



Henry flew over the deep orange canyons and brown rises of an alien world. The sky had an unfamiliar tan cast to it. Inside, the ship's cockpit smelled of static electricity and dust burning away in the cockpit's heater.

The Dreamer

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The land smelled like a dry heat wave. The air was filled with the tang of roasted plants and cooked earth. The sun seemed to crane its neck down on this part of the world with great delight. In a more reasonable climate, the warning rays would have been met by a morning mist. But there simply wasn't enough moisture for such an ambitious display.

Henry and Ubaba peered over a low rise. A band of Zulu warriors were leading two men, dressed as English officers. One was dressed in a light blue coat the other in the more typical red jacket one associates with British colonial infantry. His white pith helmet gleamed in the sun, gold badge shining. Their wrists were bound with a sort of crude, vine-like rope. They were crossing the Tugela River and appeared to be heading for Ekowe. It was a small party, only about a dozen warriors.

"What do you say?" Henry asked.

"We could probably take them. It would make a good story for the Lord Chelmsford. But perhaps we should even the odds first." The well-oiled Zulu warrior replied.

"Right as always, old fellow. Shall we distract a few of them?" Henry said in an over-the-top upper-class English accent.

Ubaba began yelling in the heat, crying out in the Zulu tongue. The warriors scanned the horizon, sniffing the air. The leader, a man with a serious headdress, pointed with his assegais at the two interlopers. A pair of warriors ran off, heading straight for Ubaba and Henry.

"I think we caught their attention," Ubaba commented.

"Yes, old boy, quite," Henry said.

The two ducked down behind the rise and readied themselves. As soon as the warriors reached the rise, the two rose from their cover. Ubaba swung first. He spun the bat as if he was going for a grounder to third base. It was a number 14, with Mickey Mantle's name burned into the handle. Henry was using an aluminum Sportsman with the rubber grip. The two Zulu warriors swayed and rocked after the bats struck them. Finally, the two men's heads came together with a loud crack and they fell to the ground unconscious.

"Two down," Ubaba said triumphantly.

"Tuna sandwiches," Henry announced with glee. "They always go for tuna sandwiches."

A loud beep- beep- beep- beep filled the air of the African Veldt.

Henry Applebaum pressed the button on his alarm. He groaned and placed his feet on the cold floor. Stretching, the air felt a little dry this morning. Outside clouds were obscuring the sun and a few flakes of snow were drifting toward the ground. Getting to his feet he crossed to the long wall of shelves in his bedroom. He adjusted the poseable Zulu warrior statue who was leaning over. The Zulu warrior was a unique item. A special effects film tool for the 1964 Stanley Baker film *Zulu*. Henry purchased it for a tidy sum on eBay. The warrior came complete with a plastic buffalo-hide shield and short stabbing spear.

Henry dressed and ate a simple breakfast. He drove to work in a used VW beetle. At the office, he carefully moved a pile of papers from the right side of his desk to the left. For lunch, Henry sat alone in the cafeteria, eating a ham sandwich. Between bites, he devoured an old pulp-fiction comic book he

bought at the Campbelltown Flee market. Back at his desk, he fastidiously moved a stack of papers from the left side of his desk to the right. The roads home were jam-packed with cars. But he made it back after passing through the fancy façade of a Fried Chicken drive-thru.

Henry's home was more of a cabin than a house. One bedroom, a kitchen with a dining area and one lone bathroom. From time to time he'd pondered selling the structure and upgrading to an RV, which would have given him more space. He'd tried to sell the building to his neighbors, so they could turn it into a garage, but they had no more money than he did.

He played a few online games on his tablet, caught the new SYFY Channel special and then tucked himself back into his bed for the night.

Henry flew over the deep orange canyons and brown rises of an alien world. The sky had an unfamiliar tan cast to it. Inside, the ship's cockpit smelled of static electricity and dust burning away in the cockpit's heater. He'd been chasing the blue blotoid alien in his one-seater hopper since dawn. He had to recover the artifact, or the Royal Imperial Interstellar Empire would implode.

The dark blue creature tried to escape, piloting his ship between high, craggy peaks and down into endlessly deep gorges with their sheer walls. "He's trying to lose you in those canyons." Henry's alien co-pilot Stern spoke up from the back seat.

"I know."

"You'd better stick close." Stern is hard to describe, with the vert-green tentacles and all. He certainly is alien, there no question there. Although Stern isn't his real name. Henry just calls him Stern, because he could never manage to get past the tongue-tying clicks which were required to pronounce his real name.

Smoke began to pour from the blotoid alien's exhaust ports. His engine was overheating. The black, acrid smoke made it difficult for Henry to pilot his ship without running into one of the canyon's spaceship pulverizing walls. He weaved to avoid most of the cloud.

Behind them, a huge cross between a snake and a slug roared. Glancing at the rear monitor, Henry could see the creature closing in from behind at breakneck speed. Henry pressurized the megatronic generators and hit the turbo-hyper thrust drive control. Seemingly breaking all the laws of Physics, Henry was blasted out into the vast reaches of space in moments. Leaving the blotoid alien's stricken ship to be swallowed by the massive slug.

Henry hoped the slug creature used floss. Those metal bits can really do a number on your gums.

A nanosecond later, Henry and Stern were just another heat source in the infinite sea that is outer space. Free in the endless frontier which makes up the boundless territory of the stars themselves. Free to explore the heavens in man's magnificent quest to understand the weirdness of the universe.

A loud warning beep- beep- beep- beep filled the air in the tiny cockpit.

"Sounds like we overtaxed the engines again," Stern remarked casually.

Henry Applebaum rolled over and pressed the snooze button on his alarm. Nine minutes later it buzzed again. As his mind pondered the difference between a nine-minute snooze and an even ten, he groaned and placed his feet on the cold floor. Stretching, the air felt a little damp this morning. Outside clouds

were obscuring the sun and a steady rain was turning yesterday's snow into an ugly mixture of slush. Getting to his feet he crossed to his desk. His leg brushed the corner of a piece of paper, sending it floating to the floor. It was a character sheet he had once used in High School. A Space Ranger in a science fiction roleplaying game. In parentheses, after the characters name he'd written Spaceman Spiff in the wide gray trails of an unsharpened pencil.

On the side was a doodle of his copilot, Stern. A Davey-Jones looking creature from the planet Mondass. His head looked like it had been swallowed by an octopus, but his wide-open eyes had somehow managed to poke their way to the surface. Henry sighed. He'd had hours of fun adventuring with this character in his youth. But finding people to join him on such mental adventures as an adult was harder than getting funding for a manned trip to Mars. Adults tended to leave play behind, despite its pleasures. And in doing so, their dreams had all become nightmares.

Henry dressed and ate a simple breakfast. He drove to work. He didn't like to rise too early, work was nothing to look forward too. As a result, his stop at the drive-thru for a cup of coffee only resulted in his being late. Still, no one looked up at him as he slowly walked back to his desk. At the office, he carefully relocated a pile of papers from the right side of his desk to the left. For lunch, Henry sat alone in the cafeteria, eating a tuna salad sandwich. Between bites, he digested a graphic novel recently purchased from the local comic book store. Back at his desk, he meticulously moved a stack of papers from the left side of his desk to the right. That night, the roads home were jam-packed with cars jockeying for position in the rain. But he made it home after passing through another fast-food drive-thru. He played a few online games, caught the repeat of a SYFY Channel special and then tucked himself back into his bed for the night.

Henry was deep asleep when the orb started to pulse and glow. At first glance, it was about the size of a normal softball, perhaps slightly larger. It seemed enmeshed in the twists and turns of peculiar dark gray metal. These metallic tendrils wrapped themselves around the sphere haphazardly as if they were yarn circling a globe. In the spaces between the metal strands, a soft green light was glowing.

If Henry had taken a close look at the device, he might have noticed some odd-looking characters stamped into the metal's surface. If he had reason to take the object to the university, a professor of ancient languages would have immediately recognized the inscription as Sumerian. They might have even provided him with a translation:

In our dreams, we live our lives anew.