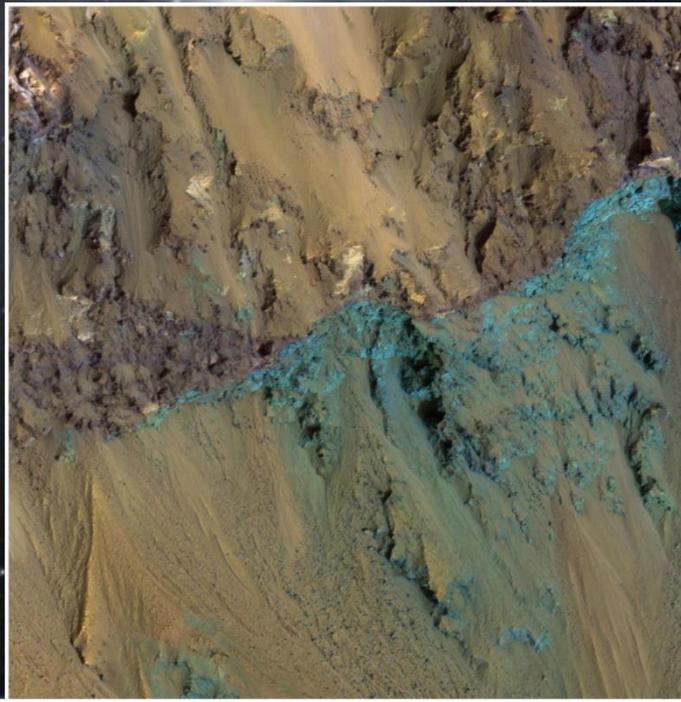


... A Friend



S. C. E s t o n

A short story

A Friend

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By S.C. Eston

Thank you for reading my story.

- Steve

A FRIEND

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... A Friend

The little girl looked at Savi, wanting a reaction, a word from his chipped voice telling her that everything would be all right, that he wanted to stay, that he was still her friend.

"I am sorry," said a woman. "It is better this way."

It was not.

The woman did not understand.

"I don't have anyone else," the girl murmured, her words lost on her ears alone.

"She is only a girl," said another voice. He was a man, younger, nicer, called Nethu. She never remembered names, but his, she did. His and Savi's. "Can't we bring her—"

A heavy sigh.

"She is safer here," replied the woman. "You know that."

The girl continued to stare at Savi. He could be so stubborn. Why was he not saying anything?

Nethu appeared to the girl's right.

"I am sorry," he said.

Tears formed in the girl's eyes, and it made her mad. No one cried in the Black Metallic Sea. Everyone knew that.

"Before, you said it was okay," she said, louder.

A few weeks ago, the carrier had appeared through the thick layer of steel clouds, descended from sky to ground, and hovered as it dumped its contents in a large crater on the eastern fringes of the Black Metallic Sea. That day, the girl guessed the location of the drop site with an uncanny accuracy. The other kids did not, leaving them far away. Alone, she scavenged and found useful stuff, including a friend. Nethu had arrived at that moment; he had let her and Savi be together.

"I know," said Nethu now. "I was wrong."

The words hurt. The girl stepped away from him and closer to her friend, who still did not move. She felt more than saw Nethu's hand trying to catch her shoulder, but she stayed just out of his reach.

Please say something, she willed Savi.

Her friend remained silent, his eyes closed. He tended to be obstinate and unmoving when he was scared. This was how she had found him.

The carrier's load had slid and rolled and tumbled out of its cargo door, a torrent of random things. The girl had been excited to be the first one on-site. The other kids

were sometimes mean to her, and on certain days she preferred not to hunt for treasures with them.

“Paleface” was the name they called her, because of the whiteness of her skin.

Someday, she would walk away completely, leave the Black Metallic Sea and go to the Low Lands or somewhere else. Not yet though. They needed each other. She found the drop sites, while the other kids provided protection in numbers, cover, and sometimes food. They shared when she ran out. Bits, but bits were better than no food at all.

She had hoped Savi would leave the Black Metallic Sea with her, but now...

“Nethu, we need to go,” said the woman.

“Give me a minute. We can’t leave her like this.”

He had said similar words when they first met. In the wreckage, the girl had found a box refrigerator, containing plastified food. She had filled her bag, which was washed-out blue and green, and had collected a coat, too large for her, but thick. She used it as a blanket on her cot.

Next she had come across Savi. He had been hiding along the side of the crater, between a broken chair and a white desk darkened by the dirt of the Black Metallic Sea. He looked small and fragile, yet friendly, his mouth showing an eternal smile.

She poked him with her finger.

“Hi,” she said, timid.

He did not reply, move, or open his eyes.

That was when she noticed the woman and the young man, shadows moving between objects. They were salvagers from the Low Lands. They moved like the wind, swiftly and furtively, taking what they needed before disappearing. Gangs of raiders would soon follow, ruthless as they depleted each site. It was dangerous to stay; salvagers would be slain and kids would be snatched. Yet the girl kept looking at Savi. She did not want to leave him behind.

She knelt by his side.

“Hi,” she repeated, poking him again, his skin cold against the tip of her finger.

This time he responded, unfolding his arms and stretching his legs. He stood and opened his eyes.

“Good morning,” he said in a barely audible voice. “How are you today?”
Louder.

The girl laughed, excited. “Good. And you? Are you all right?”

“I am good, thank you,” he answered. “What is your name?”

Before she could answer, the young man appeared above them. She was caught.

“What do we have here?” he asked.

Although scared, the girl moved in front of the boy, hiding him. The young man easily stepped around her, scrutinizing her new friend.

“Nethu!” came a voice. “We have to go, they are coming.”

Instantly, the young man climbed the side of the crater, jumping over and between pieces of debris. He glanced over the rim.

"How are they already here?" he pondered before coming back down. "I can't leave you here like this."

"I am all right," the girl said.

"What are you hiding?" he asked, pointing with a gloved finger.

"A friend," she said. "He is my new friend."

"I am your friend," agreed the boy behind her.

The man shook his head, but smiled.

"Take him away," he said. "Quickly. Not a word you saw me." He winked at her and left.

Thankful to the one named Nethu, the girl grabbed her new friend's hand and whisked him away. They had been inseparable ever since.

Until today.

The woman appeared beside her, tall, with an angry face.

"This is ridiculous," she said.

"Please, sis," said Nethu. "Just a moment."

"You already had a minute," she said before adding: "One more, then I leave and you'll have to catch up."

She walked away.

Nethu crouched in front of the girl and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Do you know how we found you?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Your friend told us."

It was not possible. Savi would not do that.

She looked at her friend, but he continued to not move.

Savi had always been nice to her. The day after she brought him to her hiding place, he had cleaned everything while she was sleeping: the floor, the fake walls, her few pieces of clothing. He had also warmed up some food. Such a rare treat, warm food.

"It is not his fault," added Nethu. "It is just the way he is. He is getting weaker and sends a signal. If we found you, others will. It is not safe for you."

The girl shook her head and looked at Savi again.

His eyes were shut, his mouth always smiling.

Inseparable. He had even come on treasure hunts and had been good at finding food. The other kids were jealous too. She knew. They had shunned her from the moment Savi appeared.

"He is my friend," she said.

There was a lurch and Savi opened his eyes. She was instantly hopeful, but it did not last.

"I am..." he started, his voice jumpy, unnatural. It was an awful sound, difficult to bear. The girl turned away, toward Nethu. She resisted a sob.

"Here," said Nethu, "take this."

In his hand appeared a small metallic flower, its petals an intriguing sheen of red.

"I kept it for someone special, and I want you to have it."

"Really?"

The girl took the flower, spun it between her fingers. It was beautiful.

"Really," said Nethu. "I will take him away now."

Hugging the flower to her chest, the girl nodded.

"Are you my friend?" she asked.

"I..." Savi tried, his voice dying. She ignored him, her eyes on Nethu.

The young man stretched out a hand and picked up Savi. The girl gasped but did not stop him. It was for the best. Savi transmitted.

Nethu stood and folded Savi's arms and legs, pushed them inside his body until Savi was a perfect box.

"What is your name?" she had asked the first night after rescuing him.

"I am the Savi 0-0-2-6-8-3, your companion and household helper," he had answered.

She had just wanted a friend. It had not mattered what he was.

The young man put the small robot in a bag hanging from his shoulder and took a few steps away. Voices were getting closer. Raiders. Danger.

Nethu stopped and looked back at her.

"Yes," he said. "I am a friend." He hesitated. Then asked: "What is your name?"

"Kina," said the girl. She did not know if it was her true name, but she liked it. She had always wanted to say it.

He nodded.

"You are brave, Kina. Stay safe. I'll see you around."

Nethu winked and started away.

Smiling sadly, the girl hugged the metal flower and ran in the opposite direction.

... About the Author



STEVE C. ESTON grew up in the province of New Brunswick, in Canada. He is a manager in technology services for the federal government and currently lives in Fredericton with his wife, Leigh, and their two children. For behind-the-scene info, excerpts and free short stories, you can visit him at: www.sceston.ca.

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