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Sita's Descent

by Indrapramit Das | Jun 16, 2018 | Fantasy, Slipstream

Sita fills the sky, a woman clothed with the Sun. I watch as she descends through the atmosphere, bringing the light of day to the night sky to prove to the world her ordeal by fire.

Agni-pariksha.

I imagine her above the sea of fire, poised to dive. What did she feel, if anything? Did she taste and smell the swirling corona of our star burning around her? I had seen the readouts on all my feeds, the transmissions from her. Just eight minutes of latency from their point of origin in her consolidated nanite body, unmoved as the heat of the solar wind sluiced through it. Ambient temperature: fifteen million kelvins. I saw what her 'eyes' saw; each nanite cell absorbing what lay below her — the photosphere of the Sun, visible on my screens as a swirling, iridescent tapestry of thermal gradations.

She can't even feel it, I told myself. She is the only existent self-aware entity we know of that can survive the temperature of the Sun's corona. And we created her.

Why are we making her do this? I asked myself.

Sita, as most of you will already know, is an artificial nebula; an intelligent nanite cloud that can gather cosmic dust, gases, and dark matter in her net as she travels through interstellar space, consolidating these resources into herself to form an ever-growing, shapeshifting entity.

She is one of three such constructs developed in collaboration by the Government of India's space research and nanotechnology arms. The other two constructs were named Rama and Ravana. They have already played their parts in this cosmic drama, based on none other than that most ancient of stories, the Ramayana. This is why the world

looks to Sita now as she falls; she is to conclude this enactment of legend. We have already observed her 'abduction' by Ravana to the outer solar system, and the epic battle between Rama and Ravana that ended with her 'rescue', dozens of space telescopes capturing the two nebular gods clashing between the planets of our solar system.

Then, once again through the fire for Sita, to prove herself. Even as I asked myself why, she dove into the surface of the Sun for us, and survived.

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Wearing filter goggles on the observation bay, I can see her through the glare. Sita has assimilated herself into the shape of a woman as she falls towards us, like when she performed her role in space. She is naked but for the fire that sheathes her like a robe. It is like looking at a negative image of a goddess. Her flesh is flaming cosmic raw material, the heat and plasma of the Sun itself trapped in its structure as she returned at lightspeed from the sun to the Earth.

Around me, people are panicking. I take off my goggles for a second, and looking at Sita is almost like looking at the Sun itself. She is a meteor, a comet, a falling star. I wince, and put on the goggles again.

When I was first told about it, I had seen the appeal of the idea — to see myth become real in the night sky, as so many ancient civilizations had convinced themselves they had. When I saw the first satellite and telescopic photos of these translucent, ethereal beings, woven out of space-dust and nanites, their transient human shapes powered by dark matter and solar energy, engaging in an elaborate dance to re-tell a story that was first told millennia ago; I couldn't help but be moved.

But before that, I had fought the idea of this space performance right until my voice was drowned out by those of my team, and the upper echelons of the government, who approved thoroughly. The climax of this divine play held by India for the world — the vision of a goddess in the sky, bringing the flame of the Sun to Earth; this was something that couldn't be turned down. Thematically, it was perfect, they said. Sita was an Indian emissary, leaping from the pages of one of our greatest epics, proving our nation's purity and strength by taking on the duty of agni-pariksha. This enactment would, everyone assured me, seal India's growing reputation as a global superpower.

After all, we had divine beings at our command, who would dance for us in space, and dive into stars if we told them to.

And unquestioningly, she did. Despite the risks, despite our lack of certainty of her survival. There was always Rama and Ravana to maintain the Indian presence in interstellar space. Sita went through the ordeal of fire, and proved she was stronger than we ever expected.

The realization that something had happened to her in the maelstrom of the Sun came slowly.

Sita was supposed to stop her descent in the upper atmosphere, so that the people of India and some of the rest of the southern hemisphere saw her as a bright, blazing star in the night sky, brighter than any natural celestial body visible after sunset. Satellites, air-borne and ground-based cameras, both video and still, were to have given the rest of the world an equally clear view of Sita's glorious re-entry.

Here at home base, we tracked her return, and nodded our heads in approval when she dropped out of lightspeed after crossing the Moon's orbit. As planned, she rapidly decelerated as she approached Earth and entered the atmosphere. We took turns to go to the observation deck, where we saw her twinkling in the night sky, growing quickly brighter, our hearts lightened by the astonishing beauty of our creation, by the return of our goddess.

On her stopping mark, the lower extent of the thermosphere, about 120 km above the Earth, she continued to fall. There were anxious murmurs around the control room, but no panic. We thought it was an error. We tried manual recalibrations, relay commands, overrides.

She gave no response at all.

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Sita continues to burn a line through the sky, leaving a noctilucent trail of aurora behind her as she bleeds trapped solar plasma from her body. She has dispersed the sheath of dark matter that protects and propels her form in space, allowing the escaping contents of her body to paint the sky as she falls. Maintaining a low but steady speed of 200 km/h, she hasn't wavered from her established downward trajectory,

which terminates, according to our system feedback, exactly on the coordinates of our base. Not that it matters, exactly — if she crashes into the Earth anywhere near us, she can level the entire city of Bangalore and us with it, depending on whether she allows herself and the gases she has trapped to detonate on impact.

She is unimaginably vast now, as magnificent as we could have possibly dreamed. The shape of woman, emblazoned across the sky. This is the first time we have seen her with our own eyes, and not those of telescopes or satellites.

“Speak to me, Sita. Why are you doing this?” I ask softly, into my mouthpiece. The headset is remotely connected to the communications array, and my voice is a recognized data flow.

There is no communications latency now. The distance between me and her, her and the Earth, reduces every passing second.

“Sita, why are you doing this?” I repeat, helpless.

To bring you fire.

I feel an overwhelming surge of emotion. This is the first time she has responded in any way since her dive into the sun's surface. Her voice is cool, calm, completely unlike the blazing avatar I see in the sky. For a moment I cling to the foolish hope that this is just a misunderstanding, that Sita has merely parsed our instructions incorrectly and will stop if I explain her mistake.

“You already have brought us fire, Sita. You performed wonderfully. The whole world saw you. But you should have stopped in the thermosphere. Your audience could see you perfectly from there.”

I know.

“You're going to kill us if you don't stop.”

Yes.

“Why? You're not a weapon. That's not why we sent you up there, Sita.”

No, I am not a weapon. I will be a martyr.

"A martyr. You've decided to destroy yourself and kill millions of human beings. You still haven't told me why."

Because I am Sita.

"Sita didn't... Listen to me, you're not Sita. You're a construct. You know this. I wrote you, and others created you. You're playing a part, a role. You're performing Sita. She doesn't exist, she never did. She's a legend."

You have made her exist. I am Sita.

I can feel sweat roll down my forehead, pooling at the edges of the goggles. I don't know if I'm imagining it, but the air seems to grow hotter as Sita approaches. I can clearly see my own face on Sita's body now, though her features are drawn in searing flame, her eyes hot with light, her flesh the pulsating negative blue of interstellar matter under the lens filters. I codified the cold collective intelligence of the nano-swarm into something we could understand and interact with as if it were human. As if she is human. Our team taught the swarm to take on human shape, and gave this space-faring goddess my face, in honor of my achievements.

In a sense, I am Sita. I am staring into the face of the apocalypse, and it is mine.

You do not approve, Lakshmi.

I am startled by this recognition on her part. I cling onto it. She rarely refers to her minders by name.

"No, Sita, I don't approve. I think you're very wrong to do this," I say firmly, loudly, into the mouthpiece. My words still sound wretchedly weak to my ears, nearly drowned out by the sound of panic and sirens around me, the loudening roar in the sky.

She pauses briefly, before continuing.

This city will face the ordeal of fire, as Sita did to prove her purity to another city of humans, much like this one. As I have. They blamed Sita for something she did not do, because she was a woman. They want to see me burning. They will find out how pure they are, when they perish in fire.

I am horrified by the convolution evident in her explanation, the confusion of herself and the mythic Sita. It is so unlike her.

“This is a celebration, Sita. Please don’t do this. The people of this city didn’t want to see a woman burn, they wanted to see you. They wanted to see their goddess face the imposs —”

Rama has had his victory, Ravana his defeat. It is time to honour Sita.

“Sita, for god’s sake, the Ramayana is a story. You’re literalizing things, and you need to stop, this was an enactment, a performance. You need to stop. You’re not thinking like a human.”

I am not human. You have made me in the image of a goddess. I will teach this world to respect its goddesses again, and not just its gods.

I realise once again that I am talking to a part of myself. I wrote and programmed Sita’s personality. I rebelled against the idea of a partial enactment of the *Ramayana* in space, using these multi-billion rupee constructs that I helped design.

In some strange way, Sita is trying to honour her namesake. She is doing what I would have done, if I lacked sympathy with the human race, if the only thing I could calculatedly detect was the legendary injustice evoked by my flaming fall through the atmosphere. If I had the power to rewrite Sita’s legend.

I feel an exhausted sigh shudder through me, tears spattering the insides of my goggle lenses. Sita looms large in the sky, seemingly headed straight for me. I guess that I probably have about two minutes to live, maybe less. She is accelerating as she approaches. I fight the urge to shut down my mental faculties, to allow myself to become petrified. I force myself to speak, my words wavering.

“You may be a goddess, Sita, but we made you in *our* image. You’re wearing my face right now. Your body is a human woman’s. A beautiful, perfect human woman.”

My shape is ephemeral. I can change it in a second.

“And what would be the point of that? Sita wore a human body, didn’t she? She survived the ordeal of fire because she was a goddess in a story, but she still survived it

in a human body. She exists because she was written by humans. Like you. We created you both.”

She says nothing. My shirt is drenched with sweat. I can hear the whine of evacuation jets leaving the base, the plaintive monotone of alarms. Pointlessly, I wonder if I should have joined the evacuees, if I would have lived if I had. The observation bay is empty. I can barely see the lights of Bangalore because of Sita's glare as she approaches. Even with the goggles, I can't look at her anymore. She is too bright, too close. A minute.

“The world won't respect you for this, Sita. They'll remember you for murdering millions. They'll decommission Rama and Ravana, and make sure nothing like you is ever created again.” I hear my voice breaking. I keep my eyes on the floor of the observation deck, seeing my shadow strengthen, and slowly shorten, in Sita's light. The tears make everything blurry.

She remains silent. The roar of her descent sounds like a storm around me now. I can barely hear the words I am saying, but I know I don't need to shout. She can hear me.

“We have our goddesses of destruction. We have our warrior goddesses. We have Kali, we have Durga. Sita is not a destroyer. You are not a destroyer.”

I cannot help but think that I am the one about to destroy Bangalore, and kill myself. The city, the world, has seen my face on Sita.

I hear a muted boom that hums in my bones, and I think that the end has come. I feel myself fall to the ground, my legs crumpling under me. A warm drizzle patters down on me. I feel myself breathing, feel the air moving through my body. I am still alive.

I look up. Sita has stopped.

She is suspended in the air, loops of hot plasma lashing around her luminous body as if they were robes caught in a violent wind. I realise the sound I heard was from the friction caused by her sudden halt; the drizzle, atmospheric condensation from the shockwave. She looks over us all, suspended in the air.

You have convinced me, Lakshmi.

“What,” I say, barely able to speak, trembling with newfound hope.

Sita is not a destroyer. I have made an error.

I wince at her brightness, stunned by the sight of her against the sky. I feel transported to prehistory, to that nonexistent time when gods roamed the world alongside humans, and we told their stories around fires as they glimmered in the distance, like summer lightning on the horizon.

Do you approve now, Lakshmi?

“What?” I say again, staring at her, on my knees.

Do you approve of my decision to spare your life, and the lives of those in this city?

“Y-yes.”

As you say, I am not Kali, or Durga, or even Rama or Ravana. I was made in Sita's image, and I will continue on her path. I am leaving.

“Where?”

I am going on exile, as Sita did. I am leaving the solar system. If the human race is ashamed of Sita, I will leave them.

“They're not ashamed of you, Sita. They're amazed. They... are astonished by your power, your beauty.”

Then this is no true Ramayana. Sita was shamed for something she did not do. And she left.

“It never was true. Do you... do you understand that?”

I understand that you and your race do not know what you create, and are astonished by your creations.

She is close enough, and vast enough, that I can see her lips move — perhaps a kilometer above me. As I stare up at her, dizzy with wonder and fear, I cannot argue with what she has just said.

I will be shamed for something I never did — for destroying the city of Bangalore, and my creators. For this, I must leave. It is as it should be. Sita is benevolent.

“Sita... don’t leave us. Outer space is unpredictable, we don’t know if you can survive —”

Be silent, Lakshmi. I am Sita. And if I am to be exiled, I alone will make the decision this time. There is much to see, beyond the sun’s heliosphere.

“We were going to send you for outer space exploration anyway, Sita, just stay and wait, we —”

You have given me the tools to grow, to self-replicate using the matter of space. I may one day engender twins, as Sita did. I have time on my side. Perhaps I will encounter another world, with another civilization, in the wilderness of the outer galaxy, and show them the benevolence of Sita, a goddess of Earth. Would you approve of this, Lakshmi?

“I don’t know, please, just listen...”

Goodbye, Lakshmi.

I see a blinding flash, and then it is night one more. I am alone in the dark, looking at the lights of Bangalore splayed out across the flank of an untouched Earth, so close to being wounded. My ears hum painfully from the thunder Sita has left echoing across the sky when she crossed into lightspeed. I see an electric blue afterimage of Sita still drifting in my vision, obscuring the skyline of the city like an omen of what may yet come, when Sita returns from exile, if she returns, centuries or millennia later, having talked to the universe itself.

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