

A HIGHER POWER

By
Max Robbins

maxfiction.com

The bridge of the star-cruiser Talon's Reach hummed with quiet efficiency. Screens glowed in pale blues and whites, numbers scrolling in neat, endless rows. At the fore, the void rippled — a wormhole, steady and bright, its edges trembling like the surface of water under a heavy wind.

The elderly Captain stood with his hands gently clasped behind his back, watching the pulsating orifice. A cadet approached cautiously.

“Coordinates confirmed, sir. Transit to the Soria Clusters will take four hours.”

The captain smiled in amusement. “Four hours,” he mused. “This run used to take a millennia of cryogenic sleep; and that was if you were lucky enough to catch a wormhole before it winked out.”

He paused wistfully.

“There are ships transiting that route that will not arrive for thousands of years. Now, we transit it in an afternoon.”

He paused as if lost in a memory, then continued addressing the cadet directly.

“Entire civilizations rose because one opened; and died when it vanished. Whole quadrants left empty for centuries.”

He tapped the glass, knuckles rapping once, hard. “That was the way of things. Chaos, indifference, the truth of the universe.”

The cadet hesitated before speaking. “And now?”

The Captain gestured at the screens. “Suddenly there was order. A system. Wormholes that don't collapse. A grid across the stars, like some cosmic accountant had lain out neat as ledgers.

“What happened sir?” the cadet asked

“Nobody knows.” he replied

The two stood silently, in contemplation.

Nathan came up out of sleep as though he'd been kicked. A sound, the high, insistent bzzzz of something mechanical; sawed through the walls of his trailer. His nose filling with an acrid bitter smell; and the memory of his failed drunken cooking attempt slammed down on him with an anvil's fury.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

He exploded out of bed, bare feet hitting the floor, only to skid on the cover of “Big Booty magazine” strewn carelessly next to his bed. His body pinwheeled once, then met the floor with a spectacular belly-flop that rattled the picture frames on the thin aluminum walls. His left knee

cracked hard against the wooden frame of the waterbed, his one prized possession, as he hopped up like a wounded heron, clutching it, breath whistling between his teeth.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the long mirror leaning against the wall, mostly buried under a landslide of dirty laundry. Wild eyes. Unkempt stubble on his jaw. A loser in boxer shorts who'd just fallen out of his own life.

The smell hit him again, stronger this time, and panic put a charge in his step. He half-skipped, half-limped into the cramped living room/kitchen.

The scene was hellish: a pan had slid off-center on the lit butane burner, and its red-hot belly was vomiting black smoke in rolling clouds across the ceiling.

Nathan grabbed the first thing he saw, a towel looking as if it had last been washed when Nixon was in office and swatted the pan. It caromed off a pot of ancient soup, slopped a trail of greenish sludge across the counter, and dropped into the sink, which was already a graveyard of dishes, rotting food, and slimy water.

The sink made a dragon roar of steam and a glass exploded with a gunshot crack. A shard shot across the room and lodged in Nathan's forehead. It stuck there, absurdly delicate, trembling back and forth in front of his eyes reminiscent of a grandfather clock pendulum.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered, as he fumbled with the burner. Blood began to trickle down the bridge of his nose, dripping into his left eye in hot, salty stings. His stomach, already sour, gave up. He puked into the reeking stew of smoke, steam, and old dishwater, the sound wet and awful.

From the bedroom, his alarm clock began its shrill nag, telling him he had thirty minutes to get to work.

Nathan slumped against the counter, holding the towel to his bleeding forehead, eyes squeezed shut. He muttered in a broken rhythm, as a man at the altar.

"Never again, Jesus. Never again. I swear to you, Lord, never again."

Elsewhere, much elsewhere, a lecture hall shimmered, big as a mountain turned inside out. Students of every possible body plan filled the seats: gas bags in jars, bug-eyed mantis people, something that suspiciously resembled a giant scab.

The Professor tapped lightly on the podium. The lights dimmed, and galaxies appeared floating in the center of the room.

"Today," he said, "we discuss overlap, a most rare... phenomena."

A gelatinous student farted wetly in its sleep.

"The quantum foam from which all things are born, for reasons not fully understood, occasionally generates multiple simultaneous universes. While each contains its own unique physics, in this circumstance a portion of each can overlap. In at least one, even more rare instance, we find evidence that the overlap encompassed a tiny fraction of an existing, well-developed universe. Momentarily the affected area shared the possibilities of all its constituent parts. For a moment, physics becomes... negotiable." He paused for effect before continuing. "It is plausible that in this moment, a consciousness with the correct understanding, might influence the very structure of those formations."

A scaly paw raised.

The Professor waved a lazy assent.

“What might an entity in that overlap require to have such an understanding, in light of the fact that the only possible universe, in that scenario, is the existing one?”

“It is an excellent question. Unfortunately, I do not have such an excellent reply. One could speculate that some direct link into the repository of cosmic knowledge might be possible... if perhaps accompanied with the rarest distillation of atomic structures. Purely theoretical you understand. An event so exceedingly rare as to be almost impossible. If so inclined, you might find reference in the archives, under the topic Unverifiable Speculative Phenomena by the late Honorable professor Krill Rrrrspreet” replied the professor.

By noon Nathan was behind the counter at Gas & Go, working through his fourth cup of vaguely brown liquid and generic ibuprofen; ringing up smokes and scratch tickets. The air conditioner whined annoyingly in the corner, failing to produce even the faintest relief. Sweat soaked through his shirt. He muttered “never again” as a rosary under his breath, but the words were already flimsy as tissue paper.

His shift dragged on inexorably. At long last the sun began to set, and the chime of ancient wall mounted clock indicated freedom. He felt mildly better as he wolfed down the last remnants of a chili-cheese burrito while punching his time card.

He passed a few words with his shift replacement, Bill, who looked about as happy to be there as Nathan, asking him to keep an eye on the list of banned customers taped to the register. He noted he had a double shift tomorrow morning, grunted internally and exited the employee door to the attendant parking lot.

Nathan’s pickup sat in the lot, poorly parked, akin to a dying dog too stubborn to crawl off and finish the job. It was a ’78 Ford in theory, though by now it was mostly rust, primer, and prayers. The paint had long ago given up, leaving scabs of orange and brown, the metal underneath a flaking sunburnt skin. One headlight was fogged over with a cataract, the other pointed slightly cross-eyed at the ditch.

The interior reeked of stale cigarettes, oil, and whatever had leaked out of a paper sack left under the seat last summer. The bench seat was split wide, yellow foam spilling out resembling the guts of a roadkill possum. You could see the road flashing past through a rust hole by the passenger’s footwell, and the floor mats were so soaked with old coffee that crunched when stepped on.

The engine didn’t so much start as negotiate, coughing and backfiring as a man on his deathbed before grudgingly rumbling awake. Every time Nathan turned the key, he half expected it to simply sigh and never come back.

But it ran. Somehow, just as Nathan himself.

They rattled down Route 9, coughing exhaust like a two-pack-a-day smoker. The steering wheel shivered in his hands, and the dashboard lights winked in and out redolent of a Christmas tree on its last string of bulbs.

He gripped the wheel tighter, jaw set. You’re not stopping. No goddamn way. You puked your guts out this morning, cut your head open, made a promise to Jesus Christ Himself. You’re gonna go

home, make a sandwich, maybe even a salad, if that head of lettuce you bought last week is still there.

The neon glow from McMurphy's sign flared up ahead, buzzing blue through the twilight. Nathan's stomach turned a slow, hopeful flip.

One drink won't kill ya. A beer's practically bread, right? Liquid bread; hell Germans drink it for breakfast. You could get one, maybe two, and walk out smiling. Nobody'll know. Nobody cares. It'll take the edge off this hangover, put the world right-side up again.

He passed the first driveway, heart hammering. "Keep going," he muttered aloud. "Keep the pedal down, champ."

But at the second driveway, his hands seemed to turn of their own accord. The truck wheezed into the gravel lot as if it had been planning the detour all along. Nathan cursed, lightly, almost fondly.

Son of a bitch, he thought, guess the truck wants a drink, too.

On a planet that smelled of a urinal puck left too long in the sun, an alien named Hrrak drained a pint of something green that looked like antifreeze. He noted the timer on his chameleon software, slowly counting down and cursed silently. He passionately disliked pre-technology worlds and the extra effort required to conceal his appearance.

A passing glance at the mirror lining the wall behind the bar showed only a row of uninterrupted humans. "What a sad-looking bunch," he thought.

His comm buzzed, bypassing his filters, which could only mean an emergency. He groaned, slapped down a simulacrum of local currency, and scrambled out the back door toward his hidden craft. He silently authorized the full transmission.

PORTAL ANOMALY CLOSING PREMATURELY – NEXT PROBABLE EVENT 2142 PRE

"Baggard's balls," he muttered. The passage he needed to return home was closing. If he failed to make the window, he could be stranded in this backward-ass system for ages.

He unconsciously began the calculations for a jump, quickly realizing that he was massively overladen for the velocity he would need to make the portal in time.

"Jettisoning that much weight would be a huge loss," he thought. Then an idea occurred to him: he could program the ship to micronize its entire backup system and store it in a pocket dimension to cover the weight issue. His eyes cast about for a physical object to serve as a local "in dimension" reference for the transfer. They fell on a discarded bottle opener lying next to the garbage bins behind the bar.

He snatched the opener and hurried into the tree line beyond the dumpsters. Once there, he shifted into the vibratory pattern that revealed his craft and mounted the ramp. He noted the final calculations had just completed, the backup system was downloading into the bottle opener, significantly reducing the craft's mass.

He entered the code into the door, only to be met with a loud alarm. Cursing, he remembered he had implemented new security codes after the incident on Rigel Six. A mechanical voice informed him that he had only moments to enter the correct code before a time-delayed entry protocol would engage. Increasingly panicked, he frantically punched entries into his comm unit which, with moments to spare, spat out the correct code. The door sprang open.

With a sigh of relief, he jumped through, failing to notice the bottle opener snagged on the locking unit of the doorway. Annoyed by the slight restraint while passing, he jerked himself forward, sending the opener careening through the air, coming to rest on the ground nearby. Its faint consciousness bid him farewell as his craft rose silently out of sight into the darkening sky.

Jenny, the backup night waitress, pulled her jeans back up, wincing as the zipper caught a curl of pubic hair. The woods behind McMurphy's were quiet except for the drone of cicadas and the snap of twigs underfoot where the manager was already heading back toward the bar. He didn't say goodbye — he never did — and that was fine. She didn't need romance. She needed the night manager's slot, and the way she figured it, a couple more "meetings" and an insinuation about speaking with that cheap bastards wife and the job would be hers.

She waited three full minutes before setting off down the trail herself. Couldn't risk strolling in behind him, both of them sweaty and grinning like idiots. People talked. At McMurphy's, people lived to talk.

The path was narrow, lit only by the neon buzz bleeding from the parking lot through the trees. Jenny kept her head down, watching for roots, when her toe caught something hard. She stumbled, muttered "shit," and looked down.

There in the dirt lay a hunk of metal. At first glance it looked similar to a bottle opener, sleek and curved, but the surface shimmered oddly in the moonlight, not steel or chrome. More of a frozen liquid.

Jenny bent, picked it up, turned it over in her hand. It felt too heavy for its size and faintly warm. Brand new, too — not a scratch on it. What the hell it was doing out here in the woods behind a dive bar? She couldn't guess.

Curiosity prickled. Jenny slipped it into the pocket of her apron.

If it was worth something, maybe she'd sell it. If not, maybe she'd use it to pop bottle caps when she finally had the manager's keys around her neck.

She smiled at that thought, then stepped back onto the trail, hurrying toward the glow of McMurphy's.

Nathan was four, maybe five deep by then, the kind of drunk where words slurred into each other like kids on a Slip 'N Slide. He leaned against the bar, jabbing his finger at a pair of regulars, two Mexican roofers who came in after shift, ball caps pulled low, boots dusty.

"I'm just sayin'," Nathan slurred, lips shiny with beer foam, "back in my day, folks spoke "English" in bars, y'know? Ain't that right, boys?" He grinned wide, displaying an array of poor dental hygiene.

The roofers ignored him. One sipped his Budweiser, the other stared at the ballgame on the TV. Nathan didn't notice, or pretended not to. He was too busy puffing himself up, trying to reclaim a little dignity from the bottom of a bottle.

"What's it gonna take for you twos to speak Ingles?," he said louder, clapping a hand on the sticky bar.

The one with the hat finally acknowledged him and said “You drink the midnight special and if you don’t puke, we will speak Inglés for the rest of the night.” He exaggerated the word with a mocking accent.

The nearby drunks laughed and egged him on. Do it, Nate. Show ’em, Nate.

Jenny was behind the bar, covering while the manager dug around in the storeroom. She froze a second, eyes darting to the shelves. Everyone in McMurphy’s knew about “the midnight special” — nasty mixes of dregs and bar slop, reserved for fools dumb enough to ask. She didn’t know the recipe. Didn’t want anyone to know she didn’t.

So she grabbed a bottle from deep at the back of the lowest shelf. Dust coated its shoulders, the label faded to nothing. God knew how long it had sat there. The cap was stiff from age and rust. She pulled the strange new opener from her apron and worked it in.

The metal groaned. Jenny twisted harder. With a sharp crack, the opener snapped a sliver — brittle as glass — that tinked down into the bottle.

Jenny frowned, then shrugged. No one would notice, certainly not that asshole Nathan.

She poured the drink and slid it across the bar. The liquid thick and black, smelling of paint thinner and old licorice.

“Drink up, champ,” she said.

In a industrial suburb of Cleveland, Carl Haskins worked the graveyard shift of the McKinney bottling company. The plant was a cathedral of chrome and conveyor belts, all noise and syrup stink, a place where men went deaf in their thirties and diabetic in their forties.

Carl swayed gently from foot to foot, equalizing the pain in his ballooning joints, dry-swallowing his midday pill. Rare meds, imported meds, the kind of thing you couldn’t find in your local pharmacy. He bought them out the back of his local health club from a guy who went only by Ron. Big man, bad tattoos, smelled of Axe body spray and pepperoni.

Ron never said much. Just: “Off the truck. Fifty bucks cheaper than your doc’ll give it. Cash only.”

Carl didn’t ask questions. Pills were pills. They let him stand another night under the factory lights, and lord knows he needed the money.

The truth was worse than he could’ve imagined.

Those pills started life halfway around the world, at a chemical plant outside Gdańsk, Poland. A plant run by a company that specialized in “low-cost sourcing of minerals”, which was code for grabbing whatever rock was cheapest to grind. A shipment of ore had come in from Kazakhstan, dirty and unlogged. Tucked among the hunks of dull brown ore was one stone that didn’t belong. It glittered faintly blue in sunlight, hummed at night. Nobody noticed. Nobody cared.

The miner who spotted it called it “The Angel’s Egg” and tossed it in with the rest. To the bean-counters in Poland, it was just another rock, so into the grinders it went, crushed into dust with the rest of the load.

But it wasn’t from Earth. Not even this solar system. The Angel’s Egg was a fragment of something older, stranger, denser than anything in the textbooks. Its atoms carried rules that didn’t quite match the rest of the periodic table, from a time before time.

That dust was refined, pressed, and used to bulk out the pills Ron sold Carl. A mineral so rare it shouldn't have existed in this universe at all.

As he bent to check the line, one of the pills slipped from his pocket. Time seemed to slow as the pellet floated momentarily above the row of bottles waiting to be capped. Carl stood mesmerized as the pill pulsed wildly, almost alive, before plummeting with laser accuracy into one of the bottles just before it entered the capping machine. Just one, laced with just enough of that alien dust to tip the scales.

He wiped his forehead, immediately doubting what he had just seen, belched, and thought about lunch.

One bottle in a million. What could it possibly matter?

Nathan grabbed the drink, raised it high as the crowd whooped, and swallowed in one gulp. His Adam's apple bobbed. The shard of alien metal coalesced with the mineral of the bottle as it dropped down his throat.

He slammed the glass down, eyes watering, face red, but grinning.

The bar roared with laughter.

But Nathan wasn't there anymore.

He was everywhere.

Galaxies spun inside him, fireworks caught in amber. Time peeled back, layer by layer, as bad wallpaper in a condemned house. He could hear particles smashing into each other at the edges of creation; a low, endless hum, akin to the buzz he'd woken to that morning, only now it was the universe's own throat clearing.

Nathan drifted through it, drunk on infinity.

He saw places, endless places. Cities made of crystal floating above suns. Oceans boiling with creatures a mile long, singing to each other in thunder. Worlds that looked like his, only sharper, brighter, better. Worlds where people didn't live in trailers with moldy laundry and half-dead waterbeds.

And for the briefest moment, Nathan thought of himself, of his trailer, his dead-end job, his promises broken before they even left his mouth. He thought of how small his life was, how it had always been small, and how he'd never been anywhere. Never seen anything.

His chest ached with longing.

God, if only I could go there, he thought. If only I could see all of this...

The thought bloomed outward and with that single, hungry wish, the universe bent. Holes tore open, not one but millions, bright tunnels punching through the dark. Wormholes bloomed as dandelions in spring, each one a road to somewhere else.

Across the stars, entire civilizations gasped as new doors yawned open in their skies. Traders launched. Pilgrims wept. Empires cracked wide to meet each other.

Nathan didn't even know he was doing it.

He just wanted to go. He just wanted out of his little, broken life.

Without meaning to, Nathan, briefly infused with godlike power, made the universe smaller.

Then it was gone.

He toppled off the stool, cheek to sticky floor. Puke filled an ashtray. His head throbbed with a hangover wrapped in barbed wire.

But under the pain, clarity, a strange lightness.

Nathan woke in his trailer.

His head throbbed similar to a marching band in steel-toed boots. His mouth tasted like an ashtray left out in the rain. He groaned, rolled over, and for a moment thought about never moving again.

But when he dragged himself outside, barefoot in the dirt, something felt different. The sun was brighter. The air felt thicker, alive, humming with the sounds of the power lines overhead.

Old Mr. Jenkins from next door waved, and instead of ignoring him, Nathan actually waved back, even managed a smile.

For the first time in years, a thought bubbled up that didn't taste bitter. "Maybe things could be different".

He spat in the dirt, scratched at his stubble, and limped toward work.