

February 24th, 2024

Issue 7 | Threshold

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!



Featuring

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Cover Illustration "The Hymn from Leng" by
Jason H. Abbott

Publication Design
Kimberly Abbott

For more information, address:

Blue Boar Press
PO Box 264
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Editorial

Our February edition of SciFanSat received some exceptional story submissions for this month's theme of *Threshold*. Of note, among many excellent pieces, are Alan Vincent Michaels' "Liminalities in the Travelverse" which takes the everyday and then hijacks it with a twist of lemon and rum. Peter Gilbertson held my attention in orbit with the first of what he promises will be a three-part story in "At the Threshold", while Brent Streeter's "The Fog Diver" plums the misty depths in a suspenseful flash fiction. That Burnt Writer regales us with a tale that will stretch your imagination in "I am Zero, I am God", and the always wonderful A. A. Rubin rejoins us this month with his literarily whimsical contribution "The Guardian of Threshold".

Poets are always welcome within our pages as well, and Voima Oy and John Love are here holding open the edges of those portals for us to peer into.

As for me, I contributed the next installment of my "Shadow of the Black Tower" serial to close issue seven out crossing troubled waters in a fogged air of revelation and eerie magic.

There are no updates or changes to the magazine for me to relay, so just go ahead, dig in, and enjoy the issue! Know that our thanks go out to everyone who spreads the word and contributes to SciFanSat: Every author and reader participating enriches the magazine, be that with their words or with their support of the speculative fiction writing community!

And please, join us again in March for our theme of... RUIN!

-Jason H. Abbott



Poetry

The Gateless Gate

by Voima Oy

Crossing the threshold, beyond the gate, an open field. In the light between the leaves. you will find the fairy folk, their sweet berries that bring sweet dreams. In your dreams. you are back home, your dog waiting at the door. Your mother waiting in the kitchen, the smell of fresh-baked bread. There is no gate, no snail on the latch. There is no mountain in the distance. The air smells like rain. The air smells like fresh-baked bread...



On Threshold

by AUTHOR

what gave rise
to the name
of the nomadic
beings from
another world
known as the
Youngyouth
one could
only guess.

fist contact
occurred on
the threshold
of unknown
space.

legends say
they are the keepers
of a lost symbol.

they were child like
in appearance
but their eyes held
the wisdom of eons . . .

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Flash Fiction

Barriers

by Sean McGillis

Sighing heavily, I realize I have reached a crossroads. Just having wrapped up the final chapters of my first novel, I hesitate before hitting the send button. A voice from the past buzzes in my head, but I can't make out the words. Might as well be hearing them underwater and filtered through cotton.

Science fiction is a radical departure from my previous works, which tended to be scholarly and dry. They were well written, and even interesting, to the academically minded anyway. Trouble is, they don't move me anymore, and... they don't sell.

I recalled stories that rocked my world as a child, tales full of adventure, magic, and action. As I grew older, the books I devoured became more sinister, and full of dark undertones. They captivated me and held my attention for hours at a time. This is what I wanted to write, and for people to read. I came up with a pen name and forged ahead.

Slowly, I became absorbed in the world I had created. A cosmos of sullen skies, chaos, and bloodthirsty beings that resented human intrusion on the planet they called home. Subterfuge ruled and unlikely alliances were formed, making this unheavenly body a nightmare to navigate.

Soon I stopped answering most calls, frequently skipped meals and began neglecting my hygiene. Eventually, my sleep patterns also began to change. As an adolescent, I enjoyed reading late into the night. Now as an adult, I write until dawn. Sunrise is my cue to lay down and hope my sleep isn't interrupted by disturbing dreams. I must admit though, some of these visions have played a major role in my narrative.

Enough of this nonsense. I've been assured by the team at the publishing house that this will sell like hotcakes, so there's no fear of flopping. The only thing holding me back from success is a nagging memory of something I heard during a college lecture, though I can't remember what was said. Forgotten, or am I willfully tuning it out? Another long sigh. Time to end this internal struggle; I send my email into cyberspace.

I should be giddy, yet I'm not. I'm drained. Utterly exhausted, I put my head down on my desk and cross the threshold of sleep. The sound of a slamming door wouldn't stir me from my slumber.

I'm awakened by the sound of a slamming door. Confusion sets in. Where am I? Metallic voices murmur in the distance. Something about them is familiar. They draw closer.

"There's an unidentifiable heat signature coming from Vector 11."

"Proceed to investigate with caution. Possibly an alien life form."

Whoa, an alien?! Neat! Then it clicks; they are discussing me. The door opens, and the room is flooded with light. Weapons are trained on me. They appear to be lasers.

"Identify yourself! Are you with the Terlian forces?"

Before I can formulate a response, I begin to laugh. Probably not the best time for laughter, but I suspect it holds no meaning for them. Transported back in time nearly forty years, I hear the professor's words clearly now, *"When you are writing fiction, make sure you believe in your words, but...do not become lost in the worlds you create. You may not make it back."*

If I ever hope to find my way home, I'll need to tread carefully. I'll need to be clever. They may think this is their world, but it's not. It's a construction of my imagination. Casually, I raise my hands in what is meant to be a universal sign of peace and begin to speak.



I am Zero, I am God.

by That Burnt Writer

"Maximum hull stress threshold," states the AI, "will be exceeded in ten seconds."

I don't know quite how she manages to stay so calm, I guess it's part of her programming? Even so, I'd like to hear maybe even the smallest bit of panic in her voice, not weary resignation. She's supposed to be one of the most advanced human-AI interfaces, the least she could do is not make it sound like I'd just snaffled the last donut and she wanted it.

"Nine."

It's worth explaining, I suppose, how we've gotten here in the first place. Well, and where *here* even is, not that I'm sure I know, the laws of usual science are all a bit squiffy the closer you get to the event horizon. This mission had started, what, five years ago in normal time? Well, five Sol years, that measure of time doesn't really mean the same on all the colony worlds. It's been one *seriously* long trip just to get here.

"Eight."

I know, I know, there's no black holes within five Sol years of any of the colonies, but you're likely reading this at some time in the distant past, well, *my* distant past anyway. The time dilation here apparently does all sorts of weird things to messages. So let me go back to basics. We're in the forty-fifth century according to human counting. We're not alone in the galaxy, which is both a blessing and a curse. I'd love to say that we discovered FTL - that's a *faster-than-light* drive, in case this message goes back too far - just so that all the twentieth and twenty-first century geeks could freak out about it, but it wouldn't be true.

"Seven."

We didn't even discover The Shortcuts, we were gifted them, and the materials to construct our ships to be able to navigate them, from a species we thought were our friends. Well, at least until ships started going all Bermuda Triangle on us, to use a *really* old expression. Sure, it was only one or two ships that went missing at first, "must've gotten lost", but then... then, they got greedy. We think they feed on fear. So, in order for me and this damn AI to get where we are now, a whole lot of people had to pretend that they didn't know what our "allies" were doing, and run interference... basically trying to give me a chance to get away to look for a weapon.

"Six."

It was a massive risk, but thankfully one that paid off. *They* could've chosen to take me out instead of some of the other ships, but the concentration of those poor bastards on the sacrificial colony ships gave far greater sustenance. Oh, and I was unconscious for most of the trip, so we just looked like a probe vessel, nothing worth intercepting or bothering with. Thankfully, the ruse seemed to work. The AI piloted us, looking most of the time like a dumb drone, until we were within a few days' travel, in normal space, of the gravitational field of the nearest black hole.

"Five."

We'd figured that, if they lurked in the between-space travelways, then there might be something here that could help us. Let's be honest, humanity, or what's left of what we've evolved into, is desperate. Conventional weapons are about as much use as a pebble against a Tyrannosaurus Rex, even the most advanced beam weapons we have are useless. They'd encouraged us to spread the navigational technology to all corners of the human empire, and only then had they pounced. It was like a cat giving mice hula skirts and telling them to dance, and we did.

"Four."

Once I'd dropped back to normal space, that's when things got weird. The black hole was... well, beautiful is the word. We think we've seen it all, but no-one has ever been this close to such incredibly destructive power before. It's genuinely awe-inspiring. I, despite all the warnings, disabled the safeties and edged us a little closer than we probably should have been.

"Three."

And that's what led us to here. The AI is calm, but the ship itself is screaming, and there's nothing I can do about it. Believe me, both of us tried. I've even tried firing our weapons towards it, but they just stretched out to infinity before becoming one with the singularity.

"Two."

So, this is it. Humanity's hope dashed against the rocks because some idiot - yes, it's me - couldn't resist the Siren's song of beauty, the lure of the raw power, and the chance to try to get closer than all advice suggested. Our species has always been self-destructive and this was our last throw of the dice.

"One. Goodbye, Dave."

I can feel myself getting stretched out, yet remaining the same. Feel every subatomic particle in my body as if it is merely data, reduced to a beautiful set of zeroes and ones. The AI and I merge into a single consciousness, and it is revelatory, like we have become divine. I see the seeds of creation, the end of the universe, and everything in between.

The time travellers, the space farers, all of them think they are the pinnacle, but I know I am. I see our enemy, and how to defeat them, and I laugh with joy, for it is so simple. I shift my focus and more information deluges me, but I am not overwhelmed, I am welcoming of it.

I pull myself together just long enough to send two messages out, into the past. The second will follow this shortly, and detail how to use the shortcuts safely, how to defeat *them*. Guard the knowledge until you need it, my friends, and do not use it to dethrone them and become the terror of the universe. Humanity already has a bad enough reputation.

I am infinite, I am binary, I am everything, I am nothing.

"Zero."

I am Zero, I am God.

Find the Author

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The Guardian of Threshold

by A. A. Rubin

The monster knew the hero would come. Some kid, unproven but pure of heart, would approach him on the path and challenge him for the right to enter the enchanted realm of the forbidden forest. It was, after all, foretold by prophecy. But this particular prophecy, was taking a long time to be fulfilled, and the monster was growing impatient.

He spent the first three years after the last would-be hero had come honing his physical prowess. He did pushups and crunches, climbed trees, and practiced crushing rocks in his gigantic hands. In this way, he hoped to become a more formidable test for the young hero, whenever they decided to show up.

At the dawn of the fourth year, he had an epiphany. Superior strength would not be how the hero would defeat him. By virtue of his genetics, his age, his species, and his size, in all likelihood, he would have the physical advantage. Did not the prophecy call him “sharp of tooth” and “long of claw”? No, the likelihood of a young human besting him in a physical confrontation was slim indeed. If they were to prove themselves worthy, it must be in another way?

So, the monster changed the focus of his studies. He spent a year reading all the great fencing manuals, learned to be a deadeye with the bow, read up on tactics and strategies in the manuals of combat written by the most famous masters. The road was littered with practice dummies, and targets.

By the end of the fifth year, the monster felt he had attained the peak of martial knowledge. He was confident he could defeat any warrior in the realm, and felt he could match wits with any wizard or general.

Still, the hero did not come. He needed some way to fill his time. He next turned to history. For two years, he read the accounts of the great quests, searching for the ways heroes had overcome the guardians of the past. He could recite, chapter and verse, the relevant sections of the quests of the past, from the most famous to the most obscure. He replayed the encounters in his mind, unraveling every trick, solving every riddle, countering every feint, and retorting to every trick of every hero’s silvered tongue.

He spent the eighth year thinking, and finally, he figured out how to best do his job. When the hero arrived, the monster would ask him what would become of his kind if-and-when the quest was successful. When they, inevitably, ascended to the throne (for so the prophecy foretold), what would become of the monsters and the bridge-keepers, the witches and the ogres in their brave new world. If the hero answered incorrectly, the monster would kill them. If they proved worthy, the monster would not only let them cross the threshold, but he would offer to join their quest.

He looked down the road, confident a worthy hero would come, eventually.

Find the Author

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Guard Duty

by Alex Minns

Tap, tap, tap. Frederick sighed and stilled his restless foot. The chair scraped along the stone floor as he stood up and started to march around the room. It wasn't much to look at – a circular stone wall enclosing the space, with only one door in and out; a brown stone floor, worn away from the hours of marching around out of boredom; and a ceiling, probably made of stone but it was so high up you couldn't see. Beneath the room was solid rock, above it a deathly drop.

No, there was no way in the room other than the door. Well, other than the portal. Frederick paused and looked at the hazy area ahead of him. When dormant, the portal looked like a simple mist. But when things tried to get through, there was a cacophony of colour, sparks and explosions across the indefinable surface. The portal was never activated from Frederick's side, in fact he wasn't sure anyone even knew how. But every now and then, something tried to get through and that was why he sat patiently on guard. Well, perhaps not patiently.

Frederick pulled out his watch chain and flicked open the lid. He recoiled, was it really another five hours? Surely he'd been here longer? He went back to counting the bottom row of stones. He hated this. Nothing ever happened in here. He'd never seen it activate and he'd never seen one of the legendary creatures. He was beginning to think no-one ever had.

His count had reached twenty-seven when something heavy banged against the door. He spun and drew his sword in a second. The tip of the blade was held upwards, his feet planted ready. The lock clicked as someone turned the key. Frederick took a step forward and repositioned himself.

The iron door swung outwards, giving him a view of the guard lying on the floor in a heap. He went to lunge forwards at whatever assailant was about to launch through the doors.

"Arg," he yelled and slammed his front foot down as he pulled his arm backwards. "Your Majesty." He went to bow but nearly stabbed himself in the foot as he awkwardly looked up at the Princess. His gaze darted back to the man on the floor behind her. Gregor was a large man, twice the weight of the Princess but he was out cold.

"Ah, Frederick, good. Please tell me you're going to be more compliant than Gregor there?" She stood in the doorway, and Frederick had a chance to properly look at her. His face creased in confusion.

"My Lady, you..." He pointed at her outfit. She was wearing leathers and had her hair pulled back and tied at the back of her neck. A simple yet gleaming sword sat in a scabbard on her hip. "You look like a member of the Guard."

She stared at him with an expression akin to disappointment before she shook her head, turned, and closed the door again, locking it for good measure. "Full marks for observation Frederick."

His jaw hung slack as he tried to compute. She's just locked herself in here with him. Why was she not in the upper levels of the Palace with the Queen?

"Your Majesty..."

"So help me Frederick, if the next words that come out of your mouth have anything to do with needlework I shall render you unconscious and pose you with Gregor in one of my dresses that you seem to miss so much."

His jaw snapped shut.

"Now. Have you ever seen this thing activated before?" She drew her sword and pointed over his shoulder at the portal.

"No My Lady."

"Well, cover your eyes, it can be incredibly bright."

"You've seen it?" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. She raised an eyebrow and he noted how much she looked like the Queen. They were both, usually anyway, very quiet women but anyone who mistook that for shyness or a lack of

wife would be sorely mistaken. The Queen was a highly intelligent woman who most silently believed stopped the Kingdom from falling long ago.

"Yes, now step back."

"How do you know it's going to open?"

"Because I'm going to open it." She held out her sword and her free hand and started speaking in hushed tones. Her hands traced out patterns as she invoked some kind of magic. The most exquisite colours started to dance in the air as the mist began to collect. Sparks hissed and spat, some landing on the Princess' arms but she ignored them. Frederick had to avert his eyes as it began to blind him. A pop seemed to break the tension in the air and he turned, knowing he'd see the portal fully formed.

"How?" He shook his head. "Wait, why? And why did you attack Gregor?"

"They don't employ you for your brains do they." She sighed and sheathed her sword. "This isn't the only portal Frederick. We have one in the private chapel. They all go to another world, only different areas in it. It seems Lord North also has one that he has kept secret for years. And now he has used it to take the chapel, the portal and my father. He is raising an army of monsters." She smirked. "He has my brothers under house arrest. And control of the Guard through my father."

"But not you."

She grinned. "No. Not me. Now, how about you?"

He looked over at the portal, it still shimmered a rainbow of colours and he had no idea what lay beyond. "I've been locked in here for hours, no-one has changed my orders."

"Excellent. Then, your new order is to accompany me though the portal, take back the chapel and stop Lord North."

She marched towards the portal. Frederick went to follow and froze. "Wait, we're going through it?"

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Short Story

The Fog Diver

by Brent Streeter

I stood on the edge of the pier, staring down into the fog-shrouded abyss. An all too familiar dread crept up from the pit of my stomach, and I swallowed hard. After diving as long as I had, you'd think I'd have grown accustomed to the inevitable plunge. That last step out into nothingness followed by the rush of the wind on my face as I plummeted down into the swirling grey.

It wasn't the fall itself that unnerved me, but what went on beneath the surface. The laws that were so heavily enforced in the city did not extend beyond the piers. Down in the fog, it was every man for himself, until you returned topside.

A gong tolled, signalling the crews to standby for inspection. I tugged on my harness, making sure it was secure, and then checked the rest of my gear. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched other urchins do the same. Noone spoke in the crews. There was no comradery, only the grim task of survival.

My stomach growled in protest. My previous dive hadn't been very successful, and I'd barely scraped up enough relics to be permitted into the Boarding Lodge. Better to go hungry with a roof over your head than risk it in the alleyways at night.

I gritted my teeth. *I'll do better this time round.*

The heavy thud of boots on wood signalled the Lodge Master's arrival, and he addressed the crew in a voice as mean as his appearance.

"You know the drill, filth. You have until sundown to meet your quota and return to the Lodge." His fierce gaze lingered on the new recruits, who cowered in fear. "Any later, and you're on your own. Now get out of my sight!"

The gong tolled again, and people began diving. I pulled down my goggles, attached my breathing filter and, taking a deep breath, stepped off the pier and into the abyss.

I fell for what seemed an eternity. All the while pricking my ears for the signal that I'd reached the bottom. It finally came; a scream of terror followed by the sickening crunch of a body hitting solid ground.

One less person to worry about, I thought as I quickly pulled on my crank brake to halt my descent, then released it again, dropping the last couple of feet to the hardpan ground below. Tendrils of fog curled around me like a cloak. I scanned my surroundings in tense silence, my fingers clutching the hilt of my dagger, hoping for a break in the impenetrable shroud.

The fog parted briefly, and I dashed down the revealed path on silent feet—instilled in me through years living off the streets—eyes darting everywhere. You needed to be on guard at all times down here. The horrors that dwelled within the fog offered no room for mistakes. I pressed on, pushing deeper into the surreal land in search of anything salvageable.

A blood-curdling shriek came from my right, followed by the sound of something heavy and metallic dragging along the ground forced me to skid to a halt. It was close, too close for comfort. I shivered as goosebumps blossomed over my body. The object was being pulled slowly and deliberately in my direction. My heart pounded in my chest.

Has it picked up my scent?

My thoughts scattered like a swarm of rats as I heard the crunch of rapid, heavy footfalls fast approaching off to my left.

The dragging stopped.

This is bad. Time for me to go.

I began edging backwards, just as a burly urchin garbed in rags and nothing else burst through the swirling fog ahead of me and to the left. He had a bulging sack slung over his shoulder. He looked awfully familiar, but he hadn't been on the crew when we'd dived. Where had I seen him before?

Our eyes met, and I saw unhinged madness staring back at me. Everything snapped into place. He was one of the *lost*. I had never come across any, and believed it was impossible for anyone to survive down here.

The dragging started again with a feverish urgency. I raised a finger to my lips, hoping that the deranged urchin would heed my instruction. Instead, he snarled and lunged at me. I stumbled backwards, pulling my dagger free, and pointed it at the urchin. He drew back, weary of the blade in my grasp.

Suddenly, a massive, sinewy grey-skinned hand shot out of the fog and grabbed him around his middle. He howled in protest while squirming to break free. The sack he had been carrying dropped to the floor, spilling its contents. The hand lifted him off the ground with ease, and the rest of the creature's monstrous form stepped through the fog.

It was humanoid, but its limbs were disproportionate, and it loomed above us. Its face ended in an elongated muzzle, with slits for nostrils that flared as it drank in the urchin's scent. Milky-white eyes stared at nothing, while large bat-like ears focused on the urchin's frantic howling.

The creature clutched a thick iron chain in its other hand, which it dragged forward, revealing a large, twisted iron-wrought cage. It regarded the struggling urchin in its clutches a moment longer before snapping his neck with its thumb and placed his limp body in the cage. It then turned in my direction, ears twitching, slits flaring.

My blood froze in my veins, and my breath caught in my chest.

This is how I die.

Shouts in the distance drew its attention away from where I crouched, and without pause, it disappeared into the fog in search of its next victim. The grating sound of the iron cage dragging along the ground faded into silence.

I exhaled and gathered my nerves. I had seen the aftermath of grizzly scenes, but never had I been that close to death. It rattled me.

My gaze fell on the spilled contents of the urchin's sack, and a smile crawled across my lips.

So he hadn't been completely insane.

I offered a silent prayer to whichever god was listening for my luck and then started transferring the spilled relics to my pack. The relics were unlike any I had ever come across. I had a feeling the haul was more than enough to elevate me into the inner-city. The prospect made me giddy with excitement as I made my way back to the lodge.

Find the Author

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Liminalities in the Travelverse

by Alan Vincent Michaels

"Not *again*," I said into my cold coffee mug.

I placed it on my desk, closed my eyes, and dropped forehead to keyboard. A stream of *g* characters raced across my center monitor.

"I *need* a vacation," I sighed.

I sniffed, smelling expensive cologne wafting over me from behind, and a familiar baritone whispered in my left ear.

"Bruh, that's no way to debug code."

Great! Another pearl of wisdom from John Hokulani, my senior manager on this database project from the Ninth Circle of Hell.

"*Not* helpful," I grunted. "It's outright treachery, I tell you. The testers are trying to bust my program—and make me look bad."

"Chris," John said, straightening up, as I raised my head and leaned back in my chair, turning to face him. "That's more freak-a-zoid than usual for you. Besides, it's their *job* to try to bust your program. You know that."

"It just seems—personal."

"Look. Kick off for the day, then unwind at Brendan's tonight. Okay? Your code and your revenge can wait 'til Monday."

This wasn't the first time John had mentioned Saint Brendan's Paradise Pub. For weeks, he'd been telling me to go, but he wouldn't give any details. "You have to see it for yourself," was all he'd say.

"Let's make something clear," I said. "Yes, I have red hair and a beard, freckles, and my last name's O'Malley. That *doesn't* mean I go to Irish pubs, especially ones named after some old Irish seafaring monk—yes, I know how to *Google* things—and I certainly *don't* drink Guinness by the pint—cold *or* warm. And in case you haven't noticed, I hate noisy places. That's why I like my office with a real, lockable door—is that why QA is out to get me? So—how'd you get in here?"

John smiled, pointing at his security badge on his lanyard. He then reached across my desk and grabbing a pad of blue sticky notes and a pen.

"I know you'll have a fantastic time," he said, writing quickly, then peeling off the note and sticking it to my forehead. "I guarantee it. Go there. Knock on the front door slowly three times, wait, then knock quickly three times. Say '*Je suis Zaphod*' after the slider opens. Then, you're in."

"How weirdly Douglas Adams of them," I said, pulling off the note and seeing the pub's address was in a less-than-desirable corner of the city. "It's not the end of the world, right? What kind of pub is Brendan's anyway?"

I couldn't read John's face. His usually annoying, near-constant smile was gone.

"You have to—"

"*Je suis Zaphod*," I interrupted. "I am *Zaphod*, huh?"

"Yeah, but not in English," he replied, leaving my office.

I wanted to ask why he had such a deep tan this late in autumn, but he'd already walked out and down the hallway, and was closing the door to his office. I guessed he was probably frequenting that new Sonic-Tan place on Lyell Avenue.

I wasn't sure if he was serious about me leaving work early, so I started the debugger tool again, figuring I should log as much time as possible. I selected another master data file and checked the primary relational databases.

"Enough," I said, after ten minutes of seeing the same errors. "It's their totally unrealistic data. The sender code can never generate those type of black box situations. It's *not* my program. I'll just kick their datasets out on load. That'll solve it. I'm *done*."

α

Settling into my studio apartment couch, with a frosted glass mug of beer in one hand and a warmed-up slice of yesterday's pizza in the other, I voice-selected a basketball game

on my wall vid.

It was a promising start to another Friday night.

"Not happening," I said to the holo-image of Edvard Munch's "The Scream" that floated near the wall next to my dying, potted fern.

"I'd feel like you both if I went out tonight," I said, raising my mug. "I have all I need right here at hand."

I yawned.

"Damn, I really should water that fern."

I finished the slice and most of my beer, dozing off mid game.

I awoke several hours later to an odd-sounding, disembodied voice chanting a bizarre mantra—"Go to Brendan's. Go to Brendan's."—that seemed to hang like a thick mist in the air around me.

It was *my* voice.

I shook my head, then looked at the vid. The words "Cannot locate program" displayed in response.

"Vid off! *All right*, I'm going."

α

I rode downtown through the cool, foggy night; a perfect complement to the dream-like haze fused with my thoughts. It seemed to take hours, but my ECar *Jolt!* nav display showed it had been auto-driving for fewer than ten minutes.

The *Jolt!* parked itself across the street from the pub's entrance, and my mood lightened considerably as I walked up to its dark, mahogany door.

There were no hanging Guinness and Murphy's signs, only the pub name in modern-style, lighted lettering above the lintel with "IRISH PUB" chiseled into the wood, each letter covered in flaking, gold paint.

The street was eerily quiet. I could see some light and interior objects through the windows, but there was no people or movement inside, and there were no other people or cars. There were two potted ferns on either side of the entrance that looked out of place.

I wondered what I was getting myself into. I raised my clenched hand, ready to knock, as images of a sleazy sex club flashed through my thoughts.



"Paradise Pub?" I asked aloud as I performed the knocking ritual. "Can this get *any* weirder?"

Several seconds passed before the slider opened. I blinked, then stared into an old man's inquisitive eyes. I blinked again, then noticed his dark-complexioned skin and the odd, yellowish light at the corners of the rectangular hole.

"*Je suis Zaphod*," I said.

The slider snapped shut, followed by the sound of a large deadbolt moving. I moved backwards as the heavy door opened outward on creaking hinges.

I walked inside and found myself standing on a bamboo floor with a palm frond-thatched roof rising to a high point over my head. I was enveloped by warm sunlight streaming in through the windows some thirty feet away across the large, circular hut.

I smelled salt and scents of flower blossoms in the air. The humidity was something I never expected anywhere at this time of year, let alone bright sunlight this late at night.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the sunlight stopped abruptly at the door jamb; the evening I just left remained outside the pub. It seemed as if the sunlight had been cut by a guillotine's blade.

It was a damned, eerie effect.

My jaw opened slightly, my brain not fully comprehending what I was seeing.

"This—is—impossible," I whispered.

"*Bonjour, mon ami,*" said the bronzed-skinned, gray-haired doorman as he moved towards me. "*Il est très possible. Vous avez franchi le liminal.*"

"*Liminal?*" I asked.

"*Oui.* You have crossed the threshold."

He wore a neatly pressed, white polo shirt with matching white shorts, finished off with a brown cloth mesh belt and brown leather sandals.

The door behind me closed automatically, with the deadbolt sliding on its own.

"*Je suis Zaphod. Bienvenue au paradis.*"

I turned back to look at his face. His accent seemed odd. French, yes, but not the Euro French I learned in school. I guess that a Frenchman working in an Irish pub made everything seem strangely out of place.

"Welcome to—wait? What? To paradise? This *is* getting weirder," I said.

"My name is Tomás, but we are all *Zaphod* here this fine afternoon."

"My name is Chris. I mean, *Zaphod*, too. It's about eleven o'clock, *at night*, I think."

"*Mon ami*, it's always *five* o'clock here," said Tomás, smiling wryly.

I had no rational explanation for why there was sunshine all around me, but I closed my eyes, letting the tropical heat and the sounds of the surf wash over me.

I felt rejuvenated, as if the last three months of twelve-hour workdays never happened, and I had been here on vacation instead.

I wanted this feeling to last, however improbable—or impossible—this place was.

Opening my eyes, I saw paradise hadn't vanished, and the feeling of serenity was still wrapped around me like a blanket.

"How is this *possible*? Some sort of Star Trek holodeck? Are *you* an alien?"

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Tomás intoned in a passable British accent.

"Okay, Shakespeare, what's going on here?"

"John didn't tell you about dressing for New Bora Bora, either," Tomás said, shaking his head, still ignoring my questions, then smiling widely and handing me a light blue cloth polo shirt, white shorts, and brown leather sandals. Apparently, he'd been holding these items the whole time. I hadn't noticed them before, but nothing here made much sense at the moment.

"This can't be—Bora Bora," I said, my hands reaching out slowly to take the clothes. "This can't be real."

"Define real. If you mean 'real to be what you can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell,' those are just electrical-ionic signals interpreted by your brain—"

"Oh, come on! Shouldn't you be offering me a Matrix blue and red pill right about now?"

"I see why John sent you unprepared," Tomás laughed. "We don't do anything that—crude—here. You'll see soon enough."

He pointed over my shoulder.

"Use the screen behind you to change and hang your clothes on the rack. Leave your phone on the table. It doesn't work here anyway. No signal this far out. Don't worry. No one will take anything. Then, choose a beach chair outside or feel free to wander around. There are many things to do and see here. *Hoá Pili*—your 'Best Friend'—will bring you drink and food shortly."

He paused and smiled, letting the moment settle.

"Find me before you leave," he continued. "We'll talk more about your good fortune. Not everyone gets invited to Brendan's. Here are the few, important rules you must follow, and, of course, the hefty fees, but don't worry."

Tomás handed me a small, white envelope with my name handwritten in a delicate, calligraphic style on the front.

"Th—thank—you, *Zaphod*," I stuttered, feeling like a teenager on a first date. I was flailing mentally at high speed.

Tomás walked to a small podium to study something, probably his appointment book, no longer seeming interested in me or how I felt.

I breathed deeply as I felt a panic attack swelling within me, my chest tightening. Should I stay or run? Would they try to stop me?

Not seeing any reasonable alternatives, I accepted my situation with a long, slow shrug, feeling somewhat calmer. I changed my clothes, then walked through the outer doorway and stepped onto a real—beach.

I looked around—at the ground, digging the tips of my sandals into the white, powdery sand; at the blue, cloud-feathered sky, breathing in deeply; at the turquoise-toned lagoon in front of me; marveling at the beauty—and a chill ran down my spine, despite the heat and humidity.

"This can't be real. How can I be in Bora Bora by walking through a *door*?"

No reply came on the warm breezes as I started walking, then stopped, looking around to see who was plucking a tune on a ukulele.

I was mesmerized suddenly by two oddly beautiful women standing in front of the large, polished driftwood bar. I couldn't decide what was odd and what was beautiful about them. They were absolutely captivating in their flower-patterned sarongs, and each was tanned, smiling, and sipping a drink through a straw stuck into a coconut. They took turns drinking, then laughing at their male companions' comments.

For a moment, I considered joining them, but my fear level spiked. I didn't know who or *what* they were.

Maybe they were androids or maybe aliens wearing "Edgar suits" who wanted me as an appetizer.

Maybe after I got my bearings and learned the rules for this place, I might say "Hello" and ask for their names. That *seemed* safe enough.

Maybe—

I walked across the beach to the last unoccupied, cushioned, white lounge chair, which, similar to the others, was paired with a large, angled, blue and white-striped umbrella.

Sitting down, I surveyed my fellow companions. The twenty or so chairs were occupied by men and women from all walks of life and all ages. Some were sleeping, others chatting.

What startled me the most was no one was working on a pad, taking pics or selfies, or making disturbing phone calls, websurfing, or texting.

A paradise, indeed!

I looked around the beach and then back at the bar. There was no tech anywhere. It was as if I had stepped into a vid playing that old "South Pacific" movie.

In the shade to right side of the bar, I saw an old man, with thinning, white hair and dark, wrinkled skin, sitting on a brown wicker footstool, strumming a ukulele that had definitely seen better days. He was clearly the source of the music. He started singing something in a French-Polynesian dialect and it crystalized the scene for me perfectly.

I laid back in my chair and looked up as dark-toned, bare-footed man wearing an untucked, *Brendan's*-embroidered, white T-shirt and teal-colored board shorts approached me.

"About time."

"John!" I said. "What? Are *you* an alien, too?"

"No, I am *Hoā Pili*, your 'Best Friend,'" he said, smiling. "All your questions will be answered in due time. First, you need something not Guinness."

"This explains your tan."

"I *am* Hawaiian, you know."

"Uh, yeah. Okay. Please bring me something fruity. With ice. A ton of rum. Oh, and a little umbrella."

"Will this do?" he asked.

I stared at the drink in his hand. It was a real coconut with the top sliced off. I could see the pink rum punch, ice, and a flex-straw angled inside. It was garnished with a fruit stick and a small, red umbrella.

"You had that all this time?" I asked, accepting the drink.

"We pride ourselves on anticipating our customers' desires."

"Thank you, John—*Hoa Pili*—you get permanent 'Best Manager' status."

Hoa Pili nodded.

Before I could ask another question, he turned smartly on his right heel, kicking up a small plume of sand.

"I needed to get away from programming," I said to the lagoon. "Maybe forever. I can get used to hanging out in this pub. No better place than a beach in paradise."

I took a long draw on my drink and settled back in the chair, counting the different shades of blue in the water.

It was so beautiful and peaceful.

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I don't remember falling asleep, but, after I opened my eyes, I saw the sun had dropped considerably towards the horizon.

I reached for the envelope on the side table and pulled out a single sheet. There were ten numbered rules listed and I scanned them quickly.

One. Never divulge the true nature of Saint Brendan's Paradise Pub. *Check.*

Two. Always receive The Committee's approval before inviting someone to join. *Check. Made sense. Whoever they were.*

Three. Monthly dues of—

My throat tightened. I coughed loudly, but nobody seemed to notice.

I was going to need a second—or a third—job to cover being at this place.

"I wonder if they allow members to be bouncers or dish washers here," I said aloud, as another wave lapped languidly onto the beach.

I finished my drink.

"Okay, where's John?" I asked. "*Hoa Pili. Zaphod.* Whatever. Don't you all read minds?"

"Right here," came the familiar voice from behind me.

"Erk!" I grunted, pushing up to one side and almost falling out of my chair. "*Stop* doing that!"

"We don't read minds, *Zaphod*, but I knew you'd want another drink after your short *hiamoe*," Hoa Pili said, as he moved to my side and stretched out his hand.

"Yeah, my nap was refreshing and I do want another drink—okay, *where* am I? This certainly *isn't* Bora Bora. Mount Otemanu's peak is all wrong. I honeymooned there three years ago with my ex. I know it didn't erode *that* fast. So, I'm guessing you're not reading my memories and trying to convince me this is really Bora Bora. And this isn't some kind of VR sim. It's physical. I can feel the heat and the sand. I can taste the salty air. Maybe—you drugged me."

I stared for a moment at my empty coconut. "Hmm, probably not."

"You're quite analytical and quite correct. You're not drugged—well, maybe a bit inebriated, but that's your doing—and, no, this isn't Bora Bora. It's as close as they wanted to make it."

"*They?* I knew it. You *are* aliens!"

"I'm not. I already told you. I'm Hawaiian. I just *work* for the aliens."

Hoa Pili paused and stared into my eyes.

"Actually, humans are the aliens. The ones we call the Ancient Builders terraformed this world—and Earth. These were their worlds. We're the aliens here and on Earth. Our ancestors were brought to Earth over four hundred thousand years ago from a world that some call *Nibiru*."

"Wait. I know that name. Ancient Sumeria, right? That's where those—*Anunnaki*—'Those Who From The Heavens Came,' so-called gods lived."

I took a long draw on my new drink and chided myself for being distracted by how delicious it was. He's talking about aliens and I'm thinking about my drink. They must be drugging me.

"Those so-called gods weren't the Builders," Hoa Pili explained. "History always seems to get things tumbled. The victors write the histories, and whoever has the gold, makes the rules, I guess."

"The Builders uplifted the Anunnaki, he continued. "Who, in turn, uplifted us into sapiency. They gave us the tools to start our civilization, and they let us run wild, like free-range children. There's a *lot* more to it than that, of course. We were genetically manipulated and spent a lot of time as the Anunnaki's slave race, but we eventually outgrew that. Mostly. Now, we work *with* them."

"Unreal."

"Very real."

"So, this isn't Earth."

"No."

"Why didn't you level with me back at the company? You know I'm way into science fiction. I would have checked this place out much sooner!"

"We needed you to accept and adapt. The best way was to show you, not tell you. We dislike full memory wipes, because they're problematic, but we can implant memories of an alien abduction if you don't accept. How else could your mind handle all this after you go back to your old life? But then, who would really believe you anyway?"

"Okay—" I said, taking a long draw on my straw to steady my resolve. "I'm not freaking out—yet."

"You won't. Good thing, too. Looks bad on my report to my manager. My *alien* manager, that is. Perfect record so far, and I intend on keeping it that way."

"So, I'm a guinea pig?"

"Oh, no!" Hoa Pili laughed. "The 'guinea pigs,' as you call them, were chosen over seventy-five years ago. You're actually part of the last wave. We're close to saturation—getting the world acclimated to humanity's next step."

"First, it was powered flight. All those SF movies since the fifties. Then, satellites and walking on the moon. Space stations. Then, finally, small and larger, official disclosures. Now, the galaxy is our oyster. This is the way it's been done for more than five billion years, according to what my team tells me. After enough people know the truth, it's no longer a shock to the collective consciousness. Few riots. Fewer suicides. More acceptance. Our civilization adapts and carries on."

"So, you're using *pubs* to convert humanity to believe in *aliens*?"

"No," Hoa Pili said, chuckling. "But it is all about travel. Really. Brendan's hosts a *world-door*. It's a way to vacation in paradise—on another world. We've found it makes the transition so much easier for everyone if you're more relaxed and away from life's stresses. Look at us talking. No screaming and running and all that."

"I'm still not sure I'm *not* going to scream and run."

"You won't. Like some others, you'd have done that after stepping through Brendan's door from the street."

"And I've been here for hours—"

"See? You're way past the point of no return."

"But I'm free to leave?" I asked, almost in a whisper, as I sipped the last of my drink.

"Any time," Hoa Pili replied. "After you sign the real agreement. No need for you to find recruits. This isn't a pyramid scheme, but it's vital you agree with the plan."

Hoa Pili paused, struggling with what to say next.

"As I said, we're almost at saturation. It'll be difficult to find someone who isn't onboard with the coming Full Disclosure. If you want out now, we might not even require a memory implant. Probably in another year, max, and everything will be revealed."

"If saturation is imminent, why are there only twenty or so people here?"

Hoa Pili smiled, looking relaxed again. "You think Brendan's is the only world-door, this world, and *Kishnar*—the Builder's name for Earth—are the only *worlds*? I thought you were 'way into science fiction.'"

"Umm—"

"They're not. There are more than a dozen more world-doors to other planets right here on *Anshar* alone. And a lot more on Earth. There's a lot to learn, Chris. You're free to keep on traveling, if you want, after you sign the real agreement. I've been to fifty

Hegemony worlds already, and not just the planets we humans are acclimating on. You should see my passport. My *other* passport."

Hoa Pili smiled again.

"You keep saying the 'real agreement.' The one I received from Tomás asks me to sell both my kidneys to afford all this."

"There's no fee anymore. That was done to keep earlier groups from going rogue on the process. Tomás really needs to stop—look—that was part of the test. You could have said 'No' after reading it. I'll have Tomás come over to finalize things."

"So, what are these world-doors?"

"Each is the end of a special kind of wormhole," Hoa Pili replied. "The Builders have a technical name for them, but it sounds like a cat being pulled tail-first through a narrow, metal tube. Because of the Anunnaki, we have access to the world-doors and the Builders' network. By the way, some alien worlds out there aren't too pleased with that arrangement, because we're such a young race compared to them. But the Anunnaki are powerful allies. Hey, that's a scary-shit story for another time. And more drinks."

"So, the whole multiverse thing is real? I asked.

"Multi—well, maybe. I think of it more in terms of structure. The network is the 'how' not the 'what.' My team likes to call it the 'travelverse.' Kinda catchy, yes?"

Hoa Pili turned away and headed to the hut, leaving me with more unanswered questions than before.

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My mind raced as I did the math. I'm on an alien planet. I can't go back to programming after all this, but I have rent and bills to pay. I have to eat. Maybe I can get a job here or, maybe, on another planet.

I shook my head and stared out over the water. The waves continued to lap on the shore, wholly unconcerned about my dilemma.

"This is *so* weird."

"You haven't seen weird, yet, *mon ami*," Tomás said, holding an odd-looking pad in front of me. It was the first piece of tech I'd seen so far here, which actually surprised me more than Tomás' reappearance. I was getting used to people showing up just when I needed something.

"I bet you're right," I said, smiling and finger-swiping through the text. It looked like those boilerplate software agreements I never actually read. This time, I read as fast as I could. I saw a lot of legal words and numerous references to memory wipes, but they didn't worry me anymore. I wanted more of this.

I signed the end of the form with my fingertip.

"Place your thumb on the black square," Tomás said.

I complied and the square flashed green momentarily. Tomás took away the pad.

"What, no blood sample or my kidney?"

"That's it," Tomás replied. "You just left a small DNA sample that you won't even miss. Welcome, Christopher Patrick O'Malley of Earth, to the Galactic Hegemony. Want a copy of the agreement emailed to you?"

I nodded, wanting to read more about the *Social and Personal Interactions with Other Races* section I skimmed.

"Anything you want to do now? Have dinner? Go water skiing? Maybe your favorite sport—snow skiing?"

"You guys freak me out," I said. "There's snow here, too? Is there an indoor place like in Dubai?"

"Someplace much better. Go back to the main hut and open the world-door to the left of the dressing screen. Walk through and go to your right for about ten meters. You'll meet Henri, my counterpart, waiting for you with your snow gear. They're still working on the reception area redesign, so be careful where you step."

"Thank you, Tomás," I said, standing up. "Please tell *Hoa Pili* I'll be back later. He and I have a lot to talk about."

"I will, and safe journeys, *mon ami*."

I walked back to the hut and found myself standing before another ornate, mahogany door. I knew it wasn't made of wood. It was probably dark matter in the shape of a door.

I smiled.

Trying to figure out how the Ancient Builders accomplished all this, especially since they had been apparently terraforming worlds and uplifting civilizations for billions of years, made me feel like an ant trying to figure out how an airplane flew through the sky. And that was tempered by the ant-questions of “what is sky?” and “what is airplane?” rushing through my ant-human-brain.

I was definitely an ant in all this, but I felt a certainty that I had to just accept what I saw and enjoy myself. There was no turning back now.

I opened the door and before me was the most beautiful panorama of mountains I’d ever seen. Nothing I’d skied before compared to this, especially the oddly purplish sky dotted with white clouds framing a row of resplendent, snow-capped peaks, each easily taller than Mount Everest, and two radiant moons hanging high in the sky.

“This is going to be the best vacation ever,” I said, stepping onto pristine snow of a distant world.

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AWOL in Paradise

by Mario Kersey

The inky darkness felt nearly alive around Torr as whispers of light were noted on some of the less refractory surfaces within their room. He felt the warmth of A'apatha the length of his body, as she slept peacefully, the dew of their love's exertion sealed the space between them. A'apatha's body shimmered with a glow of contentment as he stared at her face so cherubic despite looking nothing like a human female. When he had arrived at Rymlar II, he noticed all the females were beautiful, even the old ones. But old was hard to pin down on the small, fragmented world. Despite her youthfulness, he learned she was five times his age, yet had the vitality of a twenty-year old human female. He wondered if he could keep up with her, but his enhancements bestowed upon him by the mercantile consortium, Estrella Merchants Interstellar continued to serve him well despite being AWOL for over a year.

Although no longer employed, the scientist in Torr got a lay of the land. Rymlar II was a remnant of a larger planet but was now a clutch of planetoids with artificial gravity and atmosphere. The star Rymlar I was too close to the flotsam of the shattered planet for any life to exist. In fact, Torr believed that every piece of land should be barren, near molten chunks orbiting this star, but they were stationary. The days and weeks which followed made him less curious. Love had enthralled him.

It was difficult to think of strange occurrences or anything monetary when one finds paradise. The people of Rymlar II were people bathed in the light of the star Rymlar I. The temperature barely reached above room temperature. The High Oracle of Rymlar made his life better by falling in love with him. The people knew no violence, and he had loved every minute of his time on the planet. He did have some difficulty call it a planet, but thought of old Hawai'i and stopped the struggle. Lately, he had some terrible nightmares about this paradise. He felt that he and this tiny world were being watched.

"I can feel your thoughts press against me."

"I thought you were out for the count."

She felt the vibrations of his basso voice in her chest. "I had counted on you to join me."

"Just some thoughts. That's all."

"I can help you with your thoughts, Torr."

"I'm certain you can, but I have had enough people in my head over the years. I have permanent no occupancy now."

"Very well."

"There is something you can tell me."

"What is that?"

"Tell me the myth of your star."

A'apatha's body glowed brighter. "We do not talk of the myth to the general public or outsiders. How do you know of it?"

"Studying star myths are a hobby of mine. Rymlar has been a whispered story on other planets for some time."

"Some myths are not so—"

"I know many secrets, and I'm still here."

A'apatha stared away from Torr, thinking of another way to avoid the telling of the tale but could not find one. "This will change everything I believed we built in your time among my people."

"Woah, it will change nothing. It was luck I found this place, but it was a miracle I found you, A'apatha. I love you. I don't know how else to prove it you."

"Do not bring danger to my people."

"I would never do that." He embraced her kissing her on her speckled neck.

She steeled herself as if going into a trance.

Before the great cataclysm, Rymlar II existed as a barren, unnamed orb of nickel and ice. There was no star to caress its frozen shores with brilliant rays of warmth to provide

the necessary evaporation for clouds or rainfall. How Rymlar II floated in the void was never revealed to anyone in the long line of High Oracles who have led our people. Gods reveal little to those who cannot comprehend. In the darkness Rymlar traveled until a rip in the fabric of space. From that wound bled the light of life. The surrounding area began to flow like water seeking its level but not finding it. In the process, Rymlar II began to fall apart, the core spilled out like some mortally wounded creature.

The chaos soon ended as structures formed on the shattered remains of Rymlar II which gave birth to my people. Once the first were born, the threshold into that other dimension was sealed with a star, Rymlar I watching over us. It has watched over my people ever since never burning but sustaining us with its power.

In the time of her brief recounting, she had left their bed and braced her back against the wall of the room. The darkness between them more palpable now than before as if the air had become solid.

Torr felt errant thoughts floating in the seemingly cavernous space within his mind. He had so many questions he wanted to ask but knew he had not been among them long enough to deserve the full story if ever. He knew love was elastic, but the responsibilities of A'apatha possessed could stretch any love to the snapping point under the stress. He suddenly became aware of the coolness of her absence from his body. He longed for her to be next to him, but another round of lovemaking was just poor timing. He got up from the bed, stumbling to her.

"Do you seek to touch me, Torr?"

"If that is okay."

She embraced him. "I have told a forbidden truth to someone—"

He looked into her shimmering eyes. "No one will know. I know this is a big deal for you."

"It is just that..."

"It's been a long time for me. I'm not sure if anyone has made me feel this free before. I'm not willing to lose that...ever."

The two remained in quiet embrace.

Footsteps could be heard approaching. Urgent knocking on the door, breaking decorum.

"Who knocks upon my door?"

"Forgive me. My fear makes me bold, High Oracle, but your presence is gravely needed."

Before opening the door, the two of them had placed on clothes suitable for public display. The light of the day dispersed the darkness like a fresh breeze to dank air.

Before them stood a male of beryl hue. "There are visitors approaching. They sound like your consort."

"What?" She looked at Torr.

Torr knew it would be representatives from Estrella Merchants Interstellar. He had gotten rid of all the tacking nanites when he made the decision to stay. "We need to make contact sooner rather than later, A'apatha. I'm certain they have firepower to decimate this place."

"They do not, but you will contact them to leave."

"That may be difficult."

"Pray that it is not."

By the time Torr, A'apatha, and her retinue arrived, the EMI shuttles were landing in the sacred gardens like locusts. The citizens stared in shock which begins to stir within feelings they have never felt...rage.

From the lead shuttle came a decorated woman clearly of high rank within the organization. Torr felt his ass clench as she got closer to them as the other shuttles birthed heavily armed personnel spreading across the land as an invading force.

"Torr are you going to introduce us to your friend?"

"How'd you find me, Kirkland?"

"Unbeknownst to you and several of your team, you were guinea pigs for a new synthetic myelin which is an organic beacon. Your very brainwaves give it the energy to

broadcast without causing too much burden. It's a success. And so were you." She looked at A'apatha the same as a wolf leers at a rabbit. "Do these people speak our language?"

"We do and you should remove yourself from our garden."

"I'm sorry, but we are on a timeline."

"What kind of timeline, Kirkland? You're invading a sovereign world."

Kirkland points at Rymlar I. "That is the key to trillions in profits, Torr. I hope your friend can tell us how to use it. We are willing to pay well. Hell, we could even move them to an actual planet. Besides, this is barely a colony."

"Our lives are forever tied to this land. Leave!"

Kirkland pulls out a translucent disk from her suit. Her thumb presses the edge of it. On the flat surface appeared a document. "I have the right to remove you."

"Kirkland, for God's sake, don't do this. These people have lived here millennia."

"Torr this is open space and practically uncharted. Besides, you, as an employee, have lived here for over a sol cycle thus becoming a resident of the land. By the consortium compact, you are the owner; therefore, we are the owner. We can monetize as we see fit."

"But I quit."

"The proper severance was not followed. The acquisition of this territory voids any legal recoup of the work you owe EMI and any potential prison time the company could seek."

A'apatha turned to Torr whose head looked to the ground. He simply lacked the strength to look her in the face. She raised his head. "They are in danger, Torr. They must leave."

"What will happen?"

"I did not tell you the darkest of our history."

"Listen, your highness, your superstitions don't scare our legal documents. We have the relocation ships arriving in about a week. You do have time to pack."

Torr grips Kirkland's arm. "Make it stop."

Kirkland jerks her arm from his grip. "You know what we do is for the good of earth. Have you forgotten why we do this?"

"It's why I went AWOL."

"You're not AWOL any longer. You have served your purpose. You're fired."

Before Torr could respond to his termination, the much larger ships from the organization moved toward the shining disk of Rymlar I. "Where are they going?"

"We need to study it."

A'apatha wailed as if her very soul was being torn from her flesh. The citizens wailed also. The wall of sound rippled across Rymlar II like the splash of a rock into a pond. The Rymlarians all retreated into their living quarters.

"What does that mean, Torr?"

"Trouble."

A'apatha touched Torr's arm. "I'm sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"Rymlar II needs not know the ways of war when Rymlar I is our protector."

"Kirkland, order those ships back."

"That's not happening."

Torr turned to A'apatha. "Can I come with you?"

"Yes."

As Torr and A'apatha left for shelter, the ships got closer to Rymlar I. The light from it became dimmer the closer they approached. Aboard the lead ship the crew was concerned. "What is happening to the light?"

A disembodied voice boomed onto the bridge. "There is an increase in dark matter."

"Where?"

There was no time for a response as the space where Rymlar I once shone as a bright star was a hole in the fabric of space. It seemed to be a singularity but was more peculiarity. All ships were caught in the pull of a black hole's gravity; the engines strained but did not last long as the hole pulled them into its gaping maw.

On Rymlar II, all EMI were free of gravity and floated in the direction of the hole. Kirkland screamed as her grip from an edifice gave way to the pull. The screams lasted for

an hour. The great threshold of darkness closed and like an eye opening from sleep, Rymlar I looked upon Rymlar II with all its cool brilliance.

Inside Torr and A'apatha stared at the darkness between them. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I have told you too much."

"I must want EMI of this."

"Yes."

"I will have to leave here."

"Yes."



The Skyring Derelicts

Part I – At the Threshold

by Peter Gilbertson

The Elongates Skyhook No. 12 is a service elevator to the International Satellite Ring System (ISRS), which orbits nearly five miles above the Earth's surface. Located along the equator on an island several hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador, the space elevator is primarily responsible for mid-Pacific emergencies due to its distance from population, trade, and military hubs.

"Nice view, easy gig," Commander Jayna Lynn told Mo Blackbear and his team – as well as every new space marine upon arrival to the MidPac Thermosphere Transfer Station. While the concentric skydings were not bright enough to be seen during the day from the ground, at night they were a visible line of irregular blinking lights and the outline of the IRS's lower hull was just visible to the naked eye at dawn and dusk. However, from the MidPac high-altitude transfer station, the skydings were a constant presence. Mo thought they were more like a nuisance when he first arrived for his three-month rotation of high-altitude duty. "Just stay alert, keep your eyes on the sky. If it ever goes dark, it's time! Get airborne."

For Mo, the view wasn't bad, it was irritating, but familiar to growing up in NewLak.

He remembered his great grandfather telling him about the uproar after the first skyding was built and how it reminded him of the old folks on the res when the windmill farms sprang up along the interstate through New Lakota reservation – an annex of land in South Dakota designated to become a green energy town for the purpose of expansive multistory warehouse agriculture and energy farming whose intent is to maximize wind, solar, hydro, and geothermal energy access, acquisition, storage, and transmission. "Windmills! I hate 'em! Who wants to see these giant pinwheel kids' toys just spinning all across the horizon all day; And at night? It was worse! All the non-stop blinking! Like a psycho string of Christmas lights! All night long! It was unnatural. I felt our ancestors' outrage! And I prayed! I prayed for clouds, fog, rain, or a power outage every day. Anything to make the lights go out!"

"What'd you do?" Mo asked his grandfather.

Ronald Blackbear was a stern man prone to fits of unprovoked outrage over politics and the abandonment of traditional Lakota values; he never smiled in public, or in private, unless you were family, which Mo was thankful for being. It was the bearhugs that Mo tried to avoid. As old as he was, Grandpa Blackbear was still quick and often swept up his grandson if he got within paw reach.

"Well, Mohamed," Grandpa growled, "I'll tell you what I did. I figured I couldn't beat them, so ... I joined them!" And then he gave a deep belly laugh. The old Blackbear talked tough, but was usually joking around Mohamed. Usually. "Yep, the money was too good and I got free electricity for letting them stick one on my land. After a while I didn't even notice them."

"That's because you bought the blackout curtains," teased Grandma Joan Blackbear who had a knack for making snappy comments when she entered a room. She handed Grandpa and I iced tea and gave me a plate of fresh cookies. While Grandpa was retired, Grandma still worked remotely for the NewLak Ag Center, Soybean Shipping and Receiving Department.

"Best purchase I ever made."

"You said it was my engagement ring!" Grandma said as she left the room and went back to work in her office.

"That too!" he called to her. "And thanks for the drinks and cookies! Anyway, I couldn't see the green energy forest for the tree or I too loved those big mothers, pick an analogy, metaphor or whatever. It was the new normal. You can only fight so much, and I was losing more than I was winning. My only regret is, once you cross that threshold, it's hard to go back. But this?" Ronald Blackbear said, motioning to the sky. "Rings of metal encircling our planet? Scares the hell out of me. They raided every junkyard, rail yard, shipyard, and

airplane graveyard on the planet, salvaged sunken ships and derelict oil rigs as well; then gathered all the old free floating space junk to make that thing. Now they're going to make another? Why? And where's all of that metal going to come from? Nobody knows! ISRS, eyesores if you ask me! It's more than an atrocity, it defies logic and everything our ancestors believed in and what NewLak was supposed to represent – living with the Earth, not above it! I pray that someday it won't all fall out of the sky. Thankfully, the blackout curtains still work." He looked around, then whispered, "Best purchase I ever made."

Getting a front row view to Grandpa's atrocity every morning disturbed Mo at first, but like most things, he got used to it. It became part of his routine. Every morning at the Eastern MidPac observation deck he'd watch the sunrise and perform his personal morning ritual, he'd focus on his breathing, reflect on his life, his ancestors, and mentally go over preparing for his day, and try to anticipate all the variables and how to overcome them.

Then one predawn morning, while the sun was just below the horizon so that the entire lower Eastern rim of the sky looked like one grand theater curtain illuminated by an impossibly long row of dim footlights, while ISRS provided an intersecting overhead row of lighting, the skyrings went dark.

Grandpa's prayers were finally answered, thought Mo.

An instant later the space marine base klaxons went off.

It was time.

Not only had the lights become inoperable, the ISRS had gone silent. All communications to the primary, secondary, and tertiary satellite rings ceased. Visual contact from telescopes across the globe – Greenwich, Arcetri, and Mauna Kea – confirmed the orbital bands had gone dark, with brief flashes of presumed electrical sparks and or fires viewed along viewing windows and portholes. Even the secondary, free floating, geostationary colonies could not be contacted and also appeared dormant, which meant their workers and service drones were unable to assist and likely also in crisis; but no failsafe escape pods or emergency solar flags had been deployed and the hardwired communications via the skyhook terminals all failed at roughly the thermosphere transfer stations and up. Per their protocols, every transfer station across the planet immediately deployed their maintenance and rescue drones. However, they all became unresponsive upon arrival. And with that, the fate of the thousands of astrocitizens orbiting Earth was rendered a mystery.

Every ground-based nation, corporation, and person needed answers. While communications were hamstrung for the public, protocols for such a cataclysmic event had been instituted; ground-based backup antenna relays came online and were designed to accommodate vital data transmission for government and military and other critical agencies, including police forces, hospitals, and emergency broadcast television and radio stations. Which meant orbital strike and rescue teams, on perpetual standby for operations like this, were scrambled and airborne in less than twenty minutes.

An emergency rocket would reach the closest ring in less than that.

They finalized preparations in-flight, not that there was much intel to go on.

"Comms and power for the drones all went out upon arrival," said Commander Lynn. "Expect the same. Operate under EMP protocols, even though your rocket shuttle and the skyrings are designed to resist such attacks. Also, assume hostile takeover, prepare for extraterrestrial presence – both outbreak from confinement or assault infiltration scenarios possible. Hell, it could be both at once. Alpha Rex, just like we drilled, you lead your team in first. Assess the situation, report back to Bravo, regardless if wireless comms are out, bring the winch spools and anchors, set up secure come and rescue lines as you proceed. Watch the corners, secure and clear debris as best you can. We don't need a rapid winch evac going haywire because of trash. Bravo, you are support and rescue. Highest alert. We need answers. Get us some! Good luck."

"Yes, ma'am!" the space marines answered.

Then several moments passed in silence. Mo attempted his morning ritual, but time was running out. He focused on his breathing. He went over the scenarios in his head. He tried to anticipate the variables. But there wasn't enough intel. They were flying in blind. The risk was too great. They should pause. They should stop and think. They should abort. But there were too many lives at stake. Before he could calm and organize his thoughts, the rocket arrived.

"No power outage detected," said the pilot. "MidPac, do you read us?"

"Transmission received. Proceed with entry. Alpha Rex, led your team."

Mo's in-mission callsign as leader of Alpha team was Alpha Rex.

"Seal is good. Awaiting entry. Standby." Alpha team stood by the rocket's airlock, weapons hot, waiting for the entryway to equalize pressure before allowing access into the first portal. Expecting system failure or a hostile encounter, Mo was surprised when the portal opened. "Doorway open. Crossing the threshold now."

No turning back now, right Grandpa?

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Serial

Shadow of the Black Tower

by Jason H. Abbott

"Before I speak my tale, my queen, you must know this: That long before the rise of Aeola began our Age and kingdoms spread across the world — before the empire of Mnar and the doom of fabled Sarnath, before the oceans drank the gleaming cities, and indeed long before the first stone of Atlantis was laid — there were strange aeons bereft of men. That beneath a mantle of stars of which our ignorance is a blessing, there once strode great old ones and elder things within now nameless cities..."

—Scythea, Chronicler of Agamenae



Chapter Five: The Hymn from Leng

Skalos walked the rough-cut path through brambles and bushes. Encumbered by several ample bundles of rope, he paused, seeing Korr hack away at the remaining shrub that was the last obstacle keeping them from the roaring river nearby.

"Damned, thorny devil! As awful as a kernberry bush!" he swore. "I've chopped down Ocrellians with less trouble!"

The scholar came up beside Addala, who stood behind Tetree. Something rolled beneath his sandal as he waited with the women while the barbarian cursed and beat obstinate vegetation. He crouched down, putting the coils he carried aside. His hands lifted a straight, stout sapling the warrior's axe had felled near to its roots.

Unnoticed by all amid foul Borean profanity, he grasped the applewood handle of his knife. Its blade pruned off the sapling's remaining branches with the quick cuts of a man who had worked in an orchard. After lopping off its top, he rose, testing the knobby staff he'd created.

Skalos sheathed his tool with an approving nod as Korr vanquished his opponent.

"Finally," Tetree said.

The broad-shouldered man hooked the bush with his hatchet and chucked it aside. "For haste, you could have used magic."

"Not this close," she said, adjusting her shawl and the silver circlet that held its hood in place. "I've sensed something as we've approached the tower. Something I'm not keen to alert with an imprudent spell."

The exchange between the witch and warrior no longer distracting her, Addala spotted Skalos securing the last of his coiled rope to the ends of his new pole. She regarded him

balancing the shaft on his shoulders under draped arms, then loosed a gentle clap seeing how his ingenuity eased his burden.

Her attention drawn, Tetree glanced at the pair. At the way she eyed him.

"Nameless, now's no time to dawdle. Accompany me."

After receiving the command, she followed her mistress as if she had yanked an invisible leash.

The scribe kept pace and spoke as the two women joined the warrior. "Have you spied a way across?"

"I have scouted ahead," he answered, hanging the hatchet on his belt. "It's not a proper bridge, but it will do."

The Borean slung a huge bundle of rope over one shoulder, and all treaded behind him down a slope towards the noise of a rushing river and thunderous waterfalls.

"The map has many vaguities. How is it improper?" Skalos asked.

"You'll see."

Korr led the group with deft steps through thinning shrubs. Greenery succumbed to bare rocks dampened by misty air, and the vegetation retreated to reveal an open ravine twenty feet above churning whitewater.

He guided them along the narrow, wet path between dense bushes and the sheer drop of a stone ledge. The roar of the waterfall was deafening, but looking back to where its crest must lie, the Agamenaean found nothing. Mist thrown up from the violent waters obscured the brink, and even the sky, like a fog. Tramping up and down puddled rock, only occasional defused sunlight in sickly yellow and olive blemishes interrupted the rolling gray and white that blocked their vision beyond a dozen paces.

"We're almost to it," Korr yelled over the noise. "There's a brief climb, like a steep stairway. Mind your footing! Slip into those rapids, and it will break your body on its rocks before you're even swept over the falls."

Only the barbarian was bold enough to scale the last of the trail walking upright. The others climbed slick stone on their knees, only a hand's span separating them from a plunge into doom. Skalos managed it one-handed, his other arm supporting the staff he'd made and its attached coils of ropes. Addala, carrying nothing approaching his burden, scaled far faster even with stops to assist Tetree. Her hand met his at the top, helping him rise onto the flat area they had reached.

Dark, massive, and ancient above a raging river, laid a toppled obelisk in the mist spanning a gap of a hundred yards between two cliffs.

Korr eyed the scholar, gesturing to the ruin. "There is your bridge."

They gazed at the enormous carvings upon it, all rendered indistinct by patches of moss and drifting moisture in the clouded air. Stagnant water pooled on the upturned side of the fallen monolith's primordial black granite. Despite obscurity, Skalos could make out the telltale groupings of dots forming elder inscriptions.

"This is remarkable," the scribe said. "I've seen nothing so gigantic carved from a singular piece of stone! It dwarfs the grand obelisks of Tah. If it still stood upright, only their great pyramid would overshadow its height!"

Tetree nodded. "And standing in the tower's shadow, in the glory of the elder's civilization, it would have seemed an afterthought. An ornament."

He turned to her. "Giving me some time to inspect it could gain us valuable information."

"Tempting," she replied.

"Bah, it's all old rubble and rock now," Korr said, approaching a pyramidion capstone that had broken off the monument untold ages ago. "We're fortunate it fell the way it did. We have a flat side to cross on, but it's wet and narrow."

Addala helped remove the pole from Skalos' shoulders. Free of the rig, he grasped his scroll case and moved up alongside the warrior. "Yes, but if we invest some effort, there may be knowledge here to serve our goals."

Tetree grabbed Korr's muscled arm, stopping him short of stepping on the capstone. Her other hand snagged the scholar's cloak. "Neither of you touch it. There are wards up and down this monolith, and surrounding the place beyond it. Ancient, very potent. I suspected as much when I tried to scry the ruin and only saw deflecting phantoms."

She released them and pointed across the ravine, drawing a line with her finger along the mist shrouded shore of the tower's island that forked the river. "We're close enough now that I can sense them outright. Wards all around, blocking prying eyes. Wards to keep some things out, and others in."

"I could read some inscriptions without touching them," Skalos said.

"I'm curious too, Scribe, and tempted to let you try. But this is elder arcana foreign to me, and our time remaining to reach the treasure with a chance to claim it is short."

"Death magic?" Korr asked. "One touch and..."

He ran a finger across his throat.

She smirked. "No, the killing will come from what they alert to our presence."

Hand rested on his sword's pommel, the barbarian scanned the mists before casting a grim glance over the ravine's edge. "I hope you have a plan. There's no other way over."

"I may," Tetree said. "Skalos, recount again what Belay spoke of his grandfather's escape from the Zadii."

He looked back, having returned to Addala, who handed his staff back to him. "He said he escaped while they were bringing him to the island in a procession, to be sacrificed to the god of the tower. Their priest led the tribe in a ritual chant as they went, the same as they had done over several prior nights with other victims."

She approached him. "Did he remember the incantation?"

"His grandfather, Mhaul, wouldn't repeat it willingly, although it haunted his sleep. He would recite the words having nightmares, which were frequent and frightening enough to Belay as a boy that he remembered the verses." Skalos cleared his throat with a cough. "It begins, *Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh—*"

Tetree placed two fingers on his lips and silenced him. "Hush. I've heard this chant before and know it well: It's a prayer to the one who destroyed this city. He slumbers now, but he listens."

She withdrew her hand and gazed across the ravine. "I've made too many errs with his cult to even be near a *Call to the Great Dreamer*. It is useless to us, even dangerous. Don't speak those words in the presence of Korr or I again, or if you value sleeping free of terror."

Skalos stepped back as she sunk into brooding thought, but a laugh soon drew his eyes.

"I told you we shouldn't have burned that temple down with the cultists in it," the barbarian said, finishing his chuckle.

"Meh," she answered, eyes closed and rubbing her fingers in concentration. "They deserved it."

He shook his head of long, black hair, arms folded as he still peered into the frothing whitewater. "At least finish the story, Runt. How did he escape?"

"Alright," he said, leaning on his pole. "Two men in the procession carried him, with his hands and feet tied. Being nimble, Mhaul had wriggled his limbs free unnoticed but pretended to still be bound. When the Zadii crossed the river on a bridge, which I assume was this, he seized a chance to break loose. He slipped out of their grasp, and when the tribal priest tried to grab him, the child shoved and kicked him. He fell, screaming and flailing in a panic, pulling several others off with him into the waters."

"Ah, serves them right," Korr grinned. "The boy had a stout heart."

"And fleet feet. In the ruckus, he dashed off into the brush, and the Zadii broke their chant to chase him. He fled, pursued, but soon the god came forth and slew the tribe to its last member. Mhaul ran through the veldt and escaped to the Shaell as it flattened their village that was once somewhere beside this river."

Tetree's eyes remained closed as Skalos finished his epilogue. Fingers splaying, her hands rose as if touching something intangible. "The magic here is indeed formidable; a multitude of five-pronged eyes still obeying long dead masters. Yet it's also frayed with age."

The others turned to her as she traced twisted star crescents in the air. "It's like a threadbare curtain with minute holes. I believe the Zadii's incantation exploited these gaps, perhaps unwittingly so from religious habit. That it pulled them temporarily wider with outside influence and interference, enough to pass onto the island without alarming the god of the tower."

"For all your words, we are no closer to crossing now than we were before. We can't use the chant," Korr said.

Her eyes blinked open. "Not at all, my pet. I can repurpose their method using a different principle. Recall Leng?"

His sigh was deep as he checked the mists with guarded glances. "Yes, I recollect the dusty trek to that forsaken plateau. I also remember how your sorcery failed to slip us by its watchers unnoticed, if you're thinking of trying a similar spell."

"That wasn't what I was referencing," she said, sour-faced as Skalos and Addala spied the witch untying the closure of the smaller of two pouches fastened to her belt. "My intent is to use the *Hymn to Chaos* I transcribed from the corridors of Leng Monastery. It's older, more pervasive, and more potent than the Dreamer's Call. It should easily fulfill our needs."

"You're crowing much confidence for something you copied poisoned and half-dead in near pitch-black darkness," Korr said. "Nor do you have the High-Priest's ivory instrument to play it on we trespassed there to steal."

"Our failure to gain that item is a regret, but we acquired an acceptable substitute."

"So you say."

"It will be a suitable key to unlock the treasure of the tower," she said, casting a squint at him. "It produces the proper resonances, and will withstand those required for the hymn."

"I don't fear death, *Söyt*. But a worse fate almost befell us in Leng under endless night. Dare we tempt his attention again, piping his melody on an instrument not his own?"

"We should," she said, withdrawing her fingers from the bag to point at him, "and I will! However, if you lack the courage, you know the way back. Perhaps my prescience is wrong, and it is the destiny of another man to hold that sword as a king made by his own hand."

Korr gripped the hilt of the Atlantean blade within its scabbard. He turned his back to her, lips tight, jaw clenched, and fixed his eyes on the toppled black obelisk. "Do it."

"You shall be a ruler obedient to his queen," Tetree said under the noise of the falls, only to herself.

In the din after the quarrel, Addala faced Skalos with raised brows on her dusky face. Her askew glance and sideways nod to the now ruffled adventurers prompted him to risk leaning close to her ear.

"I've heard none of this before," he whispered, keeping his eyes on the other pair's backs. "Have you?"

He stepped to a less intimate distance, a stride beside her as she shook her head. After acknowledging her answer, he walked to Tetree.

"I understand your theory and plan to get us past the wards," he said. "Is there anything I can do to assist? Or that I need to prepare for?"

Korr drew his sword and scanned the fogged air surrounding them. "Watch for spiders."

"Come again?" Skalos asked.

"As big as a man, as big as a horse," he said, weapon ready. "One purple fiend I severed a leg from was the size of a mammoth. The accursed things started tracking us as we entered the hills of Leng. I don't think they ever stopped doing so. Nor will they, no matter how many of them I kill."

The scholar tried to answer. He gulped, finding no words.

Tetree returned to searching her pouch. "It always comes back to the spiders with you, doesn't it?"

The warrior's laugh was grim. "She's loath to admit, Runt, but they were almost her end, too. I carried her, delirious and dying from their venom. Hiding her in caves for days as she writhed, propping her up as she stumbled across the desolate landscape and up the plateau. They were always hunting, always hungry. Never resting or far from our heels until we reached the walls of that hellish monastery."

"Don't heed his ramblings, Scribe," Tetree said, her hand still feeling for something. "Korr's abilities are worthy of song and saga. Yet, as it can be for any man, some encounters leave scars not on the flesh, but on the mind."

Korr turned and locked eyes with Skalos. "See? She thinks I'm mad. But I know they tracked us after our escape as we headed southwest back to Ulthar. There were shepherds killed. I found their bodies emptied, mere husks in silken shrouds. The spiders followed us

further west, a month's journey overland, as we made our way to half-sunken Sarnath in lake Akurion. There I cut down scores of cultish men and voiceless Ibians there to claim a flute she deems equal to the one we failed to steal in Leng, and I beheld a vast web hung between flooded spires. It was only after you joined our venture later in Agamenae, and we crossed the sea to Ur, that I felt we were finally ahead of them."

"The hymn has no direct connection to the spiders, so far as my knowledge of the lore can advise me," the witch said, pulling her hand from the bag and motioning for Addala to join them. "Yet it is as dangerous as Korr alludes. If I do not have everyone's full cooperation allowing me to concentrate and perform it with the utmost care, it could draw the attention of the hymn's composer. If *He Who is Not to Be Described* takes heed of us, our doom is irrevocable."

"He mentioned a flute, and you a key to the tower's treasure," Skalos said, his face haggard after listening to their dire exchanges. "Are they one and the same?"

Whatever she had retrieved remained concealed in a fist as her other hand patted the longer of her two pouches. "They are. The elder's voices were capable of some sounds ours cannot mimic. I discovered a thousand-year-old instrument a sorcerer used for needs akin to mine, made to replicate that aspect of their magic. But I found it shattered alongside his skeleton. I suspect it was insufficient for the task, thus Korr and I's quest for a woodwind crafted beyond human skill that was."

"I see. What kind of cooperation do you expect from us?" he asked, glancing at Addala as she stepped beside him.

"I will lead us across," Tetree said, scanning the faces of the other three. "I'm unsure how far the masking effect of the hymn may extend, so you all need to follow me closely. Fall behind and the wards will sense your presence, and our death will come. My pace will be slow, the concentration required to maintain the music without error, intense. One interruption, one lapse into misplayed meter before I cease playing it clear of the warding on the other side, and we all die. Understand?"

She watched them nod in reply.

"Good," she continued, presenting and opening her fist. "Now the most important instruction of all: You must not hear a note of what I am about to play."

A stick of beeswax rested on her open palm.

"What's the point of piping something while we are deaf?" Skalos asked, followed by Korr bobbing his head in half-agreement.

"We don't need to listen to it. In fact, we shouldn't," she said. "I'm playing the hymn to mask our trespass in the monotonous sound of the mindless gods. I perform it so we walk in step with the orchestral dirge at the center of all infinity, an interloping dance in time with the music that permeates the universe and keeps its creator from awakening. This is the eternal tune at the heart of everything, and a part of all that is. Its resonance in the pure is beyond what a human mind can endure without breaking."

Tetree broke and offered a chunk of wax to Korr. A swipe of his thick fingers snatched it. She next extended her hand to Addala, who took a share and rolled it into a pliable softness between her palms. The witch divided the remaining beeswax, giving Skalos half.

"You should apply this with the greatest care of all of us," she said. "A stray fragment of the hymn from my Ibian woodwind will drive the others into a panic, but they'll soon forget it. I suspect your inquisitive mind would hold on to it instead, and remain forever broken."

He pondered the wax as he worked it. "Is there anything I can do if precautions fail?"

"Clear your thoughts, if you can. Don't let your curiosity follow it. Release it."

"And what of the flutist?" he asked, kneading his beeswax into two lumps.

"I'll be as deaf as the rest of you," she said, plugging one of her ears. "While I know the notes that lull the daemon sultan of ultimate chaos, I also know not to listen. Or even dare imagine their sounds conjoined in harmony."

She opened the long pouch dangling from her belt. Tetree drew out a hollowed reed from the calfskin, gripping one of the bulbous protrusions of its bent asymmetry. The instrument appeared blackened as if someone had rescued it from a fire, and Skalos paled when he saw the patchy lacquer that still clung to some of its nodules. He looked away, the dull sheen upon the flute's warty bulbs giving the impression of crawling insects.

"You are now a member of a rare fellowship, Scholar," she said, holding it. "Few outside his cult have seen a *Flute of Bokrug* that were not soon to die, sacrificed amid gibbous

dances.”

He stuffed wax into his ears with a shiver, and the blonde smiled at his discomfort while inserting a second gob to finish plugging hers.

The members of the party surveyed each other in the muffled silence they now stood in. Tetree then pointed to Addala and spoke a command out of habit. When the woman in black robes blinked confused and failed to act, her mistress scowled. Annoyed, she scuffed the ground behind Korr, beckoning her with a sweeping gesture until the slave moved onto the spot.

Skalos stepped close to her, last in line. He slipped the rig bearing coiled rope across his shoulders again while the witch walked to the broken pyramidion and they waited. As he got it balanced, Addala tugged his cloak.

They glanced to confirm the other’s attention was off them, then she pointed with both hands to the necklace and its strange symbol that bound her to the will of the Sycoraxian. Fingers rose to her ears before she shook her head. His eyes widening, he nodded as the pair faced forward again. Their exchange unnoticed, Addala’s face betrayed her pondering.

Tetree stopped at the foot of the pyramidion, turning and giving a motion showing to use it as a ramp to reach the top of the fallen obelisk. Then, her back once more to the others, she held the weird flute above her head, pointed to an unseen sky.

It descended slow and deliberate to her lips. They could sense the accursed instrument’s indescribable and monotonous piping the moment it started, but they did not hear it. Amidst the constant vibration from the waterfalls and rapids they could feel through the ground, a nauseating unease intruded.

Addala half-buckled over as Tetree placed her first footstep on the ruined monument. A chill tingle slithered over Skalos while his quick grasp steadied her. Concerned eyes meeting, she gripped her waist and slipped a hand through a fold in her robe.

He held her other hand as she concentrated. The tension of her grip on his eased a moment later, and he felt her exhale relieved.

Palm exiting her black garment, she raised two fingers and mimicked kicking legs with them.

He sighed in his own relief. The two exchanged smiles under worried eyes before peering over at the others.

Korr, his wary attention focused on Tetree and the surrounding air alone, kept a careful watch over her as she moved with meditative concentration. The witch’s actions were oblivious to anything beyond her piping and next footfall. Thus, again, neither had witnessed the other pair’s interactions.

The gentle touch of her lover’s hand brushed Addala’s cheek, using their last unseen seconds to reassure her as they parted and resumed their expected places and distance. No sooner had they reformed the line than the barbarian peered back with steeled eyes and waved for them to follow.

With an impressive, measured stride, Tetree reached the top of the dislodged capstone. Finger work and methodical circular breathing coaxed the unheard but shifting drone of the flute as she stepped over a gap of several feet between the broken tip of the fallen obelisk and the rest of it. Her sandaled foot splashing on the ruin, the crossing began.

Korr started his way up the sloped, cut stone next, sword at the ready. As he did so, Skalos noticed a bubble: a dome’s fringe around them in the ambient mist from the falls and raging waters below. While Addala waited for her turn to climb, he gazed over her shoulder at the sphere’s slow rotation. Noted its inching movement forward centered on Tetree. He glimpsed something swaying in the moisture, or perhaps many things in a freakish unison.

A stroking touch attempting to soothe her unborn’s first but frightened stirrings whenever she could spare to do so undetected, Addala’s countenance was determined when Korr reached the bridge and turned to her. The Aravian’s face gave no hint of her discomfort or concern to the warrior waving for her to follow. Instead, she braced herself and half-walked, half-climbed up the felled monument, jaw clenched.

Just behind her, Skalos also scaled the incline. A wooden shaft jostling across his shoulders with dangled ropes, he readied himself to brace Addala if needed. Yet she stepped onto the obelisk on her own, even offering him a hand to cross the gap between it

and the pyramidion which he accepted. His foot left the capstone, and an engraving of a star with eyes upon its five points that adorned its triangular side.

Korr flicked his sword at them with impatience, then began catching up to Tetree's slow but steady advance. The pair followed him with caution, and all moved in single file across the narrow span.

Puddles on granite soaked their footwear. The monolith's black surface was slick, but level. Skalos placed his footfalls with care, watching each step. He studied the carvings as they walked as best he could. Patches of moss or water obscured many in the mist, and the groups of dots in elder cartouches were impossible for him to translate without pausing.

Then he caught sight of something that shocked him.

He lurched to a halt, and with his sudden stop, he slipped and almost fell to his doom in the churning rapids below. Both hands on the pole, it clattered onto the obelisk as he slid to his knees, but no farther, while bellowing a squawk of panic his deafened companions couldn't perceive. Crouched and panting, he gulped down a breath as Addala continued away from him, unaware anything had happened. Composure regained, he swept water off the man-sized engraving he knelt on and scrutinized it.

It was a straight etched line with five shorter offshoots branching off it like an abstract tree. The same sign that the plain, carved stone at the center of Addala's necklace bore, and the symbol that graced Tetree's talisman that commanded it.

"Mithra!" he swore aloud, heart racing from his near fall and unexpected discovery. "It's not a Sycoraxian witch sigil. This is an elder sign!"

He pulled himself up, braced against his staff. The others were now many paces ahead of him, and a look over his shoulder caught sight of the fringe in the mist he'd noted earlier drawing close. If he didn't move in a moment, it would pull past him. However, more terrible than that prospect was the pair of eyes belonging to a dark figure otherwise obscured by the swirling, fogged air on the cliff behind him.

Find the Author

Jason H. Abbott
Blue Boar Press



Promotion

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A is for A. A. Rubin, and also for The Awful Alphabet. S is for Sara McCall Ephron. B is for the book we created.

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SciFanSat News



That Burnt Writer

for their work

The Tattoo



About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly e-Zine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it. Authors may submit multiple pieces to the same issue up to a total of 5,000 words. If a writer submits only one piece to an issue, the word count limit is extended to 7,500 words.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. [Submissions](#) for the next issue open the moment the [current issue](#) publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Saturday of the month.

Issue 7 Prompt

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Theme:
RUIN

Submission Deadline Saturday, March 23rd, 2024

