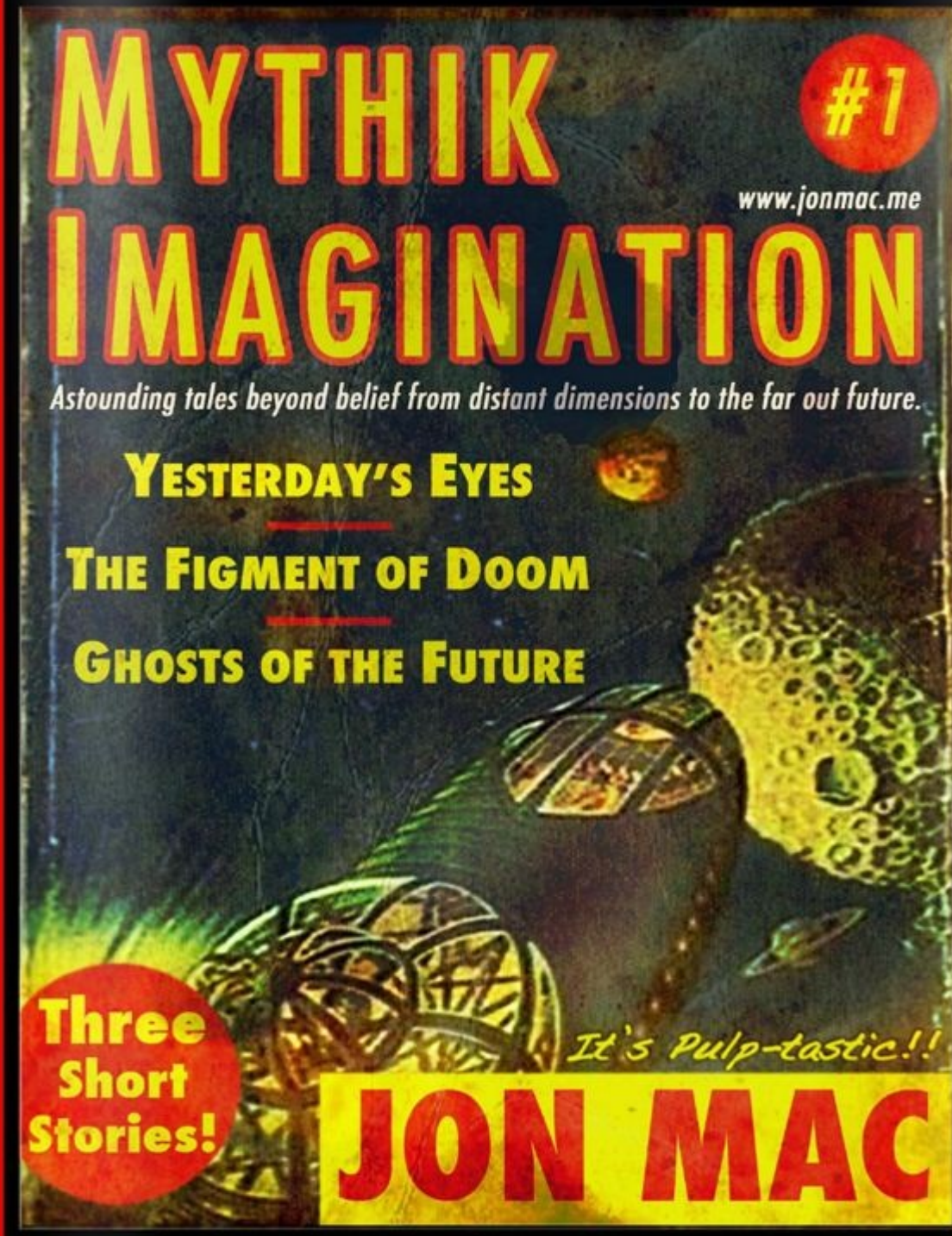
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MYTHIK IMAGINATION #1

By

Jon Mac

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YESTERDAY'S EYES

The blight of Prison made a whole world untouchable. It was a cesspool of nightmares; the one place the criminals and undesirables of two worlds feared like the bogeyman of a child's fairy tale. It was much more than any common detention facility and had an entire world all to itself, isolated on the smallest of three moons circling a dead planet.

The inhabitants of the other two moons, Arila and Torjal, despised each other with a venomous hate so deep, so sublime, it ruled their very existence. After eons of strife, they agreed on only one thing: the mutual Prison where outcasts were doomed to the horrid fate of sharing what was left of their miserable lives with the hated beings from another world.

The name of the dead planet orbited by the three moons was forever lost to history. It had been colonized by another star system too long ago to be remembered as anything other than myth. Once, the Arilans and Torjalians had lived there together as one people. But for reasons lost to history, peace led to unrest, and unrest to unending conflict, so that after untold ages of war, they had finally succeeded in transforming the surface of the planet into an uninhabitable wasteland. The few survivors claimed the two moons farthest from one another—one moon for each side—as their new homes. In the millennia of decay since then, separated by space, their corrupt civilizations grew, along with their ever-developing mental abilities fueled by hatred. The price of such abilities was a slow regression of technology.

Nobody knew exactly *how* old Prison really was. It once held thousands of prisoners from each race. That proved disastrous because the convicts killed each other so fast they couldn't be replaced quickly enough. After many centuries of trial and error, an optimum number was found to make the torture as efficient as possible. Lately, it was hard to keep up even with that smaller number. Not because there weren't enough undesirables, but because both Arilans and Torjalians barely understood how to repair the convict ships, and it was getting more and more expensive to operate them.

For those unfortunate souls who were deemed worthy enough to merit the cost of the trip, it was considered the ultimate punishment: a fate worse than death and filled only with the darkest emotions of hate and fear, emotions which eroded the life away from the convicts. Since only the

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vilest of criminals were sent to Prison, its population was relatively small, easily overseen by guards of both races who were isolated from their despised rivals at all times. Guard duty itself was a form of punishment for lesser offenses, and Prison's overseers routinely relieved their own misery at the expense of the inmates.

One such guard was Balakon. He was from Arila and desperate to return home. His long, agonizing "tour of duty" would be over in a mere matter of days, although each day dragged on like a decade. He could hardly bear to spend one more second here.

He came into contact with prisoners only during the night, when the inmates were isolated in their tiny cells. In the daytime they were forced into the large, open Yard to face the Torjal prisoners deposited there by their own guards. Balakon considered it a diabolically constructed plan that the prisoners were allowed a brief respite during the dark hours. It served to make their long day of confrontation all the more unbearable.

It was dark now, just after the sunset meal for the prisoners. Balakon was standing outside the cell of a recent arrival. The cells were claustrophobic little hellholes and the only place an inmate ever occupied, other than the Yard. Balakon made a half-hearted gesture, and part of the cell wall turned transparent. The guard was a big man, or had been before wasting away in this mentally oppressive environment. But that was nothing compared to what the prisoners suffered. He looked inside at the new fish.

The prisoner looked gaunt and tired. In fact, he had not eaten in several days as punishment for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to one of the other guards. He turned his bruised face to the transparent wall. He looked pitifully average. Not the usual hardened-criminal type at all. His name was Zinj, and he gazed at the guard with a calm defiance that surprised and irritated Balakon.

"Word is you're not adjusting well. Trying to be a hard ass," he said to the prisoner.

Zinj looked back with calm blue eyes. Eyes that would soon become vacant and dead, Balakon thought.

"I shouldn't be here," the prisoner said simply.

"I know; all convicts are innocent." The guard smiled. "It's always the same. See how far that gets you. This is your new home. Forever. With the right attitude, you might even last a bit. If not . . ." He shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. We're forbidden to kill you, so we leave that to the

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Torjals. But believe it or not, we can add a whole freight train of pain to your misery. Just a little advice because I'm out soon, and that has given me a certain amount of, ah, compassion." *Yeah, I'm going home, while you stay to rot and disintegrate in this hell*, Balakon thought to himself, knowing the doomed prisoner realized it as well.

The guard smiled as the wall dissolved back into place. Compassion, yeah right. Tormenting inmates even more than usual should ease the agony of his final days here.

* * *

Zinj was surprised by the food he received for the sunrise meal. It was incredibly meager, though, and seemed to make him even hungrier. He had barely finished eating when one wall of his cell slowly lifted without a sound to reveal the Yard outside.

He felt a hot, tingling sensation begin to burn his skin, and he was steadily pushed outside by an irresistible, unseen power. As soon as he was out of the cell, the invisible force ceased its pushing and burning, and he quickly jumped clear of the opening as the portal slid down with crashing speed. It wasn't unusual for unwary prisoners to be crushed to an agonizing death.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Zinj could hear the steady, ominous sound of the line of portals closing in random order along the Wall. Similar sounds echoed distantly from the opposite side of the Yard as Torjalian convicts were forced from their cells in their side of the Yard's wall in the same way. This was how every day always began.

The Yard was still submerged in long morning shadows. Zinj staggered under the slowly brightening sky as a rushing force of alien thoughts slammed into his mind like a tidal wave. As the last of the portals closed, the full force of Torjal hatred swept over him. He swayed with dizziness and pain as he fought to shield his mind, but black thoughts of disgust, loathing and fear overwhelmed his senses. He reeled back, fighting with all his might to keep the mental attacks at bay. Sharp, piercing pain, like a thousand burning hot needles ripping into his entire body flowed through him. After a few minutes, he managed to subdue this rush of emotions to an almost bearable level. He staggered against the Wall and vomited pathetically in front of his own portal. He was vaguely aware of a few glances from older prisoners at the new fish's gagging troubles. But they

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didn't really care enough to make an issue of it. Their own survival took every scrap of energy.

Finally, he caught his breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He'd only been here a few days and already it felt like a lifetime. He took a slow look around the Yard. It was roughly square and very large. On his first day, less than a week ago, he had walked along the Arilan side—the side where they were released each morning—known as the Wall, and it had taken over 3000 paces. All four of the towering gray walls were very tall and smooth, and he had not been able to throw a stone more than halfway to the top. Looking across the Yard on the opposite side, he could catch brief glimpses of the enemy prisoners through clumps of scraggly trees and brushy vegetation. The vast expanse of the Yard was filled with the varied terrain of hills, boulders, small forests and crude shelters scattered about. At one time, it might have beautiful, but countless centuries of mental anguish had contaminated even the landscape, turning it bleak and ugly.

He gazed along the Wall. There were no more than a couple hundred Arilan inmates, and he judged there were about the same number of Torjals. There was seldom open warfare between the two races. The hatred was more mental than physical, although small wars broke out from time to time, usually when one side had mentally worn down the other enough to finish off some of the weaklings with a quick killing blow.

Zinj heard The Old One laugh. She was the leader of the Arilan prisoners—not that they usually had much need of leadership. Daily survival against the Torjals pretty much took up all time and effort. But she was the most powerful Arilan prisoner, and the others usually did whatever she said. She walked toward him. She looked old and gray and stooped, but when you took a second look, she seemed not so much old as weathered, like one of the big trees in the Yard that had seen a thousand storms and was somehow all the stronger for it. She was probably the only prisoner in the yard capable of laughter this early in the morning.

"A fine way to start another fine day," The Old One said. She imitated his earlier gagging fit.

Zinj was still trembling from the force of hatred coming from the other side of the courtyard. The Old One stopped smiling and looked at Zinj gravely.

"Your shield is incomplete," she said. "You better start kissing some hatred, cupcake."

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"Yes; I know. I'm trying."

She shook her head in disgust.

Zinj summoned all of his will and poured it into despising and loathing thoughts. He thought of the way Balakon made him feel and focused that feeling toward the Torjals. The pain in his mind subsided a little.

"You've a lot to learn, boy. At this rate, you'll be lucky to last a week."

"I'll survive."

She laughed again, not a pleasant sound. This fool never ceased to surprise her. That was part of the reason she tolerated his company. He was amusing.

"What do you know about survival?" she asked Zinj. "Look at me. I'm probably younger than you. They call me The Old One because I've survived longer than any other prisoner. Ten long years of hell, and by now I'm almost immune. I get my greatest enjoyment from hating and killing Torjals. I kill them with my mind or with a rock; it makes no difference. And I do as I please, when I please. That is survival."

They walked to a rough wooden hut that was at least minimally shielded from Torjalian thoughts. That was another part of the diabolical Prison experience: prisoners were given just enough occasional protection to make the sudden and random outbursts of mental destruction all the more devastating. Zinj sat down, his body already weary in the new day.

"What did you do to be sent here?" he asked.

The Old One chuckled. "So, you're foolish, weak *and* rude. You're an entertaining fish, all right."

"Sorry."

"Hey, anything to pass the time. I used force against a fellow being."

"That got you got the ultimate punishment?"

"He was a high-ranking official . . ." She paused a moment. "The Governor's cousin. He annoyed me, and I lost my temper. That annoyed the Governor. That—and the twenty or so pieces of the cousin they were able to find. In another Age, I could have been a hero of the war. But not now. Not since the No Contact Treaty. So here I am."

"I don't know why I'm here," Zinj said.

"I didn't ask."

Zinj let it drop. His accusers had said he conspired against the government. But the cold, harsh truth was he had been framed. The wheels of Arilan justice turn quickly, if not always effectively. He was a man of

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ideas and determination, traits that were not always looked upon with favor on Arila. Only the determination part would be remotely useful on Prison.

"I'm going to escape from this place," he said finally.

This brought another burst of laughter from The Old One. "Boy, you are a joy. It's nice to have intriguing conversation for once, even with a fool. Escape is impossible. If anybody could have escaped, I would have done it by now. The only escape is death."

"Death by escape is better than death by hatred."

"Hatred will keep you alive, boy." She paused for effect, then shook her head with melodramatic sadness. "If you are the best example of the kind of vile, low-life scumbag on which Arila is willing to spend money to send here, then we all might as well slit our own throats right now."

* * *

When night came, Zinj considered it a near miracle he had survived another day. One of the Arilan prisoners had gone insane and hung himself from a tree, but he'd botched the job and had been twitching and moaning in the wind all afternoon. The Old One had organized a rock-throwing game with her cronies to see who could hit the hanged man from the farthest distance.

When the sunset bell sounded, Zinj ran with the other prisoners toward the Wall. It would be only a short time until the portal to his cell opened, and then he would only have a few moments before it closed again. Any prisoners found in the Yard after nightfall would be put to death. He didn't know exactly how, but sometimes in the morning they would find a body too mutilated to recognize—no doubt a rare but welcome entertainment for bored guards.

He wasn't hungry and could barely eat. He fell asleep, his thoughts troubled, dreading the day to come. He tried to fight off the feeling, knowing that was what his sadistic captors wanted, but was entirely unsuccessful.

* * *

The next day The Old One led a small group on a raid to probe for weakened Torjals. For some reason, Zinj wanted no part of this and managed to quietly slip away to a small grove of trees. He wandered

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aimlessly for a long time, occasionally stopping whenever the painful Torjalian thoughts seemed to diminish. Once they grew stronger he would move on. The pain didn't seem as bad if he kept moving. At one point, there was a peculiar, unfamiliar feeling in his mind. It was very different from the pain of Torjalian hatred. He seemed compelled to venture deeper into the woods.

Presently he heard a low moaning sound. Curious, he tried to locate it. He stumbled about for a while, then suddenly came upon the inert body of a young woman. She was sprawled at the base of a large tree. Blood flowed from a vicious gash in her head. His surprise turned into shock: she was a Torjal.

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