

Echo of the Invisible World

by Shelly Li

Six-limbed but standing on two, the foreign being stared at Dr. Richardson with black, almost blue eyes. Looking out the window, Richardson could see the cubed silver pods docking into the space station's hangar deck, ready to finally transport their alien ambassador back to their home planet.

Richardson turned back and exchanged glances with his secretary, the only other person in the room. The expression on the young man's face matched his own. Delomen was the first extraterrestrial connection that the crew had made, and now their time with the foreign planet was running out.

If Richardson had to guess, he had maybe two, three minutes to salvage an entire year of failed audiences and cement an understanding between Earth and Delomen. He couldn't let the ambassador, who called himself F'tacerus, leave the ship, for Richardson had a feeling that F'tacerus and the Delomen people would never return.

"Thank you for your hospitality this last earth year," F'tacerus said in Delomen's language, raising a hand and touching all three of his fingers to his forehead. "We are afraid that we have nothing to offer you, and vice-versa. Perhaps it is better if we go our separate ways."

The words smashed into Richardson's stomach, ripping, tearing.

"But F'tacerus, how can you say this when you will not allow me and my crew to step foot on Delomen? We can bring something to your people if you just let us come study, I know it."

And vice-versa, he said to himself.

But F'tacerus merely shook his head and said, "The Elders of Delomen have deemed this unnecessary. I'm sorry."

Richardson sighed, knowing that this conclusion was inevitable. F'tacerus had told him this all along. And so he did nothing but sit and watch as the Delomen ambassador's tall, lean figure stepped out the door and began to walk away.

"You're going to stop him, aren't you?" his secretary said.

Richardson couldn't take his eyes off the distancing F'tacerus, his heart panicking to an unsteady beat.

"It's extremely clear now that they don't want anything that we have," he said. "It's hopeless."

"Hopeless," the secretary repeated, finally diverting Richardson's attention to him. "Dr. Richardson, the suits in Washington are not going to back down just because we've given up. They've poured billions into research and mapping, satellites to capture footage of Delomen's surface, decryption systems to study their people's language. They want to see results."

Richardson leaned back in his seat, exhausted. He didn't want to hear the chiding, but he knew that his secretary was right. He needed to keep the Delomen ambassador on the ship. F'tacerus was their ticket into the planet. But how will I keep him here? he wondered, combing through his mind for answers.

However, no answers came. At least, not from him.

Just as F'tacerus was about to turn the corner and disappear from Richardson's view completely, a soft violin note seeped into the air. F'tacerus stopped mid-step and spun around, as though trying to find the slow stream of music filtering into the hallway. The ambassador's dark impassive eyes lit up for the first time ever, locking gazes with Richardson.

At first Richardson didn't understand. But as he watched F'tacerus set a hand against the wall to steady himself, opening one door after another to locate the sound, he began to realize.

So the alien race was not apathetic toward everything after all.

Of course Richardson knew where the deep, resonating music was coming from, and who was creating it. Stuck on the spaceship negotiating terms of cooperation with Delomen, he hadn't returned home in two years and realistically, he never considered his home on Earth to be home and seldom returned anyway. But he could recognize that violin anywhere.

"Allow me," Richardson said, easing out of his seat and beckoning F'tacerus down the hall.

Punching in the pass code, he opened the door and let the ambassador into his own quarters. Behind Richardson's desk, partially hidden behind a

violin case, sat a young man of twenty-four. His left hand curved over the neck of his violin, shifting up and down the fingerboard as his fingers flitted across the four strings, manipulating the sound with vibratos, an occasional tremolo.

Both Richardson and F'tacerus stood in silence, watching, waiting, Richardson out of grudging courtesy, F'tacerus, perhaps, out of sheer awe.

Standing besides him, F'tacerus whispered, "We have examined the electromagnetic waves that your kind has emitted, but this... this is something entirely different."

Finally the man's fingers halted, and he lowered the violin. He turned toward Richardson. There was no smile, no hint of warmth in his expression, nothing but a blank stare of expectation.

"Ambassador," Richardson said, making the first move and gesturing at the young man. "Allow me to introduce you to Connor Richardson. My son."

From across the desk, Connor Richardson's gaze darted from his father to the tall foreign being standing next to him, lingering on this ambassador for just a fleeting moment before returning his eyes to his father. So this was who his father had dedicated his career, his life to. A giant preying mantis of a being who stood gaping at him, as if he were a strange specimen in a jar.

For a brief second Connor let his emotions get the best of him, struggling to fasten down the years of resentment and frustration. But the moment soon passed, as logic filtered in to remind him that his father had virtually been absent all his life. It was time to accept that this would always be true.

The alien spoke before his father could, but all that Connor's ears picked up was an unintelligible garble of differing pitches.

Luckily Richardson stepped in and responded in an equally confusing sequence of low tones. But the alien seemed unsatisfied, and he gestured directly at Connor and mumbled out a few phrases.

After a pause, Connor finally heard something understandable, coming from his father.

“Ambassador F’tacerus asks that you play another, ahh, song on the violin.”

“Why?” Connor asked with a frown, looking at F’tacerus.

“Please do it, son.”

His father’s tone was gentle enough, certainly not demanding, but there was a quiet force to his words that nestled Connor. Of course he was familiar with this, the soft way in which Richardson spoke as he delegated tasks. All his life the subdued voice repulsed him, yet he could never refuse it.

And so, raising the small wooden violin to his shoulder, Connor set the pearl-white hair of the bow on the string’s and began to play. Violin Sonata No. 9, movement two. He knew every sudden crescendo, was aware of every vibrato that made his own stomach churn.

Halfway into the piece, the door to his father’s quarters slid open, and five, no six, figures approached. Connor didn’t need to raise his eyes from the violin to realize that the guests were aliens. The collective gasp sufficed.

Silence continued even after the music stopped. Clutching his violin by the neck, Connor looked around at the foreign beings standing in front of him, each over seven feet tall, with long fingers and glittering dark eyes. He couldn’t lie, he was entranced by their outer appearances; the way they carried themselves; the way they stared. They watched him with an attention his father had never had.

The ambassador, F’tacerus, finally spoke.

Richardson translated, “This must be the echo of the invisible world.”

Behind F’tacerus, another of the aliens managed a few distorted words. Those accompanying seemed to be in agreement with whatever he said. For a long moment Connor’s father seemed stunned, the scientist’s mouth agape as he stared at F’tacerus and the other foreign beings. And then, slowly, he turned to Connor.

“The Delomen people would like to invite you to their planet and play the violin for them.”

Connor couldn’t help but chuckle, setting the violin down on his father’s desk. Immediately one of the aliens dashed forward and picked it up before

he could even blink.

“Hey, be careful,” Connor said to the alien as he curled his long fingers around body of the violin. “That’s expensive.”

His father did not translate.

Taking a step back, Connor watched as the alien raised his hand and gave the A string a light pluck. Out rang the soft vibrating of the synthetic core, and the alien’s back stiffened. He plucked the string again, then moved to pluck another.

“What is he doing?” Connor asked his father, standing beside him.

Richardson answered with only two words.

“Discovering music.”

“Of all the things we possess, mathematics, religion, they want music! For such an advanced race, this is just sad.”

Now sitting with only his son in the room, Richardson replied to the hologram projection of a man on his desk.

“Connor is willing to go to Delomen and play. Are there any objections?”

“Well of course we’re not going to send a civilian to Delomen, unprotected. Come now, Dr. Richardson.”

Richardson sighed and leaned back in his seat. By “unprotected,” he knew that NASA administrator Everett Storm had meant “unsupervised.”

“Look, I think it’s great that we finally have a chance to step foot on Delomen,” Storm said. “Sharing music, getting friendly... But we’re not here to harvest warm fuzzy feelings. We are scientists, here to study. And the Delomen people are being unreasonable by only allowing you and your son onto the planet.”

“So what do you suggest I do?”

The hologram of Everett Storm, dressed in a well-cut wool suit, smiled and said, “Propose a trade.”

From across his desk, Richardson caught the look of disdain on his son’s face as he looked away from the hologram. He tried to ignore the sinking

feeling of guilt that Connor's expression sparked inside him, and he replied to Storm, "You want to trade human music for Delomen weaponry."

"Naturally. Nothing is free in this world, or should I say, universe."

"And if they refuse?"

Richardson didn't think he could take it if his one chance to step foot on Delomen, the goal he had been working toward for almost twenty years, were to vanish right now when it was already within his grasp.

"What if Delomen cuts off contact with us forever?"

Storm paused a moment, as if seriously pondering Richardson's question. However his reply proved otherwise.

"You're a smart man, Dr. Richardson, but you fail to see the big picture. The government doesn't want to see us getting chummy with the aliens. That is not why they funnel billions upon billions of dollars into this project. Our satellites have been circling Delomen for a while now, enough time to determine that we really don't need to step foot on the planet. We need the advanced weaponry of the planet, and we need to obtain it first. Who knows what China will do if given the alien technology before us?"

Richardson fell silent.

"Do what I advise, Dr. Richardson, and negotiate for the space weapons. Do your job successfully, so that I can do mine and ensure the continuation of this project."

And with these words, the hologram shut off.

Richardson hesitated a second before looking up at Connor, apprehensive. Then he said, "So. You're now a college grad."

"Since last week," his son said, fiddling with the gold statue standing on the desk, sculpted into the figure of a Delomen. It was an award that Richardson had won last year to congratulate his work in space with the foreign planet.

"Sorry I couldn't be there," Richardson said.

Connor shrugged.

"It would have seemed unnatural if you had."

The words delivered to Richardson a pain that no physical force could. How many months had passed since he had even spoken to his son? Seven,

eight months? Nothing had changed. And judging by the spite seeded in his son's voice, Richardson ventured that his wife had all but forced Connor to make a trip up to space to see his father.

But Richardson kept composed on the outside and instead said, "Tell me then, what would you like as a graduation present?"

Slowly Connor's eyes, identical to his father's, flickered up to meet Richardson's. The intensity of the stare caught him a little off guard.

"I can have anything I want?"

Richardson smiled, an uneasy feeling flowering inside his chest. He would never admit it, but he needed Connor's approval, he couldn't help it.

"Anything I can give you, son."

Connor folded his arms across his chest and, leaning forward, said, "Don't negotiate. We will go to Delomen ourselves, and I will play the violin for them."

For a moment Richardson sat frozen in his chair, his mind scrambling to recover from the blow of his son's words. At first he laughed them off.

"You have an interesting sense of humor, Connor."

Connor ran his fingers over the closed violin case, set on the corner of Richardson's desk. Since he was a child he was always fidgeting, tapping a rhythm, humming a melody.

"When I saw the alien pluck the strings of my violin, and when I understood the look of revelation on his face... I felt pity. I cannot imagine a world without music, and I cannot live knowing that I am surrounded by this gift while there are others who are kept in ignorance."

Richardson sighed, shaking his head.

"Why must you put me in such a compromising position?" he said.

Anything Connor wanted, he could have given. Anything but this.

"I'll lose my job."

"Your job? Look at what your job has turned into!" his son exclaimed, standing up from his seat.

He gestured at the hologram projector sitting before him and took a few steps back.

"Bending backwards to appease the warmongers of government? Why?"

“You have to see the big picture,” Richardson said. “The government funds this project with the unvoiced promise that I will produce results for them. If I want to sustain, I need to deliver to them what they want.”

He paused and stared at his son, wrapped in desire and held back by frustration. Richardson wanted to reach out and set a hand on Connor’s shoulder, tell him that he was familiar with the feeling. He wanted to say something that would make his son understand that real life was much more complex than the ideas in one’s head. But try as he might, he could not find the proper words, and so he let Connor speak.

“It’s impossible to love someone like you, Dad,” he said, pacing inside a three foot radius of Richardson’s chair. “You pour all your attention, all your effort into your work, so that nothing is ever left for me and Mom but isolation. But I understand that, we are attracted to what we love. I can respect that.”

Richardson’s hands tightened into fists as he watched his son take a step toward the door.

“What I can’t tolerate is my father acting like the government’s lapdog, mutilating your science and your morals. You’ve turned away from your work, what you love. It’s disgusting, and any man who will betray his soul for a business of violence will never have my love nor respect.”

And before Richardson had a chance to reply, his son stepped through the door and walked away.

The hiss of the closing door made Richardson sick to his stomach. So his son was making him choose, it seemed, between him and his work.

Sighing, he swiveled in his chair to face the floor-to-ceiling window behind his desk. Millions of stars twinkled their hellos at him, shining through a blanket of black abyss.

He began to recall all the years he had spent up here, deciphering the Delomen language, learning their culture, studying snapshots of the planet, reasoning with F’tacerus...

Turning back to face his desk, Richardson could see no evidence anywhere of this effort. No, this was clearly no longer the desk of a scientist.

Weapons schematics covered most of the space, sketches that the defense

engineers had drawn up based on satellite imaging. Space missiles, lasers, bombs, all hypothetically capable of penetrating the shields protecting Delomen.

The funders of his project didn't care about what he cared about. They didn't want to establish intergalactic connections, trade, peace. Their first priority was the continuing survival of their own people, even if that meant eradicating another.

All this, he saw in his work.

Yet when he looked at it, the papers scattered over his desk, lines and lines of raw data, he realized that he could hardly see himself anymore.

Connor Richardson closed his eyes, and the sounds of music thickened in his head as though solidifying. The first notes of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D Major echoed through him, reverberating in the core of his bones as he fingered along on his violin, sitting next to him in the station's cafeteria booth.

He could feel the eyes of others burning into him, wondering what he was doing here on the space station, why he was sitting alone with his violin, his existence pointless.

He didn't have a clue himself.

The music inside him began to crescendo, pick up speed, growing angrier and angrier until Connor's fingers started to feel sore with each pound against the violin's fingerboard.

His eyelids flitted open again, and he took a moment to scan the cafeteria, taking in the matching silver tiles on the floor and the ceiling, the men in blue uniform pounding drinks at the bar, the red and white curtains framing the sun's rays as it climbed over a ringed planet.

Connor couldn't help but wonder: Why am I here?

Why, when time after time his father had succeeded in disappointing him, why did he continue to render himself vulnerable, hoping that just once, his father would act like one?

A small smile touched his lips as he took a sip of the coffee in front of him, a decision becoming clearer and clearer in his mind.

It was time to cut his losses and return home to Earth, from where he should never have let his footsteps cool in the first place.

He was snapping shut the clasps of his violin case when all of a sudden he felt a hand on his shoulder, then a voice that drilled into him deeper than even violin notes.

“Good afternoon, son,” his father said, smiling down at him.

Connor looked up into Richardson’s eyes, frowning at the mystery shining inside them. Like an alarm, the little voice in the back of his head told him, you’re done giving him chances. It’s time to go.

For a long time Connor said nothing, struggling with the hurt and hope inside himself. He wanted to be finished with hoping, knowing it was the only string keeping his soul tied to this unbearable anguish.

He opened to his mouth to tell his father that he was leaving.

But the only words he could force out were, “Aren’t you going to have a seat?”

His father shook his head and said, “Actually, I’m afraid we don’t have the time to sit. The t-pod to Delomen leaves in,” he checked his watch, “about ten minutes.”

Connor’s heart skipped a beat as he fixed Richardson with a questioning look.

“There is no negotiation, no weapons deal.” His father reached over and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the violin case. “There is just me, you, and the music.”

Richardson’s hands shook as he took his first steps on Delomen ground. Now walking the surface of the planet, he finally saw that the cracked terrain that satellite imaging had captured was in fact a ground composed of billions of tiny rocks, like cobblestone, but organized in a smooth fashion, as though there was a layer of glass covering the pebbles.

“The pilot of your transport must stay docked here,” the Delomen guard said to Richardson. “This is the wish of the Elders.”

Richardson nodded and, handing Connor his violin, the two proceeded down the undisturbed pebbled path toward a gelatinous-looking center stage, surrounded by thousands, tens of thousands of Delomen people. Thick black columns stood rooted on either side of the elevated platform, dripping light the way a sponge drips water. Each separate bead of light sparked and flashed as it fell, dissipating into the darkness upon impact with the crystal floor.

“Dad,” Connor whispered so that only Richardson could hear. “I don’t know what song to play.”

“This is the first time this planet will hear music,” Richardson said. “It’d be best if you chose something to play before we reach the stage. Or... would you like me to first explain to them what anxiety vomit is?”

At this a smile traveled from one end of Connor’s mouth to the other, and he turned and said, “Listen, about that time in your quarters, when I told you that I had lost respect for you...”

“It was a wakeup call,” Richardson said before he could finish. “And I needed it.”

Connor paused a moment, looking as though he was about to reply, but after a few seconds he seemed to change his mind and simply nodded instead.

By now they had reached the steps of the stage, made of some flowing see-through substance that resembled a more solid version of jelly. The scientist in Richardson wanted to question the Delomen guard about its compound, maybe collect a sample to take home, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Are you coming?” Connor said, looking back at Richardson as he ascended the stairs.

Richardson shook his head and extended a hand for his son to shake.

“Today, I am your shadow.”

His son’s grip was firm, strong.

With a smile, Richardson let go and said, “Now go bring music to the world, son.”

And so Connor turned and walked toward the center of the stage, unpacking his violin on a shelf that extended out of the ground.

Richardson didn't need to survey the crowd to know that each Delomen citizen was holding his or her breath, suspended in excited anticipation.

Connor lifted the violin to his shoulder. From behind the stage, Richardson could see the ups and downs of his back as he breathed.

Then, setting the bow on the string and taking an exaggerated inhale, Connor began to play.

The sounds spilled everywhere, magnified hundredfold. It was as if the gooey composition of the stage was surging and absorbing the violin notes, sending the sound waves in all directions.

Richardson's stomach performed its first flip in a matter of seconds. Though he was not familiar with the song, slow and gut wrenchingly sweet, he had been exposed to human music his entire life, and thus had a leg up on those who surrounded him.

Still the beauty of the song shocked him.

Each note seemed to transcend the one before, transitioning from cautious to confident, delicate and warm to edgy and hard.

Richardson smiled despite the knot of emotions that had bloomed inside his chest. Here, now, with the music of the violin filling his thoughts, he felt a painful kind of longing. He longed for something he had never had, would never have, and never be able to explain.

Standing on the stage, Connor played and played, his fingers flitting up and down the fingerboard in a blur.

"My people are feeling emotions that they have never experienced before," a Delomen voice said from behind.

Richardson turned as F'tacerus pulled up beside him.

And with those words, Connor played his last note, a low, rich, vibrating sound that was capable of igniting dreams.

The Delomen Ambassador said something else—Richardson thought he had said "thank you" but the roar of the crowned drowned out all other noise.

Richardson looked up just in time to watch his son exit the stage, climbing

down the steps with sweat lining his forehead and a youthful grin that coerced a smile onto Richardson's face as well.

"Translate for me, Dr. Richardson," F'tacerus said, turning to Connor. "Tell your son thank you for the performance. Thank you, from one planet to another."

Richardson related the message.

For a moment Connor said nothing as the smile disappeared from his lips, and the intensity faded from his eyes.

Then, with a nod of acknowledgement, Connor handed his violin over to F'tacerus.

"The song is titled 'Echo of the Invisible World,' and it is not a gift from Earth to Delomen."

Richardson hesitated as his son turned to him, giving him a look that required no words.

"It is a gift from one heart to another."