

WITHOUT ACCESS

History lesson.

BY DEBORAH WALKER

I shouldn't be here. Walking in the night during the Festival of the Communing Dead. It's ... quiet. This is possibly not the safest place for a 15-year-old, off-planet girl.

But I'm so bored. Imagine no Access for three months! There's no Access on this stupid planet. Daddy doesn't understand. He thinks Access is trivial, unimportant. But my life's in Access: my friends, my immersions, my adventures. Everything that made me, me is in Access. Without Access, I'm lost. So lost. I had to do something that would make me feel something.

I see a shadow, hunched, like I imagine the local alien troglodytes to be. "Hey. Hello," I shout. The figure slips into one of the honeycomb caves lining the one main street on this planet.

At least I'd seen an alien. That's a big deal. Aliens are rare anywhere in the galaxy. I'd only seen one once before, when I visited Second Mummy on Fireworks Colony.

This is the season when the trogs — the aliens — venture out of their caves to commune with their dead in private, in secret. Daddy told me I couldn't leave the complex for the next five days. There was no way that was going to happen. I'd have gone stir crazy.

I hear a noise, like the cry of some mad bird, a loon, I guess, over the water.

I'm fine.

I've been down this street plenty of times before, but never alone, at night with the moons overhead, chequering shadows onto the pathways.

Daddy told me we had to respect the aliens' request for privacy while they communed with their dead.

They aren't even dead dead.

Apparently the trogs are technologically advanced. A very old society who record their personalities onto artificial-intelligence constructs. Memories for the society. A hundred thousand years of recorded memory. Apparently it's traditional to ask for advice from the dead during the festival.

"And they actually come out of their hidey holes, during this period?"

Daddy nodded.

I had to see the aliens.

Perhaps it would make up for being virtually kidnapped to this mining planet, being

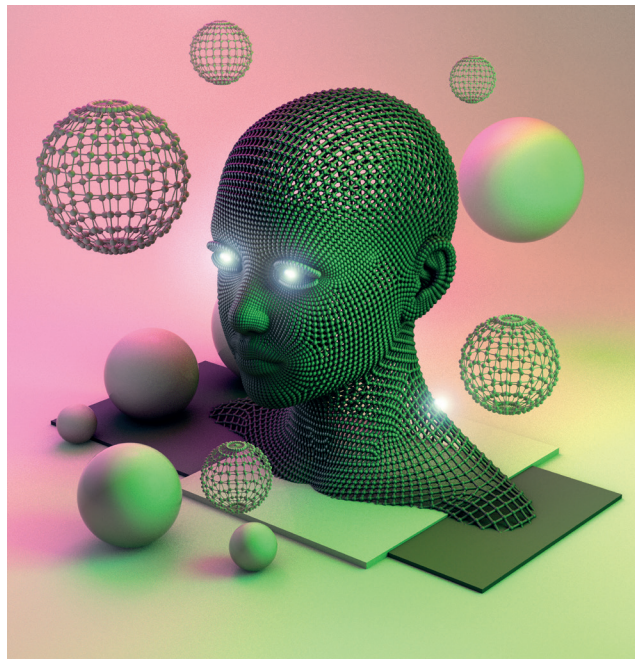


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

answers are from the voice of a dead boy. I hadn't realized they had bodies. That was a bit odd. I didn't like it.

"Sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I've lived 500 years weaving through the databases of my people and yours, Joselin. You wouldn't believe the adventures I've had in the data spheres." He holds out his hand to me. "So, human girl, would you like to ask me a favour on this night of commune?"

I don't want to touch him. I turn away, but I can't leave. He has something I want with all heart. My wanting overrides my fear. "Did you mean you have access to human databases? Can you give me Access?"

"I can. I can piggyback you on our AI connection. But there may be some bleed through to our own databases. Is that acceptable?"

"Oh, yes. I just want Access."

"It will change you, human girl."

"I'm already changed. I can't be me without Access." Daddy never understands that. He always thinks his stories are more important than mine.

Again, Silvern stretches out his dead, artificial hand to me. He offers me commune. I take it.

And then ... I'm not me anymore. I have Access, but the friends and the adventures of my own people are trivial, unimportant. Humans have such a *small* history. I Access the memories of the dead of another race. All in me: swirling. The stories I could tell you.

Daddy was right, real life is so much more interesting than Access. I dance in the sagas of countless ages: battles and intrigues, passions cross the countless centuries. I sing the tales of the endless alien song.

Again and again, Daddy tries to deny me Access. Poor Daddy. He's frantic. He begs me. I see him cry. He's tried everything he can to break the connection. But he can't control me anymore. He never understood what Access means to me.

To be honest, I don't really care.

I am changed. I Access the collective memory of the unfamiliar dead, a hundred thousand years of memories. I will never be alone or bored or lost, or fully human again. ■

made Access-less, bereft of everything I needed to be myself. Perhaps, if I told my old friends I'd seen an alien, they'd remember me.

I see another shadowed figure. Another alien. I take a deep breath and run after him.

"Excuse me. Excuse me."

He stops. My heart is in my throat as I say, "You're an alien," in a silly feeble voice just as he turns around.

"Guilty as charged." He's tall, broad shouldered, a good-looking Thor with added alien, but in a good way. I can see no snake tongue or weird stuff. His skin is luminous in the dappled moonlight. A potential, twilightesque, glow-in-the-dark, alien boyfriend. I'd never imagined the trogs to be beautiful.

"I'm Silvern. Who are you?" he asks, with a faint smile on his face. Arrogant. How I like them arrogant.

"I'm human. A girl. Joselin Hamilton."

He nods. "Once I met Katlyn Hamilton, before we went underground. You look a little like her."

My mouth's dry. "She was on the first ship, 500 years ago. You don't look much older than me. What's going on with that?" I ask a question, even though I know the answer. "Do you live for a long time or something?"

"I was 17 when I died."

"Died?" I say, with a shudder. He's artificial intelligence. His

➔ NATURE.COM

Follow Futures:

[@NatureFutures](https://twitter.com/NatureFutures)

[go.nature.com/mtoodm](https://www.facebook.com/go.nature.com/mtoodm)

Find Deborah in the British Museum, trawling the past for future inspiration.