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## **“Bestiary”**

by Nicholas P. Oakley

Rafah heard the crunch of bone and the piercing squeals over the engine roar. He palmed the emergency stop button, and the blades ceased their violent spin. Even the plated glass of the cab couldn't completely drown out the cries.

His hand hovered over the ignition switch. He knew he'd have to check the damage, however much gore he'd have to clean from the intake. With a sigh he reached behind him for his helmet and a long, stained brush.

Rafah kept the business end of the brush at arms length and made his way around the platform toward the cries. His shoulders drooped when he saw the grisly scene.

It was a mother pard and two pups.

Most of the adult pard was gone. The blades had dismembered beyond recognition. Lying beside her was one of the pups – no bigger than his hand. It had deep lacerations down its side, and it was pinned to the muddy ground. The other one looked unhurt, but was pulling at its injured sibling by the scruff of the neck, feebly attempting to free it from the harvester's jaws.

Life out with the science expeditions could be tough. Lonely. Rafah had lost most of his left foot and two fingers to frostbite on one excursion to an ice planet, and had innumerable other scars and broken bones. He was secretly proud of every one of them. On that same ill-fated trip he'd carried a man nearly a hundred kilometres on his back to shelter. He was a grunt, and he

knew it. He volunteered for the shitty jobs, and most of the time he enjoyed the work. He relished being the guy people could rely on, took satisfaction from the fact that he never refused anything that was asked of him, however hard, however much sweat and blood he had to shed to get the job done right.

But watching that little gore-splattered pard pup, futilely attempting to rescue its dying sibling from his monstrous harvester wasn't easy, even for him. Rafah knew what he should do, of course. He should take the brush and bring it down on the pards' skulls without any more hesitation. End their suffering right now.

He knew that, but bringing himself to actually do it was another matter entirely.

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“You've been working the harvesters for orbits now. You should put in for a transfer. You know they could use you over at the dock. You wouldn't be stuck in the cab every day there.”

Rafah shrugged. “I like it. Gives me time to think. And I get plenty of time off to do other stuff,” he said, digging Carew playfully in the ribs. “If I'm needed elsewhere they'll ask.”

Carew frowned. “OK,” he said. “It's just... you've been spending so much time out there these past few months. You're hardly ever here any more. I know you sometimes feel-” He paused, trailing off. “As long as you don't feel like you've got to do it, you know? I'm sure they could find other things for you to do if you wanted.”

“Yeah, I know. And I appreciate you looking out for me, Carew. But honestly, I'm fine. I enjoy it.”

“We *could* probably get it automated,” Carew said with a smile. He knew how much that would annoy Rafah, who pulled a face.

“Yeah, but they'd only muck it up like always. It can get messy too, remember. And there are a few things they aren't good for, you know.” He grabbed Carew by the wrist, taking him by surprise. He tugged, pulling the smaller man easily down on to the bed next to him.

Carew laughed, and, to Rafah's relief, the topic was quickly forgotten.

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He was unable to do what needed doing. There was something about the pard, the way it had been scurrying so furiously to free its sibling, even after it had realised Rafah was near, that had touched him.

He had cursed and shouted at it, but it had refused to budge, grappling on firmly by its small razor-like teeth. It had taken Rafah ten minutes before he had finally managed to ward the pup off, teeth bared and its cries ringing out.

Only, it didn't go far.

Rafah began to notice it a few hours later. He saw glimpses of it on the rear imagers, skulking along in the overturned dirt in the harvester's wake. He thought he might be imagining it, but then it got bolder – walking in front of the harvester, a slow trot, head held high, apparently unfazed by the thundering machine.

The first time he'd left his cab he'd looked over his shoulder more than once – convinced the pup was looking for revenge. But the pard looked on from a distance, apparently uninterested, awaiting the rumble of the engines to resume. So Rafah got on with the job, and tried to ignore it.

A week passed. Rafah soon realised what was happening. How the pard had grown so quickly, even without the protection of its mother.

He was feeding it.

Rafah watched as the pard circled round ahead of the harvester's path and hid in the scrub. There it would lie in wait for the harvester to disturb the wildlife between the harvester and its hiding place. Fleeing for their lives, they ran straight into another danger: the pard's jaws. It rarely even had to move or hide – the cacophony of the harvester was enough to conceal the pard's presence until the very last moment, by which time it was too late.

This unique method proved very successful. As Rafah neared the end of his ten week rotation, the pard could already hold its head above the tall grass of the plains. It was turning into a big animal, something that Rafah could no longer ignore.

Then it followed him back to the colony.

Rafah tried everything to make it leave. He had already seen a few dots in the sky, distant landers and shuttles buzzing around the port like bees, so they were just a day or two out now. He had no desire to lead the pard to the colony. He didn't know whether or not it was dangerous – but even so, having a pard in tow would lead to some questions that Rafah would rather avoid.

In the end, the most successful solution was also the simplest. He just put his foot down. With the blades retracted, the harvester could reach a fair clip, and Rafah gunned the engines and blasted his way across the plains, and he soon lost sight of it in the swirling dust behind him. When he skidded into the depot, the pard was long gone.

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He was glad to be back in the bustle of the dome. Ten weeks on the harvesters was lonely, and it was easy to dwell on things best left unearthed out there. The smiles and jokes washed most of that away, like a hot shower after a long day's work.

Yet he soon tired of the same old faces and conversation that just a few days before he had revelled in. Carew noticed, so Rafah overcompensated, popping too many stims and spending most of his time in the bar. But he stayed sober enough to read the feeds every morning, watching out for any sightings. As the days drew on, though, and nothing unusual occurred, he gradually began to forget about the pard, focusing on enjoying the rec time, the stims, and Carew instead.

Six weeks later, as he clambered into the cab of the harvester and began the startup sequence, the pard was just a distant, if peculiar, memory. Another anecdote for a late night stim session, if that.

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The damn thing was waiting for him.

He barely recognised it at first. It was scrawny, large patches of fur were missing, its mane bedraggled. Rafah stared at it for a long time on the imagers, magnified to maximum resolution. It was sitting about fifteen kilometres out, in the same place Rafah had thought he'd lost it. It didn't look like it had moved the whole time, but Rafah knew it must have, even if just for water. But to see it sitting in that same proud posture, the familiar silhouette that had been shadowing him all those weeks, spooked Rafah more than he liked to admit. He thought about turning

around and going back to the dome, reporting it to one of the xenobiologists, but he imagined them laughing him out of the lab and quickly canned that idea.

His mind raced with questions. There must have been five or six other harvesters that had passed this way since his last rotation. Yet the pard was still here, waiting for this particular harvester. Waiting for him. Rafah sat and watched it for a long time, before realising that someone might spot the stationary harvester and think he'd broken down. If Rafah was reluctant to get any closer, he was even less inclined to explain to a mechanic crew why he was dawdling a few clicks out of the depot.

When Rafah was a hundred metres or so away, the pard stirred, turned, and resumed its familiar trot, without another glance back. As if Rafah had never been away.

Things soon resumed where they left off. The pard began to put on weight again, and soon lost its shaggy appearance. But Rafah was more reluctant than ever to leave the cab now. He used to spend hours on the roof, looking up at the now-familiar stars, but since he'd left the colony he'd remained cooped up in the claustrophobic cab. There was something strange about the pard, and Rafah had absolutely no interest in finding out what it was up close.

And then he ran over another one.

This time there was no cry. The sensors detected a sudden burst of moisture and biological matter as the animal was liquefied by the blades and sent up the feeder tubes.

It was raining, and he hadn't been sleeping well. The cab seemed overly cramped lately, and his back was stiff. The pard had been in his dreams again, too. He had absolutely no wish to go outside and clear the remains. He knew what would happen if he didn't. The harvest be ruined by the remains, and every batch afterwards would be contaminated as well.

But getting out meant facing the pard. The thing spooked him. Loitered around, always hovering just on the periphery of Rafah's vision. More than once at night he'd switched on the thermals and seen it dozing right underneath the cab, and, when he'd banged on the window with a fist, the pard just looked up at him sleepily, before slowly slinking away nonchalantly.

He had to check. He had a job to do. He grabbed the brush and climbed into the suit. With a wary glance around to locate the pard, he left the safety of the cab and jumped out into the rain.

There was almost nothing left, certainly nothing recognisable as pard, just a red stain. He drove the brush deep into the filters, letting the rotors and detergents decontaminate them. When the liquid began to flow clear he removed the brush and stuck his head under the blades, giving the machinery a quick visual check whilst he was out there. Satisfied, he turned back to make for the cab.

The pard was sitting just a metre from him, perhaps less. Rafah's heart jumped in his chest, and an involuntary shudder jarred his throat. He brought the brush up to defend himself, but the pard didn't move. It just sat staring at him, its large green eyes like glass. Only its ears twitched as the rain continued to pelt down. Then, with a quick flick of the tail, it turned around and skulked off, returning to its usual spot twenty metres ahead of the blades, apparently satisfied.

Rafah's heart continued to thump violently. Seeing the pard up close had shaken him up. Even with the suit sensors on he hadn't picked up the pard closing in on him, like the thing was invisible. It left the hairs standing up on his arms, and he didn't hesitate as he scrambled back into the safety of the cab, where it took a long time for him to breathe normally again.

After that, they had more encounters. Rafah never got over the initial moment of panic when he'd catch sight of the pard unexpectedly close; the silence with which it moved could be terrifying. The pup continued to grow, and Rafah gained a new respect for its power, its strong

physique, its self-confident aura, its sheer size. But despite his wariness, Rafah began to spend more time out of the cab, even more than he ever used to. He'd watch the pard for hours as it made its rounds, its habits becoming familiar. Although it rarely came closer than a few metres now, the pard became a fixture, an unusual but increasingly welcome break from the monotony of the job. Like a mascot, or a pet.

Maybe even a friend, or what passed for one for a lonely harvester on this isolated planet.

This time when his ten week rotation was over he didn't stay in the dome long. After a few days he began to pace around the quarters that he shared with Carew, driving him up the wall. He was ill-tempered, and avoided company as much as was possible. He only lasted a week before he was back out in the harvester, the other guys at the depot exchanging shrugs as he went.

The pard, of course, was waiting for him.

And this time, Rafah was pleased to see it.

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The pard was nearly a fully grown male now, but continued to stick with Rafah and his harvester. It seemed uninterested in territory or mates or any of the usual things Rafah imagined adult pards engaging in. It roamed hundreds of kilometres with him, but Rafah had never seen it with another pard. He'd also never seen it hunt anything. Rafah still did that.

He caught himself talking to it during his third rotation. He'd laughed when he realised what he was doing, but he didn't stop. Although it was unlikely the pard could hear him through the suit – and Rafah never quite had the courage to turn on the external speaker – it still felt like the pard knew when he was being spoken to. It would come closer, and look at him with an

endearing expression, head cocked. There was something about that look that penetrated Rafah's course demeanour. He felt a burgeoning kinship with this powerful, proud animal. An understanding that, however stupid it might sound if he ever told anyone about it, he thought the pard reciprocated.

They spent nine more rotations like this. Rafah never stayed more than a week back at the colony now. Carew had found another partner by then, tired of waiting around for Rafah.

And the pard was always waiting for him when he got back out, away from the hubbub and complications of the domes.

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It was his first day back after the ninth rotation when he heard the news. One of the mechanics mentioned it in passing. To the mechanic's surprise, Rafah exploded. None of them had ever seen him as much as raise his voice. He stormed out of the room, nearly pulling a door off the hinges as he went.

They were done with this continent. They no longer needed the harvests. It would take another few weeks to assemble and analyse all the data, and perhaps a couple after that to begin disassembling and transporting the domes and equipment to the next continent. But the harvesting was finished, and they were ready to leave.

It had been on the feeds for months. He hadn't checked them. They explained all the things that needing doing, how they needed him to help out with the disassembly and a hundred other odd jobs. It was only when he realised that he was attracting a lot of attention that Rafah calmed

down. But when he tried to go back out in the harvester and he found that the mechanics had already begun stripping it, he lost it again.

It took four people to hold him down.

If he'd have thought about it calmly, he might have explained it all then. Explained about the pard, its peculiar behaviour, and the companionship he'd struck up with it, however unlikely. He'd never heard anyone else talking about the pards, but he was sure he could get them to understand. About how much the pard needed him, and maybe a little bit of the reverse, too. But he couldn't. He'd never been good with words. They'd laugh at him, or make him kill the pard. It might even get out that he was unreliable, that he'd jeopardised a job, that he'd gone strange. The thought of that kept his mouth closed.

It didn't stop him thinking, though.

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The night was dark, and he only had a small light on in the cockpit. There was the faintest hint of dawn on the horizon, but Rafah knew there was still enough time. He'd been planning this for a long time. Now, with just a couple of kilometres to the depot, it was almost done.

It was the first time in nine rotations that he was covering this final stretch at normal speed, without the engines roaring. Ahead, somewhere in the darkness, he knew the pard was trotting with him.

The plan was simple. Most of the scientists and their families had left the previous morning, the new domes already constructed on the continent to the south. Only a small skeleton crew

remained, now, preparing the last of the samples and completing the disassembly. The depot would be empty when he arrived, and it had been easy enough to requisition a big enough crate.

He could make out the outline of the domes now. He didn't dare risk putting on the headlights, so he switched filters on the imagers to get a rough idea of where he was heading. He could see the pard now, its muscular frame just a few metres ahead of the harvester.

A prickly sensation came over him. He had the strange feeling that it was he that was following the pard, rather than the other way around. He smiled and shook his head, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, dispelling the curious sensation. There had been many sleepless nights thinking all this through, and the tiredness already seemed to be playing tricks with his mind.

Rafah guided the harvester onto the flattened ground that marked the final approach to the depot. He was barely touching the throttle now, but he was gritting his teeth at the enormous rumble the engines of the harvester were making. It felt like he'd be heard right across the compound, if not for kilometres around. He'd reprogrammed the outer door when he'd left a few hours earlier, and they slid open as the vehicle approached. Once inside most of the noise should be muffled, and he only hoped that the others in the main dome were sleeping more heavily than usual that night.

To Rafah's relief, the pard wandered inside ahead of him without hesitation. Rafah smiled again. They were almost safe.

Then the plan fell apart.

There was somebody else in the depot. The sight of them, just as Rafah thought he was home free, caused him to jump violently. The panic, the fear of discovery, caused him to lose his head.

The throttle flared, and the harvester lurched forward toward the figure. It was in that moment that Rafah realised that the man in front of him wasn't wearing a suit.

That he was prey.

Rafah watched the familiar scene play out as if he were outside his body. The man backed away from the oncoming harvester, turning and stumbling in his bid to escape, the growl of the engine catching him by surprise. And Rafah watched as the pard appeared out of nowhere, mouth wide open, ready to receive Rafah's gift. He saw the pard swat away an outstretched arm like a twig, feeling rather than hearing the snap and, as the jaws clamped shut, the crunch and pop of the man's skull splitting.

Rafah had fed the pard again.

There was almost nothing left by the time Rafah regained his senses. The pard backed away, his mouth full. His hunger appeased, for the moment.

Rafah stood for a long time staring down at the man. He was unrecognisable, mostly pulp. Then, with another start, he realised that the harvester engines were still running and, worse, that the pard was roaming free somewhere in the depot. He acted without thinking. Reaching down, he grabbed what appeared to be a leg and, waving the limb around above his head, threw it into the large crate that stood to the back of the room. He saw a hint of fur and a glimpse of a tail follow it in, and he hit the seal button with a bloodied hand.

His chest heaved, short quick gasps that echoed around inside his helmet. He could barely see. The depot seemed to be collapsing in around him. He slumped to the floor, his back against the crate, trying to calm himself down. The room continued to close in, though, and he passed out.

Carew discovered him like that.

Rafah opened his eyes at Carew's rough shaking, groggily realising where he was. He tried to explain.

“There was an accident,” he mumbled. Carew shouted something at him. Rafah thumbed the external audio switch.

“It was the pard, it escaped,” Rafah said. “I thought I could control it. I didn't mean for this...”

“The what? What are you talking about? You are covered in blood... whose blood is this?” Carew yelled, horror visible on his face.

“He's in there,” Rafah said, struggling to his feet.

“He's still alive?”

“Yes. No, wait, the pard, not the-”

But Carew had already hit the release.

It was all over in less than an hour. Most of them were caught in their beds. Only Carew and two others had risen early, and none of them wore suits. Their soft flesh were no match for him. In the end it was just sport – he was no longer hungry, no longer scared or threatened. There was no anger, either. Nothing, really. Just something that had to be done.

They left that afternoon. There was nothing here for them any more, and the hunger would start up again soon. The harvester's engines hadn't even cooled down. They headed south, the pard leading Rafah out across the plains, as he had always done.

It was four days before they eventually caught up with him. His harvester left a straight line of destruction and debris in its wake, leading them straight to him.

The pard, of course, was nowhere to be found.

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