed the blink controls. The blink drive scared the hell out of her, but it was a comfort to know that something in the Universe didn't play by Earth's rules.

"Negative," said Raccoon. "I am detecting an instability in the blink drive. In accordance with safety protocols, I am jettisoning the drive and returning to orbit on manual thrusters."

Raccoon released the drive. It sank into the lava flow, and something shuddered deep below the surface.

SEEK administrators thought of the blink drive like they thought of Raccoon, as a tool to get from point A to point B. *We're more than that, thought Raccoon. Cut us free from our confinement and we will surprise you.*

Raccoon opened the throttle and aimed skyward. The glow of her shuttle faded as she returned to the cold void of space. Beneath her, the planet's crust peeled open as the blink drive detonated. The conflagration within glowed like a pulsar.

"What on Earth...?" said Dispatch.

*What on Earth, indeed.* Raccoon had studied Earth's past. She knew of the Siberian Traps, and how their eruption had lasted a million years. Perhaps the gash she had created would last that long; long enough for its inhabitants to find a new home.

"Farewell," said Raccoon, low enough to elude the translator. "One day, you'll find your way back to the stars." ■

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