THE STARS ARE CALLING, MR. KEATS

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ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

We had much in common with the queegy bird: a kind of lameness, a wistful yearning, and a memory for certain things ...

HUBBARD had seen queegy birds before, but this was the first time he had ever seen a lame one.

However, if you discounted its crooked left leg, it didn't differ particularly from the other birds on display. It had the same bright yellow topknot and the same necklace of blue polka dots; it had the same royal blue beads of eyes and the same pale-green breast; it had the same bizarre curvature of beak and the same outlandish facial expression. It was about six inches long, and it weighed in the neighborhood of one and a quarter ounces

Hubbard realized that he had paused. The clerk, a high-breasted girl wearing one of the latest translucent dresses, was looking at him questioningly from the other side of the bird counter. He cleared his throat. "What happened to its leg?" he asked.

The girl shrugged. "Got broke during shipment. We marked him down but nobody'll buy him anyway. They want it in tip-top shape."

"I see," Hubbard said. Mentally he reviewed the little he knew about queegy birds: they were native to Queeg, a primitive province of the Venerian Tri-State Republic; they could remember practically anything if it was repeated to them once or twice; they responded to association words; they were highly adaptable, but they refused to breed anywhere except in their native habitat, so the only way to commercialize them was by shipping them from Venus to Earth; fortunately they were sturdy enough to endure the acceleration and deceleration that shipment involved—Shipment …

"It's been in space then!" Hubbard spoke the words before he thought.

The girl made a malicious *moue,* nodded. "I always said space was for the birds."

Hubbard knew he was supposed to laugh. He even tried to. After all, the girl had no way of knowing that he was an ex-spaceman. On the surface he looked just like any other middle-aged man wandering through a five and ten dollar store on a February afternoon. But he couldn't laugh. No matter, how hard he tried.

The girl didn't seem to notice. She went on in the same vein: "I wonder why it is that eggheads are the only people who ever travel to the stars."

Because they're the only ones who can stand the loneliness and even they can stand it just so *long,* Hubbard almost said. Instead, he said, "What do you do with them when nobody wants them?"

". . . Oh, you mean the birds. Well, first you take a paper bag and pump some natural gas into it, you don't need very much, then you—"

"How much is it?"

"You mean the *lame* one?"

"Yes."

"You *are* a tesseract, aren't you! ... 6.95—plus 17.50 for the cage."

"I'll take it," Hubbard said.

The cage was awkward to carry and the cover kept sliding off and every time it did the queegy bird gave a loud cheep! and the people on the airbus, and afterwards on the suburban street, turned and

stared, and Hubbard couldn't help feeling like a fool.

He'd had hopes of getting his purchase into the house and up the stairs to his room without his sister getting her eyes on it. He should have known better. Alice got her eyes on everything. "Now what have you gone and thrown your money away on?" she said, coming into the hall just as he closed the front door.

Hubbard turned toward her resignedly. "A queegy bird," he said.

"A *queegy* bird!" The look, which he had long ago classified as "compulsive-aggressive with frustration overtones," settled upon her face, flaring her nostrils, thinning her lips, giving an odd flattening effect to her cheeks. She snatched off the cover, peered into the cage. "Well what do you know," she said. "And a crippled one at that!"

"It isn't a monster," Hubbard said. "It's just a bird. Quite a small one, in fact. It won't take up much room and I'll make sure that it doesn't bother anybody."

Alice gave him a long, cold look. "You'd better!" she said. "I can just imagine what Jack's going to say when I tell him."

Abruptly she turned and walked away. "Supper's at six," she said over her shoulder.

He ascended the stairs slowly. He felt tired, defeated. They were right when they said that the longer you lived in space, the more remote your chances became of ever being re-accepted by society. Space was big, and in space you thought big; in space you read big books written by big men. You changed, you grew different . . . and eventually, even your relatives got to hate you.

Though God knew, you tried to be just like everybody else on the surface. You tried to say the same things everybody else said, you tried to do the same things everybody else did. You made it a point never to call anyone a "fish." But there was always the inevitable slip of the tongue, the inevitable unorthodox action, and then the staring hostile faces and finally the inevitable ostracism. You couldn't quote Schweitzer in a society that conceived of God as a rosy-cheeked philanthropist piloting a winged Cadillac. You couldn't admit to liking Wagner in a civilization addicted to cowboy operettas—

You couldn't buy a crippled queegy bird in a world that had forgotten—if indeed it had ever known—the meaning of the phrase, "reverence for life."

Twenty-five years, he thought. The best twenty-five years of my life. And all I've got to show for them are a lonely room, and a pittance of a pension that won't even let me retain my self-respect.

And yet he didn't regret the years: the slow magnificent drifting of the stars; the indescribable moment when a new planet swam into your ken, grew from a gold or green or azure mote into a sphere that eclipsed the entire cosmos. And the coming in, with the new land rising up in green greeting, singing of splendors both beautiful and terrible, of strange horizons; of civilizations undreamed of by piscine man groping his uninspired way beneath his incalculable tons of atmosphere on the deep sea bottom of Earth.

No, he didn't regret the years, no matter what their price had been. You had to pay high prices for valuable things, and if you were afraid to pay, you went destitute all your life. Spiritually destitute, intellectually destitute—

The nothingness of body and the all of mind, the pure flow of thought: the unhindered passages through the staid corridors of knowledge, the breathless sojourns in cathedrals built of phrase and word; the rare and shining moments when you glimpsed the star-patterned face of God—

Yes, and those other moments, too, the soul-shattering moments when you glimpsed, in your aloneness, the abysmal deeps of hell ...

He shuddered. Slowly he returned to the bottom of the sea, found himself facing the bleak facade of his bedroom door. Reluctantly his fingers closed upon the knob, turned

Opposite the doorway, a bookcase burst with well-worn books. To the right was the battered article of furniture which he faithfully referred to as his desk, but whose drawers held not papers nor pen nor log book, but underwear and socks and shirts and all the other bodily impedimenta that mortal man is heir to.

His bed, narrow and hard the way he believed beds should be, stood like a stubborn Spartan by the window, the toes of his other shoes peeping from beneath the hem of the spread.

He set the cage on the desk and removed his hat and coat. The queegy bird, after a blue appraisal of its new surroundings, hopped lopsidedly down from its perch and went to work on one of the cups of *piwi* seeds that had been included with the cage. Hubbard watched for a while—before it occurred to him that it was impolite to watch somebody else eat, even when that somebody else was a queegy bird; then he hung his coat and hat in the closet, went down the hall to the bathroom and washed up. By the time he returned, the queegy bird had finished its repast and was regarding itself contemplatively in its mirror.

"I think it's about time for your first lesson," Hubbard said. "Let's see what you can do with Keats: *'Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.' "*

The queegy bird regarded him obliquely with one blue eye. The seconds scampered by. "All right," Hubbard said presently, "let's try again: *'Beauty is truth—' "*

" `—truth beauty—that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye *need to know!' "*

Hubbard's weight settled back on his heels. The words had been uttered almost without intonation, and in a rather gravelly voice. Nevertheless, they had been precise and clear, and marked the first time in his life he had ever heard anyone—outside of another spaceman—give utterance to anything that did not directly or indirectly concern a bodily need or function. He touched his cheek a little tremulously. Why, he wondered, hadn't he thought of buying a queegy bird a long time ago?

"I think," he said, "that before we go any farther, we'd better give you a name. Suppose we make it 'Keats,' as long as we started with him. Or, better yet, `Mr. Keats,' since we've got to establish your sex one way or another. I admit it's a rather arbitrary way of doing so, but I never thought to ask whether you were a boy bird or a girl bird."

"Keats," Mr. Keats said.

"Fine! And now we'll try a line or two from Shelley—" (In the background of his mind, Hubbard was aware of a car pulling into the drive, of voices in the downstairs hall; but in his absorption with Mr. Keats, he paid no attention.)

"'Tell me, thou Star, whose wings of light
Speed thee in thy fiery flight,
In what cavern of the night
Will thy pinions close now?' "

"'Tell me, thou Star—' " Mr. Keats began.

"Now I've really had it. A queegy bird reciting poetry!"

Reluctantly, Hubbard turned. His brother-in-law was standing in the doorway. Usually he kept his door closed. Tonight he had forgotten. "Yes," he said, "he recites poetry. Is there a law against it?"

"'—whose wings of light—' " Mr. Keats went on.

Jack shook his head. He was 35, looked 40, and thought 15. "No, there isn't," he said. "But there should be."

" 'Speed thee in thy fiery "

"I disagree," Hubbard said. *"'In what cavern of the night—' "*

"And there should also be a law against bringing them in human houses!"

"'Will thy pinions close now . . ."

"Are you trying to tell me that I can't keep him?"

"Not exactly. But I'm telling you to keep him far away from me! They carry germs, you know."

"So do you," Hubbard said. He didn't mean to say it, but he couldn't resist.

Jack's nostrils flared, his lips thinned, his cheeks grew flat. Odd, Hubbard reflected, how twelve years of marriage could make the physical reactions of two people identical. "Just keep it away from me, that's all! And keep it away from the kids, too. I don't want it poisoning their minds with that claptrap talk

you're teaching it!"

"I'll keep it away from them, don't worry about that," Hubbard said.

"Want your door closed?"

"Yes."

Abruptly the room trembled from the impact of wood on wood. Mr. Keats nearly jumped through the bars of his cage. Hubbard headed furiously for the hall.

He never reached it. What would be the sense, he asked himself, of giving them the one excuse they needed to evict him? His pension wasn't enough to enable him to live anywhere else —unless he hit Derelict Alley—and his temperament precluded his supplementing it through employment. Sooner or later he'd betray himself to his fellow workers, just as he always did, and be railroaded or ridiculed—it didn't matter which—off the job.

Miserably, he turned away from the door. Mr. Keats had calmed down somewhat, but his pale-green breast still rose and fell at an accelerated rhythm. Hubbard bent over the cage. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keats," he said. "I guess birds can't afford to be different any more than humans can."

He was late for supper. Jack, Alice, and the kids were already at the table when he entered the ration room, and Jack was saying, "I'm getting damned sick of his insolence. After all, if it wasn't for me, where would he be? Derelict Alley, that's where!"

"I'll speak to him," Alice said.

"Now's as good a time as any," Hubbard said, sitting down and opening his vacuumized supper-pak.

Alice gave him the injured look she reserved for such occasions. "Jack was just telling me how rude you were to him. I think you should apologize. After all this is his house."

Hubbard was trembling inside. Usually he backed down whenever his obligations were thrown in his face. Tonight, somehow he couldn't. "I'll concede," he said, "that you've given me a room to sleep in and that you feed me, and that I'm unable to pay you enough for either service to permit you to make a profit. But such munificence hardly entitles you to a slice of my soul every time I try to preserve my dignity as a human being."

Alice looked at him blankly for a moment. Then: "No one's asking you for a slice of your soul! Why do you talk that way, Ben?"

"He talks that way because be used to be a spaceman," Jack interrupted. "That's the way they talk in space—to themselves, of course. It keeps them from going crazy—or keeps them from knowing they already are crazy!"

Nancy, who was 8, and Jimmy, who was 11, broke into simultaneousy giggles. Hubbard cut a small square of his near-steak. The trembling in him was worse than ever. Then he thought of Mr. Keats, and the trembling went away. He looked coldly around the table. For the first time in years he was not afraid. "If the present gathering is an index to the norm," he said, "perhaps we are crazy. Thank God for that! There may be hope!"

Jack's and Alice's faces were skin-tight masks. But neither of them said a word. Supper was resumed. Hubbard seldom ate very much. He was rarely hungry.

But tonight he had an excellent appetite.

The next day was Saturday. Usually Hubbard washed Jack's car Saturday morning. Not this Saturday morning. After breakfasting, he retired to his room and spent the next three hours with Mr. Keats. Descartes, this time, and Nietzsche and Hume. Mr. Keats didn't do quite so well with pure prose, though. A phrase or two on any one subject was about the extent of his abilities.

Apparently poetry was his forte.

In the afternoon Hubbard visited the spaceport, as was his custom, and watched the shuttle-ships come and go. The *Flame* and the *Wanderer;* the *Promise* and the *Song.* The *Promise* was his favorite. He'd surfaced on that one himself—a long time ago, it seemed now, though it wasn't really. Two or three years, maybe—no more than that. . . . Taken up equipment and personnel to the orbiting freighters and

brought back Centaurian bauxite and Martian ore and Sirian chrome and all the other elements man needed to perpetuate his complex civilization.

Piloting a shuttle-ship was a sort of prelude to piloting a freighter. It gave you a chance to find out whether you could take that awesome moment when you emerged from the depths and rode free on the star-isled sea of space. If you could take it, and could continue to take it, you were eligible for the big boats and the long runs.

Trouble was, when you grew older, your personal universe shrank, no matter what you did to stop it, and the aloneness of the long runs grew with you; grew to a point where even the corridors of knowledge and the cathedrals built of phrase and word no longer helped, grew till you psychoed out once too many times and were given the plank —consigned forever to the bottom of the sea. If piloting a freighter had been an operation complex enough to occupy your time, instead of a long and lonely vigil in a cockpit filled with self-operating controls and nothing else, or if Interstellar and the other space transportation outfits did not have to operate on so slender a margin of profit that payloads had to be computed down to the last pound, the situation might have been different.

If, Hubbard thought, standing in the snow outside the spaceport fence. If, he thought, watching the ships come in, watching the huge mobile docks trundle over to the pads and fill their ravenous bins with ore and bauxite and magnesium. If, he thought, watching the ships climb up beyond the blue where the freighters orbited on the soundless surface of the sea ...

When the afternoon shadows lengthened and the daylight began to dwindle, he debated, as usual, on whether to stop in and see McCaffrey, the port operations chief. As usual, and for the same reason, he decided not to. It was the same reason that made him avoid the company of other ex-spacemen like himself: the nostalgia such meetings evoked was too poignant for him to bear.

He turned away, walked along the fence to the gate, and, when the airbus came in, boarded it and went home.

March came, and winter blended into spring. Rains washed the snow away; gutters churned with muddy water, and lawns took on a naked look. The first robins began to appear.

Hubbard rigged up a perch for Mr. Keats in front of the bedroom window. Mr. Keats would sit there all day, flying back to his cage every now and then for a snack of *piwi* seeds. He liked the mornings best of all, the mornings with the sun breasting the rooftop of the house next door, all bright and golden, and when the brightness struck the window and washed all through the room, he would fly in swift ecstatic figure-eights and loops and spirals, chirping at the top of his voice, returning to his perch and miraculously re-alighting on one foot: a golden mote, winged and living, a part of the sun itself, a part of the morning; a feathered exclamation point emphasizing each new beauty the day divulged.

Under Hubbard's tutelage, his repertoire grew and grew. The most casual remark was bound to contain at least one association word capable of provoking a reaction, and the resultant quotation would range anywhere from Juvenal to Joyce, from Rousseau to Russell, or from Euripides to Eliot. He had a penchant for the first two lines of "Dover Beach," and often would recite them without any provocation at all.

During this period. Hubbard's sister and brother-in-law left him pretty much alone. They did not even remark about his shirking his Saturday morning carwash job, nor even so much as mention Mr. Keats. Hubbard wasn't fooled. They were waiting, and he knew it: waiting till he gave them whatever opportunity they were looking for, waiting till he turned his back at the right moment

He wasn't particularly surprised when he returned from the spaceport one Saturday afternoon and found Mr. Keats huddled forlornly in the corner of his cage, his feathers fluffed up, his blue eyes glazed with fear.

Later, at the supper table, he saw the cat lurking in the shadows of the ration room. But he said nothing. The cat was a psychological weapon: if your landlord permitted you to keep one species of pet, you could hardly object to his keeping a different species. Instead, Hubbard had bought a new lock for his bedroom door and installed it himself. Then he bought a new catch for the window, and made sure that whenever he left the room, both means of ingress were securely fastened.

He sat back to wait for their next maneuver.

He didn't have to wait long. This time they didn't have to contrive a means for getting rid of Mr. Keats: one was thrown right in their laps.

Hubbard came down to supper one night and the minute he saw their faces, he knew. Even the kids showed it—not so much in the way they looked at him as in the way they kept looking away from him. The newspaper clipping Jack shoved under his nose was almost an anticlimax:

Queegy Bird Fever Strikes Family of Five

Deetville, Mo., March 28, 2043 —Dr. Otis Q. Farnham today diagnosed the illness which simultaneously afflicted Mr. and Mrs. Fred Krudlow and their three children, as queegy bird fever.

Recently, Mrs. Krudlow purchased a pair of queegy birds at the local five and ten dollar store. Several days ago, the entire Krudlow family began complaining of sore throats and aching limbs, and Dr. Farnham was called.

"The fact that queegy bird fever is not a great deal more serious than the common cold should not affect our attitude towards this totally unnecessary disease," Dr. Farnham said, in a prepared statement. "I have long deplored the unsupervised sale of these extraterrestrial bird forms, and I intend, immediately, to recommend to the WMA, a thorough examination of all birds being brought in from Venus, all birds now in department and five and ten dollar stores, as well as all birds already purchased and living in households throughout the world. They serve no useful purpose, and Earth will be better off without them."

Hubbard's eyes trailed away from the clipping, rested unseeingly on the table. In the back of his mind, Mr. Keats gave a despairing peep.

Jack was beaming. "I told you they carried germs," he said.

"So does Dr. Farnham," Hubbard said.

"Why what an awful thing to say," Alice said. "What germs could a *doctor* carry?"

"The same germs all pompous and opportunistic people carry —the virii 'publicity-hunger,' 'ill-considered action,' and 'xenophobia,' to name a few . . . He'll do anything to get out of his provincial rut. He'll exterminate every queegy bird in the system if he has to."

"You're not going to talk your way out of this one," Jack said. "That article says as clear as day that queegy birds are dangerous to have around."

"So are cats and dogs. . . . So are automobiles. If you read about a traffic accident occurring in Deetville, Missouri, would you get rid of your car?"

"You leave my car out of this!" Jack shouted. "And you get that damned bird out of here by tomorrow morning or get out yourself!"

Alice touched his arm. "Jack—"

"Shut up! I've had enough of his high-falutin' talk. Just be cause he was a spaceman once, he thinks he's better than we are. He looks down on us because we stay on Earth." He confronted Hubbard, pointing at him with his finger. "All right, tell me this, then, you're so smart! Just how long do you think there'd *be* spacemen if there wasn't people like us staying here on Earth to consume and use what you bring back from your damned planets? Why, if it wasn't for the consumer there wouldn't be a ship in the whole sky. There wouldn't even be a civilization!"

Hubbard looked at him for a long time. Finally he got up and said the one word he had promised himself he would never say to an Earth-bound mortal; the ultimate epithet, in space argot, whose esoteric meaning was forever lost to the purblind creatures of the deep

"Fish!" he said, and turned and left the roam.

His hands were trembling when he reached the top of the stairs. He waited in the hall till they

steadied. It would never do to let Mr. Keats see how upset he was

He censored the thought. You could carry anthropomorphism too far. No matter how human Mr. Keats might seem to he, he was still nothing but a bird. He could talk, and he had a personality, and he had his likes and his dislikes; but he wasn't human.

Well, then, was Jack human? Was Alice?

Were the kids?

Well . . . Certainly.

Why, then, was Mr. Keats' company preferable to theirs?

Because Alice and Jack and the kids lived in a different world, a world Hubbard had left behind a long time ago and to which he could never return. Mr. Keats didn't belong in that world, either. He was a fellow outcast. Moreover, he was a fellow outcast capable of supplying the one thing human beings needed most:

Companionship.

And he only weighed one and one-quarter ounces ...

Hubbard had just reached his door and was fitting the new key into the new lock, when the thought struck him and washed through him like clear, cold wine. Abruptly his hands began trembling again.

This time he didn't notice.

"Sit down, Hub," McCaffrey said. "Haven't seen you for millennia."

The long walk across the starlit tarmac and the long wait in the crowded anteroom, with the frosted door gleaming coldly in the foreground, had honeycombed his confidence. But McCaffrey was an old friend. If anybody could understand, McCaffrey could. If anybody would help, McCaffrey would

Hubbard sat down. "I won't waste your time with a lot of irrelevant words, Mac," he said. "I want to go out again."

McCaffrey had a pencil between his fingers. He let the point fall to the desktop and the graphite tip made a brief series of taps on the azure formica. "I guess I don't need to tell you that you're 45, that you've already psychoed out more than the critical number of times, and that if you got up there and psychoed out again, you'd lose your life and I'd lose my job."

"No, you don't have to tell me," Hubbard said . . . "You've known me for twenty years, Mac. Do you think I'd ask to go out if I didn't think I had a good chance of making it back?"

McCaffrey raised the pencil, let it fall again. The series of taps hung in the air long after the point had ceased vibrating. "Why do you think you've got a chance?"

"If I don't psycho, I'll tell you afterwards. If I do psycho, you tell them I stole the ship. You can fix it easy."

"I can fix everything easy—except my conscience."

"What does it do to your conscience looking across your desk art me now, Mac?"

The pencil fell again. Da — da da da da da-dadadada . . .

"They tell me you own stock in Interstellar, Mac."

Da –da da da da—da-dadadada . . .

"I left part of my soul in Interstellar. That means you own stock in me."

Da da da—da da—da-dadadada . . .

"I know that one or two hundred pounds can spell the difference between profit and loss. I'm not blaming you for that, Mac. And I know that pilots are a dime a dozen. You don't need much technical training to learn how to push buttons. But even so, think of the money Interstellar could save over a period of time if they could use a man for forty years instead of twenty."

"You'd be able to tell right away," McCaffrey said reflectively . . . "The minute you surfaced."

"That's right. In five minutes I'd know, one way or the other. In half an hour, you'd know."

"There's a run open on the *Promise* . . ." Abruptly McCaffrey made up his mind. "Be here at 0600 tomorrow morning," he said. "On the dot."

Hubbard stood up. He touched his cheek and his finger came away wet. "Thanks, Mac. I'll never forget it."

"You hadn't better, you old buzzard! And you'd better get back here whole or I won't be able to live with myself for the rest of my life!"

"Be seeing you, Mac."

Hubbard let himself out. There was so much to do before 0600. A special box to make, a final talk with Mr. Keats ...

Lord, it had been so long since he'd risen at dawn. You forgot the watermelon color of the eastern sky, the slow, cool, magnificent influx of light over the land. You forgot all the good things, over the years; you only thought you remembered them. You had to live them again to realize what you'd lost.

It was 0545 when the airbus set him down before the spaceport gate. The gateman was new, and didn't know him. At Hubbard's request, he called Mac. Presently he waved Hubbard in. Hubbard started the long walk across the tarmac, trying not to look at the tall spires of the shuttle ships standing like fairy castles against the citron sky. His space fatigues felt unnatural, after all the years, and he walked awkwardly in his heavy spaceboots. He kept his hands nestled deep in the voluminous pockets of his jacket.

Mac was standing on the edge of the *Promise's* launching pad. "You'll rendezvous with the *Canaveral* at 0609," he said. That was all he said. There was nothing else to say.

The rungs of the ladder were numbingly cold. They seemed to go on and on forever. No, not quite forever. He stepped winded, into the lock. He waved to Mac. He closed the outer door, stepped into the cramped control roam. He closed the inner door. He sat down on the pilot's seat and strapped himself in. He took the perforated box out of his jacket pocket. He took Mr. Keats out of the box. He checked the tiny acceleration couch, then he put Mr. Keats back in the box, on the couch, and adjusted the small straps about the small bird-body. "The stars are calling, Mr. Keats," he said.

He activated the "all-clear" signal. Presently the tower technician began the countdown. 10 . . . Numbers, Hubbard thought . . . 9 ... It was like counting the years . . . 8 . . . counting the years backwards . . . 7 ... The lonely, starless years ... 6 . . . *Tell me, thou Star* . . . 5 . . . *whose wings of light* . . . 4 ... *Speed thee in* thy *fiery flight* . . . 3 ... *In what cavern of the night* . . . 2 .. . *Will thy pinions close* now ... 1 ...

And now you knew it in the flattened hugeness of your ponderous body and in the swift up-thrusting of the jets; now you knew it in the nausea in your stomach and in the first fingers of fright clawing tentatively in your brain; now you knew it in darkening of the viewport and in the first stabbing light of the stars—

Abruptly the *Promise* emerged from the depths and floated, bereft of apparent motion, on the surface of the sea of space. In the vast distances the stars shone like brilliant buoys, lighting the way to unimaginable shores . . .

There was a slight tremor as the artificial gravity unit murmured into life. Hubbard knew normalcy again. Looking through the viewport, he knew fear. Alone, he thought. Alone on the sea of space. He felt his fingers at his collar, tearing at the tightness and the swelling terror. *Alone.* The word was a white lance of pure panic imbedding itself deeper and deeper into his brain. ALONE. Say it, his mind shrieked. Say it! His fingers dropped away from his collar, down to the box on his lap, and fumbled with the tiny straps. *Say it!*

"Alone," he croaked.

"You are not alone," Mr. Keats said, hopping up from the little couch and perching on the rim of the box. "*I* am with you." And slowly, excruciatingly, the white lance withdrew.

Mr. Keats flew over and perched on a quadrant vane in front of the viewport. He cast one bright blue bead of an eye at the cosmos. He ruffled his feathers. *"'I think, therefore I am,'"* he said. " *'Cogito ergo sum.'"*

THE END