

Journey to Alfahsfere

by Mike Combs

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There is another world which lies alongside our own.

I know because I have journeyed there.

I am Rahbert, of the Caddlemon tribe. We are one of about twenty tribes in the world (but now that I know there is more than one world, I must be more specific, and say the world of Baytahsfere). We men hunt goat, pig, and deer. Only when we are very hungry do we hunt the cows. They are embarrassingly easy to bring down, but we hate to kill such a huge beast and then let the meat rot before it is half gone. The women gather berries and nuts.

The Caddlemon tribe has sixteen huts near the lowest latitude of Baytahsfere. We get along well with our neighbors. Sometimes other tribes come to our village; sometimes we go to theirs for a visit. We dance around the campfire. We sing songs. Sometimes their songs are known to us, sometimes they are strange.

My parents are both dead, but I am old enough for the hunt. I am not yet with wife. Most of the girls in my tribe do not seem to enjoy my constant talk concerning the origins of things, and why the world is as it is.

I am not like most men of Baytahsfere. Many of my days are spent exploring the world. Once, I even walked its entire circumference. The other men of the Caddlemon tribe chastised me for this; for the journey took me all day and well into the night, and I didn't get any hunting done. The other hunters are always criticizing me for spending so much time exploring. They say I am not supporting myself, and eat much more than I bring home from the few kills I go along on. But I yearn to know everything there is to know in the world. Eventually, I would come to discover things that none other in Baytahsfere knew.

I remember the last time I heard the legend of our beginnings with innocent ears. It was nearing the end of the day. We men had returned to the Caddlemon village, and were starting to gather wood for the fire. There were only a few tiny clouds in the skies that evening, so I sat down, and began to look all through the world. I wanted to see where the herds were at, so we might know the best direction to set out in the next morning. To Spinward there seemed to be very few animals. To Anti-spinward there were a couple of decent-sized herds of elk, and one herd of horses. Horses were nasty; they kick viciously, and can run far faster than the quickest hunter. I tilted my head back further, and saw scatterings of antelope higher up on the world.

Then I laid on my back before my neck became stiff from looking up. Almost directly overhead were large herds of cows. There might have been other animals too, but bulls and cows were about the only animals which could be made out clearly on the other side of the world, even by one with the eyes of an eagle. The cow herds were almost directly behind the sun, and so were hard to see in the glare. The sun would dim and go out soon as night fell, but then the light would be gone. Then we would see nothing but the campfire lights of the other tribes of Baytahsfere scattered all over the sky.

Later, when it was dark, the fire was high, and our bellies were filled, we began to pester Storyteller to recite the tale of our origins. Storyteller knows much of what came to pass before our time; tales passed down from his father, from his grandfather, from how far back even he himself was not sure. We knew all his stories by heart, but still clamored to hear them.

"The human race was born not in Baytahsfere, as most men suppose, but in another place named Earth," Storyteller began. "Earth was to Baytahsfere as Baytahsfere is to a small pebble. Earth was a ball, also, but the people of Earth lived on the outside of their ball, not on the inside. The land was so vast that no curvature could be seen by any man. Beneath their feet were flat lands, and above their heads nothing but sky with no lands beyond it."

I thought back to the last time the tale of our beginnings was told. I had spoiled the story at this point by interrupting to ask what would it have looked like to have been in Earth (or I suppose one should say "on Earth"). I could not imagine flat land beneath me that did not curve up all around me to above the sky. Storyteller told me that none of us can imagine this, and to shut up and not spoil stories with my constant questions.

"The men who lived before the time of Baytahsfere were like Gods. They wielded a magic known as Lectricity. Lectricity enabled man to see things which were far away, to talk to other men at a great distance, to move faster than the horse, to fly through the air. In time, the Lectricity magic enabled them to fly away from Earth, and to build their own worlds elsewhere."

"Eventually, they grew weary of their sun. Beings known to us as the Strucshuncroo built Thuhship so that the men might fly to another sun which they liked better."

We had all heard stories of the Strucshuncroo since childhood. There were even illustrations of them on some scrolls Storyteller kept. The drawings showed strange, white, puffy, wrinkled beings with round heads and no face. In place of a face was one huge eye, but the eye only reflected everything around it. The Strucshuncroo had square backs, and flew about through black nothingness on tongues of flame. According to legend, they built the lands, the waters, and the sky with their own hands.

"They built a tiny sun and put it inside of Baytahsfere, for the journey would take many years. The sun was fired by the Animatter, from which all light and warmth and life flows."

Storyteller always paused at this point to let the tribe make a small prayer of thanks to the Animatter for life and light.

"They put in all of the green growing things, and all of the animals, the birds, and the fish," he continued. "They left the sun they had always known, and set out for the new sun. But their journey was not long underway before the day of the Impact arrived. A great and horrible sound filled the world, and a shudder went through all of Baytahsfere. Suddenly, the flow of the Lectricity magic stopped. The magic the Lectricity made possible was no more. Man was forced to live by hunting for game thereafter, and hunts to this day."

"But we continue to fly to the new sun. Someday soon perhaps, we will arrive. Perhaps the Strucshuncroo will re-appear, and build us a new world. Perhaps they will even bring back the Lectricity magic, so that we may once again live as the Gods of old and never have to hunt again. But here is the interesting part of the story: Thuhship had more than one world in it. In addition to Baytahsfere, there was another world built alongside it known as Alfahsfere. When the flow of the Lectricity magic ceased, men could no longer travel between the two worlds, nor could they speak between them, nor see between them. There may be to this day, somewhere outside of Baytahsfere, another world like our own, filled with our brothers and sisters whom we have not seen in uncountable generations."

I spent that night staring up at the roof of the unmarried men's hut, trying to imagine what the inhabitants of Alfahsfere were like. I wondered if they hunted animals like the ones we hunt, or ones which were inconceivably different. Then I wondered if they hunt at all. Perhaps the Lectric magic still flowed for them. Perhaps they lived as Gods. Maybe they even knew the Strucshuncroo.

* * *

Now I will tell you the story of how I traveled to the end of the world.

All hunters know that the higher up you go on Baytahsfere, the lighter you get. Any hunter must be able to tell if an antelope is going to jump six feet or twenty when it springs. We have been on hunting expeditions where we went higher than the clouds. I weighed less than half of what I did back at the village, and could slowly jump over twice as far.

One night I laid awake thinking about this. Things on the other side of the world have weight too, only they are pulled in the opposite direction. We are always pulled away from the middle of the world, no matter where in Baytahsfere we are. It is as you head farther upslope, either to Bow or to Stern, that you get lighter. So, after some thinking, it seemed to me that as one approached the middle of the world, one should continue to weigh less and less, until, when you finally reached the middle, you would weigh nothing at all. To go past this point would be to approach the other side of the world. You would begin to weigh more and more, only in the opposite direction. This made sense to me.

I closed my eyes, and tried to imagine weighing nothing at all. Would I be able to fly like a bird? Would the other tribesmen of Baytahsfere point upward and cry "Look, it is Rahbert! He is flying like an eagle!?" It was an amusing fantasy.

We had never been higher in the world than the walls. They are like stone, only flat and featureless, and nearly white. There are two of them, one to Bow and one to Stern. Each went all the way around the world, and prevented us from going any higher. All the tribes said that no man had been beyond the walls since before the Impact, and that they were uncrossable. I decided that come the next morning, I would find out for myself.

Only shortly after the sun had turned on, I set off on my journey. I briefly stopped and pondered. Should I head towards Bow or Stern? If I headed to Bow, and successfully found a way past the wall, I could make it to the base of the support which holds the sun out to the center of the world. It would have been something to tell back at the village; that I had actually touched the support for the sun. But knowing my tribe, they probably would not have been impressed; not if I had returned again with no game. Besides, the sun support would have kept me from reaching the exact middle of the world. I turned, and headed upslope to Stern.

As I ascended, I grew as light as I had ever been in my life. Eventually, I arrived at the wall. It was many times higher than a man. Even though I could now leap incredibly high, I still could not hope to get more than half-way up the wall's side. It also curved back over, making any attempt to scale it foolhardy. I began to bound alongside the wall, to see if there was any way past.

This high up on Baytahsfere, it didn't take me very long to go nearly halfway around the world. It was there I came to a forest. Up there where things were so light, the trees grew to enormous size. I came to a part of the wall which was crumbling and partly collapsed at the top. Nearby was a large tree. I felt confident that as far as I could now leap at this altitude, I could probably make it from the branches of the tree to the top of the wall.

I climbed; an easy thing as light as I was. Edging out on a limb as far as I dared (even with my weight so greatly reduced), I sprang, slowly arced through the air, and landed on the crumbling top of the

wall. Since the wall curved back in the direction I had come from, it was no difficult thing to gradually slide down the far side of the wall to the ground. I was also confident I would easily be able to climb up this side of the wall on my way back.

I resumed my upward journey. The land became steeper and steeper, but I kept getting lighter and lighter, and so had no problem continuing. Eventually, I was heading almost straight upwards, and not so much walking as pulling myself along by grabbing onto grass and bushes. It was a little like diving into a lake, and then pulling yourself along the bottom, only even less effort.

Now my destination could be seen. The middle of the world on the Stern side was marked by a large, open, light-gray, cylindrical structure jutting out of the vertical landscape above me. It was about three times as big around as a man's height, and was made of metal, like the houses of the ancients. As I got closer, I saw it was very slowly turning around.

I pulled myself into it through one of the many open areas, and was now at the very middle of the world.

Letting go of everything, I hovered in the center of the cylinder. I didn't fall toward Caddlemon village. I didn't fall *away* from Caddlemon village. I didn't fall *anywhere*, and could no longer even say what was down or up. I merely drifted as in a dream. Sometimes, when I turned my head too fast, I felt a little sick to my stomach; but mostly the sensation was pleasant. I decided to call it no-weight.

Finally drifting close enough to one of the walls to grab on, I pulled myself over to the end of the cylinder. The view of Baytahsfere from this place was breath-taking. All the lands around me seemed equally far away, and the Bow side of the world was almost lost in the blue mists of distance. The support for the sun was invisible, hidden behind the sun itself.

I wondered what would happen if I launched myself from the cylinder. It seemed that I would merely drift around, rather than fall, but how could I control where I wanted to go? How would I get back? What if leaving the cylinder caused my weight to return? This didn't seem very likely to me, but I wasn't willing to risk my life on it.

Swimming back out of the cylinder, I pulled a couple of rocks out of the vertical landscape. I returned to the end of the cylinder, and threw out first one, then the other. They didn't seem to fall any, but had very soon tumbled away out of sight. Something bigger was needed. I went back, and uprooted two small bushes. When they were cast out, they drifted about for a bit. But slowly, each began to move in an ever-widening outward spiral. After a long while, they had spiraled out far enough to hit the steep landscape several hundred feet below, and slowly began crashing down the slope. There would be no flying for Rahbert today.

I began to explore the other end of the cylinder, where it joined up with the land. At this end there was a smaller, closed cylinder. On the side was something which looked like a door, only it was made of metal, not hide like the door to a hut. But like a door, it was split down the middle. Maybe the two sides could be pushed apart like a hut door. They didn't move easily, but with the utmost of my strength they were finally forced aside, screeching with an ancient creak.

Inside was a very tiny room, scarcely big enough for six or seven men. It was square and yellow. The walls were flat, like those in the houses of the ancients. On one wall by the door was a series of small, circular disks with strange markings on them. They pushed in very slightly when touched.

At the top of the dark little room was a square panel. Bracing myself, I pressed against it. The panel came loose, and drifted away into blackness. Very cautiously, I stuck my head through the square opening. The air inside was cool, and it was very dark. In time, my eyes adjusted, and a long tunnel could

be seen. But this was not like the burrow of an animal. It was smooth, and about one and a half times as big around as a man's height. The tunnel wasn't straight. It curved around very slightly in one direction, until one could see no farther. Intrigued, I desperately wanted to explore this tunnel. But common sense told me "Not today". The tunnel was black dark, and I had neither a torch nor a littlesun with me. Also, it was very cold in there. Better to come back another day with a littlesun to see, and a cloak to keep me warm.

I went back down into the little square room and out, and then sailed over to the other end of the cylinder to have one more look at the world from this strange perspective. Then a peculiar thought came to me.

As I said before, the cylinder was very slowly rotating. Holding onto the inside, it seemed as though all of Baytahsfere was smoothly turning about me. Suddenly I thought, "What if I am not turning at all? What if I am standing still, and it really *is* the whole world turning about this cylinder and I?" I am well-known for having strange thoughts like this.

Then, for the first time in my life, the realization came that the word 'spin' was in the words 'Spinward' and 'Anti-spinward'. I couldn't help but wonder if that didn't mean something. Did it mean that the world literally spun around, and us with it?

That evening I once again had to face the complaints of the other tribesman, returning with no game, only an appetite. That night I laid down to sleep within speaking distance of Storyteller. He has much of the old knowledge, and I wanted to try an idea out on him.

"Storyteller, I think I know why we have weight."

"What do you mean, why we have weight?" Storyteller asked. "Why wouldn't we have weight?"

I decided not to tell him where I had been, and what I had done that day. But I still wanted him to hear my new idea.

"This is what I think. I think the whole world is slowly turning. It is like when we hunt with a sling. When we twirl the sling, the rock stays in. Even when the sling is upside down, the rock does not fall out. I think the world is like that, and we are like the stone. If the world did not spin, we would have no weight, and would drift about like clouds. What do you think of my idea?"

"I think that if you insist on exploring all day," he responded, "You can at least take care to get out of the sun every once and a while. You let the sun beat down on your head far too long today. Now stop asking foolish questions, and go to sleep."

* * *

The very next morning, I set off Sternward again, this time carrying my cloak and a littlesun.

The littlesuns were something I had found long ago in one of the houses of the ancients. The tribe always laughed at my explorations of the old houses, but when I discovered the littlesuns and brought them back to the village, they had to admit I'd done well that day. The littlesuns are cylinders which fit easily into one's hand. If you took care to leave them out in the sun during the day, and then, at night, pressed on them in a certain way, they made a light. It was as though they could store the light of the sun by day, and then release it after the sun had stopped shining. They were far better than torches, and have been a boon to our tribe. With them, we could hunt farther from the village since we could easily make our way back, even after dark.

Ascending the slope, I once again used the tall tree to get over the wall, and climbed upward to the turning cylinder. Again I drifted about in no-weight. I pulled on the cloak, and then swam into the tunnel, turning on the littlesun.

My pulse quickened, and my senses were all at their keenest state of alert. Perhaps the others were wrong about me, and I was not such a poor hunter after all. Maybe it was just that I preferred to hunt a mystery. My favorite quarry was the unknown.

I began floating through the tunnel. At first it was slow progress. My hands could not make good purchase on the smooth sides, and for the most part I just slowly bounced from one side of the tunnel to the other. But when I got up a bit more speed, something became apparent. Since the tunnel gently curved, and since between pushes I always moved in a straight line, I tended to bounce to one side more so than the other. Deciding to treat this direction as "down", and the other direction as "up", I turned myself, and began pushing off with my feet instead of my hands. This worked much better. It was almost like running, only very slowly, and with gigantic leaps of many feet each. I felt as though I were racing through a tunnel which always sloped upwards ahead, but yet was always level.

In short order I was getting very good at this. I ran as fast as I had ever run before in my life, as fast as I had ever chased any game animal, only with very little effort. Then a disturbing thought entered my mind. What if I had to stop suddenly?

Trying to slow down a little, I began tumbling over and over. It seemed to take forever (and *many* bounces) to regain control, and slow any. There had to be a better way to stop.

Remembering the feel of the cool wind on my face when at my full speed, I wondered if it would help me to slow down if I spread out my cloak, and caught the wind in it.

I resumed running, going as fast as before. Then I threw out my cloak. It filled with air, and my feet gently swung out in front of me. I began to slow down a little. I started trying to stop with my feet a bit, and didn't tumble this time. Convinced I now had a good way to slow down if needed, I pushed on even faster.

This strange, slowly bounding running was not much exertion, but the tunnel seemed to go on forever, unchanging. After a long while I finally did begin to tire a little. Realizing I would have to run just as far as I had come to get back, and then still had the descent downslope to Caddlemon village, I began to use my cloak to slow down. Maybe some other day I would be more determined, and press on further down this tunnel against the promise that there might be something interesting at the other end. But not today. Turning around, I began making long, loping strides back the way I came.

I returned to the village late, without meat, and hungry.

* * *

Now I will tell you the story of the day we decided it was the end of the world.

It was early morning. The sun had not been on for very long. We men were preparing to go out on the hunt. I had agreed to go with them that day.

Then the sun went out.

It didn't gradually dim, and then darken as it does with the fall of night. Besides, it was time for day, not night. No, it just suddenly winked out, and was gone.

Many began moaning and softly crying, especially the children. We ran around, re-lighting torches

which we had just put out only moments before. I was glad this had not happened when we were out on the hunt. We might have had a hard time finding our way back to the village, even with the littlesuns. The campfire was still burning redly a bit, at least enough for us to see where it was. We heaped more sticks on the fire, and built it up again. All over the sky, campfires began brightening as the other tribes did the same.

Most began praying to the Animatter, crying, "Why have you forsaken us now? What have we done to offend you? Why do you turn your back on your people?" We knew full well that with no sun, there could be no grasses. With no grasses, no game. With no game, we would starve and die. We had no way of knowing how cold it would get if the sun never came on again.

The men gathered in conference, but no one knew what to do. While the others got bogged down in a pointless discussion of how we might have angered the Animatter, I began to think. If the people of Alfahsfere really were out there somewhere, and only knew what had happened to us, surely they could help. Even if they were only men and not Gods after all, still, maybe they knew the Strucshuncroo. The Strucshuncroo built the sun, surely they could make it shine again.

Then a thought entered my head which made me abruptly come to my feet. What if the tunnel I had found was the way to Alfahsfere? I immediately went to the unmarried men's hut, and began throwing on my cloak. I grabbed some food, and some water in a gourd jug for the journey.

Storyteller had seen me suddenly enter the hut, and came in after me.

"Where are you going?" he asked tremulously.

"Storyteller, I think I know how to get to Alfahsfere. I'm sure they can help us."

"You take our food, when soon there may be none," he accused. I grabbed two of the littlesuns, and stuffed them into my pouch. "No! Not the littlesuns," he cried. "We need them!"

I whirled to face him. "You know the littlesuns only work a short time! I need them where I am going. Now let me leave!"

Dashing out of the hut, I left Caddlemon village (not, hopefully, for the last time), making my way with a torch so as to not use up the littlesuns. I scrambled over the Sternward wall, and ascended to the cylinder and to no-weight.

It was the first time I had ever seen Baytahsfere from the middle at night. The campfires kept blazing up brighter. This was foolishness. There were not enough trees in all the world to make our campfires bright enough to bring back the day. The air up here was usually hot and dry. Now it was cool and damp. My cloak felt good all around me.

I headed through the little square room, and into the tunnel. I put out the torch, and left it floating in no-weight. By the light of one of my littlesuns, I began to leap like a deer down the dark, curving tunnel. But I had to remember to pace myself, knowing the journey ahead of me could be very long.

The tunnel seemed endless, and never changed. Occasionally I grew tired, slowing down and drifting a while. Then I would take a drink from my gourd, which was a tricky thing to do in no-weight. The water did not pour from the gourd, but instead separated from it in little, shimmering, floating balls. But I could still drink the little balls of water out of the air.

The first littlesun dimmed, and went out. It hadn't had much chance to lie in the sun today. Putting it away, I fumbled for the second one, and then continued.

I began to wonder if the tunnel just went on forever. Sometimes I cursed myself for starting this journey, wondering if I would soon die cold and alone, too far into this tunnel to ever get back out again. Surely better to have died by our yellow-glowing campfire, surrounded by the tribe. But whenever I thought of the tribe, I quickened my pace, and continued my journey.

I was running at my full speed when suddenly, for the first time, there was a change in the tunnel. It had suddenly split in two, with the original tunnel continuing to arc upward. The division between tunnels sailed over my head by less than a foot. The tunnel I now found myself in was straight, but ahead I could see it beginning to bend around in a direction opposite to the tunnel I had been in.

I thrust out my cloak, and eventually brought myself to a stop. Backing up to the division, I shone my littlesun further down the tunnel traveled up until now. For as far as could be seen, it was changeless.

I briefly agonized over this decision. If the wrong choice were made, it might mean a death by thirst, drifting in a blackness where no one ever came. Somehow, it seemed to make more sense to look for something new down the new tunnel than the old. I went back down the new tunnel.

This tunnel went straight for a distance, but then began curving even more sharply than the other. Shortly, another tunnel joined up with it.

Eventually the end appeared up ahead. Slowing with my cloak, I came to a stop at another set of metal doors, like the ones on the little square room before. With only a little effort, they parted.

Beyond was a metal room, not unlike a room in the houses of the ancients. But then something happened which never happened in those old, decayed structures.

The room began to blaze with light.

I briefly wondered if the sun had turned on again, bursting forth with such pent-up brilliance that the light had found its way up that long, curving tunnel to where I floated. But it was not the sun.

On one side of the room were square panels which were shining like many, strange, close suns. I finally realized one was supposed to turn oneself to where that side was like the ceiling, so that the lights shone "down" from "above", and not into the eyes. The room was filled with several, curious-looking, incomprehensible machines.

I left both of the littlesuns hanging in the air under one of the weird, glowing panels, hoping they would store the light of these square suns as well as they did the light of the sun back in Baytahsfere.

There were long hallways connecting the many rooms here. As I approached a hallway or a room, the suns in the ceiling came on. It was as though they knew I was here, and eagerly lit my way before me. I began to explore.

In one room I saw a sight difficult to understand. The first strange thing about this room was the square opening into a much larger room beyond. Approaching the opening, I was dumbfounded to catch my ghostly reflection in it, as in a very still pool of water.

I tentatively put out my hand, and felt a surface. This was not an opening at all. Whatever weird substance I was feeling was clearer than the quietest pool (and cool like water also), but as hard as stone. But it was the sight beyond this strange water-stone, the vista which appeared when many distant lights turned on, which I still have trouble understanding.

In the vast, cavernous spaces out there dwelt huge bone-white shapes, large enough for my entire tribe to live in. Great complex things which all attached to a gigantic column many times the diameter of

the greatest tree I had ever seen.

There were pictures of something like them in Storyteller's scrolls. I did not know what they were, but knew what they were called.

They are known as spayshups.

In time, failing to comprehend any small part of what I was seeing, I turned and continued my explorations. Shortly I came to another strange sight.

On a wall in the direction I had come from, there was another one of those peculiar, square, water-stone things. Beyond it, to my left and right, were two gigantic balls set against a black nothingness. The globes slowly turned on their sides, ends pointing in my direction. It took me a while to grasp the scale of what I was looking at. As amazing a thing as it was, the realization struck that I was seeing my world from the outside.

I had been right, the world *does* slowly spin around. And right next to it was another equally-large ball spinning in the opposite direction. It had to be...yes...it had to be...

Alfahsfere.

Even the tunnels I had been traveling could be seen. There was a long one which went around in a perfect half-circle, and entered each ball at the point on which it spun, joining the two globes. I could see the point where I had left my home, and entered that long, dark passageway which led between worlds. Two other tunnels branched off of the middle of the main one, and headed this way, joining together shortly before passing below into the structure in which I floated. More than any other man from Baytahsfere ever had, I was seeing the totality of Thuhship.

The sight of both worlds from the outside was both enheartening and discouraging. Enheartening, because my destination could now be seen. All doubt was now removed. Discouraging, because I could see I was exactly half-way there. I had just as far again to travel. But no matter. I knew I would make it. For the sake of my tribe, and every living thing in Baytahsfere, I had to.

Finally beginning to look into the black spaces beyond the pair of worlds, I noticed there were many small lights out there. They looked very much like campfires spread out across the nighttime sky. For a short while, I struggled with the impossible idea that outside of our universe was another, much-larger universe of colossal hunters and gigantic, distant campfires. Was there any limit to bigger and bigger universes the further out you went? And were there tiny, unnoticed universes inside of Baytahsfere? These were the kind of thoughts which gave even me a headache. But I soon decided the little lights were not distant campfires. They didn't flicker as campfires do. What they were, I could not say.

After resting, and eating some of the food I had brought in my pouch, I collected my two drifting littlesuns, and went back into the tunnels. When I came to the first branch, I knew which way to go. The branch to the left would eventually join up with the long semi-circular tunnel farther along in the direction of Alfahsfere. There would be no need for me to retrace my steps back up the right tunnel.

I ran and rested, ran and rested. The tedium was growing unbearable. But knowing I had to eventually reach my quest, I kept going.

While running at my top speed, suddenly...

I was at the end of the tunnel!

Yanking out my cloak, I swung my legs up in front of me just in time to cushion the impact. I rebounded, and tumbled. After regaining control, I came back to the end of the tunnel. Next to it was a pair of metal doors like I had seen before. I tried to push them apart, but they refused to move.

Was this how it would end? Would I now die here at the very doorway to Alfahsfere?

I pressed my ear to the door to listen. For a long while nothing could be heard. Then a faint thumping, and the sound of a distant conversation.

"Help," I cried, clinging to the door and banging on it. "Help me please! Over here!"

The voices came closer. I could now tell that it was a man and a woman. Their accents were strange, but I could still understand most of what they said.

"My God, there's someone in the elevator shaft!" said the woman.

"No way," said the man. "That's hard vacuum on the other side of that door."

"Then we're both having the same hallucination. There's someone there, and they're yelling to us, so there's got to be air."

"Who's there?" asked the man.

"I am Rahbert. Get me out of here, please."

"How in the world did you get in there?" the woman wanted to know.

"I came from Baytahsfere."

"Oh, surely it's not possible," exclaimed the woman. They seemed to understand what this meant; that I was from another world. But they acted like it was impossible for anyone to be from Baytahsfere. I suspected they had no idea we existed.

"Hold on," she said, "I'm going to get a rescue crew."

The woman left. The man stayed behind and talked to me while I floated, waiting for a rescue. He told me his name was Tony, and the woman's name was Jennifer. Tony said he was a teacher.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Um, I...teach young people. I teach them what they need to know."

"Oh. Are you a storyteller? Do you tell people the stories of their origins, and things which have passed before?"

"Well, yes," he replies, "Among other things."

After a while Jennifer came back, saying help was on the way. While we waited, they asked me how many were still alive in Baytahsfere. I told them a little about my people, how we lived, and how I had gotten there.

Then they asked how much history I knew. When I told them of the day of the Impact, and how the Lectricity magic ceased flowing, Jennifer became confused.

"Lectricity magic, what's he talking about?" she wondered.

"Well you're the electrical engineer, Sweetie," Tony responded. "You of all people ought to be able to work that out."

"Electricity?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure. After the impact, they lost all of their utilities power. They regressed to a hunter-gatherer existence. After a couple of millenniums of recitation, the words become distorted, and history takes on mythic proportions."

"Good thing their sun was on a separate circuit," Jennifer said. "*Life* was still able to go on in Beta-sphere, if not technology."

I could hear men working on the door. With a great grinding sound, the two halves of the door were forced apart. Floating through the doorway, I could now see the people of Alfahsfere for the first time.

Tony had black hair and eyes. Jennifer had long, wavy brown hair tied up at the back. The reason for keeping it bound was easy to understand. In no-weight, a long head of hair must get in the way. The strangest thing about the people of Baytahsfere was their clothes, which covered them from below the neck down to their toes, and all the way down each arm to just above the hands. They fit their bodies like a second skin, and were made from the hides of some animal far more fine-furred, and brilliantly colored, than any I had ever seen before.

"Come with us, Robert," Jennifer said while tugging on my arm. "We're taking you to someone who needs to talk to you."

Jennifer and Tony led me out of the area. We were in a cylinder somewhat like the one in the middle of Baytahsfere, only much larger. There were many rooms and hallways inside. We swam out of the cylinder, and the whole of Alfahsfere could now be seen.

It was truly another world, much like my own. They had their own sun, and cloud-filled skies. There were fields and lakes. The biggest difference was that there were many more houses in Alfahsfere, and they were shiny and clean-looking. Most were the size of the houses of the ancients, but some were many times bigger; large enough to house my entire tribe. Also, there were far fewer animals. Apart from birds, I saw only a couple of herds of cows, penned into square areas.

Tony and Jennifer floated me over to a machine. We all got inside. Without warning, the machine began to move. We were sliding down the slopes of Alfahsfere. My weight slowly began to return.

The machine was moving far faster than I had ever ran in my life. I decided I now knew what the horses felt like as they thundered over the fields. There could now be no doubt. For the people of Alfahsfere, the Lectricity magic still flowed.

Looking around, I asked a question.

"Why are there no walls in Alfahsfere?"

"Oh please," Jennifer pleaded, suddenly saddened and concerned. "Please don't think that we were trying to wall your people in!"

"You see, Robert," Tony explained. "Alpha-sphere was the main residential area of the ship. Beta-sphere was where we kept most of the animal species we wanted to take with us to Alpha-Centauri. Your ancestors were conservationists, game wardens, cattlemen, and environmental engineers. The walls were necessary because of all the free-roaming herds. Animals still don't have good

instincts for space habitats. If you let them, they can wander clear up to the spin axis, and then float away from the sphere into the air. Then, around a half-hour later, they inevitably meet a rather nasty fate far below."

I remembered my experiments with the bushes, and could easily imagine what he meant.

"There were gates in the walls, but of course they were electrically powered," Jennifer said. "When you guys lost power, you were stuck behind the walls. But we were stuck in our sphere as well, because the power to the elevators was out too."

"But why two worlds?" I ask.

"Mostly it was a safety factor," said Tony. "Either habitat could have supported our entire population in an emergency. But it also helped to have two counter-rotating spheres so that the angular momentums would cancel each other out. If there was just one rotating sphere, the gyroscopic forces would make it nearly impossible..."

"Dear," Jennifer interrupted, "He's not going to understand gyroscopic forces."

"OK. Um...with two spheres spinning in opposite directions, it makes it easier for us to turn the ship, so that we can maneuver."

We came down to where the ground was more level. My full weight was back, and now I felt as though I were made of stones. It had been some time since I had felt any weight. The machine was slowing somewhat, and many of the people of Alfahsfere could be seen as we passed by them. They looked back at me, curious. Like us, they came in many different colors, but the palest of them were far whiter than anyone in Baytahsfere.

Soon the machine came to a stop at one of the larger houses. We went inside, past doors which opened without a touch. Tony and Jennifer led me to a room where a man sat behind a large, square object. I was invited to sit in what they called a chair.

They called the man Captainduncan, or sometimes just Captain. I gathered he was the leader of their tribe. Perhaps of all their tribes. He was amazed to learn I was from Baytahsfere. Indeed, he seemed astonished to learn there were any people in Baytahsfere at all.

"How in the world did you find him?" he asked. "And how could he have gotten here with the elevators not working?"

"Jennifer and I were in the zero-G cylinder playing Spaceball," Tony replied. "We were just leaving the locker-room when we heard Robert banging around in the elevator shaft, yelling for help. As for how he got here, I'll let him tell you the story."

I told Captainduncan my tale, and a little bit about how my people lived, ending it with the story of how our sun had died, and a plea for help.

"Who's this 'Struchuncroo' he keeps talking about?" Captain asked.

"I think he's referring to the construction crew that built the ship," Tony explained. "There's been some phonetic drift in our languages."

"Is there anything we can do about the loss of sun-power to Beta-sphere?" Captain asked, turning to Jennifer.

"Well, now that we know the space docks are still intact, it's just a matter of an EVA repair. We would have to get the electromagnetic drivers in the elevator shafts working again." Jennifer looked at me. "The place you visited between the habitat spheres was the space docks. That's the only place we can safely exit the ship. There are emergency escape airlocks in Alpha-sphere, but if I left through one of them, I'd be flung away from the ship so fast I couldn't carry enough fuel to return." She turned back to Captain Duncan. "If we could get the elevators working again, and I could get to the airlocks, I could go outside the ship and try to repair the power bus."

"And how do we do that?" asked Captain.

Jennifer frowned in thought. "If we could just get a power cable run from here to the space docks, we could charge the emergency power cells for the shafts. That would last long enough to get several elevators over there."

"But how do we run the cable? We don't have any vehicles small enough to fit through those shafts."

"Hey," Tony interjected. "This guy made it all the way from Beta-sphere by himself."

Captain looked me up and down. "I don't think any of us have his physique or endurance. He's been chasing down game his whole life, while we've been getting waited on by machines."

They all looked at me. "I am rested," I told them. "I am ready."

* * *

We all ascended to the middle of Alpha-sphere, and went to the forced-open door in the large cylinder. They strapped a huge object onto my back which they called a "cable spool". It spun, and left behind a vine-like line which was the "cable" part of the term. Jennifer put something on my head which stuck in my ear, and poked out in front of my mouth. To my astonishment, her voice could now be heard as though she were speaking directly into my ear, even though she was several feet away. More of this Electricity magic. But they would call it Electricity magic.

They handed me a little sun somewhat larger than what I had been used to. I entered the tunnel, and began the quest to the spacedock. The cable snaked out behind me as I sprinted down the tunnel. Jennifer's voice in my ear remained just as loud, even as the distance between us grew.

In a way, this journey was the most difficult. One could not exactly say the cable spool was heavy, since it was in no-weight. But it did seem to make it harder to keep myself going. I had to stop and rest more often. But in another way, this trip was the easiest because of Jennifer's voice in my ear; telling me when I was half-way there, two-thirds of the way there, nearly there now.

The side-tunnel did not take me by surprise this time. I followed it around the other way to the place where I had seen both worlds at once.

At Jennifer's instructions, I pulled the rest of the cable off the spool, and pushed the end into a hole in the wall which she directed me to. I pulled the empty spool off my back, and set it adrift. Then there was a long wait. It excited me to know that the Electricity magic was flowing through this very line.

Finally, Jennifer told me that it's enough, and I was to pull the cable out of its hole. Then she warned me they were withdrawing the cable. It began to whip through the air, then darted down the tunnel, and was gone. Very shortly later, what I knew must be an "elevator" arrived.

It was a little square room, like the one discovered near the beginning of my adventures. The door

opened by itself. Inside were Jennifer, Tony, Captainduncan, and...

One of the Strucshuncroo.

But on looking closer, I saw it was hollow; merely an empty shell. They were all pulling it out along with them, and gliding over to a doorway. They opened the white shell up, and Jennifer climbed inside. They put the round head with its huge, single, reflective eye down over her head, and sealed it to the neck. Tony explained to me that where she was going there was no air. She needed the suit to provide her with it, and to protect her from the intense cold.

She flew into a small room. The doors shut. Through the water-stone in the door she could still be seen hanging there, as though waiting for something to happen. Then the outer doors opened, and she drifted out into darkness.

"We'll be able to monitor her from the Observation Deck," Captain said. We swam through several hallways, and came to the very room from which I saw the two worlds. Captain and Tony seemed amazed at the view, particularly at the fact that Baytahsfere was intact. I got the impression that as far as they had known up until now, my world no longer existed.

Captainduncan went over and did something to one of the walls, and then a square panel suddenly lit up with a view which seemed to be outside of Thuhship. It was true; those with the magic *could* see things at a distance.

Jennifer was coming around the edge of some cloud-white machinery which was surrounded by blackness. This was surely where our legends of the Strucshuncroo came from. Seemingly at her bidding, tiny tongues of flame jetted out from her suit, and sent her where she willed. If anyone could fix our sun, I knew Jennifer could.

"It's the weirdest thing," she said in a voice which we could easily hear in the room. "There's this sharp bend in the power bus cabling, and the metal in the cable is distorted. It's all piled up in a big, congealed glob off to one side, and what's left on the line itself is burnt up. Oh my God, I know what it is! It's electromigration! That's something we usually only see in integrated circuits on the micron scale. But when you're dealing with currents comparable to the power needs of a nation, and time-scales of millenniums, I guess it can manifest itself on a macro scale."

What Jennifer was *now* calling a cable was nearly as big around as she was. "I'm going to pull up some slack, and then use some of the spare cabling to bypass the break." She set to work while we watched her.

* * *

"OK, now all I've got to do is jam this last connector home, and we should have a complete circuit." Jennifer took a spindly object, and stuck one end of it into some of the machinery. Then she slipped her feet into the other end. It looked like a handy thing to have; I knew how hard it was to keep yourself steady in no-weight.

Jennifer was bringing the end of the massive cable into a connection. The cable had almost touched, when suddenly there was a brilliant flare of light. It was like the sun, only an intense, vivid blue. Jennifer shrieked and recoiled, almost loosing her grip on the heavy cable.

"Jenny, are you alright?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm alright. I guess I should've realized a potential difference this large would create an

arc, even in vacuum. Man, it scares the pee out of me to think what kind of voltages I'm playing around with here."

She tried again, and again was repulsed by that dazzling, sputtering, blue glare.

Captainduncan was suddenly upset. "Jennifer, listen to me. That's causing major spikes in our entire electrical system! Every time you do that, we are inching closer and closer to losing anti-matter containment. You've got to get this done on the next try, or *nobody* will survive in *either* sphere!"

Seeking to understand the danger, I asked Tony to explain what was going on; and he tried. I was sure the thing he was talking about was the same thing *we* call the Animatter (although they said it with an extra "T" sound). But apparently the people of Alfahsfere had a different concept of it than we. Rather than the bringer of light and warmth and life, *they* seemed to view the Animatter as an evil genie, imprisoned in a bottle. A genie so incredibly destructive that not only could it not be let out, it couldn't even be permitted to touch the sides of the bottle. Apparently, all of Thuhship was now in danger of being destroyed by the Animatter.

Jennifer sucked in her breath, and plunged the cable in one more time. There was a long, sizzling scintillation. Finally it was over with. The cable was in.

"I see we're still here," Tony commented.

Captain flew over to one machine, and looked at it intently. "Beta-sphere's sun is shining!" he cried out with delight.

"I'm blind."

Jennifer's level remark made us all freeze. As bright as that searing light was, it was easy to see how it could taken her sight. Tony grew pale.

"I don't just mean I have spots in front of my eyes. I mean I am stone blind. I can't see a thing."

"Wait a minute," Captainduncan said. "Turn yourself around toward the camera."

The whole front of her white suit was now shiny, and metallic-looking.

"Key up your O₂ gauge read-out," Captain ordered. "Can you see your in-helmet display?"

A chuckle, gushing with relief, told us she could.

"That's what I thought! Every time you arced, you were vaporizing metal. In the vacuum, it sprayed out and deposited itself on whatever surfaces were nearby. It's all over your front, and coated your faceplate to where you can't see anything. Hang tight. I'll send for another suit, and then I'll come out and bring you back in."

Captain soared from the room. Tony turned me around to face him.

"She's going to be OK. Your people are going to be OK. We did it!"

* * *

Baytahsfere is warming back up again. And our long-separated people are again united.

They now call me the Hero of Baytahsfere. The Caddlemon tribe keeps saying how proud they are of me. Sometimes this makes me angry, remembering how they used to pick on me for my curiosity.

Only now that it has saved them all do they see a use for it. But mostly I just try to smile and be polite. They pester me to tell my tale worse than they used to pester Storyteller. I notice he listens to my story as often as he can, and seems to be trying to learn all the words. He may be wasting his time. I think one of the things the Lectricity magic...the Electricity...can do is store the sights and sounds of the past, so that they can be retrieved for the curious. Storyteller may soon be out of a job.

Tony showed me one of those ancient, stored images at a meeting we had with Captain Duncan, Jennifer, and several others.

What I now know to call a "monitor" showed a view toward the engines, back along our line of flight. Suddenly everything was lit up with a brilliant flash. Then thousands of pieces of ruined junk began drifting back. A giant sphere, ripped nearly in half, came into view. Still slowly spinning, the globe spewed vapors and soil from a gaping tear. In a surprisingly short time, the huge sphere had receded into the distance, dwindling away to nothing.

"The flash from the impact knocked out all of our forward and side-viewing cameras," Tony explained. "The stern cameras were the only record of what happened. At the same time our ancestors saw this image, all instrument readings from Beta-sphere and the space docks ceased. They came to the obvious conclusion: Beta-sphere and the space docks had been ripped away in the collision."

"Well obviously that conclusion was wrong," the Captain grumbled. "For the last two millennia we've considered the other habitat to be dead and gone forever. And all that while it was spinning merrily along right beside us, intact and unharmed, save for the loss of electrical utilities. So tell me: If that wasn't Beta-sphere we just saw coming apart and falling away behind us, then just what the hell was it?"

"I've been talking to some of the historians at Alpha University, and we think we have an answer."

"Which is...?"

Tony couldn't keep himself from grinning a little. "Space pirates."

Jennifer closed one eye, made an "Aaarrrrrh" sound, and then chuckled. What this meant, I could not say.

"Space pirates," Captain Duncan said cautiously. "I assume you're putting me on."

"Not at all," Tony replied. "History records that in the Twenty-second century there *were* a few outlaw communities in the Oort cloud. They made their living by preying on other habitats; attacking them and stealing their supplies of anti-matter. We speculate that when one of them found out the system's first starship was going to pass through their space, they decided a load of anti-matter sufficient to propel us to Alpha-Centauri was just too good a kill to pass up."

"The history books say our radar systems went screwy right before the impact. That would be consistent with the kind of radar-jamming techniques the pirates used. They tried to match velocities with us, only they must have miscalculated. I seem to remember reading somewhere that the ship was leaving the system with a somewhat higher acceleration profile than what had originally been planned. We must have taken them by surprise. They probably burned up most of their fuel in a futile attempt to match velocities, and then didn't have enough left to get out of our way. All this time we've been assuming we hit a chunk of ice about the size of this table at hundreds of kilometers per second. I submit that we instead hit something nearly as big as we are, at hundreds of kilometers per *hour*."

Jennifer glanced at me briefly. "We all know the rest of the story, but I'll run through it for Robert's benefit. Whatever we slammed into punched right through our erosion shield, and blew four fuel tanks

wide open. Seven more tanks were ruptured, and spewed away their fuel in a few hours. We had lost the biggest part of our reaction mass, and we still needed to hold back a reserve for the deceleration at the end of our journey. We never even got close to our planned cruising speed. This trip was supposed to only take 360 years. It's been 2,200 years since the impact. But our ancestors knew the anti-matter originally intended for almost two centuries of constant engine thrust could instead power our suns for the two millenniums the trip would now take. And we're still going to make it, probably within the lifetimes of most of us here."

"When we finally do get there," Tony chimed in, "It's going to be the latest arrival in human history. You know, in my more pessimistic moments, I sometimes think about how much technological advancement in star drives there could be over the course of 2,200 years. I'm almost afraid that when we *do* pull into Alpha-Centauri, we're going to find it brimming over with millions of habitats, all filled with people grumbling about the over-crowding and wishing they were out in the frontier systems where all the excitement is. It would be a shame. Our ancestors really were counting on their descendants building their own new worlds in the Centauri system."

* * *

Tony tells me he will soon send me to something called school. He says I will learn how to read, which will in turn help me to learn everything else I ever wanted to know.

It's funny how everybody wishes me to turn out like them. Captain Duncan wants me to consider becoming a ship's officer. I take it this means I would work for him. Jennifer says that since I am so impressed by electricity, I really should go into electrical engineering, like her. She entices me by saying I will learn what electricity is, and how to direct it and make it do useful things. Tony notices how well I tell my story to an audience, and thinks I would make a great teacher.

I think I will take Jennifer's advice. For if I have learned anything in my travels, it is that many of the things we in Beta-sphere took for magic were really things built by the hands and minds of people not terribly different from ourselves. They only have knowledge which we currently lack.

I hope that Tony is wrong, and that we do not arrive at the new sun only to find the worlds already made by others. I think it would be very challenging to build new worlds with my own two hands.

The End

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