

The Island



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Cover art illustration – “Obelisk” by Jorge Jacinto

Sarge sat in a small wooden rowboat out in the middle of a lake, fishing rod in hand with line uncast, reflecting deeply on the news he had just received.

On the seat next to him was a box that had been delivered to his house earlier that morning accompanied by a letter.

After reading the letter he had experienced a mix of emotions and a flood of memories had come rushing back, which made him feel the need to leave home and head down to the water to clear his head.

It was a posthumous letter from an old friend. A colleague to be precise.

They hadn't spoken much since the war when they flew together as co-pilots – something that felt like two lifetimes ago; and in some ways was. He had gone through a few career changes since then and was now retired.

The contrast of his surroundings and his internal turmoil juxtaposed to create a surrealness to his current state of mind – a dream in flux. His former co-pilot, Andrew, hadn't just passed, but he had chosen to commit suicide, leaving behind a wife and a daughter. The Sergeant couldn't begin to imagine what they must be going through, but from what he knew, Andrew had gone off the deep end not long after being discharged from active duty. Like a lot of others, it appeared he had succumbed to the psychological degradation of war.

Having read the letter, Sarge knew what the box contained and that was one of the reasons why he had left the house to open it. He picked up the box, unfastened the clasp and slowly lifted the lid. Within, the box had a soft velvety foam lining and resting snugly in the central depression was a palm-sized black stone carving of an obelisk with weird inscriptions engraved all over it. He was not a superstitious man by any means but the thought of having this thing in his house did not sit well with him.

Looking at it now, it reinforced the propriety of coming out here to open it, as the images from long ago came surging back.

Recollections of that incident from all those years past; the sights, the atmosphere, the stench.

His heart began to race wildly...

The incident took place late in 1973 not too long before the war ended.

Andrew and the Sergeant were running supplies from Đà Nẵng to a secret military base on one of the Paracel islands. They were logged to fly a UH-1H with a 1,400 hp T53-L-13B engine, having the 220 cubic feet of cargo space fully loaded with classified items.

Around mid-day they were cleared for take-off and left, travelling at an elevation of about 9,000 feet, taking advantage of mid-level cloud cover.

As Sarge could recall, Andrew was in the middle of cracking jokes as usual...something about catholic priests if he remembered correctly, when suddenly their equipment began to malfunction. The compass and altimeter went spinning-mad, and the radio began to spit out stupid amounts of static.

Trying to make light of a dire situation, the Sergeant joked about them being smitten from above for Andrew's lewd jokes and they both laughed. However, the fear was palpable.

Andrew was lead pilot on that flight and the Sergeant watched him struggling with the controls.

Soon, as the chaos unfolded, they both noticed that they had been enveloped by a thick smog which apparently had come out of nowhere, and that was when the engine died.

The Sergeant shouted for Andrew to "land with autorotation" and they began to reduce altitude. The altimeter was still going haywire, and visibility was down tremendously.

They were in a bad position, playing it by ear as they continued to descend with the expectation of hitting water soon.

Looking out of the side, Sarge called out to Andrew.

“There’s land?!”

“I see it!” Andrew affirmed with a look of confusion.

They were still in the smog but could now make out what was directly below; and as they came down, what their eyes beheld left them dumbfounded.

Instead of the sea they saw as far as our eyes could see, a black landmass made of what they could only presume was basaltic rock.

This did not compute because based on the flight trajectory they should not have encountered any such thing in the area. This vast expansive plain of black rock.

Deftly, Andrew had set the bird down and they both exhaled.

Adrenaline was coursing through their respective veins as they took off their helmets.

The altimeter and compass continued to rotate wildly as Andrew let out a long series of expletives while tapping the instrument panel.

He tried to restart the engine, but to no avail.

The Sergeant opened the door and stepped out onto the strange land mass that must have suddenly arisen out of the sea. He postulated so because the ground was wet and glistening as though it had until recently been drenched or totally submerged.

He looked up at the sky and observed that the sun still managed to effulge, as though repulsed by this strange place yet needing to peer down upon it through the desolate veil of particulate matter, as a thing of duty.

Making mental observations, Sarge also noticed a deafening silence to the place and a stiffness to the air flow. The silence was like a sound unto itself, dampening to his very spirit.

A certain smell also seemed to pervade the air, stale and tinged of burning and Sulphur as well as rot and decay.

Examining the ground more closely, he spotted different creatures in varying stages of decomposition dotting the landscape intermittently. He noticed some fishes as well as other slimy unfamiliar things still writhing in their death throes. Some of these things reminded him of the science fiction magazines one of the younger platoon members kept stashed under his bed.

He pondered whether the entire landmass had risen from the sea due to some catastrophic tectonic activity which had caused an electromagnetic disturbance that affected their aircraft. Some undefined seismo-electromagnetic shockwave.

Nothing seemed to add up.

Andrew came around to meet the Sergeant - "Sarge, what the heck is going on here?"

All he could do was shake his head in genuine befuddlement "No flipping clue. Radio still out?"

"Still blasting static." Andrew replied while bending down to pick up something.

As he squinted, fascinated by it, the Sergeant came in for a closer look as well. It was a miniature obelisk that seemed to be carved from the same rock they were standing on. It seemed to have been made with great precision, he observed based on the edges and vertices, and had inscribed into it what seemed like hieroglyphs.

The Sergeant averted his gaze and began to walk away, then turned around - "Stay with the bird and try to get the engine working or at least a comms signal."

"Will do sarge." Andrew replied, putting the obelisk into his pocket, and looking around before going back to the chopper.

The Sergeant left him and walked on for a bit, observing obelisks of varying sizes scattered around like way pointers or altars to some long-forgotten deity, and soon he came to a wide chasm in the ground.

At first it seemed like a steep drop, but on further inspection he realized that he could take advantage of the jagged rock face with its jutting ledges and make it down to the bottom.

The base wasn't too far down and as he studied the graben beneath, he saw it was mostly barren except for a much larger, towering obelisk, rising out of the ground.

His curiosity got the better of him and he began to make his way ungracefully down the slippery path.

Once he had gotten down, he wiped his hands on the seat of his pants and walked towards the obelisk.

Getting close to it, he noticed that behind the obelisk, perpendicular to it, almost like a shadow extending outward was an elongated rectangular hole in the ground.

The obelisk was littered with hieroglyphs, just like the miniature Andrew had picked up earlier and the others he had observed while walking.

He couldn't make any sense of the language and didn't bother trying to.

Sarge began to reach out to touch the monolith but then he felt extremely uneasy and quickly withdrew his hand. It made his skin crawl for some reason.

Suddenly there was a loud but muted fluttering sound, and he looked up to see a creature with a terrifying wingspan, flapping its wings without creating any air currents as it moved through the fog. While he struggled to make out what it was, the air was rent by a deafening screech which brought him to his knees, as both his palms instinctively shot up to cover his ears for fear of his ear drums rupturing. This lasted several seconds and by the time he looked up again the creature was gone.

Looking around in a daze he noticed a ripple in the rectangular hole in the ground. This startled him because he had no idea, he had been looking at a pool. He took several steps closer and found that it was indeed a trench full of a liquid that was pitch black. He couldn't be certain if it was water in there; and if it was water, it must have been black water because it did not seem to reflect or diffract light at all.

Again, another ripple, this time followed by something of an indeterminate dark glimmering hue, scaly and arcuate, briefly breaking the surface before being submerged again.

Without pausing for thought the Sergeant began to run.

Fast as his legs could work given the unadulterated dread he felt, he ran for the cliff face he had earlier descended, not daring to look back.

Slamming into the wall, he started to climb feverishly, inching upwards. When almost at the top and tenuously perched on a slippery foothold, he turned around to sate the niggling bit of curiosity that had sprung up within him in the last few seconds. What he saw when he shot a glance was something he would best describe as a prehistoric behemoth. A beast, serpentine in nature. A thing with faintly shimmering scales, like armor made from some otherworldly metal. Momentarily transfixed, he watched as the creature wrapped itself around the obelisk moving a little too fluidly for its size and with great furor, as though jealously guarding a prized possession. As the serpent coiled itself around the obelisk, the Sergeant observed that part of its body was still beneath the black pool. Scared beyond his own ability to comprehend, he turned around and attempted to make the last leap to the top but then realized he couldn't as he almost slipped and fell backwards. It was a little out of reach and he was about to start panicking (even more) when Andrew popped his head over the ledge.

“Sarge! Take my hand!”

He primed himself and made another attempt, and this time Andrew grabbed his hand and pulled him up. Once over the ledge, both men began sprinting to their chopper.

“Engine’s running again. Still no signal on the radio but all other equipment is up and working” Andrew informed the Sergeant.

“Good. I’ll fly” The Sergeant retorted as they both made unwavering strides to salvation, dodging dead things on the floor and other trip hazards.

Once they were both on board, they took off, eschewing any elaborate preflight checks.

They rapidly began to climb altitude until reaching about 10,000 feet, when they noticed they had escaped the fog and were now seeing only natural clouds.

Without warning, the radio burst back to life and chatter was restored.

Still reeling from what seemed like a narrow escape from the strange and unexplained, they maintained altitude for a while before deciding to descend again.

As they came lower, they realized they were flying over sea water now and all was as it should be.

Andrew then proceeded to check their bearings and confirmed that they were on course for their destination. He also checked his watch and reported that barely a few minutes had passed since their departure from base.

Both men continued to scan the skies, afraid to speak of what had just happened, only caring to arrive their destination without further incident; which they did

After the cargo was unloaded on the island and the mission completed, they headed back to Đà Nẵng carrying a few personnel.

Their usual banter was stilted for the rest of the day, and that night as they had dinner, sitting across from each other in the mess hall, Andrew pulled out the miniature obelisk and said to the Sergeant “We didn’t dream it up. That much I know.”

Exhausted, the Sergeant replied morosely, “It’s been a long day. Let’s just try to forget it before we end up having to write a report that sounds like a bedtime story.”

Besides, talk like that could end one in a psych eval with questions of mental fitness and competence; and so, they never spoke of it again. ...

Now, in his boat, the Sergeant was staring at the obelisk Andrew had sent to him.

As the instinctive repulsion he felt towards the object crescendoed within him, he impulsively flung the ominous thing into the lake and tried to calm his heart rate. The last thing he needed was a heart attack.

After a few seconds he flung the box in as well, just for good measure.

He was ready to go home with no fishing done and began to row to shore.

That was when he noticed the sky turning gray and a silence descending upon the lake as an unearthly fog rolled out of nowhere, smothering and muffling all the natural sounds that formed the background ambience of the ecosystem around.

He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but the water also appeared to have turned black and the air had become still while somehow being suffused with a disturbing acidity.

He continued to row, slowly being overcome with a sense of dread. The sun had now hidden its face behind the gray, just like all those years ago, and a muted fluttering of wings could be heard in the sky above.

“It can’t be” He muttered to himself, remembering the harbinger – the winged banshee. His mind began to permeate uncontrollably with images of that great leviathan swirling in the inky black waters beneath him.

Knowing what was about to come, he stopped rowing and pulled the oars in. Quickly, he bent over in his seat and covered his ears as a loud screeching sound filled the air...