

We Come In Peace (by Robert Bee)

The shadow moved. It was blacker than the deepest umbra cast by the moonlight bathed trees. Deeper than the blackest nothingness of nightmares.

“What was that?” whispered Sergeant Logan, hunkered behind a gnarly tree. He was just fifty metres off the field at the head of the vanguard. Only two men on point were further in than him. The remainder of the platoon were spread out behind him, each to their own tree. They were waiting for his signal to advance.

“What was what, Sarge?” Corporal Brin, the left point, whispered back to him.

“Something up ahead, a shadow. Moved,” Logan said, then cursing his own breach of the ‘silence on patrol’ rule, made a shushing signal, hoping Brin could see it in the dark of the forest.

Brin saw it. Not the signal. The shadow. But he was too late. Before he could move, before he could scream, it was upon him. For a moment, the shadow’s edge coruscated across the full spectrum of black, appeared to swell, then returned to its basket ball size.

Logan stared into the dark, his eyes straining to sort out the shadows, his mouth dry. He decided to risk another whisper. It came out a croak. “Brin?” He strained his senses.

But Brin was gone.

Porter? Logan looked towards the position of the right point man. He rose to a crouch, took a deep breath, then moved quickly in that direction, giving a low warning whistle as he approached. A soft reply whistle told him Porter knew he was coming.

Logan dropped down beside Porter’s tree. “Brin’s gone,” he whispered.

“Dead?”

“Gone. Probably dead. For his sake, hopefully dead,” Logan said, weariness creeping into his voice. He looked up through the branches of the strange trees. Like those back on Earth, they had wood and leaves. Otherwise, totally unlike them. This place would be a botanist’s dream, he thought.

That brought him back to the present. Through the branches he could see the stars, but not a familiar constellation amongst them. Not surprising, he knew, as they were one hundred and forty four light years from Earth. Patterns changed.

“How?” Porter was saying, breaking into his thoughts.

Logan shrugged in the dark. “The natives are restless.”

The three ships of the Exodus expedition had landed on the fourth planet of Alpha Eridani with all the attributes of their names – *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*. Due to the ruggedness of the terrain, they couldn’t land close together, but managed to touch down a few kilometres apart, exchanging mutual congratulations for a safe arrival on a strange new world. The planet was christened ‘Beulah Land’.

Then they lost contact with *Charity*.

Faith and *Hope* triangulated *Charity*’s landing site and to their amazement, found a large gravitational anomaly at the location. To their further amazement, as they watched, the anomaly receded until levels returned to normal.

“We must re-establish contact,” Captain Crookes of *Faith* said. “One third of our expedition...”

“Right,” Captain Ghandi of *Hope* said. “Sounds like my soldiers are going to hit the ground running.”

“Better take some medics with them,” Crookes said. “Just in case...”

“... it’s more than just a broken radio,” Ghandi agreed grimly. “Welcome to Beulah Land.”

It had taken Sergeant Logan’s platoon three hours to reach *Charity*’s landing site. They arrived while the sun – it was easier to think of their new star, Alpha Eridani, by the old star’s name – was still an hour from setting.

Charity’s landing site was quite beautiful. A wide flat field covered in a lush dark green grass with patches of vivid orange wild flowers. There was a dense forest of tall trees on the western edge. *Charity*’s party of botanists were going to have a ball, Logan thought in passing. Then it struck him. *Charity* – a colonising space ship over ninety metres tall and thirty metres diameter at its base – was nowhere to be seen.

Logan signalled ‘caution’, then ‘eyes open’. With a final signal to ‘spread out’, he advanced slowly towards the field’s centre, unease rising in his gut.

He saw something at his feet and stopped. He waited till all the platoon had passed him, circling, then also stopping. He looked up and found, like in an old B-grade sci-fi movie, his platoon stood in a wide circle, on the perimeter of a large empty patch of burnt grass. The landing site. But... where was *Charity*?

Had it relaunched? No, not enough fuel.

Exploded? What was there to explode? Besides, he looked around him. Where was the debris?

“Sarge, over here.” Corporal Brin was waving from across the circle.

Logan strode quickly over the scorched ground and joined Brin who was looking down at a strange object. Brin tapped it with his steel capped boot. “Metal,” he said.

“What is it?” Private Janson asked, as the whole platoon gathered to stare.

It was about five metres long and just one centimetre wide. Flat as sheet iron. Straight as a flag pole, but the last metre at one end had four long prongs, like teeth in a hair comb. There was nothing like that on *Hope*.

Suddenly Private Sullivan gasped. “My god, I know what that is... was.”

“Well?” Logan snapped.

“It’s a dinner fork.”

“Damned strange natives,” Porter muttered. “Wide eyed bandits with AK-47s I can fight. But we haven’t seen anything since we found that crazy stretched fork.”

Not quite true, Logan thought. They’d seen some movement at the forest edge, strange dark shapes. He wanted answers. He’d had his platoon check their weapons, then moved towards the forest. The sun had set as they entered it amid the deep shadows of the alien trees.

Then he’d lost Brin.

What were they facing, Logan agonised. What could make a whole space ship disappear and stretch a fork like a piece of spaghetti? Better find out or the colony’s sunk before it starts.

He whistled ‘advance’ and, watching for moving shadows, they slowly edged deeper into the forest. By the time they reached the

clearing, Logan had lost three more men. Without a sound. Without a shot fired. They were just ... gone.

Logan stared at the clearing and, finally, understood why.

At its centre hovered a huge black sphere, as big as a bull elephant. It had no solid surface. It was just an area of empty nothingness, a spherical shadow.

Logan checked his remaining troops. Like him, they seemed to be holding on to a nearby tree, as if fighting a rip in the surf, drawing them towards the clearing.

Then, to his horror, out from under the giant sphere, emerged a swarm of smaller black spheres, basket ball sized, like chicks from under a mother hen.

Suddenly, in the clearing, a small sapling which had been leaning sharply towards the sphere, was uprooted and flew to it. With a brief flash of violet light, it disappeared.

Logan bellowed "Get the hell out" and started to claw his way backwards, against the rip. One of his men, Baker, he thought, lost his grip and slid across the ground, screaming into the clearing until, impossibly, stretching like a bloody straw, he disappeared into one of the baby spheres.

Logan groaned. Using all his strength to hold onto a sturdy tree, he jabbed his transmitter and called *Hope*.

Captain Ghandi answered. "What's your status...?"

"Desperate. I need to know something urgently," Logan yelled.

"What?"

"How do you say 'we come in peace' in Black-Hole-ese?"