

# Ervin's Watch

By Scott A. Rolsen

Ervin fidgeted beneath his flowing ceremonial robe and cursed the cold morning air. He glared at the metallic ward before him. A useless slender spire stood motionless, rising from the mounded earth, stretching endlessly into the sky. His eyes slid upward along its length, searching in vain for its end. Ervin shook his head and stretched his arms. Perhaps the magic was in the mystery.

"Don't move," snapped low voice from behind Ervin. He lowered his arms and turned around.

"I said, don't move, or I'll shoot," A man in jungle fatigues approached weapon-in-hand only a few meters away. His eyes narrowed and he grinned, cocking the device with a menacing click.

"Stop." Boomed a voice. A young woman dressed in matching fatigues strode up. "Stand down sergeant." The man stood, saluted, and marched away. The woman eyed Ervin for a long moment, then turned with a snap and began barking orders.

"First squad, let's pop this can open. Second squad, secure the supplies."

A flurry of activity ensued. Trucks that had been backed into the temple clearing were emptied in a matter of minutes. A team of soldiers with chainsaws ripped through the branches at the temple base, revealing a wide pair of doors that Ervin had never known existed. Seconds later, the doors were slammed open.

"Everybody in on the double," the leader snapped. On queue, soldiers began pouring inside lugging their gear behind them.

"You," she pointed to Ervin, "inside now."

Ervin took a step backward.

"Who are you people?" he squeaked.

"I'm Shalandra. These are my associates. Now get in."

"You've defiled the temple of the gods," Ervin yelled.

She smirked, "This is no temple Monk. This is an elevator to space."

"An elevator? You wish to climb the spire into the heavens? No one can rise to the level of the gods." Ervin squirmed beneath his robe.

The ground shook beneath Ervin's feet, raising a rolling cloud of dust that pinched at his nose. Surely the soldiers were bringing the wrath of the gods! Ervin dropped to his knees and began to hum in prayer.

"Get up you fool." Shalandra stepped toward Ervin, grabbing him by the collar, and yanked him to his feet. Like a string of fireworks explosions, hundreds of branches snapped and popped along the base of the spire. Ervin covered his ears and stared dumbfounded as the fifty-meter wide temple mound split into four rising sections. The earth that had been its cover slid away as the sections peaked at a near vertical angle, and then retreated downward disappearing into the ground. Only a massive undulating plume of dust remained. Ervin squinted through the quickly dissipating fog and for the first time looked upon the innards of the temple that had been his life's delusion.

"Oh, by the gods," he muttered. Sunlight shimmered off a gleaming complex of intertwined metallic buildings. Ervin raised his hand against the glare. A tug on his collar brought him back from his daze.

"Not by the gods," returned his captor dragging him forward, "but by man." Moments later, Ervin was inside a circular room. Dozens of soldiers continued to stack their gear and supplies with rehearsed precision along one side. The remaining soldiers, along with the one who had identified herself as Shalandra, were concentrated around a mechanism in the center of the room. The sun, now much higher in the sky, pierced the room through the bountiful windows lining much of its ceiling and walls.

"This is it," one of the soldiers yelled.

A woman of light appeared and smiled blankly into the air. Although he could see her, Ervin could also see through her into the room beyond. Was this a god? He felt the urge to kneel in homage. He shook his head, realizing his life of worship had been but a sham.

"I am your holographic hostess and elevator conductor for your trip to platform Delta. At this time, I ask that you all take a seat as we prepare for departure," the figure gestured into the open air. The seats she referred to were missing. "I will be glad to answer any questions you may have once we are under way."

The soldiers in the room scrambled to take their imaginary seats, instead opting for crouching positions along the walls. But nothing happened. Shalandra remained at the panel, eyes fixed on the motionless hologram. Soldiers whispered back and forth, exchanging confused glances.

"Magnetic caterpillar engaging," the hologram smiled. The room rocked sideways, then lurched upward forcing Ervin's throat into his stomach. He heard a collective gasp from those seated nearby, and was surprised to see anxiety etched across their faces. Ervin smiled to himself. These guys weren't so tough after all.

"Monk, come here," Shalandra commanded.

"I have a name," he replied.

Her eyebrows rose, but she said nothing.

"It's Ervin."

"Okay Ervin, *please* come here,"

He stood, brushing the wrinkles from his robe, and stepped over to his waiting captor. The soldiers around the room began rise and mill about. Evidently, there were no more boxes to stack, Ervin mused.

"I'm sure you're confused, and I apologize. Let me assure you we intend you no harm." Shalandra stared into his eyes. Ervin had not noticed before, but she was a very pretty girl; nearly a woman. Her nose was small, her cheek bones high, almost oriental, but not quite. Her eyes were far too round and open for that ancestry. Now that she had ceased barking orders and dragging Ervin around by the collar, she seemed almost petite. "Once we have reached the platform, you will be free to return to the surface."

He blinked. "What platform? You're not taking me anywhere."

She pursed her lips.

"Ervin, we are already on our way."

He laughed, "You really are a bunch of fanatics."

"Ervin, didn't you hear the conductor? Didn't you feel the elevator move?"

His laughter trickled off.

"I didn't understand a word that came from that... *thing*."

She reached over and grasped his palm. Her skin was warm against his. The life of a Monk could be so solitary. She pulled him toward the edge of the room.

"Look," she said.

He lifted his head and gazed out the window, only to see an empty blue sky rimming the horizon. Then his gaze drifted downward. The ground had fallen completely away. His knees buckled. Suddenly her soft grip became a crutch.

"Oh my gods," he exhaled.

"Easy, easy," she rubbed his convulsing back.

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the window, eyes wide. So much to take in.

"It's incredible," he finally exclaimed, releasing her hand and leveling his posture.

"How high are we?"

"Higher than the Nabt Mountain peak, and accelerating."

"Gods be praised."

Shalandra frowned, "I wish you would stop saying that. As I said before, the gods have nothing to do with it. I'm not discounting them or your faith, but this machine is man-made."

Ervin snickered regaining his composure, "And I suppose the great pyramids were manmade too, huh?"

"I don't know about that," she returned, "All I know is that in a couple of hours, we'll be in low-space orbit, and we have human beings to thank for it. Not any gods."

Shalandra turned, sharp and crisp as before, and returned to the instrument panel in the center of the room. Ervin had only meant a light joke; he had not intended to turn Shalandra away.

He frowned. The spectacular view out the window quickly stole his attention. The usual land formations such as houses and trees had already melted away into a mix of greens, blues and browns. Gazing skyward, he could see that they were fast approaching the early wisps of clouds. But from his lofty vantage, they looked more like well-defined cotton balls than the clouds of drifting vapor that he knew them to be.

"Yes, I will be glad to answer that question," he heard over his shoulder. The conductor was speaking again. Ervin crinkled his brow. The over-indulgent conductor's voice annoyed him, reminding him of a salesperson high on his own pitch. But like being at the scene of a wreck, he couldn't help but turn and stare.

"Delta platform is anchored in a low planetary orbit along a 100,000 kilometer cable consisting of high-tensile strength carbon nanotubes. Through centripetal acceleration generated by the planet's equatorial rotation, the tension is maintained along the vertical length of the cable with the Delta Station. The iron-based core of the station provides the necessary mass to maintain cable tension. A magnetic caterpillar propulsion system in the elevator pod you are in..."

Blah, blah, blah. Ervin sat down returning to his view out the window. They had now climbed above the visible clouds and the afternoon sky had become a deep, dark blue. He couldn't help but smile as the color further darkened with each passing moment. It was truly beautiful. Stars began to twinkle through; tiny at first, flickering and growing as day turned to night.

His head swam, and he tipped backward searching for his footing. Were his senses playing tricks on him? Maybe the whole day had been a bad dream? He closed his eyes, drifting in his dream. Then all went black.

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"Ervin?"

"Yes?"

"Open your eyes"

"Am I in heaven?"

"Not quite."

He opened his eyes. Was that an angel from the gods? Focusing, he recognized Shalandra's face hovering over his. He tried to sit up, but balance escaped him.

"What the—"

"—Relax, everything is okay."

Her voice calmed him, but he felt like he was upside down. Casting a sideward glance toward the equipment at the far end of the room, he stared at the stacked equipment. It was all still securely stationed as he remembered it, but now opposite to his inclination.

"You passed out in low orbit. Can you sit up?"

He wanted to sound strong.

"Yes," he managed. "Where are we?"

It had not been a dream, nor a figment of his imagination. Although the command module in the center of the room had swiveled to a new position more in line with the elevator's deceleration, the room was roughly upside down.

"We are slowing. You passed out as we entered zero gravity."

"Oh," he muttered, pretending to understand what she had just said.

"Your part of this journey is nearly complete. You'll be able to return to your usual life soon enough."

Usual? Ervin felt alone for the first time in years. Where were the gods? And his life-long religion? Ervin rowed through a rising knot in his back.

"Slowing?"

"Yes, we are nearing Delta Station."

Ervin sat upright, but the motion was unsettling. His body felt as if it were floating. His stomach heaved.

"Just relax," Shalandra smiled, "we're almost there."

"Where?" he countered?

"The end..." she pursed her lips, "...our beginning."

Ervin stood, feeling as though slow motion were his only friend.

"Are we in zero gravity?"

"Nearly. Deceleration provides a minimal gravitational effect."

Ervin waved his hand slowly in front of his face. It seemed to want to sling upward now freed from gravitational constraints.

"Okay, so now what?" he asked.

Shalandra stared at him.

"The point is to get off this rock. The destination is not as important as the journey"

Ervin rubbed his chin. "I've heard that cliché before. It's part of the monastery tradition."

Shalandra grinned.

"Well then, perhaps your religion is not all bad," she winked, "and perhaps we're not as off track, so to speak, as you thought."

Soldiers were once again in a flurry, positioning the supplies near a door whose outline was only vaguely visible. Ervin marveled in their precise, efficient movements.

"Where are we going?"

"We?" she countered, "You can return to the surface. The conductor will gladly take you back down."

"And if I don't want to return?" Ervin brushed his hand over his ceremonial robe.

"You are welcome to come with us."

Ervin gazed upon the soldiers now clamoring in a rough line at the door.

"Where?"

"Earth," she said finally.

"Earth?" he demanded, "It's a fairy tale, like Jack and the Bean Stalk."

Shalandra gazed at Ervin through unwavering eyes.

"Earth is real, I can assure you," she replied turning to face the unmoving hologram. "Conductor, what is our ETA at the platform?"

"Less than one minute. Please provide your alternate destination in either coordinate form or a mapped location in the known universe."

"Destination Earth. Please ready the ship and vector our coordinates."

"Processing," the hologram returned, "Coordinates locked in. Please disembark from the elevator and rendezvous at the ship's air lock on the far side of Delta. You have 17 minutes to reach the airlock and board. After that, your escape window to Earth will close."

Ervin's jaw dropped.

"So, its real?" he balked.

"Yes, come with us now, or," she looked to the floor, "return to the surface. The choice is yours."

He tipped forward, locking eyes with hers.

"The elevator has docked at Delta Station," the conductor echoed flatly, "All occupants, please depart at this time."

Ervin shuffled his arms beneath his robe, dropping the garment in a slow, undulating heap to the floor.

"Okay, I'm in," he winked, intertwining his fingers with Shalandra's.

"Let's go."

The elevator doors slid open, and they slipped through into Delta Station.

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