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THE FLOWER

by

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The flower hung suspended between Daniel and the sky.

Oh, Daniel knew the dome was there too, of course; a giant, inverted cup of force that sat eternally over Travis City and protected them all from pollen storms, major-league bug infestations, and the noxious clouds of fertilizer and pesticides that sometimes wafted over from the fields. But the dome was non-reflective and easy to ignore. As Daniel stood rapt in the park he could happily forget that the long trailing stalks of the plant rested on a dome at all, and imagine himself at the center of an overarching canopy of vegetation, crowned with a single perfect blossom of the deepest orange.

The flower was a couple of thousand feet above his head, and it still looked big.

"Eeeee-bam!" Somebody grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. Daniel, disoriented from staring straight upwards, staggered and fell on his butt.

"Hey, dolt," said Chris. "Pay attention!"

Chris was Daniel's best friend, which didn't mean he wasn't an jerk. Fifteen years old, he had six months, three inches and twenty pounds on Daniel, and used them all to his advantage. "You moron," said Daniel. "What was that about?"

"Painful lesson," said Chris. "Easy to learn from. Stay alert. I coulda been a robot combine, and by now you'd be chopped and bagged with the rest of the chaff."

Daniel stood up and dusted himself off. "Great. Let me write that down. 'Watch out for combines in municipal parks.'" He whapped Chris right back on the shoulder. "Painful lesson: don't irritate short people with long memories."

"Did a bug just land on me? I dunno. Come on, let's hustle and bustle. School starts in ten."

They ambled out of the park and onto Sixteenth, talking trash about nothing in particular. Electric carts and trucks hummed by as the noontime rush hour unwound. Daniel resisted the urge to look up, and tried to think of something worthwhile to say.

"Anyway, what were you doing? I gotta say you were looking pretty vacant there till I dumped you on the ground."

"I was just looking at the flower. Lots of people do, you know?"

Chris shrugged. "So it's a flower. So it's a new type of flower. So it's a flower with six stalks, which nobody thought would flower in the first place. And the exciting part of all this is...?"

Daniel closed his eyes briefly. "It's big."

"Oh, a *big* flower. You should have said sooner. A brand new rather large flower on a planet covered in flowers. Wow! Hold me down!"

"I think you made your point," said Daniel. "Pretty sure I've got it, now."

#

The truth was, Daniel was darned impressed by the flower. He was four years too young to be a novice Guildsman but his father was in the business, so he got to go outside the dome more than most kids. He'd seen more shrubs and succulents and herbs and crops and flowering plants than he could shake a branch at, but he still got a kick out of them. Sometimes he dreamed about walking in bright fields of poppies, or strolling through wheat, but he'd never tell Chris that. Living on a planet devoted to cultivation, the bread-basket of this particular stellar system and the source of most of the spices, herbs, floral and medicinal materials within several light years, he was aware that flowers weren't exactly the coolest thing to be caught taking an interest in.

Size apart, what made *this* flower so special was that nobody had expected it. This single plant with the deepest root system on Degas had been chugging along sending vine-like stalks up and over the dome -- stalks which displayed an unusual degree of tensile strength and resistance to electrostatic discharges -- and the Municipal Planners had tolerated it because of the cooling shade it cast over Travis City, and because they left the indigenous flora alone when they could. And now their tolerance had been rewarded: a bud the size of a truck had appeared at the vertex and exploded into a rich golden orange bloom that defied the sky. The collective gasp of astonishment among the members of this colony of agriculturists was enough to cause a minor imbalance in the air handling system. Daniel was only one of several hundred people who could be seen regularly craning their necks upwards as the giant bloom tracked the sun across the sky.

It was part hibiscus, part tulip, and part rambling rose, and it was three hundred times bigger than any of those. They hadn't seen a flower like it before on Degas, and it certainly wasn't an import from anywhere else in Known Space. All in all, Daniel thought it wasn't unreasonable to be impressed. Even if it was only a flower.

#

"I wish I could see it close up."

His father, Martin Kemp, sat typing in his armchair. He wrote articles for a variety of info-sites in the sector, often with short deadlines, and Daniel felt guilty for interrupting, but he was an only child so what did they expect?

Martin just looked at him. Daniel knew better than to repeat his comment. His father belonged to the Arum Guild and operated on a time scale rather similar to the lilies he tended. Daniel thought lilies were kind of neat; they grew on land and on water, so that made for some variety, and they never went out of style. Then again, herbs were more complex and subtle. If Daniel did really well at school, he might consider trying out for the Herb Guild.

Finally, Martin connected. "You can. We have telescopes trained on it, on top of most of the Guild buildings. We're reinstating the internal copter rides next week, up into the dome. I'll take you up. You should get a particularly satisfying view of the pedical and sepals."

"Uh, thanks, Dad. But it's not the same. I want to touch it. I want to stand up inside it and see how the sky looks through its petals. I want to, um...."

"Experience it," said his mother helpfully as she crossed the room with a dripping paintbrush in her hand and disappeared into the study.

"I want to know what it's like for myself," said Daniel.

"Many of us would," said his father. "But it isn't a jungle gym. It's a delicate and possibly unique piece of flora. We can't get near it with a copter, and you know we can't land anything heavy on the dome. The bloom might be fragile. The appropriate communication is to admire it from afar, not jump around inside it. Why don't you do some sums and figure out how much each petal weighs?" His father shook his head kindly -- conversation over -- and went back to his writing.

Daniel did the math. The flower petals were fifty feet high and a couple of feet thick, and what with the extra cellulose they needed to keep them upright and other diseconomies of scale, they probably weighed a couple of hundred pounds. The central part where the petals joined should be sturdy enough to support a small cart, let alone a teenager.

He couldn't understand why his father thought there might be a problem. Maybe lilies scaled differently.

#

"No way," said Chris. "Are you crazy?" But if anything, he looked more scared than scornful.

They were at Chris's place. His parents were out. It was late afternoon and through the window Daniel could see the flower lolling on its side, facing west.

"You promised not to tell a soul," Daniel reminded him.

"Oh, I won't. No worries there. Think I want everybody to know my best friend is a total screwball?"

"I'm not a screwball," said Daniel. "I just want to do something nobody else has done. And I thought you might want to come with me."

Chris started reeling back and forth, bouncing off the bamboo furniture. "Help me!" he cried. "The plant... the flower... it's talking to me... it wants me to come and visit... it says it wants to be my friend... it's in love with me!"

"Oh, you're such a jerk," said Daniel, and hit Chris on the point of the jaw with everything he had, before he even realized he'd lost his temper.

Chris's mouth closed with a snap. He tumbled onto the grassy apartment floor and didn't move.

For a dazed moment Daniel thought Chris was dead, and wondered what it would be like to spend his teen years in jail. Then Chris coughed and sat up, spitting blood.

"Are you okay?"

"Ow, my tooth, Jeez." Daniel came forward to help him up, but Chris lashed out with his foot from his sitting position. "Just get away from me, you maniac. I hope you fall off and kill yourself dead as a rock."

Daniel began to say he was sorry, but realized he wasn't. He may have spent all his time with Chris, but all they really had in common were their schoolteachers.

Chris didn't understand him, even now. Nobody did.

"Get help, spaz. You're insane."

No, I'm just for real about something for a change, thought Daniel, but all he said was, "Remember, this is a secret. You promised."

Then he walked out of Chris's apartment and went to make some plans.

#

Daniel placed his gloved hands on the vine and began to climb. The stalk was seven feet thick, but its fiber was gnarled and rigid, providing a host of handholds and ridges he could use. If anything it was an easier climb than he'd feared. The force field tugged at the locks of hair that spilled out of the back of his helmet, and when his boot or his elbow brushed the field he felt a tiny crackle, but that was all. If he fell, he'd bounce off into empty space and thud into the loam at the dome's base, but he didn't allow himself to consider that. He would not fall.

The sky began to turn pink. High above him, the flower lay in its own shadow, waiting for the dawn.

Daniel climbed and left the mundane world behind.

The tree-lined boulevards of Travis City opened up before his eyes, sleepy in the pre-dawn light. A few Guildsmen would be out in the fields and plantations, and soon the pharmaceutical processing plants would be coming on-line, but this early in the day the streets were almost deserted.

Daniel briefly thought of Jack and the Beanstalk. Well, he certainly had his own giant waiting above him today.

The environment suit he'd stolen had been tailored for a small woman. The extra bagginess at his hips and chest made him feel uncomfortable -- he wouldn't want Chris to see him dressed like this! -- but at least he'd be safe enough from any toxic sprays that might drift unseen on the morning breeze. He knew the coast was clear for the moment

because the automatic filtration system in his breathing apparatus had clicked itself off, leaving him free to breathe the outside air. A riot of outdome scents crowded his nostrils.

His calves ached already. He took a break and checked the landscape behind him. He saw no sign of human activity except for a truck way off in the distance. Below him, an avenue of tousle-headed palm trees stretched away to the horizon. To the left of the avenue he saw fields of rose, cherry, apple, chrysanthemum, and some native breeds and variants more difficult to name from this distance. The crop turned functional on the other side of the avenue, with countless plots of an unrelieved green. Here would be medicinal herbs, tangy spice, perhaps some vegetables.

Further afield he could have seen the immense seas of grain crops that provided the food source for twelve worlds, had he turned up the mag on his helmet goggles.

As Daniel climbed higher, he discovered an unexpected problem. The vine-like stalks followed the curve of the dome, of course, and this meant that instead of climbing straight up he now scrambled at an angle. This reduced the weight his arms had to bear, which was good, but also forced him to look down through the invisible field to the sprawling streets of Travis City, hundreds of feet below.

The problem was that he was beginning to suffer from vertigo. He shook his head to dispel the dizziness, made it worse, and had to wait it out before going on.

The sun pierced the clouds on the horizon. Its rays illuminated the flower for the first time, turning it suddenly golden. Daniel was impressed with its loveliness for a fraction of a second, and then all hell broke loose around him.

The stalk bucked, and he was flooded with a feeling something like joy and something like terror, a pull both upwards towards the flower and down in the opposite direction towards the unforgiving earth. He lost his grip, flailed in panic, slammed back into the stalk, bounced again. His left foot slipped out of the crack he'd wedged it into, and the vine turned to glass beneath him. He slid.

His life didn't flash before him, and he didn't feel regret.

A fiber slapped Daniel's right hand, and he clung to it. When it seemed like he'd stopped falling, he opened his eyes.

The sky above him was a cold post-dawn blue. His back and butt tingled. He lay directly against the force field, nothing but space and hard earth beneath him, linked to the vine by one arm. He gulped bile and hoped he hadn't screamed too loudly.

He clawed his way back to the plant's woody stem and hugged it till the quivering in his arms and legs subsided.

Daniel couldn't figure out what had happened. Perhaps the giant flower had greeted the sunlight with a passionate cry, and the emotion had rippled down the stem and disoriented him totally. (*Nah*, said the voice of Chris in his mind; *Get help, loser.*)

Or perhaps the touch of the sunlight had caused an ionic discharge in the electrostatic field, almost instantly compensated for by the generators but sending a power wave around the dome.

Daniel was maybe half-way to his goal, leaning on the vine at forty-five degrees. Through the dome he saw wooden buildings, tiny swimming pools, electric carts crawling along the streets.

Right now it would be really nifty if he could just stop shaking.

He cranked the goggles to max mag, and the city jumped closer. He recognized signs, streets, palm trees. The magnification diminished the sense of height, and fooled his heart rate into slowing down. He scanned the park, looking down on the spot where only yesterday he had stood looking up.

And there was Chris, staring right back.

Chris lay on the ground, apparently frozen in place. The binoculars clamped over his eyes did not obscure the tears on his cheeks. Chris had the knuckle of his left index finger jammed into his mouth. Above everything else in his small world, Chris hated to cry like a kid.

Well, heck, Daniel had an audience. No time to lie here pinned with fear.

He chose not to acknowledge Chris for the time being, but re-centered the mag on his goggles and concentrated on lifting one foot above the other. *Let's hustle and bustle.*

Through his dwindling terror, the thought occurred to Daniel that even if it was a bit more risky, he'd rather spend his life *doing*, and leave it to people like Chris to be the helpless spectators.

Nonetheless, he was grateful for the support.

The slope grew ever shallower, and the flower loomed ahead. It had taken him several hours to get this far. The sun was high above the horizon, and the flower had bent up to follow it. A hundred feet away from it Daniel took another time-out to crank up the mag and check the great bloom for bugs. He'd never seen a bug on Degas bigger than his fist, but even one that size could freak him out plenty if it dashed itself into his face.

Daniel had seen close-up pictures of the flower before, of course. He'd practically memorized the newsfeed reports. But, as he'd suspected, being here for himself made all the difference.

He faced only a gentle slope to where the six separate stalks of the plant merged and twined into a tangle so knotty that he couldn't tell which stem led to the pedicel of the great flower. And perhaps it didn't matter, since surely all the stems contributed nutrients to sustain it. The stalks apparently rested in space, defining the dome with their shape. He looked higher.

Five petals of the deepest orange interleaved to form a goblet that tilted against the blue of the sky. At the base of the bloom the orange turned almost crimson; towards the tip of each petal Daniel saw the dark veins that guided sustenance through it.

The flower's simple majesty made Daniel feel even shorter than he already was.

Let's see now. Am I over the vertigo problem yet?

He looked down.

Beneath him lay the direct center of Travis City. The two major boulevards intersected here in a traffic circle surrounding a park. He could see the wooden statue of Travis, and trees that looked like tiny shrubs from this altitude. The meandering rivers that divided the suburbs and seemed so pleasant at ground level looked geometrical and fakey from up here.

A crowd was gathering in the park, a static knot of people.

His audience had grown. Like it or not, he was about to become famous the world over.

Well, the vertigo seemed to have left him, and the city was irrelevant to him right now. His goal was barely even uphill from here, and he'd be damned if he'd crawl up to it on his hands and knees like an infant.

Daniel stood up and walked, and in walking he forgot the dizzying drop, forgot the people watching him spellbound from so far below, forgot even the possibility that he might trip and fall on his nose right in front of his flower. He just walked and the bloom rose over him and dwarfed him and welcomed him.

He clambered easily over the knotty tangle and past the green-bladed ring of sepals. Careful not to bring damage to their tender surfaces, he hooked his boot into the cleft between two overlapping petals and slid sideways between them. The petal beneath him yielded, separating from its upper companion just sufficiently to allow him access, and he disappeared from the view of the city.

Daniel found himself in a world of scarlet and gold that smelled of every flower he knew rolled into one, with a scent so commanding that he could taste it on his tongue. The warm glow played on his face and shone through his suit.

He was eight feet from the thick spire that marked the flower's center. He followed the curve of the stamen with his eyes out beyond the petals to where it split into five stalks like insect eyes, each capped with a gold coin that pressed against the sky.

Within the flower he could not see the city he'd grown up in, or any part of the surface of his world. He could see only the walls of the flower, and the blue sky, and the sun.

He'd heard a theory that the plant was a 'sport' or mutation, caused by the influence of the electrostatic field of the dome itself upon some dormant native plant strain. Standing within it now, Daniel decided this couldn't be true.

We did not make this. It was here before us. By being here, it honors us.

Daniel sat down on a crimson carpet within the tilted vase of the bloom, and bent his head.

For the last hour the only sound he'd heard was the whisper of the breeze. Now, he became aware of a clattering buzz somewhere behind him.

His eyes snapped open. *Stay alert.*

The quality of the light had changed. Fifty feet above him, the petals were closing up. Their angle was changing, too -- he could no longer see the sun. The flower lurched around him, and his stomach jumped. *Painful lesson.* The petals irised ever more quickly, and the surface beneath him tilted. Daniel threw his arms up over his head and let himself tumble.

A few moments later he came to rest, encased in a bright cocoon of scarlet and gold, baffled and alone.

The emergency filtration system in his suit clicked on, and he heard the hiss of the air pump at his waist.

The pump unit clicked up into max at the same time as Daniel became aware that the stuff he was breathing was pretty stale. The flower held him so tightly that the oxygen wasn't making it through his suit from his waist to his helmet.

Daniel's mind raced.

He knew many plants ate insects. Heck, there was a breed of sundew three star systems over that ate small rodents. But omnivorous plants had sensitive hairs, glue to trap fast-moving insects, the works. They didn't look like this. What the heck?

Pay attention. Nothing was munching on him right now, but the air situation wouldn't wait. He didn't know how long he had before he blacked out and suffocated, but he didn't want to twiddle his thumbs till he found out.

There'd be a knife in the utility pack at his belt, but his arms were clamped tightly around his head. Protecting his face had seemed like a good idea at the time. He worked his right arm back and forth, trying to make space to move it further, and maybe the tightly-curved flower petals loosened up a bit. But not enough to him to reach his waist -- all he was doing was pulling his hand out of his glove and into the arm of his environment suit.

Well, hey, we can run with that idea. Daniel gave up on the knife, and instead wriggled his shoulders downwards until his head slid out from the helmet. He scrunched his head into the extra space in the chest of his suit and pushed outwards as hard as he could, and as he gulped down the new oxygen and his headache faded, he decided that being small wasn't such a bad thing after all.

He'd bought himself time. But what on earth was going on with this dumb flower?

Clatter-buzz. The noise he'd heard earlier was now so loud he could hear it even over the emergency systems in his suit, and now he had some leisure, he could even guess what it was. Travis Municipal had sent a couple of copters up to get him.

Saved by the cavalry. All he had to do was sit tight and wait for them to cut him out of this thing, take him home, and ground him for the next three years.

But they'd probably kill the flower getting him out.

Damn, damn. Daniel's heart sank. If this flower died because of him, he'd ground himself for the rest of his *life*.

From the sounds around him he figured there were two copters. The copters were for reconnaissance, crop surveying and occasional spraying, rather than carrying personnel, so they took a maximum of three people each, pilot included. Daniel guessed they'd lower some guy on a rope to cut through the petals, with another guy to grab Daniel and carry him out of danger. At least, that was what Daniel would do if he was in charge.

Daniel squirmed around to see if he had any leverage yet, but... no way. The flower had him wrapped snug as a bug. Not much he could do, if he couldn't even move.

But something was niggling him about this whole situation, something that just didn't add up.

Daniel cast his mind back over the sequence of events. Municipal had launched the copters to come get him. He'd heard them approach. Then the flower had closed around him.

Okay. He had it, now.

His first thought had been dead wrong. The copters weren't coming to save him from being eaten by the flower; they'd been launched much too early for that. They were coming to try and get him away from the flower, to protect *it* from *him*. He was breaking the law by being up here, and they wanted to nail him for it.

And the flower wasn't trying to eat him. Again, the reverse must be true. The *flower* was trying to save *him* from being eaten by the *copters*. To the flower, the copters must seem like a brace of giant bees.

Could that be right?

Daniel felt that mental dislocation he sometimes felt when he talked to Chris. Maybe he wasn't getting enough oxygen after all. He wished it wasn't so dark in here.

Then he remembered the surge of emotion that rippled down through the flower as it greeted the dawn, and his feeling of age and permanence as he stood in awe of the bloom, and thought, no, this is no dumb flower.

Let me out, he thought. *It's all right. You can let me out of here.*

Petals still pressed his arms into his helmet. He tried to think louder. *These are friends. We're all on the same side. They're not a bunch of giant insects out to eat me.*

Didn't seem to be working. So Daniel moved one mental step lower, and sent out thoughts of general contentment and love and sunshine towards those wonderful copters and towards the wonderful flower and everything was just joyous and fine and sunny and so wonderful.

That did it.

The flower unfurled. The air pump at his waist clicked into standby, the helmet filtration turned off, and a hundred feet above him Daniel saw a man in a harness dangling underneath a copter with a machete in his hand.

He thought: *Yes, Dad, appropriate communication.*

Yes, Chris, I'm talking to the flower, and yes, it wants to be my friend.

#

Daniel lay on his back in the park and watched the flower track the sun.

He'd been busted and boiled and hung out to dry by Travis Municipal, and Chris wasn't talking to him. He didn't even want to think about how nuts his parents had gotten. Then, just when he was thinking he might as well just recycle himself for fertilizer, Municipal had come back and told him it was his civic duty to help them out in their attempts to communicate further with the flower. And that they wouldn't reimburse him for his time, but if he knew his future from his butt, he'd better take them up on it.

Fine. Daniel was glad to help. Anything to get him back up there to visit with the flower, even as conversationally limited as it appeared to be.

He didn't care about his future, though. Now he'd stood inside the flower surrounded by scarlet and gold and looked at the sun, now he'd *talked to* an alien being, he couldn't imagine that his future lay in any of the Guilds on Degas. He'd seen the greatest wonder on this world, but there were plenty of other worlds, plenty of other connections to make.

The flower hung suspended, between Daniel and the sky.
But Daniel had a feeling it would only be temporary.