

THE PORTAL - PART 3

By: Kevin Miller

As I stretched my legs in an attempt to keep up with my new companion, I looked her over, sizing her up. She towered over other women I had known – almost as tall as me – and she had the same pale, almost deathly pallor to her face as most of her race. Her black hair was pulled back in a pony tail, braided together in a long, supple strand that reached to her waist. Her features were sharp and chiseled, with thin lips and nose. Her eyebrows arched high over her dark eyes. A minute, almost unnoticeable tightness around her eyes accompanied the equally subtle lift in the center of her eyebrows, a curious combination that spoke volumes of someone who has given up hope – but not resolve.

She wore a dark brown, snug-fitting shirt of a fine material that I could not readily identify. Her trousers were of a similar color, and her footwear resembled combat boots. A scabbard hung from her left hip, and an unrecognizable firearm on her right. A small bandolier hung from her shoulder.

“So who is this Gornaan?” I inquired.

“He is the commander of the Antimisian legion forces stationed here,” she replied.

There was a moment of silence. “Why is he trying to invade?”

“Because he was ordered to,” she said simply.

“By who?” This is like pulling teeth, I thought.

She looked at me sidelong as we trudged through the sand. “You would not recognize the names involved, human,” she pointed out. “So why does it matter?”

“By the looks of it, I’ll need to know eventually,” I returned.

“If we succeed in our mission, then there will be no need. If we fail, it will not matter anyway.”

I decided to try another subject. “What is this place?”

She paused to kick the bones of some long-dead creature out of her path. “This is the Lethen Desert,” she replied.

I realized something that I should have already known. “So I’m correct in my assumption that this isn’t Earth?”

For the first time, an emotion showed openly on her face. It was annoyance. “No, human, we are not on Earth.”

“I do have a name, by the way,” I told her. “It’s Bruce. Bruce Calder. Could you please stop calling me ‘human’ now?”

“Very well – Bruce. I can only wonder if Alabaster bothered to ask your name.” She now stared straight ahead, her eyes once again dead. “We are on a planet known to us as Mitra.”

I gazed overhead at the near-blackness. The wind had died down somewhat, though it was by no means silent. The tower ahead reared up into the blackness, seeming to defy me. There was a long, interminable silence between us as we made our way towards it. Rebeka spoke.

“What is it like?” she asked cryptically. Her voice seemed to quiver.

“What is *what* like?”

“Earth,” she clarified. “What is it like?”

“Compared to here? Well, it’s brighter, for starters. And more moist.”

“I have heard that you can actually see your sun from the planet’s surface there,” she claimed.

“You mean the sun never comes out here?”

“If you mean ‘becomes visible,’ no it does not. We are in a nebula. We have to go into outer space to see our star – and even then, it is dim.”

“Perhaps when all this is over, you can go there with me,” I offered.

She laughed then – a sound devoid of happiness. “I cannot go to Earth,” she scoffed. “I am an Antimisian. We are a hard and cruel race. I do not deserve to go to such a paradise.”

“There are a lot of hard and cruel people that have changed,” I pointed out.

“I cannot change. I am born to kill.” Her eyes were dead once again.

“You look just like a human without a suntan,” I said. “Surely you can’t be that different.”

“Physiologically, I *am* a human,” she said. “Antimisians came from Earth thousands of years ago. We left our humanity behind long since.”

“If you’re a human then you can change. Humans are adaptable and all it takes is a decision.”

“I wish it were so,” she said. Her eyes were still dead but her voice quivered again.

The wind returned and grew to a howling gale that made conversation impossible. The sand swirled around us, but did not seem to affect Rebeka much. I began to ponder this glimpse of a soft spot in Rebeka’s hardened emotional shell. Thinking back to the duel I had seen earlier, Rebeka’s tough and unforgiving exterior made sense.

The tower rose up, blocking half of the sky. My mind began to reel, unable to really comprehend that a man-made structure could be this huge. Now that we were within a mile of it more details became evident. The base stretched out to the sides, its edges almost imperceptibly curved. The sloped walls drifted up from the floor of the desert, making the edges of the tower difficult to distinguish. The walls were completely smooth, with no evidence of windows or seams of any kind. It was unclear as to the material used to construct it.

“We need to find shelter,” Rebeka yelled over the raging wind.

“I thought you’d never notice,” I yelled back.

“Keep an eye out for caves,” came her reply.

We searched for about forty minutes, with the wind growing stronger all the time, but we found nothing that could provide shelter. The torrent of sand that blasted us stung my skin and the occasional pebbles left small welts where they struck. We stumbled on and even Rebeka began to look weary.

“Can we make a break for the tower?” I yelled.

“We can try,” she answered. “But we must time it carefully to avoid patrols that are coming and going.”

“Do we have a choice?”

“No. There is no shelter out here. We will go to the tower.”

We altered our course, aiming for the center of the tower. The sandstorm continued to thicken, until I could barely see the outline of the tower. I looked around, and the edges of panic began to grip me. I could not see Rebeka. I called her name, but my words were lost in the storm. I hesitated, trying to ascertain how we became separated. The forceful winds quickly obscured any tracks we had made, making it impossible to guess which direction she had gone. Making a grim decision, I began to make my way toward the tower again.

As I drew closer, a gaping, square-shaped hole pierced into the side of the tower, in the centre of which was a fair-sized door. Half-blocking the approach to the entrance, a huge, chattering, clanking piece of machinery with some unknown purpose dominated the short tunnel. It was a permanent installation,

and was even surrounded by a high, intricate fence with razor-sharp barbs mounted on the highest part. A sign surmounted the gate, written in a spidery, flowing alphabet that I had never seen. The doors were perhaps twelve feet high, bearing no sign of any kind of device to open them.

I began to move toward the machinery stationed there, stumbling through the drifting sand, hoping that the doors would remain unobserved long enough for me to get to cover. The drifts of sand impeded my progress once again, and I fought to maintain my balance.

The howling wind must have masked any sound the doors made, but a crack of light seared down the middle of the doors as they began to slide apart. Gathering my energy, I began to sprint – or at least run as fast as I could in the sand – toward the fenced-in area by the doors.

As I jumped for the cover of the fence, I caught a glimpse of several figures on the other side of the door. As I picked myself up off the ground, I peeked around the machinery to get a better look.

Perhaps a dozen figures strode out of the doors, clothed in heavy uniforms that resembled radiation suits. Each figure was clothed from head to toe, with hoods that covered the entire head, with a transparent faceplate. The suits were constructed of a heavy material that was roughly the color of the sand.

I ducked low, trying to avoid notice, edging around the other side of the equipment to keep it between us. Looking back at the doorway, I noted that the short, featureless tunnel contained no guards.

I hesitated. I glanced around, trying to locate any trace of Rebeka. She was probably hiding from the patrol that had just passed. I cursed silently, not knowing her plan made my skin crawl. I hoped fervently that she had found a way into the tower – or at least found shelter from the brutal sandstorm.

The doors began to close. *This is my chance*, I thought. But what of Rebeka? She probably knew this tower far better than I. Did she have any kind of plan, or was she just making it up as she went along? I visually measured the distance to the doors. It was about a hundred yards. I hesitated and then, throwing all caution to the wind, I jumped up and sprinted for the doors.

A Hoosier native, Kevin Miller graduated from High School in 1992. After a tour of duty as a U.S. Navy Radarman, he pursued a degree in media arts and sciences at IUPUI. Although a network administrator for Vineyard Community Church, writing has always been his passion.