

Futures

The escapee

Making a clean sweep. By Hall Jameson

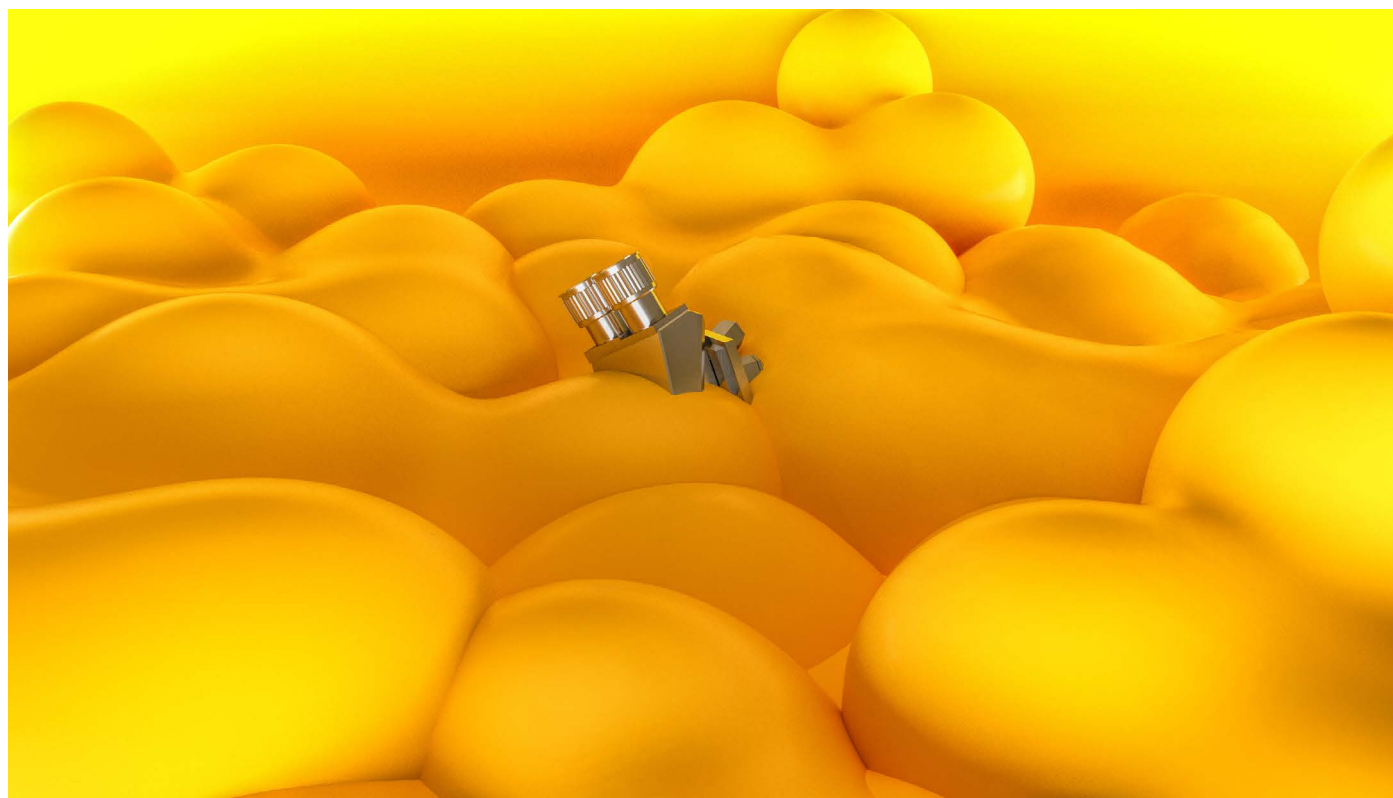


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The ground team returned from the morning recon in a flurry of excited whispers and conspiratorial smiles. Oto rolled her eyes as Chauncy, the outing leader, placed the collected samples into the no-touch case, making a big show of sealing the door with a hot pink strip of isolation tape. The group then followed Director Rosen into her office like a herd of Bearded Watuu, closing the door and blurring the office windows.

Two hours later, the crew filed out, piling into the elevator without so much as a glance in Oto's direction, probably heading to the mess hall.

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry," Oto said to the closing elevator doors. Apparently, someone had to hold down the fort, or rather, the state-of-the-art, top-secret laboratory deep underground on Planet 45BR3. "I have more important stuff to do anyway," she mumbled, striding past the elevator. "First on the list, check the no-touch case and see what all

the fuss is about."

Oto peeled back the tape, opened a collection container, and extracted a tiny sample of the goo inside. Back at her workstation, she prepared a slide and turned on her scope, adjusting the focus until the image sharpened. She increased the brightness, revealing an unremarkable pale green, cigar-shaped specimen with a long flagellum.

Boring!

The sample twitched and curled into a C, surprising given the generous drop of quieting solution she had used. It twitched again, appearing to lunge at her eye.

"Frisky little fella," she said, stepping back from the scope, disappointed that the excitement had been for nothing more than a common pond critter.

She heard a faint clinking sound, like icicles breaking. Blotting the pearls of perspiration from her brow with the tip of her tail, she leant over and peered through the eyepiece. She gasped.

The slide cover had cracked. The slide was empty.

"Whoa!" Oto straightened, eyeing her work area. A half-eaten jam sandwich sat next to the microscope; candy bar wrappers, hoof clippers, tins of breath mints and crumpled papers covered the rest of the desk. The director had spoken to her numerous times about her workspace habits, concerned about cross-contamination, but Oto wasn't susceptible to viruses and bacteria like the humans – her body ate them right up, *nom-nom!* However, she was always careful – well, *usually* – with the samples so as not to endanger her delicate human colleagues.

Oh well. So the little pondie had escaped. No biggie. It happened sometimes.

OK, actually, it didn't.

Oto sighed, she probably had 20 minutes or so to sanitize before the crew returned from dinner.

She moved fast, grabbing the cleaning spray from the custodian's cupboard,

Futures

spraying, wiping and scrubbing every available surface. With a swipe of her arm, the sandwich, wrappers, and hard candies slid into the trash bin – all but one candy, which she popped into her mouth.

After 15 minutes of cleaning, she stopped to admire her work. The lab sparkled. She let out a sigh of relief.

Then her desk lamp slid across the table and hit the floor with a crash.

She jumped, obliterating the overhead lamp with her horn in an explosion of light. “What the –?” But then she saw it, a thin trickle of slime, no microscope needed, a snail-trail leading towards the elevator.

“Crap!” Oto grabbed the alcohol cleaner and her forbidden cigarette lighter and sprinted towards the elevator, fully aware that her plan – annihilation through incineration – was a terrible one, but she had no other.

Her foot slipped on the slimy trail and she crashed into the wall, shoulder leaving a substantial dent. A tiny dot inched along the floor towards the elevator. *How could anything grow that fast?* Oto was three steps away when the elevator doors opened.

The director stood there, surrounded by the members of the ground team. Oto watched in horror as the specimen escapee, now a substantial blob, slipped through the crack

between the floor and elevator and into the shaft.

“Everything OK, Oto?” Director Rosen tilted her head, her glossy white hair unmoving, held in place by some mysterious grooming compound.

Oto grinned. “All good.” She slipped the spray bottle behind her back.

“Got a minute?” the director said. “I’d like to chat with you in my office.”

Oto followed, feeling very small, even though she was twice the director’s height. Director Rosen smiled and motioned to the bench across from her desk.

“We made an incredible discovery in the desert quadrant today,” she said. “We collected a sample of the invasive Patras parasite, the one that destroyed all life forms on the planet Devaris.”

“A parasite? Are you sure it’s not just, say, a peranema?”

The director shook her head. “That’s exactly what’s so dangerous about it. It mimics other harmless entities. Luckily, Chauncy recently published a paper about it. He identified it with the field scope.”

“Yeah, phew. Lucky us,” Oto mumbled.

“We collected a small, dormant sample, which we carefully contained. I’d hate to think what would happen if it was exposed to

moisture and light. Given its rapid growth rate, it would be the end of all of us.” Director Rosen nodded to the bottle of cleaning liquid Oto cradled in one arm.

“You were cleaning? Bravo! It is indeed a momentous day! It reinforces the fact that I’ve made the right decision.”

“Decision?”

“Yes. Your work is exemplary, so I’d like you to head the annihilation team. I’ll leave all decisions regarding further study up to you –” Director Rosen stopped, wide-eyed, as an explosive bang cut her off mid-sentence. The building trembled. A moment later, the lights went out.

“Huh, I wonder what that was,” Oto said, even though she already knew.

Hall Jameson is an American writer and artist who lives in the Pacific Northwest. Her writing has been published in many print and online publications and podcasts including *Compelling Science Fiction*, *The Drabblecast* and *Phobos Magazine*. When she’s not writing stories or taking photographs, you can find her in her kayak on Puget Sound, in the mountains searching for ghost towns, or at home wrangling cats.