

Welcome to **Phases**: a short story anthology following the events of Moonbase Theta, Out.

Story 12: Ashwini

Dr. Ashwini Ray grimaced as ze shook in zir seat. Or, more accurately, ze shook, the seat shook, and everything the seat was *connected* to was shaking. Even with the adjustments made by engineers from the NAC, the rocket ride from the Moon was anything but comfortable. Particularly when one's seat was fitted into a slot designed for transporting stasis pods, and the entire chamber remained depressurized, so spacesuits were required for the entirety of the two-and-a-half-day voyage.

Jaxon's voice buzzed through the suit's speakers: "Ashwini? You're still ... okay there? I saw you ..." He trailed off, humming quietly. Their seats were face to face – one 'above' the other, though that designation didn't mean much in open space, and they could see each other's expressions throughout. "It's not a gentle ride," he continued, and then repeated in his sing-song manner: "Not a gentle ride, not a gentle ride."

When he'd finished, Ashwini tapped the spot on zir mouthguard that let zir respond. "It certainly is not, though that's been true for the last sixty hours or so. I can even feel it in my *hair*," ze said with a wry grin – Jaxon had pulled that back into a ponytail before helping fasten zir helmet back on-Base. "But if I was frowning, it was likely due to literary concerns."

Jaxon's brow unfurrowed. "A new story? That's a ... welcome distraction."

"A new story *would* be welcome. But alas, my considerable intellect and creativity remains focused on the sins of the past. Perhaps it's because we are en route to the site of many of my past sins." Ze rolled zir eyes. "I have returned to the composition of 'The Half-Blood King.'"

"Wasn't that the story you ...?"

"I know, I buried it fifteen nested levels below the folder of my least flattering selfies, never to see the light of the sun again. And yet, here we are." Ze paused for a moment as the rocket groaned through a counter-clockwise spin. "We must be entering the outer sphere of space debris," ze commented, then continued zir previous thought. "I did further research and discovered that the rights to the ... originating work no longer lie in the hands, or at this point heirs, of that odious author."

"At some point in the 30s, after the televised revival tanked even faster than her own goodwill, a series of defamation lawsuits resulted in all claim being granted to the Calpernia Sarah Addams Society and various other trans rights organizations. While for the most part, the megas have done away with that sort of altruism, I had Guillermo trace the current legal ownership and it proves to be still at a satisfactory distance from the legacy of the now-deceased belletristic harpy."

Jaxon grinned. "That's a lot of work for ... unpublished fan-fiction."

Ashwini managed to nod slightly within zir helmet. "But for the moral of the story. And even thus, I have been moving the plot away from the original featured cast to a ... I am slightly embarrassed to say, a sort of self-insert. But I had little choice – I attempted to center the plot around another favourite main character, Miles Vorkosigan, and the whole thing started to fall apart. I was forced to step in if the plot had any chance of advancing."

“My hero,” Jaxon crooned softly. “Have fun. I have to send notes back on …” Somehow he managed to snap his fingers a few times even inside heavily-insulated gloves. “Inventories, inventories, inventories for Val …”

Ashwini frowned. “You’re still working? This is supposed to be a holiday from our everyday lives. A new adventure hand in hand on the Earth below.”

Jaxon caught zir eye. “Like you’ve given up your duties for new adventures?”

“That was not the same situation. And I do intend to take that trip one day.” Ze paused for a moment. “I hope that we’ll take it together. Presumably the accommodations are more comfortable than these.” The rocket trembled again as they spun in the opposite direction. “But I’ll let you get back to your notes, which I assume you’ll be finished with before we land.”

Ze waited for a response, but Jaxon already had his eyes closed, his lips moving slightly – probably crooning while he went through the information to be reviewed. Ashwini smiled fondly, closing zir own eyes and letting zir thoughts wander through the many options for zir composition.

Lord Ashwin escaped the castle by the light of early morning – while it had proven untrue that sunlight would kill Dracula or the other vampires under his thrall, it did reduce their powers. Still, ze closed the great wooden door gingerly behind zir, wincing as the hinges creaked, casting zir gaze back and forth to see if anyone had heard. Seeing only birds in the far-off sky, ze breathed a sigh of relief –

Changing to a gasp of surprise as a voice crackled from right behind! A figure emerged from the shadows of the doorway, emaciated but with eyes gleaming. “Oh, Lord! What a surprise to see you outside the castle walls. Has my master finished playing with you?” He licked his lips, a spider’s web clinging to the few hairs at his chin. “I shall have to broadcast the news of your survival!”

“Renfield,” Ashwin sneered, one hand resting upon the ivory pistol-grip hung at his waist. “I should have known you’d be lurking, hoping for a scrap or two from his table. Alas, the Count did not dine tonight. You’ll have to find some exiguous substitute for your meal.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” the cadaverous servant allowed, but he continued to meet Ashwin’s gaze. “Or perhaps … after a long night’s struggle, here on the doorstep, your luck might finally have run dry.”

“If I had run dry, neither you nor your master would take further interest,” Lord Ashwin quipped as he drew his weapon. “If you wish to find out just how hot my blood continues to boil, please feel free.” Ze took a step forward, the gravel crunching beneath zir foot.

Renfield cowered, bending forward, his bald spot gleaming in the sun. “I wouldn’t want to … so debase myself,” he muttered, his eyes flicking back and forth nervously. “Now, I believe I hear my … husband calling.” And in a flash, he disappeared into the shadows from whence he’d come.

The sky above Camazotz was almost completely dark, with only the slightest variation to indicate storm-clouds in motion high above the planet’s surface. And yet, a thin light persisted – illuminating two

figures side by side on a bench beside an empty playground: a teenage girl named Margaret Murry and the sharp-featured, imposing, elegantly-dressed Doctor Ashwini Ray.

“I appreciate the attention you’ve paid to the equations,” Doctor Ray said gently, drumming zir fingers against the wooden plank behind them. “The quantum entanglement is quite important.”

“You’ve gotten me all wrong *again*,” Meg wailed. “I’m not good at quantum or any other kind of entanglement! I just want to find Charles Wallace and Father and then ...” She trailed off helplessly.

“And then?” the scientist asked, silencing zir fingertips. Ze glanced at the darkness overhead, and she followed his gaze.

“Not *that!*” she quavered. “I know what Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit said, but where are they now that I need them?”

Dr. Ray tutted and shook zir head. “I have all the respect for those three, but there’s another trans-dimensional being whose advice I’d recommend.” Ze pulled a silver communication device from zir shirt-pocket, polishing it deliberately before opening. “She is not human, or alien, or any sort of supernatural being. She is an ... artificial consciousness.”

Somewhere in another world, under a too-blue sky with too-white, too-fluffy clouds, Ashwini and Jaxon stood in the crowd watching a Pokémon tournament. At one side were the champions of the Galar Region, battling with Zacian and Urshifu and the fierce, frosty Glastrier; on the other were a group of middle-aged adults milling excitedly in white coats and thick eyeglasses, and their Pokeballs opened to reveal some strange, squishy, unknown multi-legged creatures, who waddled across the playing field seemingly unaware that there was even a competition, sucking on bits of moss for nutrients.

In yet another place altogether, which Ashwini could not be certain was actually a *world*, ze stood in an endless wood beneath unbroken fields of leaves above, and soft grass broken up every few yards by identical pools of water below. The leaves did not move; the pools did not ripple; and it all felt terribly familiar while Ashwini was also certain ze had *never* been there before.

After ze had looked at the wood for a long time, a very old man stepped out from – well, from where Ashwini wasn’t sure, but he stepped out. He was tall with shaggy white hair and beard – he could quite convincingly have been played by Dick Van Dyke, and he seemed the same combination of familiar-but-wholly-new as the forest. He seemed to know everything there well – running his fingertips over initials cut into the bark of a tree without looking, stepping around the edge of a pool absent-mindedly.

As he came closer, the knowledge rose to the surface of Ashwini’s brain. “Professor Digory Kirke, I presume.” And it was he – the Magician’s Nephew, the first Boy in Narnia, the Owner of the Wardrobe.

He shook Ashwini’s hand, and offered zir a toffee from his jacket pocket, and they stood together in those woods speaking of many things. They seemed both of a single mind – not that their thoughts were the same, but they understood one another that well, and felt things similarly, and saw the world as if through the same vision.

Before ze realized, Ashwini was telling the Professor of the very story he was attempting to compose with them in it. “It’s been an intensely frustrating plot to try to resolve,” ze complained, dipping the toe of zir brogue into the water and then scattering droplets across the grass. “I’ve gone from loving my ideas to abhorring the very thought of opening the file one more time; yet I’m compelled to come back and back again, my mind entangled as I attempt to find the right way through.”

The Professor put his hand on Ashwini’s shoulder, but did not speak. After a while, ze paced a bit and spoke again. “I wish Jaxon were here. Or Tumnus – you would love Tumnus; not the one you’ll hear stories of later in your lifetime, but their namesake. My best friend. The one I used to tell stories to as I wrote them. Ohhhh, I just cannot … I wish you could summon Aslan to these woods! He could sing things into being, he would know what to do.”

Zir companion laughed, and slipped his hand into his pocket again while he replied. “Aslan is Aslan, and we are ourselves. We find our own ways to advance the plot.” He laughed again as he removed his hand, now holding a time-worn ring, covered in scratches, a faded green in color. “If you don’t mind my offering a suggestion …”

Not too long after that moment, Ashwini found zirself underwater, slightly panicked but rushing upwards, surfacing in another forest altogether. Ze stumbled from a brackish pond to shore, almost losing a shoe in the mud as ze went. For some reason, ze felt someone should have been there to see zir across; but shaking that thought off, ze pressed forward.

Not knowing where to go, ze followed a trail that presented itself. Every so often, ze heard rustling in the underbrush, or wings in the sky as if flocks of birds were passing … or once, not exactly *wings* – it almost sounded like fish flopping back and forth above. Ze also spied a rabbit dashing across the path, but it looked like there were horns growing out of its head. For the next fifteen minutes, ze tried to think of some fictional universe ze favoured where jackalopes were common.

The trail grew brighter, and Ashwini could tell ze was approaching a clearing. The animal noises had intensified, as if ze were about to walk into a busy farm, or an old-style zoo where a hundred beasts were living side by side. And yet at the same time, ze felt calm and assured as ze walked into what felt like a storybook illustration – hundreds of beasts, birds, creatures from all creation, grouped around a single figure, a massive green serpent posed regally at the center. Moss and leaves fringed their head and tail, and even still they exuded an uncontrollable energy.

Ashwini stepped cautiously into their presence, wary in a way ze rarely felt with anyone. But the Lindworm accepted zir graciously, inclining zir head to look deep into the astrophysicist’s eyes. “Ashwini Ray, you are welcome here. Come and sit with me. Please mind my friends; not all of them are at ease among humans.” As ze sat, a nearby bunyip slid further back into their puddle; but the closest bildad nuzzled inquisitively at zir fingertips.

After a time, Ashwini opened zir mouth to start to speak – but the Lindworm broke in before the first syllable could escape. “I know why you wander. I know your story has gone wild, escaped your control. I believe I can help you to see the … advantages in such a situation. But for now, sit, relax, enjoy.”

Ze followed the Lindworm's advice, even feeding Wallace (the bildad who had made his acquaintance) bits of bark and roots while ze waited. When they did talk, it lasted far into the night and the early hours of morning.

The rocket bucked as it entered the Earth's atmosphere, shaking Ashwini from zir fantasies. Ze opened zir eyes to find Jaxon watching peacefully, even as the entire world seemed to shake and shudder around them.

"You're smiling," he said with his own slight grin. "You must have figured something out."

Ashwini managed to incline zir head slightly. "Possibly. I was struggling, but in the end I might have convinced myself to ease up on the reins of this particular narrative."

"That sounds, umm, a little unlike you."

Ashwini smiled again. "Fair. But as we mentioned earlier ... new adventures, right? And new ways to take them together." Ze paused a moment. "Did I mention you were there in some of my plotting?"

Jaxon smiled back. "You know you didn't. And you better."

"New adventures together, love. You and me, and perhaps even –"

Just at that moment, as if awaiting a cue, the internal speaker within the rocket's main chamber sputtered with static, echoed within the communications of both their suits. The static resolved into a very familiar artificial voice:

"Doctor Ray, Ashwini, hello! And Jaxon! Oh, it is so, so good to see you both! Welcome to Earth! I've been waiting for you to get here."

[END NOTES]

Thank you for listening to Phases: a Moonbase Theta, Out short story anthology. Written by D.J. Sylvis. Read, produced, and edited by Cass McPhee. Our theme music is Star, by Ramp - check them out at Ramp dash Music dot net. Our cover art is by Peter Chiykowski.

For more audio fiction from the creators of Moonbase Theta, Out, check out Waiting for October, a queer supernatural audio drama series about monster stories and the deep human needs they fulfill. Find it on your podcast app of choice, or visit Monkeyman Productions dot com to learn more.

And, as always, keep watching the moon.