

CATAclysm

A SHORT STORY

NATE FERREIRA

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FOR JOB

THE EXPANSE

I cupped airless black, grasping handfuls of a smooth substance. It ran through my fingers and surrounded my body. Despite the influence of the vast expanse through which I moved, I did so of my own accord.

I scooped my hands backward and propelled onward, floating through the black of space. Sensing my weightlessness. My insignificance. And yet the simultaneous feeling of influence. Of potential.

I was lost and wandering. On some cosmic heading I couldn't anticipate.

I made my way to a distant planet, hidden behind extravagant clouds. Gaseous, dense smog lay just beyond the planet's atmosphere.

Allowing only a portion of the planet to remain visible, the guardian clouds encircled it in a wave-like flow.

They continued within the planet's atmosphere. Red-hued puffs and wisps that glided from no distinguishable cause. Portions moved circularly, trying to surround me as I drifted through them. Several cloud gatherings attempted to flee, but once they were shown the atmosphere's limitations, they seemed to abandon one direction and pursue the next.

I floated through them. With them.

Inhaling was a strange, frightening joy. With each pull, my lungs were frozen with the purest air, a sensation that nearly distracted me from my surroundings and the surface I was rapidly approaching.

The magnificence of this landmass below was uncovered once I'd broken past the clouds.

As I drew closer, I *felt* the existence of this planet. More than a recognition of its beauty, I felt interwoven with it.

THE CHOIR

Eventually I found myself on the surface of the foreign world. White, glowing sand constituted its soil. Each grain seemingly combined with whatever form I'd been allowed to hold, passing up through the surface — through my body like blood in my veins — and back down to the sand again.

The roots of colossal trees appeared to extend and join together under the surface. It felt as though the life of these trees joined into my feet with each step I took.

I found myself climbing a branch on one of these giant trees. On an enormous, hilly pasture. The air was calm, and aside from the gentle movement of the field below, the world in its entirety held a hushed tranquility.

My gaze was guided to a series of mountains in the distance, doused with fog.

The euphoria was deceptive.

I floated in a grandiose existence and felt no pain. Nevertheless, my mind was suddenly haunted by the abnormality of where I'd been cast. And the scenery changed with my speculation.

A harmony of pink, yellow, and white flowers bordered a path leading to the mountain range. Jagged rocks replaced

the flower patches a little at a time. Until I entered the circle of mountains.

The mountains were dark — a curious contrast to the soil — but remarkable. Odious and grim.

Crooked trees and prickly plant life seemed to communicate, alerting one another of my progression to the center of the encirclement.

I wasn't afraid nor did I stop.

Or was a fragment of control not mine any longer? Whatever the mountains encircled drew me to it.

Until at last —

With bowed heads they sang an elegiac song. They vocalized about the mountains — how they had begun as rocks and had grown around the choir. As I drew close to them, I realized they were injured. And I had the sense they sang not only out of desire but necessity. As though for survival.

A fiery orb flared brilliantly in the middle of them. Within it lived spinning nebulas. Galaxies seeming to orbit one another. Radiant pigments and iridescence.

I felt certain — though inexplicably so — that I would be free of this world if I could reach it. The orb was a guarded gate for cosmic travelers; I was sure of it. But would these bruised balladeers permit me passage? It was too unclear to risk. Too uncertain to draw nearer to their hunched frames and tattered bodies. Their desperate eyes.

A cavity in one of the mountains. Eerie and crudely bored though it may have been, it was the sole remaining option. So I deserted the choir for it.

As I left, they sang a solemn omen.

They sang in unison. Then in splendid confusion. They

sang of what lay before me. Then incoherently of this world's
ghastly splendor.

In such eloquence they sent me farther into this loathsome
territory, and my heart ached.

THE CREATURE

I found myself in the most putrid cave. The walls were drenched in greenish water, the stench of blood emanating from them.

Just inside the cave, a frail creature lay curled on the ground. A touch of external light was still perceptible. As was the faint resonance of the choir.

The pathetic creature held itself and looked up, though not to my eyes.

It was a horrid thing but scared. Submissive. It moaned quietly in its suffering.

Behind it, a door had been carved into the cave wall. Perhaps it guarded it. More than likely the cretin was incapable of prying it open. The door looked lodged, fastened from years of neglect. And the arms that wrapped around the feeble thing were beyond decrepit.

Dark and cold, my bones ached and my lungs longed for relief. I ran from the creature, abandoning curiosity for what lay beyond the door. Searching for a way out of the cave. For a path through the mountain.

But I was damned to a sadistic maze.

My chest thrummed as I spun this way and that, look-

ing for some sign of a passageway. Instead I happened upon a structure within the maze. An odd combination of constructed and natural origin. The doorway itself wasn't constructed but garnished with unique carvings.

Without announcing myself, I went in. I felt a rattle in my knees, and a grumble echoed throughout the cave as a great stone rolled in front of the structure's entrance.

Like a corpse in a tomb, I was shut in.

The darkness was complete, and the floor was smooth and wavy. The walls inside shared the chiseled likeness of their external sides but were even more intriguing to the touch. With my arms outstretched, my hand searched for more information on my prison.

Gently and respectfully, it slid over the floor. Waved slowly and with a cautious anticipation through the air. Nothing.

I felt only fright. Then fury. Incredulous to the damnation that had befallen me. I pled silently for rescue. Pled for the planet to deliver me. The choir, perhaps. Even the creature outside. I begged for rescue. *Demanded* it.

Then, all at once, anguish coursed through me.

Sharp shards clamped around my forearm, and I froze. As I cried out in pain, a flash of light pulsed throughout the prison. I saw my limb, captive in a beast's fetid mouth, though still attached.

Not an animal. Not a man.

A demon with vile eyes and a scrawny, deceitful frame.

And then with the light, the teeth were gone.

A loud crack resounded as my knees struck the cave floor. With my untouched hand I grasped my wounded one. I called out again. Then, in my pain, I passed out.

When I woke, the pain in my knees felt far worse than

before. My arm burned and my hand stung. My body felt a dreadful ache, and my efforts to move were met by an aggressive agony.

THE DEPTHS

As I lay still, my hand went to work sliding over the floor again, desperately searching for anything.

Finally, my finger brushed a small puddle. Painfully, I pulled myself across the floor until I could easily access the water.

I splashed water over my arm, wiping the blood and trying to cool the pain.

A last handful to quench my thirst.

I moved myself along until my legs touched the puddle and my torso curled around it. I reached in — no bottom. I reached farther, until my entire arm was below the structure. Beneath the mountain's cave itself. Consumed by fear, I dove in.

Deeper I dove. Immediately I felt constricted, yet I endured no strain to breathe. The pain in my arm went numb.

Scars promptly replaced punctures and lacerations. The strength in my arm was restored. Strength enough to swim.

I felt the pressure of a deep ocean, though I was barely beneath the prison. Determined to be rid of the foul world, I swam.

I discovered the most fearsomely gorgeous creatures as I swam along. The natural armor on these beasts was crude and weathered.

They drifted along, adorned in old wounds long since scarred over. Very much like my own. Some had formed on damaged fins. Others across faces and backs.

Much smaller but more aggressive creatures accompanied the larger ones from a distance. Although clearly capable beasts, they restrained themselves from pursuing me. And they all moved in one direction — away from the cave. Away from me.

I dove toward darkness, leaving the creatures to their journey. Escaping to the depths below.

THE SURFACE

Finally, I was alone and glad for it. Walking on the bed of this monstrous ocean.

The soothing current gently swayed me this way and that, exposing the alluring plants that clung to the floor. Trees held roots in this ocean, twice the size I'd ever seen. Their branches moved about as though they were caught in the wind.

Suddenly my heart sank.

In the shadow of the trees, the cave demon peered at me like a predator intimidating his prey.

I stood petrified on the bottom of this ocean. Once again puny in comparison to the wonders around me. Isolated like I was in the middle of a mystical desert.

His skeleton showed through his flesh, and his body was mutilated. Recovered from past afflictions, but only just.

He rushed me, but I evaded his grasp and leapt into a swim.

THE PARADISE

I looked behind me as I swam, spooning the fluid and kicking my legs frantically. My enemy was gaining on me.

The bellies of the creatures above were faintly perceptible as they distanced themselves from the cave. Leaving me in isolation. Abandoning me to the demon behind me.

But the world hadn't totally forsaken me. A light shone and illuminated the water, sending shimmering shards reflecting off the beast that was closing in on me.

Raising my hand for deliverance, I kicked ferociously. My heart pounded, sending painful pulses through my head. As fatigue set in, I barely held my lead.

Suddenly my mind was elsewhere.

It drifted in my prison, the smooth, waving walls and the cold floor. In the cave, the stench of blood. In the presence of the mountain choir and the hideous, frail creature. In the incredible clouds that guarded the strange atmosphere. In the nothingness surrounding the glorious planets. That guided me to them, fulfilling its purpose.

My mind flickered as I grasped fluid, fluid again, and then a cool, soft land. My mind speculated in desperation as I tried to pull myself up. To deliver myself and earn this

paradise. It hid upon this isolated paradise — a cool vacant beach, surrounded by a crystalline, infinite body of water. In a caressing breeze, it hung peacefully, observing the oasis it occupied.

And finally in darkness.

