

# Futures

## Five things I hate about Phobos

An unromantic view. By Stewart C. Baker



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

### 1. Its electrostatic charge

Useful for a source of energy, but I wish they'd swap the battery arrays on the surface for something that would cut down on the solar wind it gets. Even though Phlegyas Base is a few kilometres below ground, I swear the hair on my legs has been standing on end ever since I stepped off the shuttle.

I set up an app to track static accumulation on my local, but when I ran my theory past Tashi in Archives zie shook zir head, pushed a dozen studies refuting it at me, and suggested I find other things to worry about – like how late I would be for my work shift if I didn't get going soon.

### 2. Phlegyas Base

It's nothing like home. I miss the Sun! The stars! The wind and water!

And although I realize I'm not going to get all of that in the dome cities down on Mars proper, at least I can dream about what it will be like three centuries from now, when the atmosphere's thickened and the temperature's raised enough that people can live on the surface unaided.

Phlegyas, though? Its tunnels are always going to be these winding, awkward things, and Phobos's endless rotation and low gravity make me motion-sick.

As soon as my service term is up, I'm going to apply for a work-live permit in Alnif City, which is supposed to have stunning views of Olympus Mons. I'll start a farm, if they've got the soil sorted out by then, or ... I don't know. Just wander around sorting rocks. I don't have many skills, but I can find something.

I bumped into Tashi in one of the tunnels,

and when I asked what zie thought, zie said I was too much of a romantic to be alive.

I'm still not 100% sure zie was joking.

### 3. The Harmonia Festival

I've seen the recordings. Who hasn't?

All those people – scientists, engineers, artists and run-of-the-mill workers like me – standing at one edge of Stickney Crater, fully suited with their hands joined, all their outputs linked and singing joyously just as the Sun sets. The way that electrostatic corona flares into being over all of their heads at once, eerie and awe-inspiring as it twists and dances like something alive.

The Harmonia is probably the only reason anyone comes here. And it's pretty to look at, sure. But large groups of people stress me out, and I'm a lousy singer.

I never would have gone if Tashi hadn't invited me to go with zir, pinging my local out of the blue when I was halfway through a gruelling routine in the base gym. Standing there with one gloved hand in zirs and one in some random engineer's, I forgot I couldn't sing. I forgot I hated crowds. I forgot I was stuck on this tiny moon more than 75 million miles from Earth, and ...

Well, the Harmonia made me hate Phobos a little bit less, and for that I will never forgive it.

#### 4. Its name

Who the hell wants to live on something that's named after a god of fear? What the hell kind of idea is that?

When I asked Tashi why nobody ever petitioned to change the name, zie bopped me in the arm.

"Phobos keeps us on our toes," zie said. "Besides, it's an appropriate name. There's nothing between us and the endless void of space but a few kilometres of rock. If that doesn't scare you, something's wrong. It's why the first folks here started doing the festival,

you know. To remind us how small we are, in the grand scheme of the Universe, and how scary and beautiful that is all at the same time."

"Endless void of space?" I said. "Who's the romantic now?"

Zie snorted, but didn't try to correct me.

#### 5. That one day, it will be gone

Tashi agreed to come with me when I get reassigned to the surface – said zie's done zir time up here and then some, and that zie'd like to see the view from Alnif too.

I'm happy, of course, that zie'll join me, but I can't stop thinking about Phobos. How it gets closer to the surface with every orbital pass. How one day it'll burn up in the atmosphere or fall to the surface and break into a million pieces.

And yeah, okay, that's in 10 million years, when we'll all be dead ourselves. But even though I can't stand Phobos, even though I can't wait for the day when Tashi and I can get out of this place, it's sad, somehow, the thought of Phlegyas Base's winding tunnels vanishing. The thought that one day, the place

where I first met Tashi, and the rim of Stickney where they hold the Harmonia will all be smashed to pieces ...

For a while I was planning to see if there was something the engineers could do to help Phobos stay in the sky forever. Course correction, maybe. Some kind of rocket system.

But then I thought about it more, and realized that even though it's sad to think of Phobos crashing to the surface, it's somehow appropriate. What gives our homes – our lives – value is that they're flawed and transient things, impossibly full of hopes and dreams. To try to 'fix' Phobos's lilted orbit would cheapen that, somehow.

Tashi would say I'm a romantic for thinking all these things, and maybe zie's right. But maybe that's not such a bad thing after all.

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## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Stewart C. Baker reveals the inspiration behind *Five things I hate about Phobos*

Every summer, dozens of science-fiction and fantasy writers get together online and take part in the Clarion West write-a-thon, a kind of writing-based charity fundraiser for the Seattle-based writing workshop. The write-a-thon has been a good motivator for me since I learnt about it several years ago, but this year they pulled out all the stops, offering online day-long workshops and a month-long flash-fiction peer workshop with prompts by writers such as Caroline Yoachim, Neil Clarke and Nalo Hopkinson. This story was one of the pieces I finished for the write-a-thon, and it benefited immensely from feedback by the others in my group (go team Jaggery!).

Mars has long been a staple of science fiction and other writing around the world, and that's only increased as we learn more about our sister planet's potential for sustaining life. One of my favourites is Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* series, not least because of how its cast of characters very obviously comes from all over our own planet. You won't find Alnif Crater mentioned in that series, since the crater (named after a town in Morocco) wasn't approved until 2017, but you will find characters from Russia, Japan, China, Trinidad and Tobago, Saudi Arabia and the Polynesian islands. Mars's crater names reflect a similar acknowledgement of ways of life that might differ from the US mainstream that's sometimes taken for granted in sci-fi by American authors – which makes sense, given that they're approved by an international body of astronomers.

The ending of this particular story might seem like a bit of a downer. Actually, in the original draft, our unnamed narrator *did* work with the engineers to correct Phobos's orbit. Based on feedback I received in the write-a-thon, and thinking about it more, I decided that went against the general tone of the piece a bit too much. Acceptance that nothing is permanent might *seem* like a downer, but I also write haiku. One aesthetic associated with that genre of literature is the twin ideas of 'wabi' and 'sabi'. These concepts are complicated and often oversimplified in English treatments, but an acceptance of the imperfect, transient nature of life is central to both. That doesn't mean we should run out and celebrate our eventual (and unavoidable) demise, necessarily. But it puts a different emphasis on death and decay that make them less destructive and more an important part of life – as well as its fundamental opposite.

