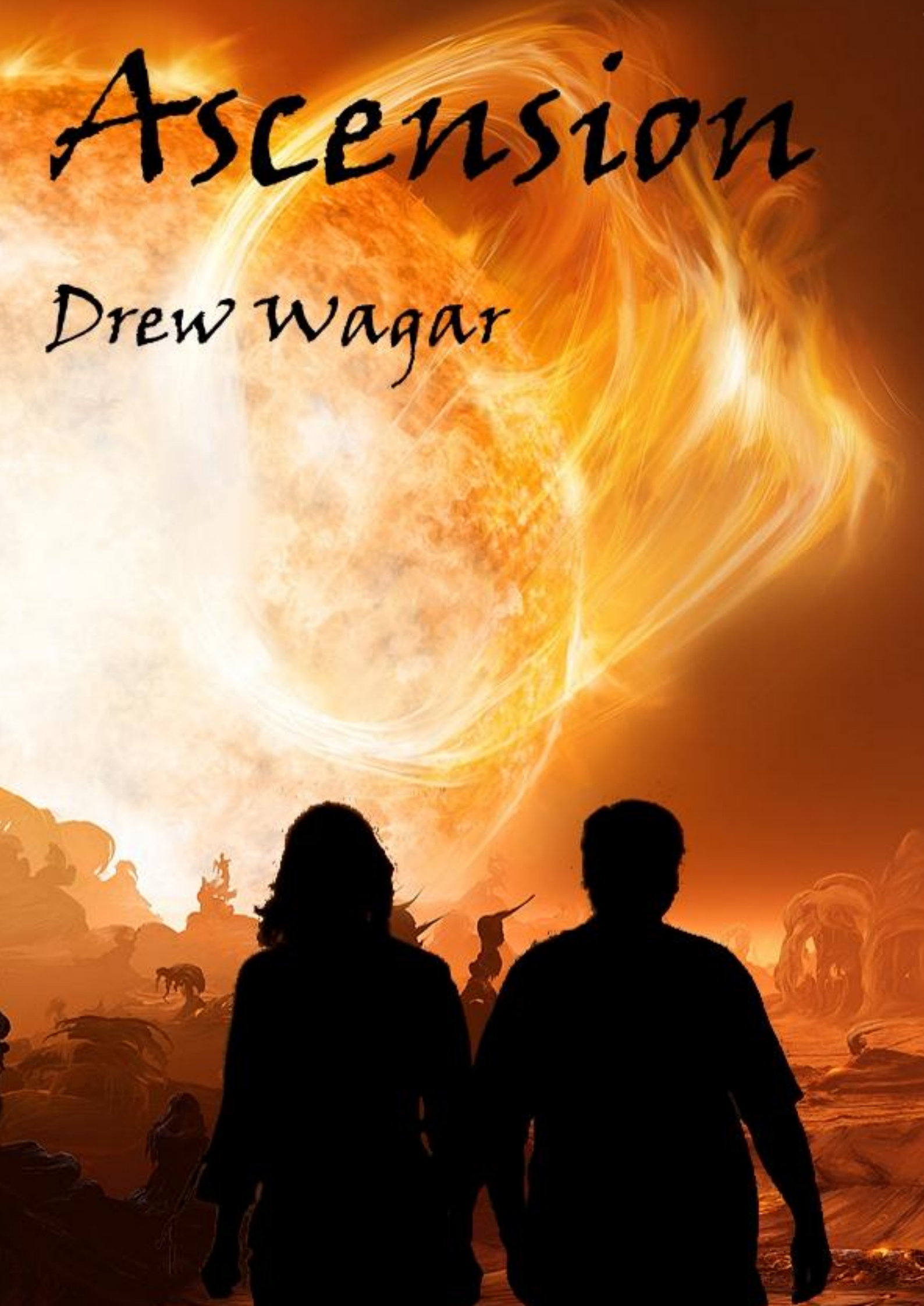


Ascension

Drew Wagar



Ascension

A short story based on the space trading game Oolite.

Written by Drew Wagar.

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Thanks to:

The Prophet Ezekiel for a bit of honest plagiarism. I often wonder if he saw some kind of spacecraft. His description in the first chapter of his book in the Old Testament invites a re-reading with the eyes of modern technology.

All those who enjoyed 'Nine' and wanted more!

Can you read?

If so, you're one of the lucky ones.

My Oolite books will always remain free to download and read. I deliberately make no financial gain from them. However if you enjoy them and would like to show your appreciation, I would like to suggest a donation to a charity local to me: the Ashford Dyslexia Centre.

Dyslexic children and adults find it very difficult to access the written word, particularly in the traditional 'black text on white background' format adopted for most printed material. This can cause acute 'visual stress'. It's been estimated that the dyslexic brain has to work around four to five times as hard to process text when compared to a non-dyslexic. Imagine trying to read a block of text when the words keep shifting position, change size, re-order themselves and go blurred at whim – that's what traditional books look like to a dyslexic person.

In children this can lead to behavioural problems as they are not able to understand why they can't access text as easily as others. Schools are typically unequipped to detect or deal with the needs of dyslexic children. As a result children are frequently labelled as 'stupid' or 'slow' despite overall high intelligence. Given that most teaching and testing focuses around the written word (clearly you have to be able to read the question in order to answer it) dyslexic children are disadvantaged on all sides, unable to demonstrate the abilities they do have. Writing is also problematic.

Often, dyslexic children have far superior non-verbal reasoning, logic and sequencing abilities. They often demonstrate higher degrees of musicianship, creativity, entrepreneurial and empathic abilities. Crucial to getting support to help people with dyslexia is an expert diagnosis and the subsequent recommendations. There are many ways to help; ebook readers, special glasses, additional time for exams and so on.

The Ashford Dyslexia Centre exists to advise, diagnose, support and provide specialist teaching for those affected by dyslexia in my home town. People with dyslexia may have a problem with traditional books, but they still love stories. Please consider helping them to access what we take for granted as book-lovers.

You can donate at <http://www.wagar.org.uk>

Thank you.

Ascension

Miri smiled at Meru's clumsy attempts to control his herg. To be fair it was newly broken in and still a young beast, yet Meru was not the best of riders and the herg seemed to be aware of this. Miri watched, amused, as the beast circled on its hind legs, bucking and rearing as Meru coaxed it into reaching the crest of the hill.

Miri watched as the herg caught sight of the endless ocean, the bright red glare of the setting sun forcing it to squint before a nictitating membrane flashed across its eyes. The beast snorted and fidgeted. Meru almost slipped off, grabbing the exposed third vertebra just in time to steady himself, but losing his shoulder bag in the process.

'Flares and droughts!' Meru cursed, struggling to reach the bag and retain his precarious balance.

Miri stifled a laugh with her hand, 'You should become a jester!'

'You could... help!' he snapped.

Miri dismounted her herg and walked quietly across to Meru. A touch and a soft whisper and the herg was calm a moment later.

'How do you do that?' Meru demanded.

Miri shrugged, she'd always been good with animals. She understood them better than people. Animals never lied and deceived, unlike people.

'Why have you brought me all the way up here anyway?' Meru demanded, stretching out his back and rubbing his posterior. It had been a long ride. 'What was so important that you...'

Miri silenced him with a wave and put a finger to her lips. She was like that, she spoke more with her hands than her voice. Meru knew better than to hurry her; she could never be rushed.

She was looking up into the heavens, her gaze fixated on the winking star.

Meru counted himself as her friend, one of very few, but in truth he didn't know her well. She was one of those people who could be around for a long time, yet if someone had asked you some basic questions about her, you would find it difficult to answer them. Meru knew little of her background, her family or even her ambitions. She was small, neat and aloof, methodical in everything she did. She had come to the Cathedral to study, and that was that.

'What do you think it is?' she asked, suddenly turning around and gazing directly at him with her large brown eyes.

Meru looked up. The winking star, so called because it occasionally disappeared for a few hours at a time, shone gently in the sky, its brilliant white light in sharp contrast to the huge orb of their familiar red sun. Already it was brighter than when they had arrived at the hilltop, its intensity growing as dusk proceeded.

Unlike most other stars it never twinkled and it moved around the sky in a curious retrograde way. Occasionally it was possible to make out other fainter stars around it that seemed to come and go with a flash of blue. Many people claimed to have seen a 'blue flash', but few had. You need to be far away from the cities and the lights, and the sky had to be dark and clear.

'The Words tell us...'

'I'm not interested in the Words,' Miri snapped, almost angrily, her hands clenching and unclenching, 'What do you think it is?'

Meru frowned. He knew Miri had been reprimanded by one of the Masters for speaking out of turn in recital recently. Her direct manner often caused friction. She obviously had something on her mind. He sighed.

'I remember my children's tales,' he said. She looked at him expectantly, a half-smile on her face.

'Go on.' She nodded. With slight embarrassment, he mumbled the doggerel from his childhood.

'Light above

Light beyond,

Flash of blue

Come and gone.

Holy night

Star so fair,

Shining bright

Take me there.'

'An ancient rhyme,' Miri acknowledged. 'But not your thoughts.'

'It's a beacon, a guide,' Meru replied. 'Reminding us that what we have isn't permanent and we should make best use of the time we have...'

Miri threw her hands up in frustration. 'Oh! Have an original thought, Meru!'

'Like I said, it's mentioned in the Words.' Meru complained, 'That's all I know.'

'The Words!' Miri scoffed, 'The canticle of the high priestess I assume? I've heard it before! Go on then, if you must.'

'I looked, and I saw a wind-storm coming out from the winking star - an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like a woman. She ascended to the right hand of the Gods, there to become the glory of their likeness.'

She scowled at him, 'Well recited.' she said, her tone indicating disapproval and disappointment, 'You'll make an excellent intermediary!'

It was plainly not a compliment.

'Elucidate your thoughts.' he said, biting back a rebuttal.

She walked forward to the very summit of the hill, raising her arms and spinning around on the spot. Her herg shuffled away, confused by her movements and then went back to munching on the soft red Soofla bushes around them.

'I think it is... a place.' she said, eyeing him warily, her long black hair streaming away from her in a sudden gust of wind.

'A place?' Meru replied, 'What sort of place?'

'A meeting place, a place of commerce, a place of stories from across the heavens, like a forum, but amongst the stars.' Miri was gazing up with an almost rapturous expression on her face.

'A forum.' Meru said cautiously. Clearly Miri's imagination had run away with her this time. If she had been spouting such nonsense during recital it was no wonder the Master had been aggrieved!

'And no doubt there are people there too?'

He'd said it as a friendly joke, but she nodded enthusiastically.

'Oh yes, those fainter stars that come and go, they are the messengers, travellers from far, traders of rare and precious gems made from dreams and visions.'

Meru frowned, but decided to pursue her ridiculous train of thought until she tired of it. 'Poetic, but not realistic. How does one live on a point of light?'

Miri gestured back at the faint lights of the city, 'You might ask how we live inside those lights, perhaps the star is very far away.'

Meru conceded the point and then gently presented his definitive argument, 'Yet these people never visit us. In all the years the star has shone, never once have these people come here. Surely they know we're here, why do they stand aside?'

Miri looked longingly up at the star.

'Perhaps they know we aren't worthy of a visit.' she said bitterly, 'Perhaps they know how we suppress new ideas and ridicule those who think them!'

So that was it, Meru decided. Miri had been caught postulating her ideas by a Master. She said little, but when she did decide to talk she frequently timed it inappropriately.

'What did you say?' Meru prompted quietly.

Miri placed her head in her hands and took a deep breath, 'Why ask for ideas if you're not prepared to hear them?'

Meru favoured her with a look of sympathy. 'You're supposed to answer according to the Words, not to dream up...'

'The Cathedral is a centre of learning, no?' she exclaimed, waving her arms around and becoming unusually vocal. 'What is the point of rote learning? Recycling the thoughts of scholars from years eternal? Preparing pat answers to set questions? All they do is teach to the test, there's no room for any original thinking...'

Meru actually agreed with her sentiments, but he was far more practical. Original thinking could wait until one had earned a position. To do that, you needed to tread a well trodden path, and hold your tongue when appropriate, perhaps even say one thing and mean another. This little detail seemed to have eluded Miri.

Something caught his attention. He looked up, frowning.

'....the whole system is wrong.' She concluded, fuming. Then she glared, 'Are you listening to me?'

Meru didn't respond. This time it was he who gestured. He pointed, his hand trembling as it rose, to indicate something behind her.

Miri turned and gasped.

Near the winking star was another star, slowly moving away from its neighbour in the heavens. As they watched it grew brighter and took on a slightly greenish hue, a garish unpleasant colour, much unlike the soft reds and oranges that characterised their planet.

It continued to grow in intensity. Miri began to fancy that it had a faint tail behind it. Soon it

was obvious, the tail becoming distinctly yellow, floating in the sky like the wake of a ship.

'What is it?' Meru breathed in fear.

Miri's face reflected the strange glare of the falling star. She turned and smiled, her eyes wide.

'They're coming! They're coming! I knew it!'

The star had now become a glowing sphere. Miri fancied she could see flames trailing behind it. Was this some kind of chariot? A conveyance of some kind?

They heard two dull claps of thunder, far off in the distance, but there were no storm clouds. The evening was otherwise quiet, the sun sinking quickly into the ocean. The hergs looked up nervously at the sound, stamping their clawed feet and cringing, their shoulders raised in alarm.

'It's coming this way!' Meru gasped, turning about and preparing to flee, 'Miri! We must leave! Miri!'

Miri was frozen to the spot in awe. The sphere was now a blazing ball of fire growing larger with deadly speed.

In a brief instant a terrifying noise rose about them; an echoing torment of ripping and shrieking. The volume was astonishing, reverberating from the hills around them, doubling and re-doubling into a cacophony of overpowering mayhem. The hergs panicked and fled, shrieking. Miri and Meru instinctively threw themselves to the ground as the conflagration passed above them. A wave of heat singed them as it raced past, the noise dropping in pitch dramatically.

Seconds passed and the noise faded abruptly away.

Miri raised her head in the direction the fireball had been travelling. She gasped as a huge eruption of smoke, dust and flame appeared not two miles further on down towards the valley. A moment later the ground shook beneath them and a dull roar assaulted her ears.

The flame faded abruptly and the smoke and dust began to drift away. A huge furrow had been ploughed in the soft ground of the valley. Something lay at the end of the furrow. Something dark, something metallic.

Meru scrambled on his hands and knees alongside her, shaking with fear. There was no sign of the hergs.

Miri slowly raised her hands and placed them on either side of her head, her mouth wide with astonishment.

They weren't the first to reach it, as it had fallen closer to the city than the range of hills in which they had been riding. Without the hergs they had been forced to walk back through the boggy fens and it took far longer than it had to travel up. In the near darkness they had to be doubly cautious to avoid a dangerous fall.

'Hurry!' Miri called out from ahead, gesturing to Meru.

Meru was tired, and struggled to keep up with her. Her lithe athletic form seemed to have little trouble with the difficult terrain, and she clearly had reserves of strength he did not enjoy.

'I'm coming.' he muttered.

As they left the side of the hill the ground firmed up. Water was now running in a stream alongside a broken path. The stream was reassuring, easy to follow and its flickering surface reflected the light of the stars, guiding them downwards.

Meru caught up with Miri when she reached a small natural dam that overlooked the lower part of the valley.

'Look!' she breathed in excitement.

Meru could see the huge furrow close up now. It was littered with broken bits of debris, twisted and unrecognisable. Right at the tip lay a large dark mass. Meru's first impression was that it was a solid slab of burnished metal. It was largely composed of interlocking geometric shapes, with virtually no curves in evidence. From his perspective there were two large circular orifices showing in the rear, from which clouds of steam and smoke were curling upwards into the night air.

He could also see the glittering yellow flicker of torch lights around the object, and more of them slowly moving up from the general direction of the city. Faint sounds of voices reached them across the cool evening air.

'We need to see.' Miri announced, and vaulted over the dam, skipping lightly on down the path. Meru caught his breath and wearily followed her.

By the time Meru caught up again Miri had reached the crowd of people that had gathered around the object. She had already forced her way through to the front and was staring at the object with intense fascination.

Up close the metallic nature of the object was obvious, but it was not as smoothly panelled as initial inspection had suggested. Every so often there were odd protrusions, small rectangular hatches, some big enough to carry the suggestion of doors or entrances. Steam and smoke continued to drift from the rear, with a soft hissing sound.

The crowd seemed wary. All had pushed forward to within about ten metres of the object

and were standing around the rim of the piles of crushed and turned earth that surrounded it. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that no one should go closer.

Meru could overhear snatches of broken conversations.

'A fallen star, did you see it land?'

'I heard it overhead! Crashing down! Almost took my head off!'

'It should be destroyed! Burnt! Buried!'

'Lucky it fell short of the city!'

'It's a piece of sky, not of this world!'

Some teenagers, evidently bored with the inaction, started flinging stones at the object. They bounced off with a dull metallic clang. One stone hit one of the smaller rectangular hatches.

There was a series of clanks from within the object, as if some strange machinery was stirring into life. The crowd held its breath.

With a jolt, a loud bang and a huge ejection of steam the foremost part of the ship lifted up abruptly. The crowd gasped in fear and, as one, sprang backwards. Some ran in terror.

Meru managed to get to Miri's side

'We should leave!'

Miri shook her head, 'No. I must see this.'

The steam dissipated slowly, revealing a gaping aperture on top of the object. Miri could see a hood of sorts, hinged at the back and raised up by two metal pillars as thick as a man's arm. The hood itself was similar to the rest of the object, but appeared to have glass sides, as she could see through it all the way to the other side.

With a final hiss the hood stopped moving and silence descended once again.

For a while no one moved. There were cautious mumblings, and some of those who had fled slowly came back.

Miri looked around the the people.

'Isn't anyone going to investigate?' she demanded, showing the palms of her hands.

She was met by blank stares and tutted, 'Cowards.'

Meru grabbed her arm, 'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to have a look.'

'What? Are you mad?'

'No, I'm curious. This is a visit from the heavens, I must see them!'

She pulled away from Meru, and walked over to the object. She gingerly raised a hand and touched the object's flank. She was surprised to find it cool to the touch. The crowd watched her with trepidation.

'Miri, get back here!' Meru called.

'It's all right.' she replied. The crowd gasped as she vaulted up on top of the object and walked over to the hood.

Miri was confused by what she saw. Underneath the hood was something like a small room. There was a chair surrounded by a series of tables in which lights and buttons were placed. Many of them were a familiar and reassuring red colour, some were even flashing. In front of the chair was a green circular dish divided into four quadrants. It was glowing faintly.

'Come and see!' Miri called. 'It's safe!'

Meru and a few of the more intrepid youngsters joined her on top of the object, peering down into the small room. Miri could make out a small circular tube behind the chair which appeared to lead down inside.

Quickly she jumped down despite Meru's continued protestations. The tube contained a series of recessed foot and hand holds, allowing her to easily descend. Inside she found what she took to be curiously mundane sleeping and cooking arrangements, simple beds and a collection of trays and utensils. The room was dimly lit by little red lights. Miri stared at one for a moment, wondering how it could work. It didn't flicker like fire.

Another tube led from the rear of this room to one much larger. On entering she realised that she was nearing the rear of the object, as she recognised what could only be the insides of the two large orifices they had seen on the outside. The room was virtually empty, with the only decoration being a series of arrows and bays marked out on the floor.

Meru and the others joined her as she looked around.

'What do you think it is?' Meru whispered to her.

Miri ignored him, raising her hands and placing them top of her head, spinning around and looking about her.

Her face was a mask of disappointment.

'But there is no one here! Where are they?' she said, disconsolately.

The object, or 'Fallen Star' as it had been dubbed, had been declared off-limits from the moment the Masters had arrived. Miri had claimed it was because they had no idea what to do about it and that their laws and words had no explanation. Unfortunately she had said this out loud and landed herself another period of hard labour aimed at taming her wayward spirit.

Meru found her gazing at it from the tallest parapet of the Cathedral the next morning.

'Still waiting for 'them'?' he asked.

'No need to tease.' she snapped back. 'They should have been in there. Why come down here and then vanish? It makes no sense!'

'Perhaps they were never there. It could just be a broken thing, thrown away the same way we would discard a worn out shoe or knife.'

Miri seemed unconvinced. She rested her chin on her hands and stared out across the fields towards the end of the valley where the gouge in the ground was clearly visible.

She shook her head. 'No. That's not it. But the Masters know something.'

'What makes you think that?'

'You saw how quickly they stopped people looking at it. You saw how they censured me!'

'That was because you shot your mouth off as usual!'

'An excuse, that's all!'

Meru sighed. 'But why? We saw the inside. It was nothing special, a few empty rooms, some clever lights....'

'Exactly.' Miri said, turning and fixing him with a look. 'Nothing special was there and no visitors either.... so what is it for...'

She frowned, and then her eyes grew wide and darted from one side to another. She was clearly thinking something through.

'Miri?' Meru growled in warning, knowing the look on her face.

'Oh, nothing.' she said, leaning back against the stone wall. She idly walked past Meru, humming to herself.

'Maybe.' she muttered, 'Just maybe! The Canticle!'

Meru reached for her, but she danced out of reach and fled down the spiral staircase that had led them up to the parapet.

'Don't do something stupid! Miri! Come back! Miri!'

Meru chased after her.

Miri had run all the way to the Fallen Star and had clambered aboard it before Meru arrived. He was surprised to see no sign of any guards, but the Masters had clearly indicated that any caught near it would be censured. He could only assume they were watching from afar. Doubtless Miri and he would receive a severe punishment as a result. Damn the girl!

'Miri! Come back down, if we're spotted...'

She didn't respond. He was forced to clamber up on top of the Fallen Star.

Miri was sitting in the chair, looking around at the lights and buttons, as if trying to work something out.

'What are you doing?' Meru demanded.

Miri waved him to silence, looked about her for a few more moments and then looked up at him.

'What if this is supposed to be empty?' she said, her eyes flashing with excitement.

Meru shook his head in bewilderment and Miri continued.

'Perhaps they never were here, they didn't intend to come down. What if this is a means to go to them? This could be an invitation, and it would be rude to refuse.'

'An invitation? To go where?'

Miri pointed at the winking star, just visible above the horizon in the glow of dawn.

'There.'

Meru stared at her, 'You don't really think this thing could take to the skies do you? It has crashed, it is damaged, that much is obvious!'

'If I can find a way...'

She randomly pressed one of the buttons. There was a soft musical tone and a voice from nowhere spoke in a curiously feminine voice.

'Ident Computer Activated.'

Miri frowned and pressed the button again.

'Ident Computer Deactivated.'

'Miri stop messing around with things you don't understand! Come out of there now before you...'

Miri had pressed another button.

'Escape pod sequence initiated, please standby. Ejection commencing in ten...'

The hood suddenly began to lower into place. Miri glanced up, fear etched on her face for a moment, before a look of resolution replaced it.

'Eight, seven, six...'

'Miri!' Meru demanded, trying to hold the hood open. It was no use, the mechanism was robust and far stronger than he was, 'Get out of there, please! Now! Miri!'

Miri sat with her hands folded, 'Meru go! I want to do this! You know I don't fit in at the Cathedral. This is why I'm here! This is my purpose! Meru...'

The hood closed with a solid thunk, there was a hiss of pressurised air. Meru could see Miri speaking, but he could no longer hear her.

Meru pounded on the hood, 'Miri! No! Stop it! Make it stop!'

Steam issued from the area immediately around the hood and sections of the metal exterior began to fold away in sequence. Meru could see Miri gesturing for him to get out of the way.

He jumped back with a last desperate look. She smiled and waved, her face composed and almost serene.

There was a loud roar and he jumped, falling into the soft ground beside the Fallen Star. By the time he rolled over and looked up, all he could make out was a vapour trail, shooting up from the Fallen Star and rising into the sky. Meru could just make out a small dark dot towing a sheet of blue flame. Within minutes it had disappeared from view and the vapour trail slowly drifted aside in the morning breeze.

The whole forward section of the Fallen Star appeared to have detached itself and lifted off into the sky, carrying Miri with it.

The Words came to Meru's mind. They had spoken of them only the night before.

'The Canticle...' he mouthed silently.

'I looked, and I saw a wind-storm coming out from the winking star - an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like a woman. She ascended to the right hand of the Gods, there to become the glory of their likeness.'

Meru wondered. The High Priestess? Was it possible?

He staggered slightly and then drew himself up and adopted an attitude of prayer.

'Bless you Miri, and bless us too.'

Author's Note

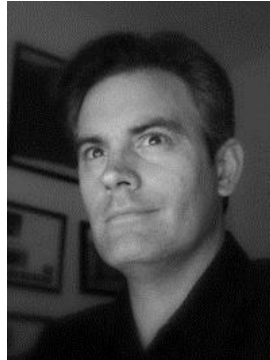
This is another 'very' short story. I like to juxtapose religion, space and science, as you get a rich vein of ideas and situations.

Miri and Meru have also been borrowed from my teenager rambles. At least I had a usable cast of spare characters! Inventing all the names can get a bit tedious.

I originally wrote an extra bit at the end to indicate what happened next, but I decided to remove it because it changed the point of view from where it had been during the rest of the story.

As a result the reader can interpret it one of two ways depending on their outlook; either it is a simple accident with unfortunate consequences, or it's part of some greater plan. I'll leave it up to you to decide.

About the Author



Drew has written a series of novels and short stories for the '[Oolite](#)' Universe, along with other contemporary ebooks. You can find them at his website below.

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