

# The Writing on the Wall

A SHORT STORY



JASON COLAVITO

# **The Writing on the Wall**

by Jason Colavito

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*The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (Prometheus, 2005)

*Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre* (McFarland, 2008)

*"A Hideous Bit of Morbidity": An Anthology of Horror Criticism from the Enlightenment to World War I* (McFarland, 2009)

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Cover images: Background: rock on Mars surface (NASA). Inset: “Iridescent Glory of Nearby Helix Nebula” (NASA)

**M**AJOR ROB LEVOER was not prepared for what he heard when he switched on the transmitter and listened to the signals returning to the lander from the first human expedition to explore the surface of L0-K3, nicknamed Loki, a resource-rich but otherwise dry and dead planet several light years from earth. The seemingly endless journey here had given him plenty of time to ponder the revelations that NASA men had given him and his crew in the hours before they left earth, but nothing could prepare him for what he now heard.

From outside, in the hard, dusty atmosphere of Loki, the voice of Lt. Aaron Caenelli spoke with terrified awe.

“I told you Major, it’s writing. Writing on L0-K3. And it’s in English.”

Levoer was startled.

“Are you sure it’s not just some discoloration or optical illusion?” he asked, stunned at Caenelli’s breach of protocol. He knew they should use code for this.

“I’m sure,” Caenelli responded.

“Well, what does it say?”

“It says . . . It says . . .”

“I can’t hear you, Aaron,” Levoer said. “You’re breaking up. Please repeat. Aaron? Please repeat last transmission.”

Silence.

The lander rocked back and forth and began to rumble as the dead planet's surface surged and ebbed.

"Aaron! Aaron! Can you hear me? Hello? Aaron? Please report status. Lt. Caenelli, please respond. Aaron, come on, damn it."

Levoer turned to his navigator and asked looked at her with sad eyes.

"Major," the navigator said, "it appears to be some kind of earthquake."

"Forget about that. What about Lt. Caenelli? What about his GPS?"

Levoer knew better than to say GPS. On Loki the rudimentary Global Positioning System set up before their arrival was referred to as the Loki Positioning System. Judging by his basic mistake, navigator Sheila Townsend could see that Levoer was under heavy stress. In fact, she was, too.

"I've lost his LPS signal and his life stats all flatlined. Either he got cut off by some freak gravitational phenomenon, or. . ."

". . . or he's dead," Levoer finished.

"I'm sorry, Rob, but I don't know what else to do."

"Can you retrieve last position, Sheila?"

"Yes, major." She typed at a console for a moment and reported back. "Last position at 4361-298."

"All right."

"No, wait. There's something strange. The last signal was located five meters below Loki datum."

"*Below?*" Levoer asked. He wondered why the LPS would have said Caenelli was fifteen feet below Loki's waterless version of sea-level.

"It says below. It must be a faulty reading caused by the earthquake. Probably the magnetic disturbance from the quake. Previous reading also at 4361-298 but at 2.7 meters *above* datum."

"You're probably right. It's probably magnetic."

“Or he might have fallen in a hole,” Townsend suggested.

“Either way we have to do something.”

“What, major?”

“Whatever the book says is protocol for this sort of thing.”

With the thirty-three minute delay between the painfully slow encoding and sending of a distress signal through the quantum transmitters and its decoding, translation, and reception on earth—and the thirty-three more minutes to receive a response—they had to act on their own if they were to help Caenelli.

Townsend pulled up a manual on her touchscreen marked with ominous symbols connoting death. She scrolled through the text and read a paragraph aloud:

“Section 65031-2139b. In case of accidental incapacitation on extraterrestrial land surface. When area is secured under protocol 554 of General Security Guidelines, incapacitated expeditionary member may either be retrieved for triage, or, if deceased, be secured for shipboard disposal. If this is not possible, the remains may be interred on planetary surface or cremated according to commander’s discretion.”

“I’ll go as soon as the dust from the earthquake clears.”

The wait was agonizing.

Levoer left the lander and started to make his way in a rover toward coordinate 4361-298 so he could bury his lieutenant, who Levoer was certain could not be alive. It had been more than an hour since the earthquake; Caenelli’s air tanks would have given out anyway. Levoer had very few thoughts on the short rover-ride to 4361-298.

When he arrived at the spot, he hopped out of the rover and trudged through newly-settled red dust looking for the body of Lt. Caenelli. He prodded a few suspicious-looking lumps of purplish-red soil that he suspected might be a dust-covered body, but he did not find what he sought.

“Levoer to Townsend. Do you read?”

“I read you, major.”

“I don’t see anything. I don’t know what happened to him. God, I hope he’s not walking around out here disoriented and looking for help.”

“Where could he have gone?” Townsend asked from the safety of the lander.

That’s when Levoer spotted the cave.

He shuffled as fast as his space-suit would allow toward the entrance to the cave, or more accurately, structure. The building looked to be made of tightly fitted stones resembling the pebbled appearance of a dinosaur’s hide. He had been prepared for the possibility of finding ruins on the planet because the NASA men had briefed him on the stone structures spied dimly from satellites, probes, and unmanned drones in years past. Levoer switched into the code NASA mandated for exploring extraterrestrial ruins as soon as he knew it was a building.

“Located a code 53 anomalous geologic formation,” Levoer said. “Preparing to investigate internal cavity.”

Inside the lander, Townsend trembled with anticipation.

Levoer entered the roughly spherical construction through a large, round opening. The internal chamber appeared smoothly-finished, though covered in the ubiquitous dust of a thousand centuries of disuse. Levoer estimated the floor was three feet under Loki’s red sand.

He flashed his xenon light against the interior walls and recoiled. There was something written on the wall, something written in Roman letters, maybe even in English.

“Have located an anomalous ABC fault,” code for writing on the walls.

He looked more carefully and noticed that the letters were not really words, more like amorphic visions shifting and changing as he



himself thought about what they said. He read out loud: “ABC fault.” “What the hell?” he thought, and then read “what the hell” off the wall.

On a hunch he checked the chemical levels of the chamber with a hand-held sensor. “Extremely high levels of neuro-sensitive chemicals in geologic anomaly. Will pull back,” Levoer said.

Dear God, he thought, the place is projecting my thoughts on the wall.

“Dear God,” read the wall.

“I can’t hear you, major,” Townsend was saying in his ear. “Are you still there, major? I’m not getting any readings from you. . . Rob, are you there?”

“I’m here,” he shouted into his headset, knowing full well that she could no longer hear him through the pea-soup of electromagnetism and chemicals in the atmosphere.

He wondered exactly how the unknown builders of this chamber produced such a remarkable illusion. Since he was not a scientist by training, as the others were, no answer came immediately to mind.

In frustration, he struck the wall to take back a chunk of brick for analysis, and reddish goo poured from the new crack in the too-soft wall. Levoer realized instantly where he was and what had happened to Caenelli. Then the ground began to shake and the chamber snapped shut, pulling itself beneath the planet’s surface where the unnamable monster began to chew.

## About the Author

**Jason Colavito** is an author and editor based in Albany, NY. His fiction has appeared in several anthologies and magazines. His nonfiction books include *The Cult of Alien Gods: H.P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (Prometheus Books, 2005); *Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre* (McFarland, 2008); and more. His research has been featured on the History Channel. Colavito is internationally recognized by scholars, literary theorists, and scientists for his pioneering work exploring the connections between science, pseudoscience, and speculative fiction. His investigations examine the way human beings create and employ the supernatural to alter and understand our reality and our world.

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