

The Ancient

by
Nicholas Waller

The winter snows are on us again in the north of Battuta's World, making me feel my age. Every now and then I like to sit quietly by the fire, looking out over the rolling sea and thinking about my two ancients - to the annoyance of my grandchildren, who would rather build snowmen.

Ancient. What an evocative word that was when I was their age! I'd wanted to be an Ancient too, a nomadic galaxy-spanning time ranger, bronze, frosted and headed for the future. Metaluminal liners worming between stars but going nowhen new had about as much romance as a ferrybus; I dreamed instead of surfing eternity in my own sub-c schooner. I'd bubble up through time to some Olympian peak of knowledge and from that lofty perch I, and the other brave travellers from other ages, would gaze back sagely on the passing of all things...

Even as an adult, buried in Port administration, I was intrigued by the ancients. I even checked the records once, to see if any had ever passed through (but none had). Why the fascination? Well, think of all the changes to humanity during the last ten thousand years. You can't go back, of course, but you can go forward; wouldn't you like to see the fortunes of All-Worlds unfold, see if we ever meet alien intelligences out there? Why spend your life pinned down in one century when you could actually go and see amazing things across the next few sprawling millenia?

The cost, of course, and losing all your friends. But that made it purer... ancients seemed to me to be genuine explorers with the light of distant horizons sparkling in their eyes. They were heroes; fabulously well-resourced, agreed, but heroes all the same.

Then one day I actually met a couple of them.

The night the man appeared was key. I'd met the woman long before, but I was unaware of what she was; anonymous and apparently insane, she'd gone straight from my Port control to the Al-Kwarizmi hospital, where we all thought she would stay to the end of her days, mute and unknowable.

The man was different. He tracked me down to the soukh one night, where I was nursing an after-duty beer. White-haired and pale, he was clearly a long-time spacer, and his sucked-lemon fat face indicated a habitual complainer.

"You are Rawadi?" he asked. "Port Director?"

Wondering why my deputy had sent him on without warning, I keyed my recorder. "Yes. Can I help?"

"It's the only port? On - "

"On Battuta's World? Yes. Port Byblos. It's the system hub, too."

"Good." He held on to a chair back, unsteady on his feet. "I have a message."

"Do I know you?"

"No. And all I want to know about you is that you're Port Director."

"Why?"

He waved a hand impatiently. "Just listen. My message concerns someone who will come after."

As he sat down, heavily, I wondered if he was some apocalyptic nut. He was dressed for it, in an ascetic shapeless tunic and baggy trousers, and his eyes were a piercing bright blue. I signalled for more beer.

"As for me, my name is Pieter Kan Davu, rightful Eighth Lord of New Fiji," he said. "I have travelled long from the deep and I require your aid."

"The deep? Deep time?" I said. I'd heard of New Fiji; an early name for the world now known as Hammerdown. Originally settled in the Middle Diaspora, I found later. My interest was piqued.

"Are you saying you've slowburned?" I said, a little nervously. "Are you an ancient?"

"An ancient? Yes. If that's still the name."

Kan Davu was then taken by a fit of coughing, allowing me time to take this in. Here we go! Ancients are rare, almost mythical. None had passed through Battuta before, to my knowledge, and now here in front of me was this man, who seemed about sixty standard, but who must have been born hundreds or thousands of years ago...

Where and when had he been?

What had he seen?

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir," I said, and I was, though I cringe now to hear my voice on the corder. A waiter brought the beers and I pushed the ancient's over to him. He took it without thanks, like a man used to being served, and drank.

"Would you mind if I asked-" I started, but he held up his hand.

"My name is Lord Pieter Kan Davu, rightful Eighth Lord of New Fiji. I have travelled long from the deep and I require your aid." As I

realised only later, he had repeated himself word for word.

"It is now seven thousand years since my parents, rest their souls, gave me life to follow them in Lordship, and at that time the dominion of man, though less widespread than today, was a brighter and a stronger realm."

Seven thousand years! Just think about it. Before the Second and Third Barrier Wars, the first disastrous experiments with the Ketel Drive, the abortive Change-Up... What couldn't he tell me!

"What was it like before the Commonwealth?" I asked.

"I was First Born," he continued, ignoring me completely.

"Destined to rule. New Fiji was a wealthy and a powerful world, and responsibility for it would be heavy, and complex - and mine alone."

He stopped, and gazed up over my head, into the high beams, his eyes glinting.

"At eighteen, I had two major tasks," he said. "To study at Unisof, learning of the wider span of humanity in time and space; and to marry, to establish the future line of our family in our annals, duly witnessed."

He looked down. This wasn't how I'd imagined an ancient; I was expecting a swashbuckling adventurer, not some hereditary government official. But still, I was impressed by Unisof. Long gone now, of course, but the university world was the academy of choice for the elites of the diaspora before the Wars. I looked it up, later: the Colleges at Unisof served to maintain bonds between the settled worlds in the absence of a united political structure, allowing cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures and personal networking, and so on and so forth. And it hosted the Games. The fact the Barrier Wars subsequently took place showed the idea hadn't worked, of course, but it seemed like a good plan, and if Kan Davu had studied there, he really was ancient.

I wanted to ask about the Wars and the defeat of the m-Minds, and the stutter-stars left in their wake, but I hesitated. He had his own agenda. And something didn't sound quite right. Maybe it was just the speaking style of his time, but he seemed to be on auto-pilot, repeating proclamations by rote.

He could have been ill. His hands shook as he clutched his beer. He must have only just arrived on Battuta and should probably have had a medical and some rest. But frankly, he was my first ancient, and for some reason he'd made this clear effort to see me.

"A wife," he said suddenly. "And I found her at Unisof! She was the girl of my dreams!" He leant forward. "Don't forget her, Rawadi! Oh, her family was neither wealthy nor powerful, and only from Kurie, but there was an inner nobility to her, she was electric..." He smiled.

"When first I landed on Unisof I was lonely, ill at ease and out of place, but she freed me and made me dance and feel joy!

"I remember everything!" His face lit up. "She was like nothing before; she was an explosion in my soul that touched every last corner of my life! she was crackling with energy, she had a bright intelligence, she made the world shine for those she smiled on, and she smiled on me, she illuminated everything, she exuded life itself, and we spent long hours together, walking over snowy hills and on the pink sea sands; or searching together in the nets, talking in the bars and the coffee houses and the streets; and we shared the grief she felt on the anniversary of her young sister's death: we lay there as she cried and I held her, and we talked of our past, our lives, our beliefs, our hopes and thoughts and dreams, our future, and I loved her dear sweet face and I fell into the deep brightness of her eyes-" and as he spoke his hands waved in the air, as if trying to conjure her up there and then, as if conducting the words; he seemed desperate to convince me of the truth of his love and his story, perhaps concerned that I did not believe he had met this woman and swum with her and watched the sun sparkle in her blonde hair on crunchy cold mornings...

"And now," he said, "now when I close my eyes" - and indeed he did close his eyes - "and I drift back in time, I can reach out and hold her naked body and taste her liquid kisses, and the wind puffs up the clouds and blows our hair and together we are reading the book of our destiny, and we sing out the words as they pass before us!"

He opened his eyes again and they were gleaming. I wasn't sure quite how to respond.

"And what is your message?" I asked, but he ignored me again.

"We made our vows. I returned to New Fiji, and counted the days until she came, and when she did I met her ship myself, and for a little while it was as before. I presented her to my family, I showed her our halls and archives, I flew her over our oceans and islands, our vast farms and high mountains, our mines and deserts and estates and peoples... She was quiet, strangely so, perhaps amazed by my world.

"Then she began to learn her duties, while I was away often, discharging mine. We had little time together. She had no one to talk to, except her instructors and attendants. She grew introspective, less happy."

Kan Davu himself now looked introspective and less happy. He stared at the floor.

"One day she spoke up," he said. "She said she loved me, but we were different, she could see that now; at Unisof we were equals, displaced and making our own choices on a freeform world; but here, on New Fiji, she was faced with a strange history and a hierarchical

culture in which I had a function but she did not fit.

"Of course, I laughed at that. We're not at school now, we're not a sociology case study! She pushed me off. Said she was nothing in our world, unwelcome, outcast, untouchable. I was angry at her insult. We argued. It was short but furious. I even slammed the door.

"I never saw her again." Tears glinted in his eyes. "In a letter, she said it could have been all right if we'd been alone, far from the expectations of others, but people are different in different circumstances and perhaps it was all for the best and blah blah blah. She was gone. Forever." He looked at me, his eyes red.

"For a while the afterglow of our togetherness kept me warm," he said, rocking gently in his seat. "We'd made promises, claimed the future together. But it was a lie. I was destroyed. Everything unwound, came apart in my hands." His voice rose sharply, nastily, his mouth twisting. "How did I feel now? Sick. Empty. Humiliated...

"The poisonous little bitch! She tore the core out of me and ran away with it! How the hell could she, Rawadi?" He jabbed his finger at me, hostile. "How could she be so selfish? Did she think of me at all? And the scandal? No! Or, or - was it all planned? It might have been... It must have been planned, by her and our enemies!"

He let out a long sigh, and looked down again.

"Who were your enemies?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

"I re-read all her old love notes," said Kan Davu, not giving me one, "and sometimes they felt real and sometimes fake. I hated her and wanted her, wanted her body, wanted to hold her, squeeze her, crush her..."

He looked crushed himself, defeated, as if she'd left him earlier that week. But all this had happened seven thousand years ago, when he must have been forty years younger! What was up with him?

And what did he want me to do about it?

It struck me only then that this was nothing less than a performance, by turns exuberant and depressed. He was acting out, for me, his youthful crisis according to a well-rehearsed script.

"What is it you want now?" I asked, after a silence.

Kan Davu surprised me by sweeping our glasses off the table to crash on the floor. People stopped talking to look round, and he got to his feet. "The Family soon tired of me," he said. "I was told to leave New Fiji for a while, and take a trip round the Inner Worlds until I achieved a sense of perspective."

He strode away from the table, towards the faux-bedouin tent flaps of the soukh exits. I hurriedly chucked down some coins and followed. I was his audience, after all!

"I did what they suggested," he said loudly as I trotted to catch up, trying to ignore the curious glances from the people we pushed

past. "I did a Grand Tour. It didn't work, because I felt her everywhere, on Stun Flamingo, on Earth, Cal Quentella..."

All these fabulous, semi-mythical places! I wanted to hear about them and how they were in the early days... "Earth!" I said. "Did you really go there?"

"Everywhere I went," he said, "I wanted her with me, each journey in between space reminded me of how utterly alone I was, every foreign girl I had reminded me how much I missed her."

We came out into the open night. In front of us, through the palms on the cornice, was the sea. Behind us, above the shimmering lights of the town, the mountains loomed; rounded and snowy and mysterious. Kan Davu just stared ahead as we walked, and it was all too easy to imagine him wiping the memories of his affair off on exotic landscapes he failed to see.

"It was no better when I got back home," he said. "She was in my brain like a cancer. I was gagging on her - I wanted to retch, to clear her from my systems..."

We left the crowds behind and walked across the cornice to one of the dark panorama points. In front of us lay the huge ocean, its waves rolling onto the shore as they had done long before we ever came to this world and as they will carry on doing long after we have passed on. A breeze blew lightly. Down south, the spaceport lights glittered, and above us the stars ascended like glory into the towering night. I liked it there, where land and sea and sky and space and man and nature all come together.

"I could no longer believe in my own life," said Kan Davu tightly. "A crisis came; a family Council, to disinherit me, and make my younger brother heir instead. Let them, let him, I don't care, I won't stay to see."

He rested his arms on the balustrade, looking out into the distance. "I ran away before that. To put her in her grave."

I looked at him sharply. He pretended not to notice. When he spoke again, he seemed relaxed, as if thinking out loud.

"To shoot or strangle her would have been shameful, of course, but there was another way. I knew of the ancients. I had the means. I took one of our starships on a sub-light trip of a hundred or so years, and by that means I put all of them - my family, my friends, and her - to death forever."

So that was it, his sole reason for flying up through the generations.

His was no inquiring mind, humbled by what he saw as he explored time and space; he was aware of nothing save himself and the memory of this long-dead woman. You and I have a closer attachment to the universe: we're rooted in it, a living part of the

pattern. He, by contrast, made nonsense of that by clambering out of his allotted slot and dragging his thousand-year old traumas along with him.

Kan Davu let my thoughts run on, patiently. Because of course this was not the whole truth.

"A hundred years later I came back out of the Deep, where my great-nephews were now Lords. I wanted to pay my respects at my parents' tomb. Of course it felt strange; biologically I was only a few weeks older, but they had been dead for decades.

"And I went to the room where I had last seen her; it had become a child's playroom. I sat down quietly, and for the first time I felt at peace.

"And I resolved to find her burial place too, perhaps on Kurie. To forgive her.

"But when I told my great-nephews, they said nothing, just called up the archives.

"I had thought it was over, that I could rest." The ancient gripped the balustrade hard. "She had come back. If I had only stayed, done my duty... Do you understand? She had come back to New Fiji - for me! But I had gone, off into the future, no-one knew where!

"The family gave her a ship to follow me, glad for her to be gone too, and she left a note in the records and asked me to wait for her ... but where, or when..?"

He flung an arm theatrically across the vastness of the sky.

"And I've been looking for her ever since. I've heard clues, more in the early days than now, but every time I surface from slowburn there are more worlds to shuttle round, looking, can't you see? The sphere of humanity is expanding, there are always more to search, and I will never rest..."

He stopped, breathing deeply. That's why he'd picked on me, I saw now. I had records of ship movements at Battuta since first landfall 433 years before. He wanted to track her through our deep memories...

But even that was not it. Kan Davu looked at me and said, calmly and directly: "Rawadi, have you seen her here?"

Seen her? In person? Seventy centuries on?

"This is her," he said, pressing an antique cube into my hand. I looked at the picture, 3D but immobile. Curiously, I found it a shock to find that this woman was - or had been - a real person. She was certainly attractive, but then, who isn't? Her head tilted to one side, her blonde hair fell straight to her shoulder and her face had a youthful look of suppressed exuberance, as if she was just about to break into a grin.

"No, I've never seen her," I said. "We've never had an ancient here at all, ever, until you-"

Then I stopped.

You remember the nameless woman who'd gone straight from the Port to hospital? She could have been an ancient. Ridiculous; but why not, and why did I think of her? Did something about the cube remind me?

I was hesitating, and Kan Davu, watching closely, was well aware of it.

"What is it?" he said, his hand on my arm.

"What's her name?" I asked. Oddly, or perhaps not, he hadn't mentioned it.

"Alis Ann." said Kan Davu, finally answering one of my questions. "Tell me what you know, Rawadi."

It made little difference; we didn't know what our hospital guest was called either. I could put it off no longer, but I did feel odd, as though I only then realised that this man was not a charlatan, or mad.

I couldn't look at him, standing there on his chosen stage under the open sky, so as I stared at his cube I told him there was a woman here who might, conceivably, once have been an ancient.

We took the rail. As Kan Davu sat beside me, for once silent and withdrawn, I called Salalah Mazoun, director of the hospital. We normally got on well, but she was not best pleased to be disturbed at that time of night, still less when I told her who I wanted to see. I said it was important, and signed off before she could argue.

I wondered if I was boosting Kan Davu's hopes unfairly. And what about the state of the patient we were going to visit? I remembered how she'd looked when I first saw her: wild and speechless. A liner investigating an automated distress beacon had unwormed in deep space to pick her up. She was the sole occupant of her drifting ship, and according to the rescue crew's estimates she'd been alone for at least three years. She had no company of any kind: the ship's log and libraries and even its registered name had been wiped clean, presumably by her. In all senses she was lost.

I looked at the cube again. I could see no real similarity, but was it possible that this young Alis Ann had turned into our mute patient, unhinged by a lifetime of fruitless searching?

We arrived at the hospital station, where Sally Mazoun was waiting for us.

"You're sure this is important?" she said, looking at me closely.

"Let's get on with it!" said Kan Davu.

Sally ignored him. I nodded, putting my doubts behind me. I

even felt a certain excited anticipation as Sally led us along the bright corridors to the suite where the nameless woman lay.

The room itself was dim, with only a tiny glow of light registering at first. A dark silhouette moved - just the night nurse. He nodded to Sally before leaving the room.

"Where is she?" said Kan Davu, whispering.

I could see a huge circle of paler dark - the window looking out over the sea. And I could tell there was someone half-sitting up in bed, resting on pillows. Sally undimmed the soft golden gleam of the night light.

Her eyes were closed, but in the subtle candle-like light that smoothes the skin and makes every lover beautiful, the patient did resemble the woman in the cube, and I felt my heart beat a little faster. Was it really true? She was different from how I'd first seen her, six years before. Now, she lay in bed serenely, her face relaxed. Her hair even looked blonde.

For a few moments Kan Davu stood in the shadow, perhaps stunned. All the anger had left his face; his expression was open. Then he stepped forward, and slowly crossed the room, his gaze fixed on the woman's eyes. He sank to his knees, his hands coming to rest together on the bedclothes at her right side as if in prayer. Soft-lit by the night light, Kan Davu and the patient looked almost angelic, like subjects of some pre-diasporic religious painting.

I felt like an intruder at a historic occasion, and even now I try to make some sense of it. If you've ever walked through the ruins of old cities, or looked at overgrown graves and tried to imagine those long-dead people inside them living and breathing in the sunshine, you'll probably know what I mean. It's a feeling like vertigo, a sense of the depth of history and the fragility of our lives. By now these ancients should have been long dead, just memories of footnotes, but here they were, live ghosts risen out of time. The oddest thing is, if they'd stayed when they had been born, subjectively, in their own minds they'd still be alive in their own time, ticking through their allotted heartbeats... and all of this, my life and the lives of billions upon billions, would be in their unknown future.

But they hadn't: instead they'd come to be with us, damming to dust everyone they'd ever known, and once the past was slammed behind the door of irreversible time there was no choice but to carry on out.

And now they had been brought together across the millennia, drawn by a strange force I could almost feel in the room. The air was electric, as though a great spark was about to leap between their time-charged bodies.

Alis Ann's eyes were still closed. Pieter Kan Davu's lips were

moving silently. The distance between them seemed so small; why did he hesitate? A word, a kiss would be enough... Perhaps he was scared of crossing that final gap... of getting a shock.

No. He reached out and touched her hand, and there was no flash of light. He tried to speak, but only croaked. He cleared his throat, the sound loud in the intense quiet.

"Alis?..." he said tentatively. "Alis Ann?"

I saw a small sparkle between her eyelids. Kan Davu clasped her hand tightly. "Alis!"

She opened her eyes, looked up at his face, into his eyes. She seemed uncertain, but she did smile, briefly. I took a breath and held it, tense.

Then it happened; I saw comprehension break through on Alis's face, as clear as dawn. Her eyes opened wide. She came out of the darkness, as though following him down a long tunnel and into the light. She grinned with pleasure. I shook with excitement as her right hand came over to hold his, strong with joy, it must be joy!

"Alis!" shouted Kan Davu, sitting down on her bed. It was true!

Alis tried to respond. She pulled in her strength, trying to break through shackles that had held her mute so long.

But she failed.

She tried to speak, but instead spluttered. She gripped Kan Davu's hand hard, then his forearms, his elbows, as though he was a mountain she was trying to climb. She seemed panicked, drowning, sinking; in her agitation she twitched and shook and held tight, jabbering, shrieking.

What to do?

Light burst white as Sally hit the main switch. Alis's face, twisted with anger, showed its true age; she was old, far older than Kan Davu. He saw that now, and rocked back in shock.

The magic broke, unravelled fast. Kan Davu pulled away, trying to prise Alis's bony hands from his arms; his face twisted in disgust, even fear. Sally and the nurse held her as Kan Davu pulled free and fell back against the wall. Alis tore at her own hair, ignoring Sally as she jabbed her.

Kan Davu, unsteady, stood up slowly and edged round to me. He held my arm harshly, forcing my attention. Reluctantly, I looked at him. His eyes were hard.

"It's not her!" he said.

"But she recognised you!"

"It's not her!" he said, shouting. "How? This mad old hag? Alis is young, didn't you listen to a thing I said? She's young and shining and beautiful! Why'd you trick me?"

He pushed me against the wall. Without a single glance at the

old woman now unconscious on her bed he stormed out of the room.

I sat on the floor, shocked.

Eventually Sally knelt by me and asked what the hell was going on. It was a while before I could tell her.

Now I sit here in my long retirement looking out to sea, much like Alis.

When I told friends about the ancients, they thought it tremendously romantic, like Romeo and Juliet. I disagreed, at least until I discovered what a mess of things Romeo and Juliet had made.

I wonder if all ancients are really like mine? I don't know; I never saw another one. I didn't even see Kan Davu again, either. He lifted ship the following night. He left a formal message, as though we'd never met. He asked us to be on the lookout for a young woman, Alis Ann da Kurie, who might come searching for him one day, and requested that I or my successors give her a list of his next intended ports of call, stretching 500 years up the line.

Attached was an identical portrait cube, the same young woman with her head tilted to one side. It's still fresh, though decades old and first taken seven thousand years ago. I imagined Kan Davu in his tiny cabin, sailing up from star to star surrounded by an endless supply of this one image.

Maybe Kan Davu was right, and our old woman in hospital was somebody else entirely, victim of some other disaster. I think, though, she really was Alis Ann. It may seem fortunate that Kan Davu had come to Battuta while she was here, but I suspect he was following up a rumour of our strange guest - and in their cosmic dance she'd leapfrogged to twice his biological age.

Who knows? Perhaps they'd met before on their colossal journeys, and he'd rejected her then as well. Perhaps that's what had sent her out alone in her drifting ship.

She died for real a couple of months after Kan Davu left. Sally Mazoun had told me that she was just staring out over the sea and singing to herself, so I thought I ought to visit. I remember the rising and falling of her voice, sighing like the waves as they rolled one by one onto the shore. I felt responsible, but not guilty. At least now she's at peace, her ashes scattered as they should have been thousands of years ago.

But Kan Davu's are not. Long after I've been buried, and my lively grandchildren buried beside me, he'll be out there, measuring his long heartbeats against the pulse of the universe. When he wakes again an instant will have passed for him, though hundreds of billions of other people will have lived and died.

And what will he do? The same thing he did when he came here. On new worlds to as yet unborn people he'll retell his story, go through his performance, feed his memories by sucking the sympathy of the living, like a vampire dead for millennia.

Finally he'll hand over a cube and ask: "Have you seen her?" and none of those men and women of the future will ever have seen her.

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