

The end of night watch. Intermittent drops of rain pelted the lagoon's surface. At the black-sand beach, fishing skiffs rocked in the predawn wind beneath a dark blanket of overcast. Ragged fragments of cloud skittered inland on the breeze. The dank, sweet smell of gutted lampreys drifted in the air; crabs tussled for the dismembered innards floating in the water's froth.

Prologue to

*Anomaly at the
Vishnu
Horizon:
A Grand
Canyon
Adventure*

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Above the sounds of the surf on the lava-stone breakwater and the breeze through the palm foliage, a bell tolled faintly in the distance. It came from inland, beyond the beach road that fronted thatch-roofed cottages, beyond the sprawl of other villages that ran up the low tropical valley toward the arid highlands to the west. And in that distant western sky, at the Ballo-nay frontier, a smudgy-red fire raged.

Inside one of the beach cottages, an oil flame restlessly flickered within a conch shell set on a shelf. On the wall above, uneasy shadows accentuated the symbol of an eye carved into an alabaster plaque. Among a clutter of items on the floor, a pair of sandals lay; into each insole three toes had worn their impression. In a corner leaned a kite of woven palm leaves with a ball of coconut twine attached; on the kite, a painted eye, as on the wall-plaque, watched over a figure prone on a sleeping pallet.

A second bell pealed; this one closer. Irg stirred in his bed. With the approaching dawn, he would soon rise and join Colo and other his friends. The high holiday of Tertan's Gift gave them a welcomed sabbatical from the lyceum. Unencumbered by school clothes, they might fly their kites from the beach or play hide-and-seek in the caves along the glistening-green sea cliffs or sail out for a rollicking game of tag amidst the scalding bubbles rising from the underwater volcanic vents. Or, they might just sit under the palms and practice Rhamgot stratagems, using Irg's basket of game pieces.

The bell in the square near Irg's dwelling sounded. He heard running footsteps; one set, then two, followed by many. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he raised up on one elbow. The road-side door upstairs banged as it was thrown open, and he heard a commotion among his two temporary caretakers. Then footsteps hurried down the stairs and approached Irg's corner room.

Old Oskou burst in. He called breathlessly, "Master Irg! Rise immediately. We must leave . . . now!" From a cut across his gill-flap, green ooze bled onto his collar. Red blotches marred the sleeves and front of his rumpled dress tunic.

"Oskou, what has happened to you?"

Editors' Note: This is an excerpt of a science fiction novel. Portions of the work were also published in Volume 29 (2012).

Oscou set down a blue velvet bag he was holding and scanned the room. He scowled at the disarray. Limping, he picked his way across the floor to the cubical below the oil lamp, and nodded to the eye plaque on the wall. He hastily collected a folded tunic and a coiled belt, and handed them over to Irg. "Great Seer preserve us, Master Irg. I will explain after we've boarded the skiff and are underway to Ferecon City. We must hurry to the dock. Ah, you will need your identity papers."

Fastening his belt and stepping into his sandals, Irg retrieved a pack of papyrus documents, neatly bound into a brown, hand-sized booklet. As Oscou ushered him toward the door, Irg snatched his starfish talisman lying next to the oil lamp and his prized crystal of sulfur from the Rhamgot game basket on the floor.

"No time to collect," said Oscou. "Bring only your courage." Picking up the velvet bag, Oscou escorted Irg down the hall to the beach-side door. Behind him, Irg could hear the clatter of his caretakers and their panicky voices. Exiting the cottage, Oscou grabbed an oilcloth slicker from a wall-peg, and guided Irg down to the beach, hurrying him onto the dock. Bells rang from all directions.

"What of my surrogate, Oscou? Is he returning from the Parley? Does he know we're leaving?"

Oscou did not reply, but steadfastly directed Irg into the family's small boat. He loosened the lines from the dock and boarded, placing the bag and slicker under the tiller seat. As they pushed off and readied sails, Irg glanced to the village. People hurried left and right on the beach road, and others rushed toward boats, all carrying hastily gathered belongings. Tan-uniformed militia formed in the village square with coconut-husk helmets donned and lances shouldered; a contingent double-timed toward the spawning pools and tadpole nursery. Beyond, to the western horizon, a smear of dense, black smoke billowed inland on the wind, with occasional tongues of yellow flame licking up

above the green foliage.

As Irg turned back to help prepare the sails, Colo emerged from the cottage next door, nudged along by his surrogate, Tuso. Irg worried how his surrogate would find him. Kioc was his dearest mentor. Irg was so proud when Kioc had selected him from the tadpole nursery. And now, Kioc wouldn't find Irg at home. Angrily Irg hoisted and secured the amber headsail as Oscou manned the tiller, maneuvering the skiff toward the opening in the lagoon's seawall.

Looking to the beach, Irg froze. Two men in green and gold uniforms restrained Tuso on her knees and a third had his arms around Colo. Another man, in colorfully patterned dress, approached, said something to Tuso, and then struck her with such force that she slumped to sand. Colo pointed toward Irg's boat.

The men turned and looked. The three in uniform then sprinted down the beach toward a two-masted galley that dwarfed the village fishing boats. The finely dressed one just stood there and stared. A chill went down Irg's spine; he pointed the men out to Oscou.

Looking back, Oscou spat and said, "Mercantile constables . . . and Lolok . . . that conniving traitor. Great Seer curse him!" As the skiff passed through the breakwater, he said, "They're going to want you in their custody, but they'll have to wait till the tide's higher to get that lumbering beast into the sea."

Irg watched Colo kneeling to help Tuso. Looking up he met Irg's eyes and halfheartedly waved; Irg gestured back. He wanted to know why constables would be seeking him, why they were off to Ferecon City, and what in Tertan's name was happening, but Oscou preoccupied himself with raising the triangular mainsail. Once secured, he tacked starboard and the southeast wind propelled them into the choppy, gray sea. Δ