

## ***Laxmi's Stowaway***

by Juliana Rew

Diki waited. The strobing lights of the airport runway alternately burned and fogged her retinas as she crouched in the shadows. She checked her watch. Half-past three. The last of the CosmiCo Exploration prep crew had left on break, talking and laughing, probably at the prospect of getting paid so much overtime. They'd be back in half an hour for the pre-dawn countdown. A rustling noise caught her attention. She stifled a gasp as a three-foot alligator sluggishly worked its way across the warm Florida pavement, headed for a cooling dip in the nearby canal, no doubt. The air felt hot and muggy though it was still the dead of night.

She strapped on her ABO tank containing extra oxygen. Wouldn't want to screw up the adventure of a lifetime. Sure, maybe using O2 was for wimps, but she'd learned a little insurance didn't hurt.

This was it. She crept through the shadows toward the rocket platform. While not technically a spacecraft, the Actium-7 could go to space. And when it did, she was going to be on it.

Diki headed for the far left side of the rocket, opposite the tower elevator and gantry allowing the astronauts access to the capsule. She would be mostly out of the line of sight of the security cameras. She peered skyward toward the bulbous Actium-7 capsule sitting sixty feet atop a twin-booster rocket. Reaching upward, she slapped the palms of her gecko gloves on the rocket's underside. She then kicked up, attaching her magnetic boots, until she stuck, spread-eagled alongside one of the thrusters on the rocket's underbelly. It felt good, being upside down like this again. She'd spent a good deal of her professional life hanging like a spider on the undersides of cliffs, the horizontal toe spikes of her ice crampons and her fingertips the only things denying the pull of gravity.

Righting herself, she began the slow crawl up the rocket, crab-walking to the capsule's hatch. She pulled off a glove and twisted the handle, slipped inside, and tugged the door closed. She noted with satisfaction the Actium-7's panorama of windows. Nicknamed "Bright-Eyes," it was designed to give people the maximum possible view outside. Lifting a large tile in the floor she rolled into the 18-inch-high crawl space and nestled among bundles of shielded cable and high-pressure plumbing.

She'd timed it just right. The pilot's footsteps thudded above as he climbed aboard, trailed by the rich "astronaut" being taken up for his pricey joyride. The trapdoor opened suddenly, and a heavy camera bounced down into the hold. Diki held her breath.

"Hey, that's my Canon Ultrashot," the astronaut complained.

"Sorry, Westerbrook, but it's not on the manifest. You can't bring your own camera anyway. You didn't get it approved in advance, so it's not on the manifest. But don't worry, the whole flight will be filmed, and you'll get your own copy." The door slammed shut. Diki exhaled.

So, the rich guy was named Westerbrook. She'd met plenty like him before, as a guide on Everest. Now, space tourism was all the rage for those who could afford it.

She'd always dreamed of traveling to space. CosmiCo's short flights beyond the atmosphere were the closest thing a civilian could aspire to, and it cost upwards of a million just to buy into the elite club. She didn't have anywhere near that kind of *paisa*. In fact, since her flight from her home country to the U.S., she had only held a low-paying job cleaning aircraft at the CosmiCo Spaceflight Center. The first time she'd spotted the ball-shaped Actium-7 capsule through the CosmiCo fence, she'd said to herself, "How can I make Bright-Eyes my best friend?" Diki set about wowing co-workers with her knowledge of the care and feeding of aluminum alloys, having tested and proven many varieties of climbing equipment as a sherpa guide. Though she knew a flight was out of reach financially, she did have one undeniable asset—her lungs. The thin air of eternity didn't frighten her.

Diki Sherpa's father had been one of the six climbers every year who went missing "on average." Her mother had almost named her Pasang, after the famous Sherpa girl who died on Everest, twenty-five years ago now, but she decided instead on a name that meant "healthy and wealthy." Diki was definitely healthy. Soon after she learned to walk, her grandfather supervised her free climbs in the hills behind their village in between porting gigs up the mountain.

Though she was strong, she was also a girl. Diki knew her dreams of becoming a great climber were probably more fantasy than fact. She wanted to be a certified guide like the famous female climber Dawa Yanzun Sherpa. It was in her blood, after all. Every day after school she stole away to climb without telling anyone. The higher she climbed, the better she felt.

When he discovered this, her grandfather was angry, forbidding her to climb alone. *Datha* stressed safety and teamwork, warning that free climbing was different from summiting *Sagarmatha*, the Forehead in the Sky. "One depends more on a person's technical knowledge, while the other takes an army," he said.

"When will I be able to go with you, *Datha*?" she asked when she was ten.

"A few more years, little one," he said. "When you become as strong as the mountain. For now, you need to build your mental strength as well as physical." The poet of the family, *Datha* had taught her all the poems of Laxmi Prasad Devkota. "The Great Poet's words will give you the strength to live a good life," he had said. "Heart is just as important as bravery." He was right when he'd said her first Everest ascent would be like going to Hell, but you could learn how to return to *terra firma* if you wanted it bad enough.

Fighting to take her place among the few hundred to have looked down each year from *Sagarmatha*, Diki redoubled her efforts to earn her climbing certification, gaining notoriety for the Winnie-the-Pooh patch she had sewed onto her parka, a sign of solidarity with the Chinese resistance. *Datha* seemed genuinely impressed, but only after she had made the trek up Everest multiple times. When *Datha* died, Diki felt rootless, she missed his wisdom so much. She needed that proud feeling again, after having been kicked out of the Everest guides. She still felt she'd done the right thing, raising a ruckus because essential safety methods adopted over the years by experienced guides on Everest were increasingly compromised by the competition between rival guiding agencies in order to get their clients to the summit.

Now, if she played her cards right, she would witness the delirious burning blue of planet Earth even higher than the sky. And all the world would know she'd done it.

She'd be a pioneer, a real-life participant in those futuristic visions where humans go out exploring the solar system, mining the asteroids, colonizing Mars...

At last the rumbling of the supply trucks muffled, and the countdown began. As soon as Diki felt the rocket leave the ground, she started the stopwatch and pulled down her goggles. She had ten minutes to chill. Literally. She'd been accustomed to wearing down-filled climbing suits and double boots insulated with heat-reflecting aluminum. This space suit was totally different, optimized for keeping her pressurized, not for keeping her warm.

She pushed away thoughts about freezing to death, like that airliner stowaway nearly did several years back, trapped for hours in a wheel well at fifty below zero. This flight would rise to the edge of space, where there would be fewer air molecules to run into each other, along with less pressure to contain these molecules. Temperatures would plummet, because a gas's temperature decreases when the pressure does. She'd done her homework, though. Luckily, part of the trip would cross through the stratosphere, where the temperature would actually rise before turning cold enough to freeze a penguin.

Diki wore a homemade pressure suit like those used by high-altitude pilots. She'd bought it off eBay from a Russian military surplus wholesaler. It was a size Small, and there were no other takers in the bidding. She tore out the old capstan tubes running along the arms and legs. They reminded her of the hollow bones of birds, only they were on the outside. She replaced them with new ones that would provide pressure when inflated. She hoped she wouldn't *have* to inflate them. She hadn't had a chance—or a place—to test them. The final step was to sew the Pooh patch on the chest. So far, the suit's tight fit seemed to be holding her together.

*You've gone where no one has gone before*, Diki recited to herself, parroting the intro to the Star Trek TV show. Well, maybe not yet. Not till she got above fifty miles. She'd heard about stowaways on big ocean liners, who couldn't even afford to pay steerage. Famously, they paid the price when they hit the iceberg first, but on an airliner, wasn't the rear supposed to be the most dangerous? No exit. It didn't matter. She didn't have a choice about where to sit. She lay quietly below the floor, waiting for the chance to look out of Bright-Eye's windows.

She hoped all this would be worth it. She'd promised to retire and use her guide savings to help her little brother with college, but she'd spent everything on the suit and Aviation Breathing Oxygen. Soon, though, when she got famous again, there'd be plenty to go around.

She noticed for the first time that her ABO was missing. It must have slipped off during her climb up the rocket. A rush of adrenalin tingled in her fingertips.

She told herself to calm down. She probably wouldn't even need it. She knew Sherpas had super abilities. In the evenings, when her mother thought she was studying to be a nurse, she was reading scientific papers about Sherpas' adaptation to high altitudes. Well known for their physical strength, they could adjust so well to high altitudes that they almost never experienced mountain sickness. A serious area for scientific study—and a condition devoutly to be avoided on Sagarmatha. She'd seen a few climbers in the "death zone" above 26,000 feet develop high-altitude cerebral edema, leading to stumbling, impaired speech, confusion, and hallucinations. More than one famous climber had succumbed to pulmonary edema, their lungs filling with liquid and drowning them. As Diki suspected, her talent was genetic, but not in the usual sense. Sherpas at both high and low altitudes carried a gene that could produce an enzyme called angiotension-converting enzyme (ACE). ACE could trick the body into thinking it was at low altitude. Then she remembered that she was only half Sherpa...

The roar of the reusable first stage engine ceased, followed by an eerie silence. Loud creaking and scraping sounds reverberated, as another muted countdown sounded from speakers somewhere inside the passenger cabin. Diki began the trancelike exercise she used before loaded free climbs. Fumbling with the zipper of her suit's side pouch, she pulled out a roll of bias tape,

tied herself to the cargo tie-down loops along the floor's edge, and braced for acceleration. Brutal vibrations rippled as the Actium-7 rocket ignited and thrust Bright-Eyes up toward goal altitude of fifty miles.

The strong blastoff rattled her teeth, causing her to bite her lip; the taste of blood made her pray this bucket of very expensive bolts would hold together. She almost forgot to nearly empty her lungs to avoid explosive decompression, a lesson she'd picked up reading about deep sea diving. But a minute later the rumbling ceased; the silence back. Trembling a bit, she reset her stopwatch, inflated the capstan tubes to three psi, and silently told her lungs to wait for further notice.

Above, she heard muffled shouts of glee. They were weightless. She unwound the bias tape and floated, an embryo cushioned inside the amniotic fluid of an egg. Diki groped for her camera, ready to shoot a few selfies as soon as she popped up into the main cabin. They'd be surprised, but what could they do about it?

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Pilot Patrick Furlong gestured toward Derek Westerbrook, the passenger given the honorary title of CosmiCo Explorer Astronaut/Co-pilot for the two-man flight. The CEO of a mega corporation, Westerbrook was just short of five feet tall. Jealous competitors claimed that he'd made all his money as compensation for his height. Furlong unbuckled from his seat and began his canned safety speech, like an airline attendant. He peeled an orange and tossed the rinds into the air to demonstrate the effects of zero-gravity. "This is why in space we have to eat everything from sealed packets and use straws to drink," he recited.

Ignoring the safety presentation, Westerbrook unbuckled and performed several somersaults, whooping excitedly. Suddenly his face turned a light greenish tinge, and he stopped with a groan. Furlong handed him an air-sickness bag and said, "Try not to get it all over the cabin."

Furlong didn't often get airsick. The pressurized cabin helped a lot, but newbies like Westerbrook weren't used to all these changes in g-forces. "You should have waited a bit to let your stomach settle," Furlong said. "But don't worry, we'll give you an extra minute—we can overshoot for a bit before heading down. Folks at home can just cool their jets until your triumphant return."

Westerbrook wiped his mouth and began to swim around a bit more cautiously. "No problem, I've got it," he said.

Furlong thought about his glory days as a NASA astronaut, but now here he was, babysitting civilians. At least guys like Westerbrook were fans of human spaceflight, keeping exploration alive—if only with their money.

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With nothing to do for a couple more minutes, Diki concentrated on holding her breath.

The tips of her fingers were becoming numb. How long were they taking? They should have begun descending by now. She checked her watch again. Time seemed to be slowing down. The nagging thought she had shoved to the back of her mind shouldered its way forward. She might not make it this time. She regretted not telling her family. But only a little. She didn't mind, really, it all felt so surreal and lovely. She didn't feel the need to breathe at all.

*Here, I'll help you. Remember the poem by Laxmi, about Muna and Madan—*

"Datha?" What was her grandfather doing here? The poem told of a man who left his wife behind and returned to find she had died.

*Do not look upon this earth, Muna*

*I am also coming.  
With tokens of tears,  
with the jewels of love  
that you left behind.*

Was *Datha* here to help her leave life behind? For the first time, she admitted to herself that she was afraid. She shuddered, a single tear spilling into the air before her.

Diki felt a tug at the back of her neck. *No! The poem isn't finished.* A gloved hand hauled her backwards up through the hatch. A space-suited crew member pushed his helmet against her forehead and yelled in her face.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" She couldn't see him very well. Something was wrong with her eyes. She could smell him, though. Like orange. *Air.*

Diki tried to speak, but her lungs weren't ready.. She paused a few minutes to equalize her pulmonary capillaries and tried again.

Her eyes began to focus as she remembered to breathe again.

A middle-aged but fit-looking man leaned over Diki, his face full of frowning concern. Probably the pilot. The passenger, the richie rich, floated there behind him, open-mouthed and speechless, like a ghost. More likely, *she* was the ghost.

"We heard on the radio they found an ABO canister and a gecko glove on the runway and that there might be a stowaway. Don't you know you could have been killed? Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Diki Chhurim Sherpa—"

"Hey, I've heard of you sherpas," the passenger said. "Shouldn't you be carrying loads up the mountains of Nepal? What are you doing here in America?"

She wanted to reply that she was an American now, but Diki couldn't feel her lips and began to feel dizzy.

"What's that?" Westerbrook asked. "Oh, I think she's fainted—"

"It's the bends, you dolt," Furlong snapped.

"The bends? I thought you only got those in the ocean."

"You can get it anytime you build up gases in your bloodstream that have nowhere to go," Furlong said. "I'm surprised she isn't already dead. Luckily the crawl space is pressurized. I wonder where she got this ancient suit. And the helmet's hardly more than an old-fashioned leather pilot's hat. We don't have a hyperbaric chamber to treat her, so we've got to get her into one of the extra suits we brought..." He began loosening Diki's suit collar and pulled out the lanyard she wore around her neck. "Dammit. Look at this. She has a CosmiCo ID badge. She works for us—Where's that suit I asked you for?"

"Do we need to keep our suits on too?"

"Of course, but only as a precaution. We'll need to adjust her suit pressure gradually to bring her out of the bends."

"Um, I don't see any extra pressure suits," Westerbrook said, peering into the maintenance crawl space.

"Are you kidding me? They should have been on the preflight checklist." Furlong grimaced. "I must have missed it. She'll have to get by with this piece of shit of a suit, then."

Diki's eyes opened. That pilot guy again.

"Welcome back. We thought you had a case of the bends, but that's the fastest recovery I've ever seen."

*Awesome.* Diki couldn't believe her luck. Behind Furlong's shoulder, the luminous Earth beckoned. The disk filled the entire window, much closer than it would appear from the International Space Station. She knew from pictures on the web that her first glimpse might be a little disappointing, and the land underneath the thin stripes of cloud would be rather *brown*. Still, they could see the whole American continent, including the Florida panhandle. The serene vista was a stark contrast from the almost-blinding brilliance atop Everest. There, looking south, you could see Lhotse (the world's fourth highest mountain), its ridge carving Nepal to the west and Tibet/China to the east. Spiky peaks swirled in all directions, covered in bright snow even in May. And the crisp needles of ice clung to your nostrils, leaving their cream scent forever. . .

"No, I just held my breath a little too long. Eleven minutes is my limit." She'd practiced a lot to get that far, not even close to the world record.

"Then I guess your suit worked after all," Furlong said. "You understand we've compromised our safety protocols just helping you, don't you? It turns out we didn't have a pressure suit to spare. You're in big trouble, young lady."

Furlong radioed back to CosmiCo. "We've found the stowaway, and we're headed back down."

Diki shrugged. She supposed she deserved the lecture. As her distance vision sharpened, Diki looked out the thick plexiglas cockpit windows. The fuzzy blue and brown ball glowed, summoning her back to Earth. She wished she could stay here forever.

An alarm wailed. The P.A. announced: "Warning, pressure is dropping. Cabin breach. Alert." The message repeated, louder this time.

Westerbrook looked at Furlong. "What should we do?"

"Set your suit pressure to four psi and put your helmet back on," Furlong said. "I'll re-check the floor in case our finding the stowaway messed with the cabin sensors."

Westerbrook fumbled with the knob on his suit. "I can't get it to work," he said, a note of panic beginning in his voice. "The gauge is stuck."

"We don't have time to deal with the pressure problem, then," Furlong said grimly. "If we can just make it back to fifty thousand feet, we can lower the wings. It's not as bad as the old days where you needed heavy shielding to avoid burning up on re-entry, but, I'm afraid it's going to be a hard ride down. We'll be dropping like a rock." He put his helmet back on.

"Aren't you going to give me your suit?" Westerbrook said. "After all, I paid for this flight."

"No, it wouldn't fit you, and I've got to be conscious to pilot this thing. It's really nothing but a rocket-propelled Citroën with a rudder in the back," he added with a black look.

Wild-eyed, Westerbrook looked at Diki. Silently, she counted to ten, stuffing her temper back down where it couldn't get out at this entitled bastard.

"No problem," she said, her voice calm. She unzipped her suit and disrobed down to her thermal underwear. "Take my suit and head straight down. Without suits, it would be too rapid a descent for you guys, but I'm used to this. You just have to swear to me that if I don't make it you'll tell my mother what happened when we get home," she said. "... Tell her I'm sorry."

"Really?" Westerbrook said. "I mean—I will."

Diki's eyes swept the cabin and settled on a portable ABO tank mounted on the wall next to a fire extinguisher.

Understanding, Furlong said, "You've got experience with ABO, right?"

"Let me suck on that O2 a couple of minutes," Diki said. "I won't be needing any after that. Have you got any duct tape I can use on my arms?" That at least might help with the pressure changes.

Diki and Westerbrook buckled in, staring wide-eyed as Furlong jockeyed the capsule into a steep downward attitude and began the descent. But as their plunge accelerated, even Furlong gripped the armrests tightly, as if that would keep the jostling, bouncing craft from tumbling uncontrollably into disaster.

As Earth took the Bright-Eyes into its crushing embrace, the last thing Diki remembered seeing was a beacon raking across a black, turbulent sea.

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"Wheels down. You made it," Furlong said to Diki. "An ambulance is on its way to get you to a real decompression chamber."

"I won't need it," Diki said.

"That's an order," Furlong insisted. "But I've got to warn you, kid. The press is here, and the cops want to arrest you. God, look at them—what a lot of jackals." Turning to Westerbrook, he said, "Co-pilot, give Miss Sherpa here back her damn suit and make it snappy."

He glanced around and leaned closer. "Between you and me, I think you showed a lot of guts, and you saved Westerbrook's life. Plus, we're bringing back a treasure trove of actual information about what happens to unprotected humans in low-pressure or vacuum. There haven't been many situations where people have chosen to try to survive in such conditions."

"Except for stowaway Sherpas, you mean," Diki said, thinking of the many medical studies she'd read. She unwrapped the tape on her arms and surveyed her swollen hands, which had turned an alarming shade of purple. She patted her head. Her hair hurt. She must look a mess.

Westerbrook spoke. "I know you guys think I'm a dick, but I really am grateful for you getting me back in one piece."

"Um, right. I'll be sure to mention that at the debriefing," Furlong said. "Just kidding about the dick part." Turning to Diki, he said, "You've earned your astronaut badge, Diki Sherpa, but next time, book a flight in advance."

Though she knew she was in big trouble, Diki felt intoxicated, filled with happiness. Light-headed in spite of the oppressive sea-level gravity, she practically skipped toward the exit.

"Whoa, there," Furlong said, grabbing her arm and steadying her.

Furlong pulled the hatch open. "You first," he said to Westerbrook, as light from flashbulbs ricocheted around the cabin. Painfully, Diki followed, taking a step down and shading her eyes against the early morning glare.

She glanced back at Furlong, who nodded. Diki got ready for her fifteen minutes of fame. She stopped to take a last look at the spaceport. A long silver line marked the Florida horizon, while laughing gulls with black heads and red bills swooped and cried. The Great Poet's verse began to flow freely, unbidden...

*Fallen from the black clouds*

*Living in the darkness*

*Is he the god or a beggar?*

*He wanders from house to house*

*He speaks in tunes suffused with pain*

*A heart weighed with compassion—*

Yes, in many ways she *was* that beggar. Begging to come back to the only thing that meant anything to her, her desire to live at the roof the world, surrounded by light, cool-headed and floating high.

Someday she'd fly again. It was in her blood.

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### About the Author

Juliana Rew is a software engineer and former science and technical writer for the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado. She has published stories in *The Colored Lens*, *Stupefying Stories*, *PerihelionSF*, and *Mad Scientist Journal*, among others. She is the author of the science fiction novel, *The Unwinding: Gin's Story*, as well as two YA SFF series. Her author website is [julianarew.com](http://julianarew.com).

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