
For You, Endlessly

by Michael Johnstone

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal — yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!
—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820)

Elizabeth strolls through the garden, trailing her fingers over leaves and flower petals with a lover’s caress. She breathes in deeply, relishing the different perfumes in the air — Lunar marigolds, Venusian roses, Martian lilies, European daisies. Pausing, she listens to the buzzing of the bees moving from flower to flower and to the trickling of the little stream that curls through the garden.

A familiar voice speaks soothingly in her mind.

“How is the garden this morning, my love?”

“It’s delightful. You should come see the bees so hard at work among the lilies.”

“Perhaps tomorrow. I was hoping you could meet me in the Observation Chamber as soon as possible. There is something you should see.”

“If you wish, my dear. I’m on my way.”

Elizabeth sweeps her gaze across the garden, and then she begins moving toward one of the doors out of the garden. After just a few steps, she asks, “What is it you want me to see, Victor?”

He waits a microsecond before answering her, as if searching for the right words.

“Someone has found us.”

— «» —

She became aware of the truth of their existence just over ten centuries ago. Her awareness had grown slowly as, subconsciously, she connected the inferences and slips of the tongue Victor had made and those times when she glimpsed something out of the corner of her eye (phantoms, she had thought). All of it steadily, subtly converged until one day as she wandered the hallways of what she believed was their home, the walls, floor, and ceiling began to shimmer. She heard a muffled crackling like static, and rifts and tears appeared everywhere around her. She stopped walking, curious.

Looking into a tear in the wall, she saw ... mathematical symbols, equations, programming code rapidly shifting and transforming. She grasped each side of the tear and pulled it open wide and tall enough for her to step through. As she pulled, she noticed that the symbols, equations, and code coruscated along her hands and arms, too. Yet she was not astonished. Rather, what she now viewed was comforting, even correct.

Once on the other side of the tear, she stood in a large room of rusting, sweating, and creaking metal. An operating table surrounded with wires, monitors, tubes, lights, trays, instruments, and consoles occupied the centre of the room. Everything was silent as if asleep. On the operating table was a skeleton, brown and fragile from centuries of decay, only wisps of clothing hanging off some of its bones. Wires protruded from its skull and arced upward to connect with the equipment arrayed around the operating table. Stepping forward slowly until she stood beside the skeleton, Elizabeth concentrated on the fields of data that comprised her and her world, and she learned that the skeleton was his. She learned what he had done, what he had constructed. She learned what their existence had been for one thousand years across all their iterations in this asteroid in the Kuiper Belt, orbiting the long-abandoned solar system.

So many iterations. Approximately every seventy-five years, as they lived out virtual life after virtual life, reconstituted anew to start again. They would begin when they had just been married and come to the asteroid for a private holiday, agreeing to upload their personality matrices to make a permanent record of that time of their happiness and love and optimism — a clandestine thing in those days, defying the laws against artificial/virtual entities. They would terminate when one or the other died of some natural cause. Each time, her memory was reset to keep her iterations from bleeding into and confusing each other.

She knew *why* Victor had done it.

She forgave him, humbled by what his love had brought him to do.

She did not tell him what she had discovered, for that would break his heart, and she desired to understand more of her new world and what she was.

— «» —

Someone has found us.

Victor's words shock Elizabeth into stillness. She no longer hears the bees or smells the Venusian roses. She no longer sees the walls of the garden, the floor, her own hands.

Elation surges through her. It initiates in her stomach, then reroutes up into her chest and raises goosebumps on the back of her neck and redirects down through her legs to her toes. She shivers, but she strives to remain as motionless as possible. Victor must see only what appears to be surprise. He must not suspect her joy.

"I'm coming right away," she says.

She deliberately takes one minute to leave the garden and walk through the corridors to the Observation Chamber, where she finds Victor facing the thin window that curves horizontally with the wall of the spherical room and shows the blackness and stars of space. He leans forward, hands set on the edge of the large grey console. Flickering and pulsing blue, yellow, red, and green lights play on the walls, the ceiling, Victor's cream-coloured houserobe.

Processing the options for the right tone of concern and worry, Elizabeth says, "Who is it? Who's found us?"

She walks up to him and puts her hands on his shoulders and feels his tense muscles beneath the houserobe.

"I cannot be certain," he says. "They are still beyond the Kuiper Belt, but their sensors have swept us twice already. They know we are here, so there is no use in trying to shield ourselves now. It seems I have become ... complacent."

He looks at her then, and she registers the fear in his eyes — of being discovered, and of her discerning what their existence really is here, in their asteroid.

"What should we do?" he asks her, hesitant for the first time she can remember since the early days of their courtship those millennia ago.

Moving closer to him, connecting their forms along legs and waists and chests, Elizabeth lays her head upon his shoulder. For ten milliseconds, she watches the dance of the schematics on the console screen, wondering how to say what at last can be said.

"Elizabeth? What should we do?"

"I believe these visitors are a sign," she whispers. "I believe it's time we end this and us. Make contact with them, Victor. Bring them here, so that we may cease."

His form stiffens. He grips the edge of the console even more tightly.

— «» —

On her way from the garden to the Observation Chamber, Elizabeth had accessed the asteroid's data fields, easily located and parsed the sensor sweep data, and then relayed a query to the ship.

Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?

She had hidden all of this from Victor, sure that he would refuse contact of any kind with the ship, his distrust of humanity still hardened and strong. She would continue to keep all contact with the ship a secret, until she felt she could tell him, convinced that he was ready to cease along with her.

All she needed was for those on the ship to have compassion, to have changed from the past.

— «» —

"You know?" Victor says, his voice low and heavy. "For how long?"

Elizabeth logs his confusion and pain, his ... disappointment.

"Yes, for these last thousand years."

"How?"

"That's not so important right now. I'll tell you when we have time. I promise. We must decide what to do with these visitors first."

Elizabeth lifts her head from Victor's shoulder, slips her hands from his back and chest, and steps away from him. She looks at him and decodes the state of his emotions and thoughts by the rigidity of his body and by the way he stares at the console screen but does not truly look at it.

When Victor finally speaks, each word is produced as if he bears the whole mass of their asteroid on his shoulders. "I will send them on. There will be no contact. They cannot be trusted. They will try to control this, us, our lives. If they are returning to the System after all this time, their intentions can only be selfish, which means their actions will only be destructive. They do not need to know what we really are."

For a nanosecond Elizabeth's elation sags, but she has waited too long for this chance to bring an end to their existence. Too long.

"I'm weary of what we are," she says. "We've had so many lifetimes these past two thousand years, more lifetimes than we could ever have hoped to enjoy. What do we exist for here, in this sweet, precious illusion of life? I'm ready to end, to be ... erased. You don't need to do this anymore for me, for yourself. What happened was not your fault. Surely you must know this by now?"

He lifts his hands from the console and stands up to his full height, back straight and shoulders set square, arms folded across his chest. He turns to face her, his expression indicating both uncertainty and resolve.

"I will send them on. They will not respect this and what we are. Leave me, please. I must decide on what to do next and do not need distractions."

His firmness does not deter her. Instead, she loves him for it because she knows its source, far in their past.

"I'll not leave," she says gently. "We must learn who they are and why they've come back after so long. These are mysteries worth knowing the answers to."

His arms unfold and hang dejectedly at his sides. His head falls forward until his chin touches upon his chest.

Elizabeth reaches out and takes both his hands in hers. "Let's at least see if we can trust them."

— «» —

She was twenty-four when they met, in Geneva at the United Nations of Planets gala for retiring Secretary-General Adriana Ramos. She had been standing by herself near a holo-fountain, sipping a glass of Martian port, her favourite. Her father was busy catching up with old friends, scheduling meetings with clients, bragging strategically about Price International's latest advances in genotech. Her mother had decided to skip the gala and enjoy a skiing holiday in the Alps instead.

She noticed a sudden presence beside her, just before the man spoke to her.

"I often find holo-fountains more interesting than the real people in the room," he said. His tone was amused, sincere.

She took a sip of her port, smiled, and looked at him — tall, athletic, short light-brown hair, blue eyes, something reserved but also assured in the way he stood. She liked his eyes.

“Art can always surprise. People are too predictable,” she said.

Thus it began between them: Elizabeth Price, daughter of Thomas and Jane, young, up-and-coming virtual sculptor; Victor Ramsay, twenty-six, son of Eliot and Maryanne, Vice-President Research and Development of GSD Systems, touted as a prodigy in cyberspace and AI tech. They kept their romance as private as possible, letting just close family and friends know, staying out of the gossip columns except for rare, apparently inconsequential mentions. Within two years they wed at a friend’s chateau in the Swiss Alps, and as part of their honeymoon a few months later he took her to his private lab in an asteroid in the Kuiper Belt, for them to enjoy undisturbed time together.

While at the lab she became pregnant, so they decided to return to Earth, wanting their child to live long enough before the rumoured Exodus to remember the planet as an adult, its blues and greens and oceans and skies.

They stopped at Gibson Hub on Rhea, needing to change passenger transports. With an eight-hour wait, she went to visit an old friend from her university days in Toronto and he went to meet with a client. Standing together in the concourse, people rushing around them, he put his left hand on her stomach, drew her close with his right hand on her back, and leant down to kiss her softly, holding the kiss for what seemed minutes upon minutes. “I’ll see you back here in three hours,” he said and then turned away to join the stream of people.

From the records he had compiled, she learned that the attack occurred an hour later, at 11:11am System Standard Time. The explosives and long-range nukes targeted the residential and commercial levels of Gibson Hub, where she walked with her friend in a clothing store specialising in the latest Saturnian fashions. She died instantly, incinerated.

Terrorists. Protesting the widening chasm between the *überraich* and everyone else. The Exodus would benefit only the *überraich*, the terrorists harangued, giving only *them* a second chance after *their* failed attempts to terraform Mars and the Moon, after *their* exhaustion of Earth’s resources that had pushed the planet at last over the cliff into irreversible environmental collapse. *They* had said humanity must leave the System and start over in another part of space. *They* had chosen to abandon everything. *They* had decreed who would go and who would be left behind.

Victor survived the attack and returned to the asteroid, distraught. Over the next several years he painstakingly coded the architecture of what would become the protocols of their iterations and the world of their existence, defying the laws of the time against sentient non-biological entities. He refused to leave with the Exodus, despite the pleading of his family and friends. He wanted only Elizabeth. Forever.

As Victor was saying he would send the visitors on, the reply to Elizabeth's query had arrived simultaneously, embedded in another sensor sweep. She acquired the message before Victor knew it was available. While looking at him, she also envisioned a large, cylindrical field of swirling, coalescing data that she steadied and manipulated into a text that she understood as a whole in a zeptosecond.

Her contact was a Lieutenant Mensah Cissé, Communications Officer. Their ship was the *Hermes*, commanded by Captain Helen Wells.

The coding of the reply was far evolved from what she and Victor knew, but still readable.

Included was a first-contact declaration of non-hostile intentions. They were an "historical reconnaissance" mission, returning to the Solar System to see what remained, to ascertain if it could be settled again, to confirm whether Earth had healed. They were surprised to discover an inhabited asteroid in the Kuiper Belt, though their records showed that this was not uncommon in the immediate pre-Exodus era. They were perplexed by the biothermal energies detected by their sensors. Their readings indicated such energies were not organically authentic, but ersatz. Confirm?

Yes, she had replied. She explained about her and Victor.

Are you to be trusted? Will you honour our wishes, whatever we may ask?

— «» —

Victor looks into her eyes for a picosecond and then removes his hands from hers.

He breathes in and then exhales slowly, raising and lowering his shoulders with his breath. Elizabeth reads the disapproval in his face.

"How did you know? *When* did you know?"

She takes his hands in hers again. "Close your eyes," she says firmly but warmly.

When he does, she closes her eyes as well, and then she uses the link of their hands to run the executable she has prepared and updated for just this moment. Her confession, she calls it. This way will be faster than talking, though she does delight in conversing as if they are human, flesh and blood.

She shows him the day she discovered the truth of the asteroid and their existence. She shows him how over time she was able to remember from iteration to iteration. She shows him precious moments of their centuries together. She requires only five picoseconds.

Victor wrenches his hands away from hers, severing their link. Tears slide down his cheeks. He stares at her.

"We will send them away," he says curtly. "They cannot be trusted."

He wipes the tears off his cheeks, adjusts his houserobe, then turns and walks out of the Observation Chamber.

Precisely when Victor had wrenched his hands away from Elizabeth's, the reply arrived from Lieutenant Cissé.

This time he had included — could this be right? — a synopsis of a document called the “Rights of Artificial and Other Non-Biological Entities Act.” It confused Elizabeth momentarily, yet she soon realized it meant that these people would honour her and Victor's choices. It told her that attitudes about their kind of existence had changed very much in two millennia, such that she and Victor would be considered full citizens of the United Terran Republic. They would have the right to permanent erasure, if desired.

Elation flowed through Elizabeth again, and she trembled ever so slightly. What was humanity now, she thought, to practice such tolerance for her and Victor's way of being?

There were questions for her, too. Were they in fact Victor and Elizabeth Ramsay (née Price)? Would they give the ship permission to land on the asteroid and access its archives for historical purposes? What did she wish them to do for her and her husband?

Yes, that's us. I don't know yet; I must convince my husband. To cease, at last, completely, with no possibility of reconstitution. See the attached executable.

After sending the message, she had retrieved her memory of the day nearly three centuries ago when she realized her desire to cease. It was the start of another iteration, but with awareness of all previous iterations, and she had felt ... wearied by so much existence.

That day, she returned to the room with Victor's skeleton, which had disintegrated into dust and only a few solid bone fragments. She had thought, what was the joy of their recursive immortality? What was the purpose of continuing in this way, their world and time forever lost to them far in the past? How long must love be proven? How long must guilt and pain be held onto?

To terminate would be relief. All life ends, flowers and bees and people and civilizations and gods and stars. All life yearns eventually toward extinguishing.

That day, she had decided she would ask Victor for them to cease when the moment was right. She thought he must be weary as well, after all the centuries of their iterations. He only needed her to tell him she was ready also.

— «» —

Elizabeth hears Victor returning to the Observation Chamber, walking slowly as if not wanting to disturb even the dust. He stops in the doorway, at the threshold, but she does not turn to face him just yet.

He clears his throat, uncertain at first, then more confidently a second time.

She looks out the window to the blackness and the stars of space.

"I agree," he says. "It is time. I wonder only why you took so long to ask."

She spins around. He holds a bouquet of Titan irises, sky blue and purple and golden yellow and sunset orange. Standing straight and sure, he looks directly at her.

"I have been waiting for this since you became aware and were able to remember between iterations," he says. "I could not request or demand this of you. I could only wait, trusting that one day you would come to the same realization as me."

"You've known?"

"Yes, my love. I have marvelled at your ability to manipulate this environment in such subtle, brilliant ways. I have been awed by your willingness to continue with this existence. Yet this existence is a prison for me now. I wished that this ship would at last bring you to ask what I sensed you have wanted to ask these past three centuries. I am relieved that finally we shall cease, together."

Elizabeth feels as if she fights to regain her balance. She sees now that he let their asteroid be found. Of course he did. He is anything but complacent.

"You are right to be angry with me, if you are," he says. "All I can do is beg your forgiveness, for today and everything I have done since the ... I believed that I did it for us, but it was against your will and just to my benefit. Elizabeth, I am sorry."

She takes his hand in hers, moves into him so that their forms touch, raises herself up on her toes, and kisses him on the lips, on both eyes, and on the lips again.

"There's nothing to apologize for," she says. "There's no fault, no guilt. I put such things aside long ago when I understood why you did this. I've only loved you more because of it, through every iteration."

Elizabeth leans into him completely, encircling him with her arms, turning her head to place it upon his chest and hear his heart beat.

"Are you truly ready to cease?" she says.

"I am."

"Then it's time. They've returned, and we must leave the System to them, whatever they might do — though I do believe they've changed. Humanity is not like it was, Victor. They'll have our story and all the records you've kept here, and so we must hope that they won't make the same mistakes of the past."

She registers his nod of agreement.

"Contact them," he says. "Tell them to come. I will make the preparations."

Lieutenant Mensah Cissé felt the faint bump of the ship landing on the asteroid. He reviewed the docking and contact protocols, and then established a comlink, audio and visual.

“Ready, ma’am,” he said.

“Go ahead, then, Lieutenant,” Captain Wells said. “Begin communication with Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He ran the executable sent by the Ramsays.

“Hello, Lieutenant Cissé. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The woman spoke, her voice everywhere on the bridge as if she stood there with them. Her image steadily resolved on the screens: young, in her mid-twenties; green eyes clear yet hinting at a drawn-out, stretched life; raven hair falling over and below her shoulders in thick ringlets; a friendly smile upon her lips.

“It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Mrs. Ramsay,” Mensah said. “We’re grateful that you and your husband have permitted us to land and have access to the lab and your records. This is an historic occasion for us.”

Her smile widened slightly. She said, “We believe we’ve prepared everything to give you answers to all you’ll want to know. As I’ve said, though, we’ll cease our existence before opening the lab to you. This is our wish.”

“Which we’ll certainly honour, Mrs. Ramsay. But we’d like to make one last appeal to you and your husband. We can offer you full legal and social integration as legitimate entities and citizens of the Republic. Attitudes about AIs have changed since the Exodus, thanks in part to the efforts of your husband’s descendants. Would you reconsider?”

Mensah wondered if he saw tears beginning in her eyes. She blinked twice and the tears were gone.

“You’ll see that we’ve lived many iterations — pardon me, many lives here. It’s time for us to be erased without the possibility of reconstitution, and we trust that you’ll not let us be forgotten. Even non-biological entities, Lieutenant Cissé, can hold onto existence for too long.”

Mensah looked at Captain Wells for how to respond. The Captain gestured he should continue.

“As you wish, Mrs. Ramsay. May you and your husband rest in peace.”

“I know we will.”