

The Land of Eternal Night

by Mike Combs

mikecombs@aol.com

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"So you're going to Nightworld?" Jeff Martin cackled. "Oh man, this might be the point where Gary Decker finally loses his virginity!"

"Bite me," I said.

"What? Why, how rude!"

"Sorry. Please bite me, sir."

Evidently Jeff had heard of Nightworld's reputation as a sexually uninhibited colony; the place where the nights never end, and the parties never stop. He had learned this was my latest assignment, and, of course, could not forego giving me a bit of grief about it.

"Well, I'm off to the spacedocks," I told him. "Try to keep the office from falling apart while I'm gone."

"Yes, sir," Jeff replied. "And I hope for your sake a report is *all* you come back with."

I'm with the HDSP: Habitat Design Study Program. My job is to tour the newer habitats with unconventional designs and write up reports on them. But you might need some history before I go any further with my story.

Once upon a time the entire human race lived on the planet Earth. Being a planet, it was a super-gigantic globe of dirt, rock, and molten metal. The inhabitants lived on the outside of this sphere, not the inside. The gravity was 1 G (1 G in this case meaning Earth's average 9.8 meters per second squared, not the modern rounded-off-for-ease-of-calculation 10). This gravity came from the staggering amount of mass underfoot, not from rotation. The Earth rotated, alright, but only once every twenty-four hours. This caused the sun to move across their sky and then set, which is why our habitats (at least the normal ones) have day and night.

The first space habitats built were as Earthlike as the designers could possibly make them. The colonists were going through enough change as it was in the transition from planetary living to space living. Standing in one of the original habitats was pretty much like standing on Earth, except for the curving horizon.

But the colonization of space was not too many generations along before the youngsters were asking, "Why do we expend so much effort in our habitat designs to do so-and-so?" The old-timers would say, "Well, it makes it more Earthlike," only to get blank stares back from the youngsters. This reason had no meaning for them. They had never been to Earth, and didn't plan on going there, ever. Why should they care what was "Earthlike"?

So some later habitat designers got a little more creative. Many colonies were built for a centrifugal pull of less than one G. This caused the inhabitants to become thin, frail, and spindly, but this didn't

concern them. They had no intention of going anywhere where the gravity was higher. A very few groups went in for higher-than-one-G. They became short, squat, and astonishingly muscular. I've heard them brag that not only were they physically superior to all other humans, but that when the continuous acceleration space drives finally came along, they would be able to go farther and faster than anyone else, due to their adaptation to higher acceleration. To hear them tell it, they'd be running the whole galaxy some day.

Other colonies started dicking around with the day-night cycle. Those who went in for shorter-than-twenty-four-hours didn't seem to do as well as those who favored longer. There seemed to be support for the argument that the human animal actually functioned better with a twenty-five or twenty-six hour day.

The most unearthly habitat I have ever visited in my surveys thus far has been Foundation. Instead of an aluminum and steel shell, Foundation is a double-walled glass bubble. Instead of using left-over slag for radiation shielding, these people use two meters of water flowing between the glass walls. The sphere only rotates once every twenty-four hours for their day-night cycle, so the inhabitants live in free fall, swimming around in their transparent space bubble like goldfish in a bowl.

The design of the colony I was coasting through space towards, however, had taken a bizarre turn which no one else had even dreamed of. Every habitat built to date points gigantic mirrors at the sun which focus the sunlight through windows into the interior. In most cases, great care is taken to reproduce a normal-looking sun in the sky.

The designers of Nightworld had decided to dispense with the sun.

Nightworld was now visible on my personal viewscreen. It was a twenty kilometer long cylinder shaped like a cold capsule. It slowly rotated with its spin axis ninety degrees to the orbital plane. That in itself was not unusual; many single-cylinder habitats were thus arranged. But there was invariably an oval-shaped mirror hanging above at a forty-five degree angle, reflecting sunlight down into the habitat.

None of that for Nightworld. The surface was coated with silicon cells which seemed to be mounted directly onto the skin. Heat generated from sunlight striking this solar array was allowed (no, encouraged!) to travel into the interior. The skins of most habitats are shielded from the direct light of the sun because so much heat is already being generated in their interiors. But of course that's heat from sunlight beating down on the ground inside. Nightworld's unique external heating kept it at an equitable temperature. Since the cylinder rotated once every five minutes, the heating was doubtless very uniform.

Our ship docked, and a handful of other passengers and I drifted into the habitat. In the concourse I saw a strikingly lovely woman hovering, holding a sign which said "Gary Decker". My lucky day. Her hair was raven-black and drifted around her head like a dream of a cloud. Her eyes were jet-black as well. I would have judged her facial features to be American Indian if not for the fairness of her complexion. She wore wings on her back of a peculiar design.

"I am Andrea," she said when I coasted over to her.

"Andrea..."

"Just Andrea."

A woman of mystery. I was already in love.

She led me out of the concourse, and into the interior of Nightworld.

The main cylinder was dark, but not black. Streetlights sprinkled the inner surface. The overall appearance of the habitat was a landscape lit by moonlight. Illumination was provided by a single globe-shaped light about half a kilometer across at the spin axis. It seemed there were gray, circular patterns painted on it. I finally realized it was intended to look like Earth's moon.

That was a strange touch. One thing most unconventional habitat designs have in common is a lack of concern for emulating the Earth's surface. The paint job on the artificial moon seemed quaintly nostalgic.

The air was cool. I would have guessed standard New England climate, but still, the humidity seemed a bit higher than what most colonies went in for.

Now that my eyes were adapting to the low light levels, I could see many of Nightworld's inhabitants on the wing. The maximum gravity was only one tenth of a G, so most everyone seemed to fly wherever they wanted to go. Again, there was nothing unusual in that. It was in a habitat like this one, where the residents spent as much time in their wings as out of them, that a genetic engineer told me with a perfectly straight face that they were trying to figure out how to replace human arms with genuine wings while still retaining digits. I told him to look at an illustrated Bible sometime.

Andrea was handing me a set of the same peculiar kind of wings she wore. Every wing set I had ever seen before had a single handle-grip on the underside of each wing. This design seemed to involve each finger in a separate strut which ran all the way down each wing.

Noting my hesitancy, Andrea asked, "You do know how to fly, don't you?"

"Of course," I responded. "I've just never seen wings quite like this before."

"These are a far more efficient design than what you're used to. The independent motion of each finger allows more precise control over the wing surface."

She helped me guide each finger into a strut. After flapping about experimentally for a minute, I had to admit she was right about the control. I then joined her in a long, lazy swoop down from the axis to the surface of the cylinder.

I angled a bit closer to Andrea to ask a question.

"What in the system made you guys decide you didn't need the sun?"

"We consider the notion human beings can't get along without sunlight to be a fallacy. We've all known for a couple of centuries there's no such thing as a safe amount of sunlight. We simply extend that logic to say no sun is best. Please look closely at the people you see here. You will see very few wrinkles and no sagging skin."

I looked at Andrea. Right. Nothing sagging there.

"We also consider raw sunlight to be bad for your retinas over a lifetime. And another point: The ability of human skin to synthesize vitamins from sunlight has been vastly overrated. Our health is excellent. The elimination of windows from our habitat design gives it a structural robustness which we consider very advantageous as well."

We neared the landscape below. It was without vegetation, naturally. We set down next to a large single-story building. The sky above us gleamed with street and house lights on the opposite side of the habitat, so the illusion of a nighttime sky was complete. It seemed as though the Milky Way had been wrapped around us into a continuous cylinder. It weirded me out a little to realize all those lights were not

going to be turning off in a few hours because this place was never going to get light, ever.

I turned to look at the building we stood next to. "What's this?" I asked.

"I'll give you the long tour later. But first I thought you might want to join us for our evening orgy."

She said it so casually I almost convinced myself I had mis-heard her. Fearing she was teasing me, and that I would look foolish if I reacted, I decided to say nothing. Andrea doffed her wings, set them in the racks by the entrance, and proceeded in. I did the same, and followed after her.

She wasn't kidding. The room inside was dimly lit, and the floor was strewn with massive pillows. Almost a dozen couples were already well into their love-making.

I turned to look at Andrea. She was naked. I'm trying to avoid the "perfect alabaster body" cliché, but nothing else fits. No tan lines for obvious reasons. Her small, conical breasts jutted out provocatively in the low gravity.

Her achingly slender body swayed over to me, and next *my* clothes were coming off. I've never minded the female taking an active role in sex, but it would not be an exaggeration to say she pinned and ravished me. Andrea seemed driven to take every last drop I had.

Afterward, she lay on me with her head on my chest. In higher gravity I usually use lack of circulation as an excuse for extricating myself. I waited as long as I thought necessary for politeness sake before saying, "Go get me a sandwich, woman."

She raised her head and looked at me, genuinely puzzled. "What?"

"Sorry. I always get the munchies afterwards."

She grinned devilishly. "There's no food here."

There was something odd about the way she said this, something that didn't sit right. Then, in a flash, I realized something I had noted before, but which had only now surfaced up to a conscious level.

This habitat had no agricultural ring. There were certainly no food crops being grown here in the main cylinder. An external agricultural ring was the only alternative. I couldn't bring myself to believe they were buying food from other colonies. It was always far cheaper to grow your own than to import. Even if the people here were devoted to keeping the sun from ever touching their pasty bodies, they could always program robots to harvest their crops for them. How were these people feeding themselves?

I scrambled out from under Andrea's body, because suddenly I knew. I knew even before her folding fangs swung forward like those of a cobra. I knew even before the scattered screaming began.

I looked off to my left and saw a young woman's throat being ravaged by her partner. I realized that only about three of us were human. The rest...

Andrea was stalking me like a panther. I scabbled back and made a cross with my fingers. She shook her black-maned head and laughed riotously.

"That's crap! That doesn't do any good."

She's on me now with a strength I haven't felt in men twice her size. I gasp with shocked agony as the vulnerable flesh of my neck is pierced...

* * *

I have submitted a report that Nightworld is a healthy environment and a perfectly sensible habitat design. I also let Jeff Martin know I won't be back to the office... ever. I have immigrated to Nightworld. I said nothing to contradict his assumption that Nightworld's liberated sexual attitudes was influential in my decision. That's how we grow. The stories of our orgies spread, and they come.

The Nosferatu Virus is in my bloodstream, and my genetic code is now completely re-written. I am one of them. Every twenty-four hours (I can scarcely say "night" since it is always night here) we all launch ourselves into the cool air on our velvety black bat-wings. Great rivers of us meander through the dark sky, obscuring the face of our synthetic moon. Up near the spin axis are many labyrinthine caves. We swarm up and pour into the entrances. The even-lower gravity up here enables us to scabble over the rock walls and roost above fetid pools of guano.

I often fly alongside Andrea.

"Is holy water crap, too?" I ask her.

"Holy water is crap, too."

"Is it true we can be killed by a stake through the heart?"

"Well, yes. But wouldn't that also have killed you before?"

"Oh, yeah," I murmur, and fly on, thinking some more.

"What about garlic?"

"Just think of it as a severe allergy."

There are many curious beliefs about us vampires. I can see myself in the mirror fine enough to shave every morning, thank you very much.

It's also an old wive's tale that we all sleep in coffins. That's merely what medieval peasants took vampire's light-proof sleeping boxes for. After the industrial revolution, we gave them up for houses specially-built to block out all sunlight. Nightworld is merely the next step. Right now there is only one eternally-dark space habitat, but our numbers increase each day. Soon there will be many more.

Do you want to know what the holy grail of all vampire scientists is? That most elusive goal of physics: fusion. When you are immortal, you actually think about things like the fact the sun will eventually sputter out and die billions of years hence. Not that we worry about it. As long as energy can be derived from fusing hydrogen, we can keep our habitats from turning into solid blocks of ice. Artificial lighting in separate "food farms" could keep Spirulina algae going. That would serve to feed herds of humans, enough to meet our nutritional requirements.

We calculate there is enough hydrogen in the Oort cloud to sustain our race beyond the point where the universe itself perishes from heat-death. Again, when you are immortal, your mind considers such things. We fairly cackle with glee at the thought of that day in the distant future when all those mighty suns are reduced to burned-out cinders, the hottest of which will only glow a faint, darkening, bloody red.

It's not like we have a use for sunlight.

[Return to](#)