

**Dr. OCCULARI**

# **VAIL'S WORLD**

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THE FAR HERE AND NOW

Part 1

**CHERISHED ILLUSIONS**

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#### 1.1.1 release

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## TYPO REPORTING

I am my own proofreader, and I'm not good at it. Proofreading, for me, is like pulling weeds: every time I come back to the manuscript it has grown new errors.

When you, dear reader, inevitably come across typos and grammatical errors (I'm especially bad with homonyms), if you are so inclined, I would appreciate you letting me know.

Send typo and error reports to:  
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Please report the error and the correction. Include the title of the work, the release number, the chapter (if there are chapters), and enough text surrounding the error so I can find it with a search.

I am looking for obvious typos and errors, not critiques.

Thanks so much for your sharp eye.

Special Note: In this story tense usage is intentionally weird. Please try to grok it before reporting errors.



## CHERISHED ILLUSIONS

*One morning in the far here-and-now, Vail  
Ramjmaman finds herself in a race against  
dawn . . .*

She rushes along a gravel road winding through fields of barley, pumping the stirrups of a bi-wheeler, its bamboo frame shaped and stressed to imitate the form and motion of a cheetah: the fast, spotted, savannah cat of the Grath equatorial reserve. In the almost-dark, she peddles up a shallow incline, building a sweat, then brakes hard at the crest sliding sideways on the gravel. She dismounts, drops the bi-wheeler in the ditch on the south side of the road (so as not to impede, or be run over by, a passing agrarian hauler) and runs through waist high barley to a rise several decameters to the south, from which, she knows, there will be an unobstructed view of the skyport lawn.

‘I made it!’ she says, breathing hard.

She can see by the light of a few work lamps, and the dawn glow rising from the east, that the lawn is mostly

empty. A few Os couriers, looking like baby owls with their fat, little displacement hulls and stubby wings, are tied down on the far side. Two are being pulled onto the lawn, ready to scurry aloft at daybreak, but the large vessel area is empty. The Cherished Illusions, a conglomeration of cloud-ships, must still be inbound.

While her breath settles, Vail looks into the northern sky. The Ghost River is lost in the accumulating dawn light, along with the fine dust of the dimmest stars. The ever present, razor-thin Great Arc slices from east to west across the sky. A few of the brighter drift objects, lit from beyond the horizon by the approaching sun, move at random angles; one skims along, following a pole-to-pole path. Three of the solar moons are spread out across the sky following their slow, distant ellipses far beyond the Great Arc, but the world's moon, in early crescent phase, is missing, having set before deep night.

Vail's breathing is approaching a resting pace. Her sweating, however, is increasing. She presses her handkerchief against her forehead and feels heat radiating off her skin. This isn't a residue of exertion; she is burning up with a fever. Then she notices the sharp pain in her stomach just below her breastbone and realizes it has been there, slowly building, throughout her mad dash from the Great City proper to this spot in the agrarian surround.

She has enough warning before retching that she is able to bend forward, saving her jacket and sweeth, but not the cuffs of her pants, or her shoes, from the bile that comes up. Vail's head swirls. She reaches back—not knowing

what for—finds nothing and instead sits quickly in the barley before the dizziness knocks her off her feet.



*Three hours retrograde the elf says . . .*

‘This will immunize you, but there may be lingering side effects,’ and then sticks Vail in the buttock with that long needle.

Vail does not know the meaning of immunize, and is not sure what to make of side effects but the thing the elf has put in Vail’s ear, the thing it calls the voice of Harry, a pig god, whispers an explanation. ‘Immunize means you will be protected from the most dire consequences, such as dying, but side effects means you will not be protected from less dire consequences like feeling sick.’



Sick indeed! She rubs her right cheek: no longer sore but still tender, and the seat of her pants is soaking wet, as are the shoulders of her jacket and the front of her pants legs. The barley is dripping with dew.

The pain in her stomach has departed along with the bile, but her head continues to spin, and she is still burning with fever. Vail lifts the strap of her bag over her head—the bag that holds the thing—and sets it to the side, pressing down some barley to make a place for it.

She reaches forward, and undoes the tiny golden hasps of her bile covered shoes. Each hasp is fashioned after the mischievous face of Jolo, the trickster dragon, biting and holding tenaciously to the hasp ring until forced to let go by the press of her thumb between its eyes. She pulls off

her shoes, nearly toppling backward when removing the second one. She tries cleaning them with an ear of barley, fails, and sets them next to the bag.

She pulls off her jacket, damp on the inside from sweat, and wet on the outside from dew. It is decorated with the woven image of Hast, the dragon of dreams, rising from the dim night-glow of a Great City into a deep-blue starry sky. It spreads its wings across the jacket's shoulders and coyly wraps its two heads around the collar to whisper sweet dreams in one ear and nightmares in the other, or worse, boring dreams into both. Vail picks children's dragon stories as her adornment for what should have been an all-night euphoria laden celebration. She should be hungover by now. She understands hangovers but doesn't know anything about mysterious fevers induced by elves. Vail folds the jacket and sets it on the bag.

Next, she unwraps her sweeth. Its silk dyed and painted with the form of the unseeable, unnamed Dragon of the Os, the only true dragon, the one of which all other dragons are but shadows. The illuminator of this cloth truly achieves the sublime: Lay the sweeth out and you see a pastoral landscape at the edge of a Great City surround where developed land folds into feral reserve, but look at it long enough, and you see the dragon—its tail in the shape of clouds, its body in a stand of trees, its head, the rocky tumble of a river cascade. When Vail puts on the sweeth, this almost invisible dragon follows the cloth across her shoulders, around her torso, and twice around her waist before tucking its head and tail into the small of her back. Now, in reverse, it uncoils into her hands.

She folds the sweeth on top of the jacket, then pulls her blouse over her head. (The mirrored, embroidered, white on cotton-white forms of the friendly little twin dragons, Clev and Eur, chase up the sleeves, crisscross the back, dive under the arms and finally meet, face-to-face, on the front panels.) She folds it on top of the sweeth, then unhooks the waist strap of her pants: made of a silk and gossamer blend, they are loose, flowing, and almost impossible to damage, also dyed and painted, but with the world girdling coils of the eponymous dragon, Ocean, and hemmed at the cuffs with fine, gold imbued gossamer thread in the shape of waves. She kicks her pants off her legs; too tired, too dizzy, too hot to do anything more with them. She lays back in the wet barley, feeling the dew against her skin, desperate to cool off.

*She looks up . . .*

By now the sky is bright enough to hide all the stars except a handful straight up in the deep ultramarine of the zenith. Vail's fever addled senses attempt to swirl those stars around. Like when I am a child, she thinks, growing up in the surround of the Great City of Instantiation at the forever balmy Top of the World where day and night are synonymous with summer and winter. In the long, warm night of winter she sometimes lies under the stars, even sleeps under them. She remembers how, if she remains calm enough, for long enough, she can see the stars move, ever so slowly, on the edge of perception. Sometimes she is sure she can do more than see them move. She feels the whole sky rotate around the dark axis,

pulling on her, wanting her to join its day-long, once-around dance.

The first time she sees the stars move Vail is lying on the grass behind the family-house organized by Sussa Kolekek: the house where she and her father live. She is lying opposite her best friend, Santh, with the tops of their heads touching. 'The sky is turning,' she says. 'I can see it!'

Santh is silent, but Vail feels, through the top of her head, his breath slow, becoming deliberately regular. 'I see it too.' He lets his breath out, and takes in another. 'Compared to this, watching clouds move is a walkaway.'

Vail smiles, but in her breast, she feels a pang of pure heartache, the kind only children with no experience of the world can feel. If only they are adults practicing their vocations, she thinks, she will pick Santh to be the father of her first child, and for her second also. But it can't be. After receiving their vocations, they will never see each other again.

*The stars are gone . . .*

The zenith has lightened to a sapphire blue. All around, dew sparkles. The sun is up, but low, just above the eastern horizon, sending its light skittering sideways across the land from the Great City's Os Engine tower to granary silos in the surround, to anything poking up and facing east, to finally light up the east slopes of the western timber reserve.

At the Top of the World, this is the continuous light of the early growing season when the agrarian communities

are bringing in the first harvests, taking the pressure off ocean husbandries like the one where Vail grows up.

She spends her childhood within five degrees of the Northern Axis, knowing nothing but the steady, horizontal spin of the sky. Upon making her twelfth tilt, Vail is sent three-quarters of the way around the world to learn her vocation, here, in the Great City of Correspondence: forty-seven degrees from the Southern Axis (which is not warm at all).

The way the rest of humanity experiences the cycling of the sky seems sped up. Away from the axis, days and nights flutter by, like a child blinking fast to make everyone move with a stutter: day-night-day-night-day-night; blink-blink-blink. Of all the changes the vocational diaspora brings about, the sudden change in the day-night cycle is the hardest for those from the Top of the World to get used to. By the time she makes her fourteenth tilt, Vail meets several others from the Laz continental group; they all agree, the experience of day and night away from the axis feels wrong. Emamas Tohoshin, the old woman who manages the clothing exchange where Vail finds the sweeth, grows up in the Great City of Happenstance, across the Inner Fecund Sea from the Great City of Instantiation. She says she cannot fully adjust to day and night, and, she jokes, having made thirty-two tilts, she expects to never have much time left to get used to it.

*The zenith is sky blue . . .*

The dew has evaporated. The sun is high enough to reach into the barley and warm Vail's skin. There is a quiet

buzzing in the background. Bees, she thinks. She presses her palm against her forehead; it's cool. The fever has broken.

She sits up, picks up the pile of clothes she had compulsively folded on top of her bag—



*The thing in the bag . . .*

'It's an artifact,' the elf says. 'Something from ancient history.'

Like immunize, the words, artifact, and ancient history, mean nothing to Vail.

The pig-god in Vail's ear attempts to explain: 'Artifact means it is not natural; it was created by someone. Ancient history means this happened long, long ago—generations ago.'

Vail is more confused. The pig-god in her ear seems to sense her aura of frustration.

'Your society's epicyclic conceptions of time and existence are quite . . . vexing' the pig-god mumbles stifling it's own frustration. 'Allow me to try again. This object, this artifact, is like a missive, but a special kind of missive, one allowed to persist, like an illumination that someone conceives and makes several tilts retrograde from now, but for this object it's not several tilts, not even hundreds of tilts, but hundreds of thousands of tilts retrograde, and its existence, through all these tilts, is contiguous. That is what we call, ancient history.'



Vail sets the clothes in the matted barley where she had been lying, and touches the bag; feeling the shape of what is inside.

No, not bees; the Cherished Illusions! Vail looks up. Through the barley, she can see the cloud-ships drifting low. The background buzzing grows into an orchestrated thrumming of overlapping impellers working with purpose, and sometimes, it seems, at cross-purposes, to nudge the drifting conglomeration of displacement cells and gondolas down to the skyport lawn.

'Not yet,' Vail says, turning back to the thing in her bag, 'You will have to wait.' Pointing at the descending ships, 'This is my world. It doesn't include elves, or pig-gods, or you!'

She stands, turning her back on the thing. This is how her night is supposed to end: probably hungover and maybe still a little drunk, but standing here, watching this beautiful, rare thing (there are only four cloud-ship settlements in all the world) float out of the sky, and settle on the lawn of the skyport of the Great City of Correspondence. She wants this memory; it is important.

An unknown voice calls out from the gravel road behind Vail, 'Excuse me!'

She turns. A young man stands at the edge of the barley field, behind a surveying camera, and next to a tri-wheeler. 'You're blocking the view,' he says, then grins and flips the camera's shutter release. *Shta-tick*.

Vail, raises her voice to be heard, 'What are you surveying?'

The man lifts the camera, hugging it around its tripod legs, collapsing and retracting them, then stuffs the camera into the bin of the tri-wheeler.

‘Hey! Where’s your locator’s mark?’

He hops on the wheeler’s saddle, puts feet to stirrups, and pumps; kicking up stones, he speeds along the gravel road.

Vail chases a few strides through the barley yelling after him, ‘There’s no beauty in a photograph; nothing sublime about it at all! It’s false memory. You . . . you . . . utilitarian pervert!’

He tops the incline to the north and disappears.

Vail walks back to her spot in the field. She has missed the landing. The Cherished Illusions is down; its gondolas moored to the ground. Lawn attendants are belaying the guy-lines dangling from the displacement cells. Even as they settle in, the cloud-ships are a glorious sight: sunlight reflects off of and refracts through their shimmering gossamer displacement cells; the multiple ship gondolas, shaped like fantastic creatures of the sky (part whale, part petrel) move in the morning breeze as though alive and nudging around to make a comfortable resting spot on the lawn.

With the tie-downs secure, tank wagons wheel out to pump off lifting gas, compensating for the diminishing ballast as travelers depart and cargo is unloaded. The wagons, adorned caricatures of bulbous young tapirs, attach their pudgy snouts to valves along the bottom edges of the gondolas making them look like scrappy, suckling broods.

Vail watches the scrum of activity until she feels the itch of burgeoning sunburn on her shoulder. She ducks into her matted nest in the barley and dresses. This time she spits on her shoes and diligently cleans them with her handkerchief before putting them on. She even manages to wipe most of the dried bile off the pant cuffs.



After dressing, she crouches, sitting on her heels, and picks up the bag. Holding it in both hands and feeling the object (the artifact?) inside, she takes a slow, contemplative breath, and speaks, not to the thing, but to the long, long ago someone who makes it.

‘I understand you have a story to tell. I can not be sure I will understand it, and if I do, I can not promise I will like it, but I will listen; everyone deserves that.’

She opens the bag and draws the object out.

