

## *The Stars Beyond Midnight*

*By Pete Planisek*

Stars. It was impossible to comprehend the magnitude of the infinite array of stars that lay beyond the window. Or did they? The longer Alexei stared the more remote the possibility seemed. What he was seeing, where he was seeing it from, was unimaginable. Still such an awe-inspiring view held him transfixed. How could it not? The glowing lights bore a host of colors as they flickered; celestial candle lights desperately beating back the oblivion of the blackness all around them.

He'd flown only once, as a small boy on his family's sole vacation to the Black Sea; before his father's illness. Standing here now the sensations from that experience returned. High above the clouds one lost all sense of scale in the vast, open sky. He hadn't been nervous about flying until they were actually up in the air; the sense that nothing stood between him and the distant ground below, except the air they rode through, left him tingling with doubt. One mistake, one moment when either human error or nature's wrath besmirched their aircraft would have changed everything. Flying made him feel vulnerable. Now, looking out into the unyielding, eternal night it was difficult not to feel exposed and frightened. He pressed his palm to the window. It was cold to the touch.

“Oh my God. Where are we?”

When the woman spoke, Alexei's gaze didn't waver from the window but did refocus on the reflections of the faces framed by the dim light cast by both the stars and unusual instrument

panels. He'd almost forgotten the others completely. The muscles in his left hand moved reflexively to sense the reassuring weight of the knife he held in his hand; the object, so familiar, now felt both absurdly out of place and empowering.

"I..." the woman's wealthy companion began before reverting back to silence.

Alexei and the others stood in a tunnel that stretched beyond view in either direction. The walls were grey, the light muted; only the woman's white evening dress and Alexei's still smoldering cigarette blessed the sterile environment with color. Recalling it now, he hesitated to remove it from his lips. This could be the last one he ever had. He closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled the smoke deeply into his lungs.

"Hey," the woman's voice again broke the silence.

When Alexei opened his eyes it was clear the woman's tuxedo clad companion was displeased that she'd summoned their would-be mugger but she clearly did not care in that moment as she motioned Alexei for his cigarette. He studied her coolly. Her brunette hair elegantly complemented the white evening gown and fur she wore. He'd used the cigarette as a pretense to get close enough to rob them as they left the theater. It was a common ploy he often used successfully.

"Can I trouble you for a light?" he'd causally inquired before forcing them at knife point off the main street and into the unfamiliar alley. The main street and alley they could still see on the other side of the portal from where they now stood. A few steps away, life progressed as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. The rich continued to slowly exit the theater amid the persistent snowflakes and march of headlights. Yet they all remained where they were; too terrified to move. Were they in some other dimension, lost in the cosmos; did they truly exist at

all? As they'd always perceived reality, had they ever existed or were they just playing out roles predetermined by some unseen force? This place called everything Alexei had ever known into question. He knew somehow he must find answers.

The older man the brunette was with kept looking down at Alexei's knife, still clutched tightly in his hand. A few minutes ago its purpose there had been crystal clear in the young mugger's mind. But here...

Alexei began to fold the blade down before deliberately flipping it upward again and holding it at the ready. He looked each of the others directly in the eye. They nodded in understanding. Alexei slowly concealed the knife safely back on his person before reaching a shaking hand up to retrieve the cigarette from his mouth. He handed it to the woman who drew it to her lips without preamble and inhaled deeply.

"Explain this trick," the man harshly demanded. He was trying to sound intimidating but he could not hide the wild fear in his eyes. Alexei felt emboldened.

"Walk back through and see for yourself," Alexei challenged. He hated men like this; a modern robber baron; wealthy, indifferent to the plight of others beyond his unspoken need to control people. Men like this had kept his family poor and made Alexei into something he'd never wanted to become – a thief. Or was he?

"Why have you brought us here?" The woman asked. The question escaped with the smoke she'd inhaled. Alexei stifled his revulsion as his eyes fleetingly darted between the couple. If only she wasn't with him then Alexei might feel some sympathy for her. But it was hard for him to see her as anything but the robber baron's plaything. Or was she? Alexei's eyes again took in the heavenly vista beyond the windows of the endless corridor.

“How do I know you didn’t bring me here,” Alexei demanded. Was this some sort of test? Was something waiting to see how human enemies interacted when under stress? Could Alexei be no better than a lab rat? He clenched his jaw.

“You’re the one who tried to rob us,” the woman began, “forced us into that alley, where...”

Where...what? There’d been no periods of unconsciousness, no flashes of light, no strange physical sensations. The mugger desperately sought to bring some type of order to chaos.

“Can you see Earth?” Alexei asked the others.

“What?” the woman breathed.

“It’s right there,” the man declared, pointing at the normal images playing out in the nearby portal.

“No! Out the window, do you see it out the window?” Alexei implored.

The others hesitated before looking.

“No,” they answered almost in unison.

“Then where is this?”

“Earth is there,” the man asserted, again pointing at the portal.

“Is it?” the woman asked; doubt was replacing fear in her voice. Alexei felt a new respect for her.

Silence again descended upon them. What if the reality they perceived, as presented on the other side of the portal, was nothing more than some type of illusion: a hologram, the product of some shared conscious vision they'd somehow managed to escape. Did that put them in danger? Would those who'd constructed this hallway in the depths of space punish them for being here? If so, then wasn't it prudent to hold such a debate on the other side of the portal? Shouldn't they go back to the safe, the familiar world on the other side? Could they?

But what if it was fake? What if all they viewed as existence was actually controlled from here? Were they merely living roles assigned to them? Were the choices they made, the consequences there actually their own? Why did such a portal exist? Were they being studied, their world infiltrated from this place? Was there something special about each of them that had permitted them to arrive here? Could one of them be one of the invaders, testing to see how humans might react to such revelations?

Fear gripped his heart. Alexei sprang forward to the woman who dropped the cigarette. He stifled her screams as he retrieved his knife and held the robber at bay. What did he hope to accomplish? He was falling back into the role that was most familiar to him. Should he? This place might offer him a chance to transcend the ills he'd suffered in his life.

“Just hold on. Hold on and nobody gets hurt.”

He had to be sure. If he could just see that they were what they appeared to be; prove that they were all human.

Suddenly the man lunged at Alexei as he tried to free either his companion or the knife from the mugger's grip. There wasn't time to think, only to react.

“What are you doing?” the man demanded through clenched teeth.

The image of his dying father returned to Alexei. There'd been no money for medical care and he'd died within weeks of learning of his heart condition. Men like the robber baron were to blame for that. What if the makers of this corridor were long since dead and news of this place travelled back to the Earth they all knew? What would people like this do with such information? What if the corridor held other portals to other worlds or even different realities? In that moment Alexei saw humanity as a plague; only taking, rarely giving. What if this moment wasn't just a test for them but for all of humankind? The light around the portal changed color just as Alexei's knife sank into the man.

The woman fled. She ran through the portal, back to what she knew, back to a place that made sense to her. Alexei watched her. For a moment she ran; the white of her dress as bright as any of the stars outside the corridor windows. Then her steps began to falter as her hands clasped her chest. Those passing by on the street began to gather as the distressed woman fought for air as she sank to the ground. Minutes passed. Alexei considered the knife in his hand. Could he have stabbed her too? Or had returning from this place affected her?

Alexei turned away from the portal as an ambulance arrived on the other side. He looked down at the dead robber baron, uncertain if he'd meant to kill him or acted out of panic. The knife no longer felt right in his hand. Was he even capable of change? He had to know. If that was ever to be, Alexei knew he couldn't return to the reality he'd known. He placed the knife on the floor and began to walk slowly down the dark corridor.



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