

JUST LIKE US?

By Kayla Carlamere

The pod swung from the tree—at least, *they* would've called it a tree. The pod's umbilical cord-like cable and its wires that burst free from the electrical hatch now became entangled with the tree's vine. Intrinsically tied in a way that both seemed natural, and anything but.

As it swayed back and forth, the pod rhythmically hit the tree's trunk, enough for the inhabitant to wait in anticipation. *Surely*, it thought—though not exactly in these terms or this language—if *there is something inside, it must wake*. But it waited for longer than its patience was willing, and just as it turned to leave, it heard a banging from the inside. A language it did not understand. A term similar to its own “Flavarf” which is used in only in the most frustrating, annoying, or shocking circumstances, and a term which one is typically scolded for—although those doing the scolding use it more than any other.

Of the same language, but another voice—of different pitch and tone—sounded from another pod the inhabitant had not originally observed, and although the words were muffled, the two seemed to be communicating with each other.

A mechanical wrenching noise all entirely foreign to the inhabitant reverberated from the pod, causing it to cower behind a bush—or what *they* would have called a bush. A screeching sound then made it cover its ears—or what *they* would have called ears. When it peaked out from behind the bush again, a door on the pod was opening at a snail's pace—though for all the inhabitant knew, this could mean opening lightning fast, another expression it would be lost upon. The sounds of effort from the unknown being inside excited the inhabitant, and made its tail twitch.

When the door was finally opened, and the inhabitant could see inside, it saw a figure not entirely unlike its own. It instinctively brought its hands to its eyes, mouth, and nose—or its equivalent of eyes, a mouth, and a nose—as it studied the figure’s face with the same elements. *A human*—someone else, though not the inhabitant, would have thought... if they in fact knew what a human was.

The only blaring difference—other than the absent green hues and being double its size—was that the human’s face was on the bottom, and its feet on top. But as it unbuckled itself from the pod and fell six feet onto the ground, it readjusted its feet to the bottom and shot straight up, alert, holding some sort of gun which he pointed frantically into all directions. A *gun*—a term the inhabitant would not have understood even if explained to it in its own language, yet it understood the human’s expression enough to remain behind the bush.

The second human called one word over and over—*Van*—and the first human reacted in a way as if it was calling for him. Then he shouted *Kate* and the second human answered.

The inhabitant stood carefully behind the bush, watching the humans as the first one helped the second down from the tree, and when they both were free they pulled each other into an embrace—something that *was* familiar to the inhabitant.

Looking from the embrace, to the gun on the ground where the human had thrown it in hopes to help his friend—a word the inhabitant *did* have in his language—it then felt safe walking out from behind the bush.

The second human saw it first, watching wide-eyed and frozen. The first human slowly pulled away and looked at it too. It was smiling as it approached them with open arms, and slowly the fear left the second human’s eyes and she began to smile too.

“Van,” the inhabitant struggled to say, placing its hand—or its three-fingered equivalent to a hand—on the chest of the first human. The man only slightly flinched.

“Kate,” it continued, identifying the second human with a hand on her shoulder.

“Zlof,” it finished, placing its finger on its own nose—what *they* would have called its nose.

Van smirked and called him *clever boy*, although if Zlof had known what “boy” meant it would’ve been offended, considering the true age difference, and considering its gender—or lack thereof. Instead it smiled more, and as the humans tried to tell it that they accidentally crash landed on this planet, Zlof simply smiled and nodded as it didn’t understand.

If Zlof *had* understood what Kate said about being disconnected from their people while trying to find a new home, it may have cried, in a very similar way as the humans would. But alas, it hurriedly moved on.

As it tried to tell the humans that it was going to take them to its people to introduce them, they simply smiled and nodded as they didn’t understand. Although if the humans had known what it meant they would’ve been scared and cautious. Instead, they smiled as it grabbed each of them by the hand, and willfully followed as it dragged them forward, catching its excitement as if it was a contagious disease.

“Zlof, *wait!*” Kate called out as they were passing a herd of Glophuntumps.

Zlof didn’t understand the word, but the sound of desire and urgency in her voice was universal, and the wonder in her eyes made Zlof forget his destination. As she stared amazed at

the baby Glophuntump, Zlof stared amazed at her amazement, and Van stared cautiously at its amazement—though he was softening the longer he watched.

“Kate,” Zlof pushed out, still struggling with the new sounds on his lips—or what *they* would have called lips. It smiled at her as it held a hand out to the baby Glophuntump, and with its other hand, guided her hand to do the same. The baby waddled over to them, its trunk-like appendage reaching out to feel them once it was close enough.

Kate chuckled, which startled Zlof. It jumped, which made the Glophuntump fly away. Kate said *sorry*, which Zlof did not understand, but just thinking of her laugh brought a huge grin to its face. It had never heard such a noise come from its people. Not quite.

As they continued, Kate often got distracted by new plants and animals they passed—or what *they* called plants and animals, on Earth. Each time she would stop and say something was *like* a sunflower, or *like* a chicken, or *like* a squirrel. Despite her constant use of the word, Zlof had no idea what the word *like* was meant to express, and the fact that it was always followed by an unfamiliar jumble of sounds did not help. Still, every time Kate spoke, Zlof stared with the most intent and serious expression, as if it just had to *want* it enough to understand. But if that’s all it took, Zlof would have known everything about these humans, for it had never wanted anything more. And yet, it did not even know the word for them, not one. Not *humans*. Or *people*. Or *man* or *woman*. Or *Earthlings*.

To itself, Zlof only thought of them as *Oveb*. The closest translation in the human language being *new*.

Il Oveb, Zlof thought at other times. *Not new*.

Zlof's excitement hadn't faded throughout their day's journey, and although Kate and Van had grown weary, Zlof was still quick on its feet. They were feet-like, at least. Zlof still had one destination in mind: Lurvna. *Home*, or *family*. To Zlof, community was everything. And its new friends—it thought at least—would fit in splendidly.

Although walking slouched forward and eyes drooping, Kate shot straight up as they approached the tree, and she swung around and smacked Van in the shoulder—an action which had Zlof concerned until it saw Van's smile. It didn't understand this acceptance of violence, but it shrugged it off as a funny difference it did not yet understand, though it hoped it would come to understand in the future.

What Van and Kate thought of as a *tree* stood five times taller than any human home, and was illuminated by the surrounding glowing plant life—or what they *thought* was plant life, but if they had ever had the chance to see them in the daylight, they'd have considered them more among their “animals.”

They stood there so frozen and starry-eyed that they didn't even notice the entrance before them. An entrance perfectly cut for anyone Zlof's size, though they would have to crouch to get through.

“Wait,” Zlof said, prolonging the T-sound that felt new to his lips. Kate was drawn to the use of the word and the communication they were building. She smiled, like a proud sibling might.

Zlof still had the same large grin on its face that it had carried all day throughout the forest. It gave them a reassuring nod before it continued into the tree without them.

Although separated, the humans could still hear its muffled voice from inside:

“I found something weird,” Zlof said—though not so simply, or in such a language—but it spoke with excitement, which *was* understood by the eavesdropping humans.

Van grew concerned on who he might be talking to.

An elder from inside grunted, and motioned, *What?* while slowly turning around.

Zlof called, “Kate! Van!” with an innocence still filling its eyes and its smile.

Kate and Van hesitantly made their way into the tree, crouching to get through the small opening and staring in shock at the dozens of inhabitants around them.

“Flavarf!” The elder exclaimed in response as soon as it laid eyes on the invaders.

The inhabitants all around were sent into a frenzy. *Flavarf* echoed throughout the crowd, from those young and old, as well as more chatter the humans did not understand.

Van brought his hand to the gun at his hip.

Zlof called out repeatedly, “Wait! *Grala!* Wait! *Grala!*”

No one listened.

Although weaponless—though the word seems redundant on a planet without weapons—a group of Zlof’s people encircled Van and Kate, and quickly smacked the gun out of Van’s hand as he was about to draw it. They had quicker reflexes than he could have ever hoped to beat.

“Grala! Grala!” Zlof continued pleading, but it was being detained by the elder as it tried to fight towards the humans. Its pleading were mere echoes throughout the chaos of the room.

The two humans were escorted away, down a spiral staircase within the tree that kept continuing down. And down. And down. Deep into the depths of the planet, lower than where even their prisoners who did actual *wrong* were kept.

“Wait! Wait!” Van tried to plead.

“Grala! Grala!” Kate echoed, remembering the last words she heard from their new friend.

They got no response but a *humph*. They knew even on their planet, that meant they didn’t care. It would be no use to beg for mercy. Van called it savage. *Inhumane*, which he didn’t see the irony in. But Kate had to remind him, in the days of old Earth, if it had happened to them, would they have not done the same? The only difference now was that they were the invaders, not the inhabitants.

“Space is no worse than us,” she muttered, and hoped they had just one more day with their new friend.