

Frost

by Bud Sparhawk

Cold. I awake so cold that my heart feels a frozen pellet, barely able to pump slush-filled blood through my frigid veins. I strain to free my eyelids of their icy coating. How long, I wonder? Centuries? Eons? I shiver at the thought of so much frozen time.

Flitting memories of previous awakenings dance at the edges of memory, but, aside from these, little else climbs from the empty pit of my memory.

"I feel he is awake," an alien voice chirps. With that sound I realize that I have traveled to the far stars. With that knowledge I welcome the warmth seeping into my body. It thaws the core of ice at my center, and melts the years of stasis away, drop by drop; a year of icicles here, snowflakes of months there, a glacier of frozen centuries melting away as life returns and a flurry of wakening muscles arrives.

I wonder at what I awaits me as the ice that held my eyelids finally gives way. Best, I think, to linger a moment more and savor this sweet anticipation of the new and strange. Once my eyes open I will be forced to face whatever reality awaits me.

"Can you move?" the voice asks and I detect a warm breath, heavy with the scent of sweet herbs, on my cheek. "Please indicate that you are functional." I open my eyes and see a pair of soft brown eyes staring at me. The face surrounding those eyes is mantis-like – alien. She tilts her head in concern.

I wiggle my fingers and toes and nod to acknowledge her inquiry as I stare about me.

The ceiling glows with a warm autumn light, tinged in russet hues. There is very little equipment – apparently these aliens are beyond the need for the vast array of medical facilities I had devised to revive the frozen. I vow to learn as much of their revival process as I can before, before... What is the thought trying to come to mind? I struggle, but cannot focus.

A smaller triangular head peers over the creature's shoulder. "Is it all right, Paula?" he asks. I think it strange that I understand them, but my curiosity dies quickly, leaving placid acceptance in its wake.

"Yes, of course " the female responds. "Do you know your identity?" she asks.

I glance at the mirrored surface above me. I am nude and hairless and wear a tightly fitted helmet. Despite my nakedness amongst these aliens, I feel no distress. Is this perhaps some lingering, unexpected effect of the stasis, as much as my faulty memory and my strange, calm passivity?

"I am... Frost," I answer, and then add with greater certainty, "Doctor Frost."

"And where are you from, Doctor Frost?" she asks calmly.

Would I be as calm if I were suddenly to find myself reviving an alien creature? Would I be able to confront an alien with such calm and aplomb?

"I am from the High Brasilia, in near Earth orbit," I respond. "And whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

"My name is Paula," she replies with a nonchalant wave of her hand in the direction of the smaller alien. "And this is my... husband, Paul. We welcome you to the Christmas season and wish to have you help us celebrate."

There is a rote quality to her voice, as if she has said this many times before, but that question pales when I wonder how there could be a Christmas celebration here? This question makes my confusion worse. Just who am I?

I'd easily recalled my name and where I had lived. But the reasons that I'd traveled frozen into the far future, never to return, was still unknown. No matter how I try, I cannot bring

About the author

Bud Sparhawk's rather more cheerful stories and articles have appeared frequently in ANALOG, Asimov's, and other US magazines as well as anthologies, two more of which will appear later this year. This autumn his first published novel will appear. He has been a three-time finalist (1998, 2002 and 2006) in the SFWA Nebula's Novella category. More (and possibly