

In Perpetuity

A short story by
Ellis Morning



IN PERPETUITY

Ellis Morning



First published in Analog Science Fiction and Fact,
May 2014 (Vol. 134 No. 5)

Cover art by [Mark Bowytz](#) ([Mark Does Art](#))

© 2014 [Ellis Morning](#)

All rights reserved.



IN PERPETUITY

Ellis Morning

“Don’t you love a hint of slag on the evening breeze?”

Ali Nazari raised an eyebrow at his colleague, Victor Talbot, even though his mirrored visor hid the gesture. The pair bounded along the dusty lunar surface toward their rover, carrying a loaded rectangular container between them. Gravity was more suggestion than imperative, which helped. On Earth, there was no way the lanky pair would have managed it.

“What breeze?” Nazari asked. “If you smell anything in there, I guarantee it’s not slag.”

Talbot cackled over Nazari’s transmitter. With his free hand, he pantomimed tugging at the collar of his environment suit. “You buffed my poetic streak right out of existence. Congrats. What’s the fate of this batch?”

“Probably nothing we haven’t already seen,” Nazari replied. “I can think of so many better things.”

“Like what?”

“Well... like building a fort.”

“Complete with slag-snowballs?”

“Seriously. Shape bricks, make a slag-based cement, see how it works. When pyrolysis takes off, slag will be cheap.” Nazari hefted his end of the container for emphasis. “It’s the building material of the future.”

“Lunar suburban sprawl. I can hardly wait,” Talbot grumbled.

They reached their skeletal vehicle, added their burden to the existing stack of containers in the rear, and secured it for the drive home. Each lock slid into place without a sound. Plastic panels beside the locks shifted from red to green to confirm they were fastened.

“Don’t want your own place to call home?” Nazari asked.

“Negative. Once one schmuck has a house, everyone’s gonna want one. That leads to neighborhoods and, worse, homeowners’ associations.” Talbot pounded a fist against a stubborn lock. “Then we’ll need roads, parking lots, traffic signals, enforcement... you might as well go back to Earth.”

“We might not have a choice on that count,” Nazari reminded him in a subdued tone. “The budget-axe drops any day now.”

Talbot pointed toward the rolling horizon. “Give me stark barren pioneer country any day!”

Nazari allowed the evasion, only to revert to a different sticking point with a teasing grin Talbot couldn’t see. “If you stay in colony dorms, how will you ever get time alone with that programmer you’re always ogling? Samantha?”

“Oh, can it,” Talbot snapped. “It’s not like I stand a chance.”

The men inspected their rigging one last time. Before climbing into the passenger seat, Nazari turned back the way they came. He faced a shallow depression in the mare, where suited chemists hovered like bees around a vacuum pyrolysis apparatus, the largest and most efficient to date. While Nazari and Talbot hauled away the byproducts of their experiment for analysis, the chemists harvested their end goal: pure oxygen.

Nazari raised an arm to wave farewell to whomever might be watching. That was when he noticed something unusual upon the ground, not far from his feet. To most, it would have been a mundane rock, one of millions littering Oceanus Procellarum. To Nazari, it stood out like obsidian in a riverbed. He drifted over for a closer look.

“Drop something, Ali?” Talbot asked.

Nazari knelt and retrieved the rock. He held the football-sized, pockmarked specimen close to his visor, trying to get a feel for its texture through his gloves. “I thought this whole area was titanium-poor... but this looks like pure ilmenite,” he mused.

Talbot was at Nazari’s side in an instant. “Hey, that’s something! Don’t tell the chemists, they’ll want to torch it. Mind if I look it over?”

“Negative, I insist.”

Talbot lifted the rock from Nazari's hands, and returned to the rover to prepare it for the return trip and its eventual exposure to air. Meanwhile, Nazari knelt again. With the palm of his hand, he smoothed the patch of lunar dust where the rock had lain. He then used a finger to trace an X, along with his initials and the date. If left alone, the markings would last as long as the Moon did.



Nazari and Talbot huddled before the glow of a terminal monitor in the Lunar Science lab. Ambient lighting had shifted into night mode hours earlier, prompting the men to balance battery-operated lamps atop the clutter on their workbench. They were alone; the hum of power supplies and the ventilation system filled their ears. This was the only time during which one could pursue matters of personal curiosity without absorbing flak from one's superiors.

Talbot squinted and fiddled with dials, his angular neck craned to its limit. Nazari sat behind him, occasionally remembering to sip from a thermos of tea that had cooled long ago. His gaze never deviated from the monitor, which displayed the fractured crystalline patterns of the sample they analyzed with a scanning electron microscope.

"You sure that's a low-titanium region?" Talbot asked. "The chemists'll be thrilled to hear otherwise."

"No map I've seen shows that high a concentration at that spot," Nazari replied. "Granted, the maps we have are pretty old."

"No erosion, no water... no wind, quakes, microbes, volcanism, or continental drift," Talbot rattled off. "Selenology: geology for the dead lazy."

Nazari shrugged. "Maybe a meteor impact in a titanium-rich mare sent over some ejecta. I'll show this to the boss. What are the odds he'll put us on point for an investigation?"

"About as likely as shedding gofer detail for something dignified," Talbot answered.

Nazari frowned. "Think if we do enough homework ahead of time, it might convince him otherwise?"

In a rare display of restraint, Talbot waited for him to continue the thought.

“When we go back out for slag, we can scout for more ilmenite, try to establish a pattern of distribution,” Nazari explained. “Meanwhile, we can hunt through old data for meteor impacts that might have thrown the ilmenite that far.”

“Think it would’ve been that recent— as in, recorded-history recent?” Talbot asked.

“Probably not, but there’s a recorded history on the Moon’s surface that’s a lot older,” Nazari said. “We can look for craters that indicate a collision with the requisite force, at least narrow it down to a specific region.”

“Big region, I’m guessing.”

“Information Science ought to have something to get us started. I’ll leave a note.” Nazari darted from his chair. The action lifted him off his feet for a moment, but he quickly regained his balance. His terminal rested on the opposite end of the same workbench. He tapped it awake, then flipped to a messaging client. Its readout made him blink in surprise. “The IS main desk is still online. At this hour?”

“You don’t think we’re the only night owls in the Luna-Bin, do you?” Talbot asked.

Nazari sent a brief message to the main desk. The response appeared in an instant: *By all means.*

“Might as well head over now.” Nazari doubted he would get any sleep otherwise. He logged out of his terminal.

“That’s right, leave me to clean up,” Talbot grumbled.

“You mind?”

The false annoyance disappeared behind a smirk. “No, but when I finally get to work out why there’s so much thorium in Compton-Belkovich, you owe me.”

Exiting the lab deposited Nazari into a metallic corridor with a high ceiling and walls lined with labeled doors. This was the Lunar Science pod, in which he spent the majority of his days. At either end of the pod were openings to tunnels branching to other pods. He opted for one of these.

Unlike the pods, the tunnels connecting them were lengthy and transparent on all sides, offering a view of the colony, the mare in which it rested— and, often, a phase of

Earth. During colony night, one could bound through these halls without fear of discovery or collision, challenging himself to leap ever higher and farther. Nazari supposed he hadn't grown up yet, and never would. He arrived at the Information Science pod within minutes, but had to pause to catch his breath before proceeding to the door labeled MAIN DESK.

The still of colony night evaporated as soon as the door slid open. Nazari took one step inside before halting with confusion. Before him spread a maze of papers, books stacked ankle- to eye-height, half-packed storage containers, and torn posters left to spill wherever the meager gravity took them. He heard the faint, persistent whirring of a herd of printers, deep in the back of the room.

"Hello?" Nazari called.

A head of thinning ginger hair shot up from behind one of the shorter book piles. It belonged to Dr. Swain, the colony's chief information scientist. "Ah, yes. Dr. Nazari." Swain deposited a thermos atop the stack, and navigated the labyrinth toward his visitor.

The younger man knew everyone in the colony, but hadn't had much chance to acquaint himself with Swain before. "Something keeping you up this evening?"

Even in reduced gravity, Dr. Swain barely reached Nazari's shoulder in height. He offered Nazari a weather-worn hand and a genuine, if harrowed, smile. "Please, pardon the mess. I'm afraid my office is starting to look the way my brain must." He tugged at his collar.

"It's no problem," Nazari dismissed, shaking firmly. He didn't miss the dodge, but didn't press either. "I'm sorry, I know it's late."

"Yes, well, good science rarely adheres to a schedule. Your, uh, your timing's very good, actually. What can I help you find?"

"Information on meteor impacts near Oceanus Procellarum," Nazari explained. "I know that's not very specific, but I'll be able to refine it soon."

"Ah, yes, I'm sure. New project?"

"Side project."

“How interesting. Well, even if I don’t have what you’re looking for, I can get it.” Swain retreated through the maze, reclaiming his thermos en route and running a hand over his scalp. “Want to wait here while I check? Not out there, I mean. Here, let me clear off a chair. Come on back— unless you were planning to be elsewhere, that is. This could be a long wait. Did you want any coffee?”

Nazari quirked an eyebrow. “Are you sure this isn’t a bad time?”

“No!” Swain called back. “No, not at all. Make yourself comfortable.”

Nazari was anything but comfortable as he inched through the mess. Books, magazines, pictures of family, juggling balls, fictional starship models, tin wind-up robots... and the chaos bloomed even more colorfully around Swain’s desk. His nerves rivaled his curiosity, but he felt he should mind his own business.

He lowered himself into the chair that had been cleared for him. Swain sat at his desk, squinting at his terminal. A coffee maker with a full carafe waited on a ledge behind him.

“I don’t know about you,” Swain said, keeping his eyes on the screen, “but I do all my best thinking at night. Here, the sky always looks like night. I can’t tell you how grateful I’ve been for it.”

Nazari chuckled. “I admit, I miss sunny days. Real sunny days, with light scattering through an atmosphere?”

“Well, give the chemists another few centuries. They might figure out how to keep an atmosphere from running away,” Swain replied. “Though, I doubt it. Just easier to keep it caged... like everything too good to share.” Emotion crept into Swain’s voice, but he dismissed it and plowed on. “I’m finding plenty I can print out for you.”

“You can just email—”

“Printing’s easier at this point, believe it or not.” Swain’s eyes finally found Nazari’s, while he tilted his head toward the source of constant noise. “It’ll be a bit of a wait, though. I’d hate to make you sit here.”

“I don’t mind,” Nazari said.

“You will in another few hours.”

Nazari frowned. "That's some print job."

"Don't I know it." Swain smiled, but the expression was as distracted as the rest of his demeanor. "Tell you what: you'll find something to get you started in your mailbox tomorrow. I'm sure you'll want to review that much, and we— well, I, or maybe someone else, can meet with you afterward and talk about narrowing your focus. How does that sound?"

"That's great," Nazari said. "I appreciate it."

"Of course. If you need anything else, Dr. Nazari, make sure you let us know."

The men stood and shook hands again. Dr. Swain forgot his visitor almost at once, but the snub seemed less rude and more... necessary. Nazari hesitated before turning to leave.



The alarm buzzed at 0600, two hours after Nazari had drifted into his bunk. He forced himself up, prepared for work, and left his quarters. Talbot was waiting outside the door, leaning against the wall with a bitterness that wasn't directed at his friend. "Just in time, sunshine."

Nazari scowled and rubbed a bloodshot eye. "They haven't sent you home yet?"

"No, but you might soon get your wish. The axe has dropped."

"On us?"

Talbot shook his head. "Scuttlebutt's weak. There's a general assembly in twenty minutes."

Nazari swallowed. "After you."

The assembly room housed row after row of long desk, packed with murmuring scientists and the cloud of nervous static hanging over them. Painfully white writing boards plastered each wall, none bearing a single mark. In his two-year stint at the colony, Nazari had entered this room only a handful of times. While he normally enjoyed socializing, the tension in the air forbade it; besides, it was too early to think past "Hello." He and Talbot claimed chairs, nursed tea and coffee respectively, and waited for their

brains to awaken. Nazari also kept an eye out for Samantha the programmer, debating whether to wave her over and force Talbot to introduce himself. However, she remained unseen amid the din.

Out went the call for quiet. Seats filled, conversations halted. The only person left standing was a sour woman at the front of the room, hugging a clipboard against her torso. She was Dr. Hirsch, colony director.

“Good morning.” Hirsch’s voice was strained. Her perpetual scowl rendered the words more dressing-down than greeting. “Let’s begin with the good news. EvoFirma Industries has licensed the enhanced protein crystallization technique patented by our Exobiology team, affording us a much-needed boost in capital and exposure. Congratulations to Dr. Goldman and...”

“Don’t forget: your research means squat unless some well connected jerk can vacuum up dollars with it,” Talbot sniped under his breath as Hirsch ran through her acknowledgements. “I wonder how many Congress-critters own EvoFirma stock?”

Nazari communicated his mutual displeasure with a *tch* of his tongue, not wanting to draw Hirsch’s ire with chatter— especially as her demeanor darkened.

“As for our main point of business: I don’t intend to repeat the messages you’ll find in your inboxes. Rather, I will be supplementing them. I ask that you hold all questions, and refer them to your supervisors after this meeting is adjourned.” Hirsch pursed her lips. “The new administration’s budget cuts have finally been released. We’re some of the hardest hit by this veneer of frugality. Several projects have been canceled, especially those of lengthy or indefinite duration.”

Murmurs rose through the gathering.

“Quiet, please. The one loss I wish to elaborate on this morning affects everyone in this room.” Hirsch paused. “It’s with considerable regret that I announce the end of Project Alexandria, and the closing of the colony’s Information Science department. If there’s any need for research assistance, seek it now before we’re left to fend for ourselves. Dr. Swain and his staff will be returning to Earth in one month, and the Alexandria vault will be sealed off permanently. During this transition phase, Dr. Swain is

the only person authorized to enter the vault and make preparations for its closure. Again, please refer all questions to your supervisors. Thank you.”

Rows of scientists shot out of their chairs with bitter exclamations as Hirsch marched toward the nearest exit, dispassionate. Neither Talbot nor Nazari moved to join the bobbing tumult. During the latter announcement, Nazari’s throat had dried and constricted. His fingernails clawed into the rim of his thermos.

“Dr. Swain was the one manning the IS desk last night,” he spoke, almost inaudible. “He was completely off. The news must have shell-shocked him.”

Talbot glanced to Nazari, frowned, and sat up straighter. “It’d devastate anyone. After walking on water to earn a berth here?” He shook his head in confusion at the angry crowd plowing out of the room. “I’ll hover in uncertainty for a while longer, myself. Not exactly intrepid pioneer behavior, but...”

Nazari nodded, distracted.

The pair waited in reflective silence for the exits to clear before returning to Lunar Science. Their colleagues had already torn into their email, and were shouting out names of personnel and projects of close personal interest.

“What? No!” Talbot exclaimed when one of these fragments grabbed his attention. “I just got approval on the proposal!” His reluctance evaporated at once, and he dove for his own terminal. Nazari stuck with him, unable to bring his eyes toward the screen.

“They killed my Compton-Belkovich survey. Five years of fighting, I finally get a damn wheel to turn, and they blow up the engine!” Talbot clenched a fist and released several more choice words, directing both rant and glower at the screen.

“I’m sorry, Vic,” Nazari muttered. “Are they shipping us back?”

“No.” Talbot paused to collect himself from this perspective. “But they’re sure trying to make Earth appealing by comparison.”

Their supervisor made the mistake of appearing at the threshold of the lab, and soon vanished amid chaos. While Nazari should have checked his own email, he found himself drifting toward the physical mailroom instead. Within his inbox rested a thick

stack of paper, with a handwritten note clipped to the top: Glad to be of help. Good luck always.

The stack contained maps, lists, tables, and articles. Swain had also compiled a bibliography and suggestions for further study. Nazari sighed, then returned the stack to his mailbox for safekeeping.



Losing so many parts of the team imbued a grim survivor's guilt upon the colony. However, life— whether Earth- or Moon-based— had to go on. For Nazari, this meant long days in Lunar Science devoted to routine core analysis. His supervisor had conceded interest in the ilmenite discovery, but noted the ore wasn't about to get up and walk away. He'd felt it more important to hold his subordinates to their scheduled assignments. However, he'd promised to drop the chemists a note. When the chemists inevitably broke down his door, perhaps he would allow Nazari and Talbot to assist them in whatever followed.

While Nazari wasn't one to complain about his job, especially in light of recent events, the monotony wore on him. It seemed he wasn't alone in this. A week after the announcement, while preparing an umpteenth slide at his workbench, he caught whispers and stifled laughter behind him. A glance over his shoulder confirmed the source: Talbot and a few of their research partners, huddled around a table for an impromptu break.

"Section Eight!" one of them declared.

"It's a protest," another said, "like handcuffing himself to a radiator in a condemned building."

"You think it's funny?" Talbot chided with a scowl, then noticed Nazari glancing his way. With a strained expression, he hurried to his friend's side. "Ali, you hear about this?"

Nazari glanced around. The coast was clear, no supervisor in sight. "What?"

"Dr. Swain. Flipped his lid. After Hirsch's assembly last week, he locked himself into the Alexandria vault and hasn't come back up since."

Nazari gaped, flinching at a twinge of guilt. "Where'd you hear this?"

"From the rest of IS. Hirsch is trying to keep a lid on it, and they're not happy."

Talbot's expression darkened. "Neither am I. If word of this gets back to Earth, they'll use it to paint us all as lunatics and shut down the colony."

Nazari blinked. "*That's* what you're upset about?"

Talbot sighed. "Look, I sympathize with Swain, but whether he means to or not, he's dragging us all down with him. It's out of line. My pet project got put down, you don't see me holding a chisel to my throat."

Nazari made a *tch* with his tongue in rejection of what he considered a poor comparison. "Has anyone tried talking to him?"

"He doesn't answer— just flips his radio off and on," Talbot said.

"What about going down to the vault to check on him?"

"No one's authorized for that."

"They'd let authorization stand in the way on something like this?"

"It's stood in the way of far less."

"Yeah, but this is a man's *life* we're talking about!" Nazari snapped. "He was *not* all right when I saw him. He shouldn't be alone—"

Talbot wiped his face of emotion, clapped a hand on Nazari's shoulder, and walked off. Instinctively, Nazari returned to his own work. Sure enough, their boss drifted through moments later, tracing out his supervisory orbit. Nazari pretended to be captivated with his slide, then darted to Talbot's station once it was safe.

"Doing something about this, *fast*, is the best thing for Swain and the rest of us. I think we can agree on that much," Nazari muttered.

"What can we possibly do?" Talbot asked.

"We can talk to Hirsch."

Talbot looked at him sidelong.

"It can't hurt to try," Nazari pressed.

"That remains to be seen."



The door to Hirsch's office was the only piece of finished mahogany on the Moon. Upon entering the colony's administrative hub, Nazari made a beeline for it.

"Shouldn't we find an assistant first?" Talbot asked, hurrying to keep up.

Undeterred, Nazari rapped on the door with a knuckle. There was no response for several moments. Talbot moved to pull Nazari away, but just then the door opened, revealing Hirsch in all her severity.

Nazari greeted her on behalf of himself and Talbot. "Sorry to interrupt you like this, but we're here about something urgent."

Hirsch arched a thin eyebrow.

"Dr. Swain," Nazari elaborated. "We've heard he's locked himself in the Alexandria vault."

Vexation surfaced, but Hirsch was quick to stifle it. "Perhaps if we talk about this, Doctors, you'll be willing to explain it to anyone else caught up in gossip-mongering? Step inside, please."

Hirsch's entire office stood in tribute to Earth: wood and granite fixtures, potted plants, a poster of a photograph of a window, displaying a sunny spring day. Two leather chairs sat before her desk, which she gestured to with a wave of her hand as she returned to a third on the other side.

For the launch that had conveyed them to the Moon, the junior scientists had been allotted ten kilograms of personal items, no more; it was expensive to free matter from Earth's gravitational pull, after all. Nazari had never given it much thought. Now sensitive toward the subject, he had to wonder how many tens of thousands had been spent transporting Hirsch's furniture alone.

Once everyone was seated, Hirsch folded her hands in her lap, and appraised Nazari and Talbot with a long stare. "Dr. Swain has been away for several days, yes. He'll be back before he wants to be. If someone was pulling the plug on my work, I know I'd be keeping late nights."

"But wouldn't you at least let someone know what you're doing?" Nazari asked.

“I would, but Dr. Swain isn’t known for the same courtesy. You haven’t worked with the man for years. I have.” Her steel gaze softened. “Doctors, if I had cause for concern, I’d act on it. As it is, I’m afraid I’d only be interrupting work there won’t be time for later.”

“Or you might be saving a man’s life,” Nazari said, failing to keep his voice level. Talbot squirmed in his chair.

Hirsch scowled. “What grounds do you have for presuming Dr. Swain is in danger? If that’s what you’ve heard second- or third-hand, you ought to know it’s sensationalist nonsense.”

“Is it true he doesn’t respond to anyone’s calls?” Nazari pressed.

“He acknowledges our messages the same way he always does when caught up in something,” Hirsch said, then sighed. “Dr. Nazari, Dr. Talbot—” she nodded to Talbot, although he hadn’t spoken in her presence “—your concern is noted, but there’s no issue here, aside from the lack of foresight back home.”



After a sleepless night of deliberation, Nazari had decided upon two things: he wasn’t interested in waiting for the month’s end, and he could worry about his career later.

His pulse had raced double-time ever since he’d sneaked away to suit up and run outside, briefly tripling during the depressurization phase. Conducting seal checks on his environment suit without a partner inspecting his back made as much sound sense as diving into a pool naked holding an electrical appliance that may or may not have been plugged in. A day earlier, Nazari would never have dreamt of attempting it. That day, he sought to isolate any and all fallout to himself.

Bounding across the lunar surface did little to calm his nerves. He didn’t have much ground to cover, at least not horizontally. The smooth, raised platform rested close beside the colony that had installed it there. In the middle of that platform yawned a vertical tunnel several meters wide, a lengthy drop into darkness. A lift had been planned,

but had never materialized. The only way down was via the four sets of ladder rungs spaced out along the circumference.

As Nazari knelt at the mouth of the tunnel, he abruptly recalled his first spelunking excursion as a child, one downward climb in particular. A rope had snapped; rocks and dirt had given way under his boots. He'd screamed and driven his fingers into any available crevice, bloodying skin and cracking nails. In those awful seconds between danger and safety, the Sun had dug into his eyes, while unfathomable blackness had lurked beneath his feet, waiting for the strain of his own weight to get the better of him. No pain had registered until after his father had hauled him up by the wrists, and his mother had pulled him against her and kissed his hands. *Eh Khoda! Dast-ha-ye jahn-am!* she'd wailed in their native Farsi. Nazari hadn't thought about that day in years, but the memory triggered a cold sweat.

He took a deep breath and glanced over his shoulder at the colony he'd left behind. The pods and tunnels glittered in the ever-present Sun, a string of diamonds amid piles of dust. The intervening mare bore the occasional boulder and a wide worn path of overlapping footprints that might have been made years earlier. Nazari couldn't banish a sense of dread. With nothing but the sound of his own breath to keep him company, his imagination raced unchecked.

"All you're doing is making things worse, you know that?" Talbot's harsh rebuke burst through the transmitter in his ear.

Nazari gave a start and nearly fell into the tunnel, but managed to catch himself in time. "Keeping tabs on me is the least any of you can do for the luxury of sitting on your hands." He wanted to sound angry, but his friend's voice brought a measure of reassurance.

"Ungrateful turd. If anyone finds me talking to you, I'm in for an epic reaming." Talbot tried to maintain a head of steam, but his concern botched it. "You're lucky you got as far as you did before Hirsch could order your backside stapled to a chair. Better hole up with Swain until the feds send the party-crashers. It's looking like the safe bet."

Nazari took another deep breath, resisted the useless urge to wipe his forehead with his sleeve, and started down one of the ladders. The cylindrical passage bore lighting that activated upon sensing his movement. He took the rungs two at a time, floating through the spaces between. The rhythm soothed his nerves further. "Is anyone following me?"

"Negative— not yet, I should say. Listen, Ali, how're you gonna get in there?"

Nazari glanced up at the circle of starry sky shrinking from view. "I'll use the magic words I eavesdropped from the forty thieves."

There was a pause. "You *are* the right person for the job." Talbot's voice told of the tension-breaking laugh he hadn't radioed. "I'd better get back to the lab before I'm missed, but I'll keep an ear to the rail as long as I can."

Nazari nodded, out of habit rather than necessity. "Thanks, Vic."

"Be careful. If you can't, don't leave me a mess."

Nazari smiled, but the mirth evaporated quickly. Anxious thoughts returned amid his isolation, reeling at what tragedy might lie in the depths. He hated to think he'd ever be afraid of this place, nestled within the rocks he knew better than nearly anyone on Earth or Moon.

By the time Nazari reached the bottom of the tunnel, it felt like he was halfway to the Moon's core. A lit passage awaited him there, this one horizontal and stunted: a decontamination chamber. Microbes were not as much of a threat on the Moon, but dust was. He switched his transmitter to a different channel, that of the work-study area lying somewhere beyond.

"Dr. Swain?" he chanced, forcing a casual tone. "This is Dr. Nazari— Ali. Selenology. I've come to see how you're doing."

Nazari paused. No clicks, no static. No response at all.

Maybe Swain's not in the work-study right now, he thought to himself. It wasn't a reassuring prospect. If Swain never heard him, and Hirsch had time to rally, this excursion might prove a life-changing waste of time. They weren't booting him off the Moon before he gave his all, though.

“I’m not here to drag you out, I just want to make sure you’re OK. I’m hoping we can talk before you have to leave.” With a note of levity, Nazari added, “I could use some help with those maps. I’m no Magellan— ask Dr. Talbot. I needed a sextant to find my way out of Copernicus crater.”

Nazari fell silent, mulling further words, but none were necessary. An indicator over the door ahead of him lit up green. Awash in relief and buoyant with triumph, he switched channels again. “Vic! Dr. Swain’s letting me in. I’m entering the vault now.”

Silence. Talbot was likely listening, but unable to respond.

The decontamination chamber was a white cube studded with vents. Once Nazari was sealed in, gas vented from the walls, which powerful fans pulled toward the floor. He rotated in place, shaking out his limbs. This wasn’t a pressurization chamber; he would have to keep his suit on while visiting the airless vault.

The whirlwind ceased, and the wall ahead slid aside. Nazari sucked in a sharp breath. It wasn’t a reaction of horror, quite the contrary. The utter vastness of the vault weakened his jaw and knees. It spanned several football fields in length and width, with a ceiling looming stories high. Ahead of him rose five massive shelves, stretching far into the distance. Each housed hundreds of metal cabinets labeled with decimal numbers. Ladder rungs lined their support struts for ease of access. To either side of the massive quintet sat the footprints and stunted framework of fledgling shelves, which should have been swarming with construction specialists. The vault could have hosted dozens more of those giants, but most of it lay empty. Those that did exist, whole or otherwise, abided like the lonely pillars of a forgotten ruin.

Standing a few meters from Nazari’s entrance was a slab of black marble. He read the engraved bronze plaque mounted upon it.

BIBLIOTHEKA ALEXANDRINA SELENES
Humanity's Voice - In Perpetuity
David R. Swain, Ph.D., Head Librarian

A host of dedications appeared in smaller script beneath.

The vault's curator awaited him in the work-study area. Nazari didn't know where to find it, but a temporary map— hand-written, posted to the marble slab with masking tape— outlined the planned contents of the unfinished chamber. The work-study abutted the huge room's rear wall.

Nazari stepped past the dedication and entered the realm of monolithic shelving with tentative steps. He opened a random drawer at waist-height, an action that produced no sound. Inside was a neat stack of clipped printouts, with labeled dividers interspersed. He flipped through it with his clumsy gloved hand, glancing through the contents of books in scripts familiar and foreign. Shielded from air and the surface radiation from the Sun, they would endure for thousands of years. Millions, maybe.

Nazari glanced up, gazing over the multitude of drawers yet to be examined. His breath caught in his throat.

"Have you found him?" Talbot's voice returned in a furtive hush.

With a jolt, Nazari remembered his primary objective. "Not yet. I'm sorry you can't see this, Vic. Quite the treasure they're about to bury."

He launched into a practiced bounding jog that seemed to last an hour. At the end of the journey, Nazari paused to catch his breath. Much smaller shelves sat along the rear wall of the vault, reminiscent of the card catalogs libraries used to have when he was a child. There were several doors too, each with portholes cut out of them. Only one of the portholes was lit. Nazari approached this door, peeking in. Past a decontamination and pressurization chamber, he saw yet another porthole. Shadows danced in that meager view.

Nazari proceeded through the gauntlet. At the other end was a sight much like the one he'd stumbled upon in Information Science a week prior: towers of stacked papers, a

horde of printers whirring full-tilt, and a highly caffeinated jumpsuit-clad librarian striving to make sense of it all.

Dr. Swain seemed in good health, if overwhelmed. He paused by the threshold to await Nazari, and summoned a wistful smile once the younger man had removed the helmet from his environment suit. “A dream in hiatus,” he greeted.

Nazari blinked. “Excuse me?”

“That’s what you just walked through.” Swain glanced back the way Nazari came with a faraway look. “When the original Royal Library of Alexandria was destroyed— not by fire, as many claim, but by complacency and ignorance— human progress took a giant leap backward. Things well understood by the ancients, like the heliocentric model of the Solar System, had to wait a thousand years to be rediscovered. Countless great works of literature were lost forever— plays by Sophocles, for instance. We know he wrote over a hundred, but all we have are *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and five others. Just imagine where mankind might be today if that knowledge had been protected, cherished?”

“That’s why I fought so hard to make this place a reality, to archive everything— *everything*— that way.” He pointed to one of the myriad printout stacks. “No digital copies, nothing that requires power sources or technology that might not be available thousands of years from now. Just paper and ink, available in Mandarin, Spanish, and English to start, with further translations printed over time.”

Swain backed himself into a seat upon a cluttered desk. “We could have brought artifacts and historical documents here, too. The Rosetta Stone, Cleopatra’s Needle, Constitutions defining dozens of nations— all spared further erosion. Earth is too volatile, nothing lasts there. Your discipline grants you an acute appreciation of this fact. On the Moon, time stands still. Hiatus.”

He swigged at his thermos in lieu of a sigh. “Well, for another few weeks, at least. Before I gathered the smallest fraction of what I’d hoped to house here, people back on Earth looked at a spreadsheet and decided a handful of temporary numbers were more important than a permanent legacy for humanity. Where’s that spreadsheet going to be a million years from now?” Swain looked toward just such a spreadsheet printout lying

beside him on his desk, and let out a sad chuckle. "Maybe I should be glad they're only sealing it. No one's coming with torches and rope. Still, it feels like a victory for ignorance. I can't let it happen that way. I won't let Alexandria's library decay again. The night you came to see me, I had an idea. It's consumed my attention ever since."

Swain gestured to the computer terminal on his desk. "I went to the widest public forum ever devised. I wrote to the world about this place, about how it'll soon be sealed up like a time capsule. I asked for submissions, things that might tell future explorers something about us. The response?" He shrugged, this time with genuine amusement. "Anecdotes, fiction, poetry, jokes, letters, artwork, photographs, biographies, *autobiographies*... I won't possibly put a dent in it, but I'll leave a note with the unsorted material to explain the situation. Yes, for all the lovely submissions, there are plenty of things that may be considered offensive or just plain wrong, but it's not my aspiration to play censor. Everything I receive, I print."

Swain turned back to an awestruck Nazari. "I'm glad someone defied the rule-makers to see this. I'm going to miss you all dearly. Can you think of anything you'd like to contribute, on behalf of yourself and the colony?"

"Me?" Nazari asked once he'd found his tongue.

"Yes. Actually, now I insist. Your voice is every bit as important."

Nazari frowned, racking his brain. He pointed to a stack of blank paper on Swain's desk. "May I?"

"By all means."

Nazari sat before the pile, removed his gloves, and corralled a pen. He did indeed have a crucial tale to write down. Before he got started, he messaged Talbot again. "I'll need a few hours to immortalize us. Should I use your real name, or would you rather remain anonymous to the future?"

THANK YOU FOR READING!

That's all from my Moon-based research colony from now, but there's plenty more to come. Would you like another free story in the meantime? Click here to join my mailing list: <http://eepurl.com/K7D1L> I'll send you another short story, and you'll have first dibs on upcoming books and giveaways!

You can also find more to read at my website: www.ellismorning.com

If you have any questions or comments, click here to email me:

contact@ellismorning.com I'd love to hear from you.

Thanks again!

-Ellis

ABOUT ELLIS

Ellis has always loved staging adventures in her head before going to sleep each night. When she was twelve, she started putting these adventures on paper.

For the next twenty years, she wrote with varying degrees of seriousness, but always as a hobby. In that time, she fell in love with Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut, the original *Star Trek* series, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Science fiction became her favorite domain to work in, but she also enjoyed reading fantasy, horror, Western, and detective stories, and incorporating their elements into her work. One of her favorite things to do was make people laugh.

Ellis denied being a writer for decades- but then she sold articles to [The Daily WTF](#), and a short story to [Analog Science Fiction and Fact](#). After quitting her full-time job to finish her first novel, it was time to own up to writing as her calling. She's currently having the time of her life penning the [Sword and Starship](#) series, and has ideas for many more stories and books to come.

Website: www.ellismorning.com

Email: contact@ellismorning.com

Google Plus: [+Ellis Morning](#)

Twitter: [@EllisMorning](#)

Goodreads: [Ellis Morning](#)