

# The Baylah Run

And Other Quantum  
Leaps of Imagination

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*For Maggie -*

*we miss you greatly*



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*Tom D Wright*

## FOREWARD

One of the great good joys of teaching writing is the acquisition of talented students. In this I've been lucky, and Tom Wright has been solidly among that crop of new writers that the world is planting for the benefit of readers everywhere, as this collection makes evident. Tom writes about endings that are also transformations and redemptions, chances to change the past or future that are never insignificant. His characters deal with a world that sometimes makes no sense to them or seems actively hostile, always working to reclaim the pieces of it that they can.

His details are evocative, his worlds richly realized. In the title story – or sequence, really, since it's told in three parts – “The Baylah Run,” a trio of characters, Mae, Rhan, and Baylah, all struggle with their linkages to each other and Rhan's dead wife, Jessine. Each successive part does what it should, building on and amplifying the preceding section. It could be an ordinary story of jealousy and the ghosts of memory, but Tom makes it more, finishing with one of those endings that hurts but feels right, as though the story could end no other way.

Whether aliens talking in scent patterns or humans confined to a body that is brain and spine alone, Tom's characters are unique, distinct personalities, ones that we come to care about, knowing all the while that they may not have achieved happiness by the end of the story, despite our good wishes for them. It's the mark of a good storyteller that they can make you hold your breath in trepidation for a character, but continue reading on because you care whether or not they meet the fate you fear.

So read on. There's plenty of surprises for you in store.

Cat Rambo

January 4, 2015





## THE RUIN OF AVALON

As I stood outside those newly uncovered doors, the presence of some ancient iniquity clung to my psionic senses, like a dangling bead of sweat refusing to let go. Evil lurked there, within the ruins, Marla; I am glad you never saw them.

Had he been there, I am sure Dr. Carlyle would have rejoiced; this was why he came to Avalon. At the bottom of the trench a section of one door had collapsed, letting dark grainy sand flow through to form a beachhead inside. Lengthening shadows cast by the harsh bluish sun already obscured most of the dig, but I had time to send in a probe.

Still, I hesitated.

“Son, these ruins can wait another ten thousand years, but I don’t have that long,” Dr. C chided me, that first day when we set up camp and he caught me napping. If nothing else, before he died he taught me not to waste time.

Shrugging off my apprehension, I retrieved a surveyor-bot from the groundcar and set it before the dark opening. The sand was already cooling down in the shaded part of the trench where I sat, as I slipped on the viewing goggles and control glove.

The bot moved inside when I tilted my palm forward, and the goggles displayed an image of a wall constructed with featureless tight-fitting blocks. Unlike the previous sand-filled structures I uncovered, this chamber had been sealed and preserved from the ravages of time. I turned and tilted my head, and the camera

panned across a round sepulchral chamber perhaps forty-feet wide, with twenty-foot high walls that joined the concave surface of a shallow dome. A pile of debris lay in the middle of the barren room, and a large passage opened in the wall on the far side.

Thick silence pressed in on me, breached only by the jagged sound of my breathing. None of the xenoarchaeology classes, none of the endlessly pontificating texts and none of the monotonous lectures on theory at the university had prepared me for this—the reality of an actual find. Dr. C was supposed to be here telling me what to document, what I should not touch, and pointing out the things I usually missed. He had been more than just a teacher or even a mentor, he had been like a father.

His absence surrounded me.

A twist of my hand directed the bot to move toward the center of the room, casting more light on the dust-covered debris. I almost jumped when at least half a dozen skeletons came into view, sprawled and entangled in random directions amidst a pile of what might be wood fragments, which lay in the threshold of the passage.

With my free hand I switched off the display, then took several deep breaths to quiet and focus my mind. Aside from supervising my thesis, the main reason Dr. C brought me was my clairvoyance, because sensing the past came in handy when locating new dig sites. I stretched my senses toward the room and gasped as a shiver burst through my body. Cold, delicate traces of alien ghosts lingered in that chamber, like the soft touch of butterfly wings.

No, Marla, these were not really ghosts, but rather the echoes of a long-distant past. Too distant for me to perceive more than their presence, but they could be amplified. The Psychometric Transducer Array, or PsTAR, would strengthen and tune the psionic echoes, the way a sonar technician used a hydrophone.

‘Don’t be superstitious’, I told myself and turned the display back on. No other artifacts were visible in the chamber, but as eager as I was to examine this find, the probe had to do a full atmospheric analysis of the chamber before I could enter and look for myself. The process started, I scrambled out of the trench and called the nearest supervisor robot over. Supbots were invaluable for managing the local native workers whom we called dirks.

“I want one bot standing watch on each side of that door, and the third bot right here in front,” I ordered it. Superstition or not, I

sensed something in that chamber which made me feel uneasy. Those were the first psionic traces I had detected, which were more than just background static, since arriving on that desolate planet. As the supbots moved into position, I added, "Stun anything that comes within ten yards, especially if it comes out of the door, and maintain a live video stream to my comm unit."

"Yes, Boss," the supbot responded in the deep, bass voice that was supposed to instill authority and respect in the workers, though it seemed to have limited effect on them. I confirmed that I was getting a video stream, then rested in my groundcar while it drove the ten minutes back to the compound where I lived with my wife, Heathera.

As the car navigated itself through the barren hills, I started to let myself imagine that maybe I finally had something I could hang a dissertation on.



The stated purpose of the Avalon Scientific Research Mission was to study the planet before it opened up to colonization, but the mission was a military operation and Commander Standish ensured that every member of the team knew it. Every day.

An electrified perimeter fence enclosed the small airfield, buildings and hangars that we called Camelot. The camp's two squads jogged in formation along the landing strip, calling cadence as they completed their last laps. Their chants echoed in the chalky dust of the empty street, when the car pulled up to the squat building that was the designated command post and I hopped out.

A sign declared that I was not to enter the Planetary Headquarters without authorization. The primitive, single story modified insta-hab structure, featureless aside from several windows and a door, served as both office and quarters for the Commander.

The door slipped out of my grasp as I flung it open and smacked into the wall with a metallic whang, before it bounced back toward me. The young, attractive aide-de-camp looked up from her meticulous desk in surprise, then silently held her hand up as she gave me her 'just go away' look and pointed back out the door.

"Not this time," I said, taking a couple steps into the anteroom and toward the back office. "Whatever Standish is doing, it's minor compared to my news. I've found the reason we're here."

“Alright, wait there and I will advise Commander Standish that you are here to see him,” Lieutenant Jacqueline Buchet said as she stood and carefully adjusted her uniform back to perfection, then headed toward the door to his office. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Keeping her frowning eyes fixed on me, she cracked the door open and called into the room, “Sorry to interrupt, sir, but Brendel is here and he insists on seeing you right now.” She nodded in response to his muffled response and closing the door, gestured toward the only other items in the spartan room: a pair of worn metal chairs designed to wring regret out of their occupants while they awaited a meeting.

Despite the excitement balled up inside me, I waited over by the chairs but the space was too small for me to pace. I was about to sit when the door snapped open and Commander Standish strode through. His burly shape filled most of the doorway, but not enough to hide my wife’s flushed face while she scowled at the unfastened blouse she was tucking into her skirt.

I did not need a sixth sense to know what my intrusion interrupted. Heathera and I had not been intimate for a couple years, since landing on that forsaken planet. The first rumors about her affair came out right after Dr. C died. I was so consumed with shock and grief at the time that I did not believe them, and when she finally admitted it to me, I was beyond caring any more.

She did not interfere with my work at the dig, so I tolerated her affair with Standish for the sake of our four-year-old daughter, Saphora. The only common bond Heathera and I still shared was three and a half feet high, weighed about thirty-five pounds and had her mother’s blond hair.

Standish silently waited outside the door, his narrow eyes drilling into mine as Heathera stepped into her shoes and stamped out of his office, her crossed arms holding her top together. She focused on the front door while she walked by and, along with the breeze of her passage, I felt a stab of anguished pain as I recalled the love we once had between us. Her glassy eyes never wavered as she stormed through the door and out of sight.

Without a word, Standish turned back into his office and I followed him in. Several trophy cases filled one side and pictures covered the opposite wall, so that the small room was more like a personal museum than an office.

Standish pointed at the chair in front of his desk, matching the ones in the anteroom, and made sure I watched while he slowly rearranged all the items on the desktop that had been pushed to one side. With a contemptuous glance he then sat in his chair, and whipped his words at me across his desk.

“What was so important, that it had to interrupt a community liaison meeting? I was deep in a discussion with your wife about a problem she brought to my attention. In fact I was just about to help her find a satisfying answer, so this had better be good.”

My arms trembled as I gripped the sides of the chair, and Standish’s twitching smile begged me to try clobbering the sneer off his face. I no longer cared what Heathera chose to do but he did not have to take such pleasure rubbing it in. Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself—archaeology was much more important than his petty game.

“A couple days ago, I pinpointed the center of the ruins we’ve been excavating and directed the dirks to clear the side of a mound. Well, this afternoon they uncovered a pair of doors.” As I continued with my report, Standish started leafing through some paperwork on his desk. But when I started describing the intact chamber he looked up and leaned forward, half rising out of his chair.

“Did you see any writing or pictures? Any machinery?”

“The space was empty,” I replied. “But it looked like it hadn’t been disturbed since the city fell. I set the supbots to guard the site when I left.” I did not mention my foreboding, or that I was less concerned about what might get in, than I was about what might come out.

“Thinking about security, that’s a first,” Standish snorted. “You are to make careful records of this site and how you located it, and disturb nothing. Understand?”

“But we’re here to do research!” I rose up in anger, leaning over his desk and raising my voice. “How can you tell me to stop now, when I’ve finally found something worth researching?”

“You’re just a student, and a discovery this important requires a real scientist. Now sit down!” Standish stared at me, and after a few, long seconds I sat back in my chair and quietly seethed.

He continued, “You’ve made no progress since we’ve been here. We need to understand what happened to the original inhabitants so that whatever or whoever killed them off doesn’t do the same to us. Luckily, Dr. Harriman is aboard the incoming supply ship.

Thanks to your find, he'll soon get this project back on track."

Harriman—the room spun around me. The last time I saw him was the board meeting when Dr. C petitioned to bring me as a research assistant. Regent Professor Harriman pandered to whatever the military wanted, and they were adamantly opposed to my presence on the mission. But Dr. C had centuries of university tradition behind him, so even the regent could not force him to leave me behind. The issue was settled when Harriman suffered a mild stroke because someone had the audacity to oppose him and a medvac bundled him off. We left the next day while Harriman was still undergoing bio-reconstruction.

Marla, Harriman could not find the tail on a mouse.

I took a deep breath and forced my thoughts back into the room. "Yes sir. I'll get everything ready for him. I'm sure we'll make a lot of progress once he's on the site."

Stunned and deflated, I quietly rose and turned to leave when Standish added, "I suggest you use this time to make your records as complete as possible. Dr. Harriman will decide, based on your work, whether to retain you on the dig."

The commander was not giving me fatherly advice. The gloating smile on his face said that my fate had already been decided, and he wanted to make sure I knew it.