

Under the Eye of God

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*For Olivia Lowe Partridge,
with love.*

Out Of This Whorl

If you consider the Milky Way galaxy as a great wheel turning ponderously through space, then you may regard the Palethetic Cluster as a clot of earth tossed up by that wheel as it pounds down eternity's highway.

You will find the Palethetic Cluster a hundred thousand light years off the plane of the ecliptic, and nearly that distance off the galactic axis. It spins whirligig in the galaxy's wake, but it does not trail the Milky Way; on the contrary, the Palethetic scuttles off in its own direction, a sideways tumble which takes it away from that immense brilliant disk with an unexplainable velocity.

In the old tongue, *palethetic* means "interesting place to stand." Indeed, the Palethetic's singular appeal lies in the fact that it affords a spectacular view of the enormous starry spread of the Milky Way galaxy—as seen from the *outside*. On almost any world within the Cluster, the great spiral displays a dazzling splendor. The locals call the view *the eye of god*.

The Palethetic Cluster itself contains (approximately) seventeen point five billion objects of large enough mass to justify a place in the Regency star maps. Only a small percentage of these objects radiate enough energy to deserve the appellation of *star*¹. Approximately a hundred

¹ Most starship Captains plying their trade among the worlds of the cluster elect to purchase regularly updated listings of all of these objects for their inboard memory tanks, demonstrating a more than casual curiosity about matters which might impact their existence.

million stars comprise the cluster; less than one percent of them shine their light on inhabited worlds. Despite the lack of any recent census to validate the count, the locals still refer to the cluster as “The Million Worlds.”

Cosmologists in the Palethetic remain puzzled by its existence. None of the best models of galactic dynamics can account for the anomalous existence of seventeen point five billion objects scurrying across the galactic wake; none of the worst models can account for it either. No cluster should exist where this cluster exists; but the fact that it does exist clearly demonstrates the fallaciousness of all current cosmological theories which do *not* account for it—meaning *all* current cosmological theories.

Some scholars have argued that the Palethetic Cluster may have originally spun off as a side effect of the Milky Way’s formation. Unfortunately, the path of the cluster does not support this thesis. The Palethetic hurtles into the darkness at an odd angle and at an astonishing velocity relative to the Milky Way—as if it knows something it shouldn’t about its apparent primogenitor. Tracking the models of both stellar aggregations backward through time produces unbelievable headaches for astrophysicists.

Another theory, one far more attractive to those with much less knowledge of stellar mechanics, holds that a careless creator left the cluster here after finishing its much more important work on the greater wheel of the nearby galaxy; to these theorists, the cluster comprises nothing more than leftovers. A splinter faction, operating under the auspices of The Church of The Grand Jape, suggests an even more insidious premise: that a mischievous God deliberately created the Palethetic Cluster and sent it whirling off on this deliciously unexplainable vector specifically to confound cosmologists throughout eternity.

Others simply refer to the whole thing as “the Pathetic Cluster” and leave it at that.

Whatever the case, the view remains spectacular.

Under the Eye of God

High up in the northern reaches of the Cluster a swollen red star gutters and sparks in the darkness. It gives off just enough heat and light and feeble radiation to register on the star charts. A small orange planet named Thoska-Roole orbits the giant at a gloomy distance.

A dark, burnt world, Thoska-Roole has little to recommend it. The planet tumbles in an elliptical orbit, spending most of its time roaming out in the cold reaches of night, but occasionally approaching close enough to its primary to pass through streamers of gas, or the outer fringes of its corona. Life exists here only by the application of powerful technologies. During the extremes of Thoska-Roole's orbit, infra-winter and ultra-summer, life survives by burrowing underground and waiting for the seasons to pass.

Under the vast sun, day smolders like a ruin. The sky becomes a ruddy ceiling, filled with the massive red gloom of the ponderous giant. Vision becomes almost impossible; everything looks rippled and indistinct, as if illuminated not by light, but by heat-blurs. During the day, the citizens of Thoska-Roole avoid the outdoors.

When night rises, the Eye of God glares down with a horrific splendor. Brightness fills the air with wild hallucinatory colors. The sky sparkles like radioactive foam. The mordant light dances, blazing through states of exhausting glory. The eye cannot assimilate, the mind cannot grasp the grandeur of it. The overload of optic ecstasies intoxicates like a drug, leaving the

viewer delirious and bedazzled. Under this shameless exhibition, this great tumbling wheel of heaven, the desert burns so brightly that all normal patterns of diurnal life have collapsed, staggered and stunned.

Here, creatures of daytime instincts have redirected themselves into nocturnal channels, coming out only when the sky blazes like a pinwheel, while those of nighttime impulses struggle blindly through the crimson murk of day. The brilliant leeward sky arouses the activities of life, the dreary red mornings bring the release of sleep.

Night, described as shadow elsewhere, exists only as a supernatural dream on this terrible star-blasted world—never as a darkening, neither of the sky, nor of the soul. On Thoska-Roole, the souls of the people have already darkened by themselves.

Despite its awesome glory, the Eye of God weighs as a heavy burden to the inhabitants of the cluster. Popular belief has it that the good people of Thoska-Roole come into their lives already in a state of virtue, and that throughout the length of their small existences, they do not commit as many of the nine unforgivable sins as often as do the inhabitants of other worlds elsewhere beyond the reach. Perhaps, as some think, under the direct study of the Eye of God, the commission of any sin seems infinitely more dangerous.

The same belief also suggests that when the good people of Thoska-Roole can no longer bear up under the strain, when they can no longer maintain their holier purposes under the intense scrutiny of the Lord of Creation, they fall from grace with a *thud* that shakes the ground for leagues in all directions. Some storytellers insist that this explains Thoska-Roole's perpetual earthquakes and tremors: the unending rain of unfortunate souls falling from grace has shattered the planet's poor crust.

As a result, either of the rain of souls or of the many stories told, probably the former more than the latter, the name Thoska-Roole has become synonymous with the Stygian depths of human behavior. Here, the stench of villainy and mischief reeks so profoundly that the smell of it seems to permeate the entire northern reach of the Palethetic Cluster. The scent apparently serves an attractant, not only for those who practice such skills, but also for those who have need of them. Money begets mischief.

The pheromones of wealth in any of its myriad forms have an irresistible allure. Maddening. Mind-numbing. Intoxicating. Infuse that allure with the enticements and attractions of power, glamor, drugs, violent excitements, and of course, sex—never forget *sex*—and suddenly, all the starlanes point downhill, with the Starport at Thoska-Roole at the end of the slide.

Here, you will find: aesthetes, arbiters, barristers, bean-eaters, boodlers, box men, brokers, burymen, cackle-broads, camp-followers, clinker-boys, coosters, cotton-pickers, councilors, cyberphytes, diggers, doops, dung-burglars, dusters, dweezils, easy-walkers, fandanglers, firecats, fences, flappers, flummists, filberts, fingermen, floor-walkers, gaffers, gamines, gandy dancers, ghouls, goons, grinders, grounders, hackers, half-fasters, handlers, hardballers, heir-baggers, heralds, honeyfugglers, hooters, hornheads, icemen, importers, ink-slingers, Ivy-smokers, jackarandles, jackbooters, jammers, jaw-breakers, jeansles, jeppos, jimmies, jinglers, jinkos, jollywobblers, kadigans, keepers, kelsies, kewpies, knockabouts, larcenoids, lawyers, leathermen, libertines, lifters, mask-workers, mid-leggers, monkeys, monkey-chasers, morkies, Mortals, mud-busters, muscle-suckers, narrowbacks, needlemen, nose-lickers, number-crunchers, ore-burners, outlanders, pettifoggers, pilferers, pinkertons, psychomorphs, publicants, questors, quickies, razzlers, rippers, rooters, scofflaws, scramblers,

slavers, sugar-doggies, tar-boys, tinglers, tipsters, touts, twizzlers, twinkies, uncles, undermen, users, vaginoids, Vampire-attendants, vintners, voluptuaries, walkabouts, weed-breeders, weevils, xenophilatics, yafflers, yocky-doctors, zaglers, zappas, zombies, zoomers, zoots, and zygothetics of every persuasion—Thoska-Roole draws them all.

The rich quality of the underlife here draws supplicants from all over the cluster—to buy or to sell, but almost never to settle.² They come only for so long as it takes to conclude their disparate purposes. Some come to market: they sell their bodies, their memories, their wit, and if necessary, even the tattered remnants of their souls—whatever commerce necessary to provide survival or provoke advancement. Some come to purchase—the market belongs to them. The jingling of a fat purse always commands the world. Others come merely to inspect the wares, not knowing in particular what they seek, but hoping nevertheless to find some interesting novelty or diverting artifice to excite their pitifully atrophied spirits. These frenetic souls create much entertainment on Thoska-Roole, if not for themselves, then certainly for the local inhabitants. “The Eye of God always watches. The mouth of the Devil always eats.”

Of those who come to Thoska-Roole for legitimate purposes, most do not willingly seek out the underculture, preferring to have as little as possible to do with the low-principled denizens of the endless deserts, the badlands and the bottomless crevasses. They finish their business quickly and depart as fast as they can arrange passage.

Those few who *do* seek out the practitioners of the dark trade, select themselves into three categories:

The lawless.

Those who wish to do business with the lawless.

And those stupid enough to think that they can bring one of the lawless to justice.

² Most of those who stay, do so because of the unavailability of death.

Trackers

A small ramshackle building persisted on the southern lip of the Lesser Desert. It stood alone, two forlorn stories, near a great tumbled ruin.

Behind it, not standing, but scattered like the forgotten toys of a child, lay the remnants of countless other constructions. Here, a twisted crane, its back broken like a crushed scorpion; there, the remains of an old ore-cracking plant, the hardened slag still pouring raggedly across the rock; and all around, poking up through the hard-baked dirt, the fallen walls and marbled avenues of a forgotten, transitory civilization that passed this way and disappeared two thousand years before.

An orange light faded from the building's windows, the only sign of life for kilometers in every glittering direction. This tumbledown refuge, this last wretched attempt to hold back the hot dry night and the dull red dust, seemed poised in the final desolate moments preceding its ultimate collapse. The ceramic and metal walls of the structure creaked and groaned alarmingly every time the day spangled into night, and each time the night lapsed back into day.

Time plucked at the building with fingers of wind and malice. Quakes rumbled beneath it, rolling and shaking and trying to unbalance it. Sandstorms scoured it till it shone. The parched sear of the day baked the resilience out of it, fatiguing the weathered old walls until they sagged

in their frames. And of course, blazing over all, night after night, the Eye of God scorched and blasted everything with unseen radiation.

The sad structure endured, not in defiance, but in resignation. Inertia ruled. Too tired to complete the job of collapsing, it stood. Dismal brown light outlined its dirty windows and plaintive music slouched out of the single lit doorway, escaping away into the bright night and the empty desert. The bloody glow of the little building marked a long southward descent into the bowels of gloom.

Nearby . . .

Two men appeared on the crest of a low, barren hill, the feeble northernmost finger of Misdemeanor Ridge, a hardened tumble of slag and gravel. The ridge stretched across two hundred leagues of desert, bearing witness to the long forgotten crime; here sprawled the discarded part of the land, the dross and refuse of centuries of ore-cracking.

Thoska-Roole wore the face of a hag. Misdemeanor Ridge and the long gouge beside it betrayed the greedy history of those who'd come to plunder here. Long gone, and long since turned into the same kind of dust they'd churned this planet into, they'd left as the only sign of their passing one more desolate scar, another appalling wound carved into the old crone's visage.

Here, where the northernmost slope of the ridge faded away into desert, lay the tail of the descent, a glistening notch of scoured and broken rocks. Here, the old machines had clattered back up out of the earth, having found nothing more to grind and melt. Here, the mines had died, leaving the tortured scar across the desert as the only sign of their passing. A thousand years had neither erased nor polished the wound. The ugliness remained.

The two men paused on the rounded crest of the hill and looked down the slope at the only charted settlement in a thousand leagues. They studied the little structure through high-

powered scanning-binoculars for a long silent time. The place looked lonely and very dangerous. The pale one looked to the dark one. The dark one grunted. They both unshouldered their rifles, grim expressions in their eyes.

The pale one stood tall and thin; the other, the dark one, much broader in the chest, came up only to his shoulders. Both wore long black coats, ankle-length and made of thick, heavy material. Both wore wide-brimmed black hats and black silk scarves wrapped tightly around the lower halves of their faces.

The dark stubby man growled something unintelligible. The tall man understood it anyway and agreed. They started carefully down the hill.

They moved with delicate precise steps. Although the hill consisted of layer upon ancient layer of hard-packed gravel and earth, the surface stones still came loose too easily, slipping and tumbling away in miniature avalanches. The skittering noises echoed brilliantly in the night. Too conscious of the sound, the men picked their way with elaborate caution, keeping their separate attentions fixed on the shallow building below.

Behind them, the Eye of God began to open. It crept up over the horizon, casting long pale shadows before it. As it rose, a great wash of light poured slantwise across the desert, illuminating every irregularity, every twisted rock and gully. The shadows writhed and flickered like souls in torment. As the *Eye* climbed toward zenith, the shadows would start to shrink and fade; the spangled blaze would turn everything simultaneously bright and ghostly, but that would not occur for hours yet. Down the hill, still hidden from the *Eye*, the dying little building cowered in the purple shade.

The two men circled it once, keeping wide away from it while they checked the alley and the back exit. They glanced over the few scooters and floats parked at the side, then came back around to the front.

Inside . . .

They entered. They carried their rifles at their sides; low, but ready. Their eyes narrowed. Each scanned the room quickly, professionally:

A deflated poker game. A cheerless bar. Two plastic whores in wilted feathers. Worn-out ceramic furniture, greasy ceramic walls. They'd seen all this before, smelled corroded hope on a thousand different worlds. They could describe the room with their eyes closed, the customers too: a technoid tinkering with gritty distortion on the keyboard of a howling synth, a couple of nervous bioforms whispering illicitly in a dark corner, and of course, the usual sweaty collection of sullen toughs and slow-dying prospectors. Everywhere, the frontiers of desperation weighed the same.

The blue-skinned bartender glanced up distastefully. He recognized not the men, but the mission.

“Slow night,” remarked the tall man, pulling his scarf down to reveal clear even features. Sawyer Markham grinned, a wild bright flash of laughter in a gloomy hole.

The bartender ignored Sawyer, his comment, and his grin; he continued wiping disinterestedly at a glass.

Sawyer shrugged and stepped sideways so the bartender could see his partner behind him.

Finn Markham.

Now the bartender looked up. Finn Markham had an ominous look; his eyes shone like coal, glowing in the dark space beneath his hat. His scarf still covered his mouth, and when he spoke, his voice rumbled like death. “Where’s Murdock?” he asked quietly.

The bartender considered the question. He considered putting down the glass and picking up the hand-weapon under the folded towels. His eyes flicked up and across and down again, quickly assessing the two men and the power of their rifles. Slowly, he put down the glass. Then he picked up the next one and began to wash it carefully. “Don’t know anyone named Murdock,” he said noncommittally.

Sawyer snorted.

Finn glanced over, then flicked his eyes upward. Sawyer nodded in response. They headed for the stairs.

Finn went swiftly up the hard ceramic steps, treading as lightly as he could. Still, his footsteps caused the boards to creak. Sawyer waited at the bottom; he turned and studied the room, his gun casually covering a wide arc. The synth fell silent. The technoid closed the cover on its keyboard and faded into a corner. In the silence, conversation ebbed. A few of the more cautious patrons moved out of the center of the room.

Finn paused at the landing. He listened at the first door. Nothing. He moved to the second—

The bartender started to move. Sawyer looked over at him, one eyebrow raised questioningly. His rifle swung meaningfully. The bartender stopped; he shrugged apologetically. What the hell—Murdock meant nothing to him. Sawyer grinned and looked up to the top of the stairs again, watching his brother with great interest.

At the third door, Finn paused. He glanced down and nodded. *This one.* He lifted his rifle; then he kicked—

The door crashed open with a *bang!* Finn plunged in like a charging buffalo. A scream and a roar—“Murdock! I have a warrant for your arrest!” Something crashed against the wall, shaking it visibly, and then another shuddering crash, and a chair came flying out the door, arcing over the railing, tumbling down into the bar and shattering on the floor below. The crashing, smashing noises continued, punctuated by painful grunts and other meaty sounds.

A naked young man—no, only a boy—just a little too young and a little too pretty, came running out the door carrying his clothes in his hands. He looked terrified. He came flying, skidding, tripping down the stairs. He slipped and skidded the last few steps.

Sawyer’s eyes widened in surprise at the sight of the voluptuous boy, but he let him pass. “That’s not Murdock,” he decided. Apparently, this establishment kept a wider variety of erotic talents available for the entertainment of its guests than he had previously assumed.

“Hm,” said Sawyer, looking after the boy’s rosy cheeks. “I didn’t think Murdock liked humans of *any* sex.”

Another thundering crunch from above pulled Sawyer’s attention around again. The sudden sound of rifle fire spattered loudly above—a fast-crackling whistle, the sound of *air burning*—and then a sudden *oof!* and an even greater loud crash! Large pieces of ceramic molding cracked and shattered from the ceiling, from the walls. They fell to the floor in a lacerating shower, spattering fragments in all directions. Customers gasped and jumped out of the way. The bartender looked up alarmed.

A second chair came hurtling out the door, followed by the two halves of Finn’s rifle. The chair bounced once and broke apart. The fuel cell in the stock of the rifle discharged itself in

a terrific flash of light and energy. Another frightful impact from above hit the building like the fist of god. The brittle front wall cracked with the shock; all three windows shattered at once, spraying shards of glass outward into the lambent night. For just the briefest moment, they glittered like diamonds in the air.

Sawyer Markham listened thoughtfully. Then, nodding to himself, he admitted, “This one could get serious.” He listened half an instant more to the shuddering, thumping, crashing, clattering, thundering sounds of the titanic battle overhead—yes, *very* serious—then headed out the back door.