

Prelude to *Filaria*

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They were digging, though digging was not in their nature. Awkward and hunched, under a relentless sun, exposed to all harsh elements, for several seasons they laboured, chipping away at the slurry, primitive tools either wrapped in a taloned foot or pincerd between long, weak fingers. If they became injured, or died at the task, their bodies were dragged aside, to be replaced immediately by yet another, which had jostled and shrieked and fought for the dubious spot.

At dusk, granted a few hours respite, they caused a veritable sandstorm lifting off, en masse, to roost; at dawn, after quickly lapping up tepid water with pin-sharp tongues—to replenish energies inexplicably stolen, again and again—they returned, darkening the morning sky with sheer numbers.

Finally, one of those clawed feet, slamming down a chunk of petrified slag, plunged through, sending debris (and the rock) plummeting into the massive cavern exposed below; with a skinny leg and pelvis dangling, trapped, the creature screamed, flapping, panicking.

After a great struggle—with no offer whatsoever of help, buffeted by the others, even struck by their rocks—the beast was at last able to extricate itself. Where the leg and lower torso had been: a hole, emanating light upwards that welled from the cavity as if it were some other matter altogether, one never seen before in the limited spectrums of their desolate land. The glowing shaft illuminated ugly faces from below, as they peered in, capturing the looks of rapture that now transfigured all, as one, for at the back of each beast's neck, a tiny polymer shell, rooted there, held in place by a thin tube through which passed back and forth even smaller devices, had triggered, as a reward, a quick burst of endorphins.

But this moment of bliss was fleeting. There was more digging to be done. The creature that had broken through, whose dry scaly shin was snapped, like a twig, and whose wings had been shredded on the slurry as it had tried to pull itself up, flopped and dragged about as best it could, searching for another rock to use before it was clubbed to death by a healthier specimen, equally eager to enlarge the hole and be the first to dive headlong into it, for that mad desire had replaced all others, including reproduction, hunting, and even eating as the prime reason to continue existence.

Now that an opening had been made, digging intensified.

And, now that an opening had been made, the jubilant little polymer shells began to emit a beacon: hydrogen-line, unidirectional, interstellar.