

The Evangelist

by Colin P. Davies

Jesus Santana considered himself in the vanguard of civilizing forces. When pressed, he would confess to the sin of pride. When praised, he would deflect the compliment onto God. And when pilloried... Well, that wasn't about to happen.

It had been ten days now since he'd made the five-hour crossing of the frozen Strait of the Aurora and driven his stealth sled up the island's icy beach — nine days since he'd first walked cautiously out of the coastal frond-forest and into the village — and already he'd seen enough to confirm the stories which had reached his church back in New Reykjavik. Those first travelers had brought knowledge here and trinkets, and introduced the language, but the harbingers clearly needed more than that — they needed *him*.

On this strange new Benedict's World, so far from the hopelessly lost souls of Earth, the harbingers were one of the more mysterious indigenous species. They lived austere, and in their own way, happily. They worked and socialised, raised their crops and reared their pups, bartered produce and negotiated reproduction, and, so many times a day that Santana eventually stopped recording, exchanged premonitions of doom with a delight which he could only describe as uplifting.

Santana had to admit he almost liked the creatures, pagans though they were, and they seemed accepting of him — although it wasn't the deference that he was used to receiving, or even simple respect, but more the indifference afforded a waiter or elevator attendant. At times it was as though he wasn't there.

Which was a mixed blessing...

It meant he could go anywhere and see anything, but ultimately that would become pointless as he was unable to engage the creatures in communication, let alone conversation, and that had to be the prerequisite to conversion.

Still, it had been only ten days. He had a good forty days yet before the blizzards of summer arrived.

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“God preserve me!” Santana slammed and bolted the door to the hut. He was inside, and the night-time blizzard was outside. God's will — though at times he wished God would go a touch easy on the mini-cyclones. That last one had nearly tipped him into the septic tank.

He brushed snow from his beard and slapped his parka, sending white dust to the floorboards, then removed his gloves. Thank God for this woodcutter's hut — he'd hired it for a loan of his pocket trivee. He'd made the better bargain, as the only station within range was WRVO out of San Benedict with a solid diet of game show repeats.

He'd been surprised by the severity of the storms, and if the temperature fell much lower his breath would freeze in his chest. Much more of this and the whole island would be under snow, fifteen, twenty meters thick and they'd all die a slow... He caught himself. “Damnation!” The doomsaying was infectious. he'd pretended to succumb to their philosophy for too long, but it had been the only way to establish dialogue, to become worthy of recognition. Now he needed to pray.

He took the handheld from a pocket in his backpack, which lay upon the floor, and reset the frequency for Heaven — his last linkup had been with his rector — and pressed it to his forehead till it hurt. The device was a conduit to the AI housed in the altar of his church. The intelligence claimed to have established a direct line to Heaven. The science was beyond Santana, but faith was something he could manage in abundance. He felt calmness flow down his body.

Ten seconds later he lowered his hand and glanced at the fire in the hearth. The logs still glowed. He threw on some more sticks and fanned the flames with his journal. “Ah...” he sighed. “God’s miracle of combustion.”

“All humans... they talk to themselves also?” The harbinger that Santana had named Nostradamus came out of the darkest corner of the hut, from the shadow cast by the oil lamp and a tall stack of planks. This creature was his best prospect for conversion. It had already submitted to Bible lessons, and its universalspeak, though heavily accented and littered with clicks and wet guttural choking sounds, was at least understandable.

Santana laughed. “You’re still here then, Nosey... yes they do.”

Though one of the taller members of the village, the harbinger — a biped — stood only as high as Santana’s crucifix epaulettes. Its clothing was a drab brown coverall that, nevertheless, was a good insulator. The creature’s tongue flicked and licked its lidless eyes. Reflections of flames moved in the big black globes. “From your Holy Bible... this self-talking is an instruction also?”

Santana felt a moment’s irritation. “No. Of course not.”

“But you said... everything happens through your God.”

“Yes...”

“And God does not wish... bad things to happen.”

“Of course not.”

“But this self-talking... it could lead to misunderstandings, accusations, paranoia, fatalities...”

“Enough!” Santana slapped his journal down on the crate he used as a desk. “I suspect you’ve been sent to test me, and My God you do... but I’m no saint, and I swear one of these face-freezing, nose-numbing days I’m going to wrap...” He slammed the handheld prayer device back against his forehead. It hurt even more this time, but he’d be damned if he was going to let it show.

Nostradamus shuffled forward and tapped his prehensile nose on Santana’s shoulder. “Gulliver says it’s time I show you something.” He moved towards the door.

“I’m not going out there again — not while it’s still dark anyway.”

“Gulliver says it’s something you will want to see.”

God was at it again, keeping him on his toes, always on the move, no rest... and there was no arguing with Him. Santana ran his hand over a wall-hung cylinder. It was still hot. “Tell you what... I’ll just have a coffee and then we’ll go and see what all the fuss is about.” And it had better be suitably fascinating or shocking, he thought. He’d put himself through too much to stomach an anti-climax... .

Those thoughts arrived like an ambush. This was not his way! He was disappointed and somewhat anxious.

He knew he had to leave this island, and soon.

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The prison was in a part of the village he'd visited before. They were clever, these harbingers. Who would have expected a grain exchange could house the isolation cell of the most notorious lunatic on the island?

The sky had cleared temporarily and dawn was a glittering flame on the mainland mountains when Nostradamus took Santana into the low-ceilinged barn and gestured for him to wait. Santana kicked the snow from his boots and watched his breath mist in the yellow illumination. The lamps which hung on the planked walls emitted dark smoke and Santana knew that the ceiling was as black as an atheist's soul.

Sited uniformly across the wooden floor, large tables held goods of all descriptions — not only sacks of grain, but vegetables, medicinal shrubs, hand-made wooden toys, surgical instruments, night-sky maps and astrological charts. At least that was the closest he'd come to understanding Nosey's attempted explanations. This was a temple of barter and during the day would be bustling with villagers. Here they would swap produce, skills, and ideas.

Now Santana watched as an argument ensued between his guide and a female. They appeared to curse, but they clicked and coughed so rapidly he gave up trying to follow. His understanding of their language was too basic. Then Nosey raised a long-fingered paw and struck the other on the nose. The argument was over and the female shuffled away to open a door in the far wall. Last time, they had told him this was a storeroom.

"We may go through." Nostradamus went past the female without a glance and into a dimly-lit corridor. Santana followed, ducking to avoid the lintel.

He caught up and tapped the harbinger's small shoulder. "So I'm causing a bit of a problem?"

Nosey turned. "In what way?"

"The argument. That slap."

"You don't understand... she told me you would lead us to disaster." He licked his eyes. "I was just thanking her."

They came upon a door, twice bolted on the outside. Nostradamus released the bolts and gestured with his nose for Santana to enter first.

The cell was small and cold. No window and no furniture. It should have been grim, but had a white ceiling and a frond carpet, and smelled clean, in spite of the sanitation hole in the corner and the single smoking lamp beside the door. In the centre of the cell, hanging by its bound feet from the ceiling, head hovering just short of the floor, was a harbinger. The creature was elderly, evidenced by the tufts of white fur in its button ears. Its coverall was fresh and white.

"It's sad," said Nosey. "He used to be normal. He understood that bad things come to us all and, forewarned with that knowledge, we will grasp each day to the full."

"Can you speak?" Santana asked the prisoner, tilting his own head over in an attempt at politeness.

"But he had a transformation," Nosey continued. "Forty-nine days ago. He described it as... an enlightenment."

“He’s been in this cell for forty-nine days?”

“Forty-five... we had a debate first.”

Santana stared into the prisoner’s eyes. “He doesn’t speak then?” Santana stood straight again.

“When he chooses.”

“What’s his name?”

Nosey croaked an unintelligible sound.

“That’s no use,” said Santana. “As before, I’ll have to come up with a name.”

“Call him what you wish.”

“Paul... I’ll call him Paul.”

“That is a good name,” said the hanging harbinger. His tone had the steadiness of conviction. “I am certain it will lead to good things.”

“You see now how sick he is,” said Nosey.

To Santana he didn’t look sick at all. These harbingers must have phenomenal constitutions, he thought. “Why is he suspended upside down?”

“We are torturing him, of course. Every night we lift him up and draw... a cup of blood from his veins. He weakens, and so his resolve weakens. Soon he will have a detransformation. He will... unenlighten.”

“Or die,” said Paul, lightly.

“No doubt it could all go terribly wrong,” said Nosey.

“This is ungodly.”

Nosey directed Santana towards the door. “It is our way.”

And therein lay Santana’s challenge.

* * *

The following day was an uncomfortable one for Santana. Ploughing nonchalantly through the morning’s heavy snowstorm, Nostradamus pulled him on a sled to a roofed clearing in the frond-forest to witness basket weaving. Then at lunchtime he was invited into the village’s classiest restaurant — sited on the beach and overlooking the Strait — to sample real haute cuisine, instead of the rations which had so far ensured his survival. What could best be described as pizza topping on a leather base proved to be inedible. His teeth were no match for the powerful incisors which gave the harbingers the misleading and permanent appearance of long-suffering amiability.

At sunset he was called upon to officiate at the ceremony of fertilization of the membranes, which he found distasteful and ridiculous in equal balance. He was no prude, but a sentient race really should display more reserve, especially in front of strangers.

This all strengthened his determination. He had to get Paul out of that cell. As a minister of The Lord, it was Santana’s duty to get the pariah back to the mainland. With training and teaching, Paul could be the

key to converting the entire species. A campaign plan began to take shape in the war-rooms of his mind.

Civilizing these creatures would be a huge challenge. The harbingers occupied several hundred villages across the island. The full extent of their habitations had not yet been mapped. Humans had only been on the planet for fifty years now. There was so much to learn — so much to change.

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By the next morning Santana had a plan for freeing Paul. It wasn't a good plan. It wasn't even a Christian plan, calling as it did for lying, deception, and even a bit of violence. But you can't fight the Devil with snowballs, especially not on his home ground. The plan was risky, audacious, and required the coordination of many parts, but, like a raft built of bound twigs, with luck and a following wind it should stay afloat.

By noon Nostradamus had arrived with a proposition, and the raft was sunk without a trace.

Every summer, the harbinger explained, for the past thirty-eight years since the incident — almost forty E years, he'd been told — a play would be performed to celebrate the *Intervention of the Alien*.

conclusion

Nostradamus clearly took a delight in narrating the story, as his nose whipped and snapped with the rhythm of his telling. He had settled himself on the floor of the hut and gestured for Santana to sit on the chair recently constructed for their human visitor by the pups of the Woodtool School.

“It was clear something was going to go terribly... wrong when smoke was spotted on the far side of the Strait.” Nosey licked an eye. “Our people would not venture there and the spiny quadrupeds are afraid of fire.”

“Humans,” said Santana. “The first wave.”

Nosey ignored the interruption. “One of our number, a male known to my father as... in your language, Hollow Echo, decided to build a bonfire, hoping to communicate. Unfortunately he built the fire out upon the frozen sea. He was warned, but he did not hear.” Nostradamus sprang up on his thick legs. He began to walk around the small hut. “After he'd kept the logs aflame for two days, the ice finally submitted, and he... crashed through into the sea below.”

Santana breathed heavily and clutched his handheld to his heart.

“All this was to satisfy the words of the prophet,” said Nosey.

“What prophet? You've never mentioned a prophet before.”

“My father told Hollow Echo that the ice would break.”

“That's just common sense. It's hardly clairvoyance.”

Nostradamus stopped walking and his nose became rigid. Moisture gleamed on the black globes of his eyes. “You had to be there...”

“You mentioned an alien.”

Nosey began to pace again. His wrapped feet made soft thuds on the floorboards. “In their excitement the villagers... did not see the approaching sled, which moved without pulling or pushing. Nor did they see the large creature riding upon it.”

“A human?”

“The creature was of a kind unknown to us, and unsettling to look at. It leapt from the sled and threw out a rope to Hollow Echo, who was clinging to a chunk of floating ice. As if alive, the rope coiled around Hollow Echo’s arm and the alien dragged him out of the water.”

“I’d suspected the story was going to end badly,” said Santana. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

“I did not say it would end badly.”

“But you did mention a proposition.”

“Yes.” Nostradamus stopped pacing. “We would like you to play the alien.”

* * *

Santana watched from the beach as a group of villagers cleared snow from the frozen sea and polished the surface of the ice into a makeshift arena. They stacked up the sticks for a bonfire. Snow was falling thinly and patches of blue sky had appeared.

The cold had begun to penetrate Santana’s boots and he paced about on the bristly coir-grass to keep warm.

An hour later, the snow had stopped and preparations were complete. A surprisingly large number of villagers gathered upon the beach — males, females and pups, together with a contingent of crab-like scavenging beetles that Santana preferred to think of as pets, but which he suspected were actually black-shelled chickens. Then the harbingers parted and Nostradamus emerged, and behind him, unshackled and cheerful, was Paul.

They approached Santana. Bright sky and scattered clouds were reflected in Nosey’s huge eyes. “Paul will play Hollow Echo,” he said. His teeth chattered together in apparent amusement. “A fitting name for the lunatic.”

The senior harbinger known, to Santana, as Gulliver, came out of the crowd, flanked by two lieutenants. Paul and Nosey moved to the side. One of the lieutenants lifted a huge book and held it open for Gulliver to read. The elder turned the pages with his nose, went too far, turned them the other way, then held the tip of his nose to a page. He read in universalspeak: “Welcome to... the thirty-ninth enactment of ... *The Intervention of the Alien*.” He slammed the book closed so suddenly that the lieutenant struggled to hold on to it.

Gulliver spoke directly to Santana. “This is the first time the... play will have been performed in your language. Most likely a mistake we will regret later.”

“I’m grateful for your consideration.”

“It will be a novelty.”

Nostradamus took Santana’s parka sleeve in a paw and tugged, indicating the human was to follow. They made their way onto the cloudy surface of the frozen sea.

“My lines,” said Santana, as they reached the piled sticks of the bonfire. “I don’t have any. What do I say?”

“You will know what to say.” Nosey returned towards the beach.

“But I...”

The harbinger spoke without looking back. “When the time comes, you will know.”

Paul was rearranging the sticks on the tall bonfire. “At least we’ll be warm.”

Santana gulped and swallowed frosty air. “You mean they’re going to light it!” Fear reached down from his chilled lungs and clutched his guts. He grabbed the handheld from his pocket.

“Of course.”

Santana tried to reset the frequency of the handheld to contact the security chief in New Reykjavik, but his hands were gloved and shaking.

A harbinger approached the bonfire. He was carrying a huge flask. As he tossed liquid over the wood, the smell of oil struck Santana like a slap.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” he said.

Paul pointed a stubby finger across the frozen Strait of the Aurora. “Look... Smoke!”

Santana gazed at the distant white mountains. No smoke. “Where? Where?” Perhaps help was near.

“I am simply performing my part,” said Paul. It seemed to Santana that the renegade harbinger’s smile grew wider.

“You don’t have to do this,” said Santana. “I think I’m supposed to save you... and I can’t swim.” He noticed the villagers were moving out onto the ice and circling around the performing area.

“I think I shall build a bonfire,” Paul announced.

“They’re going to kill you if you stay here, in this village.”

A flame bobbed above the heads of the crowd as a torch was carried down the beach and onto the ice. As he tried to intercept the bearer, Santana’s boots slipped and he whirled his arms to regain balance. The young creature out-maneuvred him easily and tossed the torch onto the bonfire. The oil ignited and the bonfire was ablaze.

The heat was uncomfortable on Santana’s face. He grabbed Paul’s arm and dragged him away from the fire. “We’re leaving. It’s time to go home.”

Paul did not resist and they moved towards the perimeter of the cleared area. The villagers were on the ice and blocking their way.

“Move!” Santana commanded. But the creatures remained as before. He pushed between them.

Suddenly a pup leapt at his leg and sank its teeth through outer cloth and insulation and into his flesh. He screamed and released Paul. Others now jumped upon Santana and he was forced to the ground, face pressed into the cold sea ice. “Let me go. You little bastards. Let me go!”

“Now, you remember your lines.” It was Nosey’s voice. “Let the alien go.”

Santana was released and the creatures backed off. His leg throbbed. He raised his head. Odd... There was something in the ice, a white shape, directly beneath him.

A face.

He flung himself away.

A human face... only a fist’s depth below the surface. Pale, rigid and timeless. The eyes stared with the terror of death. The teeth were bared from drawn-back lips.

Santana got up onto his knees. He was shaking. So this is what happened to the alien. They put him into the ice... preserved him all these years. Santana jumped to his feet.

Nostradamus was close.

“Why? Why kill him? He saved one of you. He was a hero.”

“Oh yes,” said Nosey. “And at first we welcomed him. But his optimism was depressing. He began to upset the elders. We had a debate and decided his people were in need of re-educating.”

“How does killing him achieve that?”

“He was asked to take my father back to his city to teach his people our way, but he refused. So my father insisted.”

“You mean he tortured the poor man?”

“The alien had a transformation and agreed to take my father.”

Santana stared down at the body in the misted ice. “What went wrong?”

“The alien had deceived us and tried to leave by night, alone.”

“So your father killed him.”

“The ice was still thin... and the alien was careless. He had been warned that something dreadful was bound to happen.” Nostradamus’s nose grew rigid, his eyes reflected fire. “Now we finish the play.”

Santana grabbed Paul’s arm and charged at the villagers, hauling the harbinger behind him. As though stunned, the creatures parted and let them through. The fugitives ran up the beach, feet skidding on frosty stones, then set off into the frond-forest and the safety of Santana’s sled.

No-one followed them and presently Santana slowed to a walk. The elderly harbinger was gasping for breath. It would be a tough journey home. Five hours across the Strait and then three days to New Reykjavik. Difficult and dangerous. But God would look after him. Hadn’t God always looked after him?

The sled was where he had left it, hidden under decaying fronds and a scattering of balloon-tree leaves. Santana tore the cover away. “I’m sure you can squeeze into the rear storage compartment,” he said. “There’s only the tent in there — everything else, all the food, is back at the hut.”

“I am certain we will manage.”

“I wish I had your optimism.”

Then Santana noticed something upon the driver's seat. A package wrapped in cloth. He opened it and found his own food. Biscuits and many of his concentrates. There was enough here to see them home. But who was the mysterious benefactor?

It could only be Nostradamus. His friend Nosey. The harbinger had known what was coming and had prepared Santana's escape. That creature would make a Christian yet!

They rode the sled down to the sea and, within an hour, the island of the harbingers was no more than a portentous smudge upon the fading horizon.

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Civilization greeted Paul with fascination and celebrity. He was interviewed by the media. He held audience with the wealthy and curious. Santana attempted to train him in the ways of the Church as preparation for returning him to the island, but Paul showed little interest. Instead, the harbinger followed his own path.

By the end of the first year in New Reykjavic, Paul had established a network of xenophiles and hangers-on. He liked to call them disciples. Santana meanwhile had gained news of an indigenous race of tripeds with a tradition of epic literature and cannibalism. He gathered his safari suit and sun creams and headed for the tropics.

Paul, however, stayed in the city that had made him so welcome.

On the first and third Thursday of every month, he could be found in an upstairs room in the quayside Beowolf Inn, with his growing group of disciples and a handful of visiting seafarers. He would tell them of the long history of his people, the story of the first alien, and the adventure of Jesus Santana and his mission to the island. He told them how his own son had once hung him up by his heels for an hour, in a cold cell, head pounding and legs aching, as a selfless sacrifice to help the visitors to this world.

And he would tell them not to concern themselves with mapping out the future — with careful planning and anxious trepidation. Only one universal law governed the path of life.

Something dreadful was bound to happen.