Behemoth

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Contents

About this Piece **v**

1 Behemoth **1**

Source **15**

About this Piece

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CHAPTER ONE

Behemoth

"Can you believe it?!" Iris nudged him. "All the way from Earth. Finally we get to see some real Earthers, Flint!" Iris said, as she giddily made little jumps next to him.

"Why aren't we moving?!"

"Everybody wants to get on," Iris responded. "A door that big, and we still have to wait?!" She pointed towards the airlock.

Flint watched her brimming with excitement, still doing her little signature jumping motions in place. The airlock leading to



the freighter Behemoth #7 stood as tall as two grain silos. It was situated at one outer end of Steadfast #2, one-half of the Citadel.

From where they stood, just inside the last segment of one of the two 32km-long and 4km-wide pipes that made up the O'Neill Cylinders, they could see the outer dome. It capped one end of the tube they called home. Steadfast #1 and #2 were a pair of counter-rotating cylinders that served as a refueling hub, located at La-grange Point 2, some 1.5 million kms from Earth. It offered food, drink, and lodging to weary travelers. These consisted mostly of workers who were coming from, or going to, their next shift re-covering rare Earth metals from distant Kuiper Belt objects. Iris and Flint had strict instructions not to interfere with the travelers. The outer dome consisted of transparent panels, made from some kind of metal alloy. They were the size of football fields near the center, gradually shrinking towards the edge. These were framed by printer-bot structures. It looked almost organic. There was a fractal symmetry to it all. In the center of the dome, a large spher-ical hatch had lifted from the airlock. It blocked their view to the other side, where co-inhabitants were making their way up to the hatch, slowly trickling in. Suddenly, the queue to enter the vessel started to move. "Uuuuugh, finally!" Iris growled. "Come on, let's go." Slowly the crowd shuffled forward.

When they finally arrived at the beginning of their ascent, a friendly woman secured them to the platform with a clipwire. "Go-ing to see the big attraction?" she asked.

"Yeah," they responded in unison.

"Mom said we could go," Iris added, just in case the woman would change her mind and send them back.

"Alright, hon," said the woman. Five other people joined them, each attached to their own cord, giving them just enough freedom to look around as the platform started its journey towards the airlock.

"You take care now." The woman waved them off, and they waved back.

Around them, the other inhabitants were either busy talking to themselves or fiddling with their ModPads. Cargo had been strapped to the platform too — great hulking containers, bigger than people. Flint and Iris cared for none of it. Their gazes were firmly fixed on the outside visitor.

"HOLY COW!" Flint shouted. He had never seen a cow and knew very little about them, but he had learned the expression from some remake of an old cartoon. "Look, Iris. Look!"

Iris's gaze followed his finger from the airlock to the walkway that extended out into space from the airlock. "What Flint? What is it?" She wrinkled her face, moved over a bit, and looked harder, to better follow his movements as he pointed again.

"Just follow that giant yellow tube," Flint said. The yellow umbilical cord was slowly rotating and twisting away from Steadfast #2. Flickering lights dotted the outside, as did the occasional porthole.

Then she saw it. "It's not going to the others."

"No, not that, silly. Of course it's not directly connected to the other side."

"How else are we going to get onto the cargo ship?"

"Look at where the walkway ends up." She started again, her eyes carefully tracking the tube's twisting and turning segments.

Then she saw it. The ends of the tubes from both Steadfast #1 and #2 embedded in two enormous slabs on the cargo ship's hull. Grooves big enough to fit a village indicated where they would slide when those doors opened. They both pressed their faces against the clear side of the moving platform. "There must be a massive bay behind that, right?" Flint suggested. "It could swallow us whole!" The other folks on their platform took no heed of the scene spreading before them.

Iris just stared at the monstrosity. It stretched out impossibly far above and below them.

"They say it can carry enough material to build at least ten Steadfasts," said a keen voice. A young man, maybe thrice their age, made the comment. "That's twenty cylinders and their contents," he explained with some heft.

"No way!" Flint responded.

"Yes way," the man replied dryly, as he launched into all kinds of details about how many metric tons the ship could haul, what kind of material the hull was made from, and all kinds of boring information the kids didn't really care about.

Iris was staring, glassy-eyed, at nothing in particular as she fantasized about the space princess that surely must live on the enormous ship outside.

Flint, too, had become bored as the man went on about the speeds the cargo ship could reach. His attention drifted towards something far more interesting. He made a small jump. Then, with more force, he jumped again. "Iris! Iris!" he shouted excitedly.

Iris, awakened from her fantasy world, turned to look at her brother.

"Check this out," he said. He spread his legs a bit, bent his knees, and jumped as high as he could. Iris could almost see the underside of his shoes.

"How are you doing that?" Iris asked in amazement.

Flint just grinned. He then proceeded to do a backflip. And a frontflip after that. Iris started clapping and cheering him on.

"Hey!" shouted the young man. "Don't fool around up here!" He folded his arms, annoyed the kids were not interested in his factoids. "Gravity may be less of a factor the closer we get to the airlock, but you would still fall to your deaths if you tumbled from the platform and your ziplines broke. So cut it out!"

The big airlock was surrounded by the same transparent material as the hull. They now stood in line below it. A double helix connected both vessels, and there was just enough gravity in the outer perimeter to allow folks to bounce along. The center had zero gravity and was used to ferry large containers back and forth.

"I think I see some Earthers!" Iris said.

"Where, where!?"

"Look at their clothing. You see? Over there. They look weird!" Iris stretched her arm and index finger as far as she could.

Flint gawked at the weirdly cut and colored clothing of the travelers.

They watched two distinct flows of people. On one track of the double helix, people in different outfits than theirs were seen moving from the Behemoth to Steadfast. While on the other, folks in their mode of fashion moved in the opposite direction.

"They look small," Iris said.

"They can't grow tall on Earth. Too much gravity." Flint responded with a hint of sorrow for the Earthers.

Some space had opened up between them and the people in front of them. "Hurry, it's almost our turn!" Flint shouted as he pulled Iris up the gentle slope spiraling towards the entrance of the airlock.

"Do your parents know you are here?" said a low voice. They looked up at a clean-shaven face packed tightly between a stiff dark blue collar and a padded helmet. "What are you two up to? Tell me."

Iris avoided the gaze of the burly officer with the grumbling voice. She crept behind Flint, who was almost four years older and a lot bigger too.

"Mom said we could go to the store." Flint said, pulling out his and his sister's cards. The man looked at both their cards and then at them. "Don't get yourself into any trouble, Okay?"

"Okay," Flint echoed softly.

"Go on then. Off you go."

Flint shuffled off, Iris in his wake. They entered the stairwell. There weren't any actual stairs but this is what everyone called it. Instead, the floor was mostly smooth as it disappeared off into the distance. A man and woman who had gone before them were strapping a platform of boxes into a groove that ran along the stairwell floor. When done, the platform started moving at a leisurely pace, and the couple followed it. "I wish we could ride it." Flint said as he looked around for some way to make it possible.

"No! We can't. Remember what the man said. You'll get us in trouble, Flint!"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. Let's go."

The trip was quick, thanks to a double conveyor belt, one stacked upon the other. They were used to riding like this, as Steadfast featured some that had up to four stacks of belts connecting its various locations to each other. When they exited on the other side, the size of the bay was dizzying. They hadnothing to compare it to, and vertigo made the duo almost keel over backwards. Smaller ships, vehicles, and a whole lot of cranes and conveyor belts were dispersed everywhere. Most of the ship did not have any gravity. It was not needed for most of the cargo. But this place did have some, as it lazily spun inside the belly of the Behemoth. They gazed at it until someone ushered them along.

The shop was located at the outer rim of the bay. "Jerry's Knick Knacks" read the faux neon sign on the exterior wall. "It looks like a dump," Flint said. Iris agreed. There were some other, more refined-looking storefronts along this piece of bay-rim. "We can't..." sighed Flint. "Mom said we can't afford anything else."

They entered the shop. It was a gloomy place, and it smelled weird. Like a library with a hint of wet dog and mechanical lubricant. A few people browsed nearby as the purveyor of the store, a small grubby man, kept an eye on things. He was nervously hovering around two lanky men, obviously from one of the Steadfast cylinders, as they intently thumbed through some old books.

"Real paper!" Flint shouted, as he ran over to the book rack, Iris skipping along in his wake.

Books were hard to come by. The sheer weight of them was not economical to transport in space.

Before they could reach it, the fat earther blocked their way. He looked annoyed as he held up one fat finger in a threatening manner. His flabby body jiggled as he waved it at them.

"Hold on you two. This part of the shop is off limits for children! Come to think of it, you wouldn't be able to afford any of my stuff anyway. You can go and rummage through the junk pile in the corner over there."

"How many sats do we have?" Iris asked.

Flint pulled out his ModPad and opened their shared savings jar. "Mom gave us 500 millisats to share." They looked down at the fat little shopkeep with questioning eyes.

"Go on, shoo! He said, as he pointed towards a big bin in the far corner of the store. "Go look over there!"

The duo turned away and slowly slumped over to the bin that was topped with a sign that read "75% DISCOUNT." It was jam-packed with odd stuff. Pre-ModPad era handheld devices, VR-goggles in various form factors, and sleek boxes that probably housed retro personal computers.

"Maybe we can get a miner and mine our own sats?" Iris pointed at a shelf on the wall, behind the discount bin. A big pile of machines, prices, sizes, and hash rates varied quite a bit, but none of it seemed to fall within their budget. "There aren't even any decent toys."

The spindly booklovers had made a purchase, and the store owner, having no one to satellite around after they had left, had been eying the two for a while. His demeanor had turned friendly. Jolly even, as he said,"Hiya kids. How's tube-life treating you?"

Flint and Iris did not realize there was a derogatory connotation to the way the man asked the question. They just smiled.

Flint followed up with, "What's Earth like mister?" Even though he was only eleven years old, he loomed above the Earthman.

"Oh fine, just fine," responded the man. "I'm Jerry by the way. Tell me. What are you kids looking for?"

Flint was eager to do the talking. "We only have half a sat to spend, and everything is too expensive." The disappointment on both their faces was clear as day, and the man secretly enjoyed it.

"That's too bad." He said. "Let me think. I might have something for you over here." The kids followed his gaze as he guided them to a big box underneath the discount bin. "I bet you'll find something in here." Disturbing years of dust, Jerry opened the box. Flint and Iris ogled the heap of junk. Having no real choice, they started rummaging around in it.

The pile contained old watches, tiny single-board computers, random circuit boards, bouncing balls, and filthy plushies with fake fur disintegrating at the touch. They saw drinking cups embossed with old-looking cartoon characters, a lunchbox, an old, worn-down backpack, and some clunky ModPads that must have been a few decades old. Flint picked one up and was surprised to see it power on. The screen flashed, and it took a while for the thing to boot. "Man, this thing is slow," he said.

"Let's see if it has games," Flint said, as he tried to figure out how to navigate the relic. "There's not a lot." He said disappointed. Iris pointed to the screen, "pick that one, pick that one!" Satoshi's Gambit was the name of the simple holographic platformer. Flint

tapped the icon, and it jumped out from the screen. In no time, Flint was running a little character around, trying to collect multiple spinning bitcoin that were littered throughout the level. "Look Iris, this thing is keeping score in whole sats!" He said the word "whole" with great emphasis and amazement. Iris tried to wrestle control of the Modpad, but Flint protested. Suddenly, the game faded and an ad appeared. It was a man in an old fashioned looking suit. When he spoke, the volume seemed to triple. He said:

'Since the implementation of Quantum Artificial Specialized Intelligence Fractal Economics Blockchain technology, we now finally have brought stability to the economic system. Modern financial historian's often argue about what is really happening at the core of this process, obscured by the ever increasing speed of QASIFEB evolution. Determining what happened at the core of the system is increasingly difficult. The divergenists believe 'QASIFEB evolution is inherently divergent!' 'No¡' counter the convergenists: 'QASIFEB evolution is a convergent process!'

Iris stared at the hologram, bemused.

"Turn that down!" the salesman yelled from the other side of the rundown establishment. Flint frantically tried to find the volume controls as the ad blared on.

"…then there are those that propose it oscillates between being divergent and convergent. This is, of course, preposterous! Now you too can be a part of this unstoppable force. QASIFEB will be the backbone of modern day economics and we have mastered it! This is no normal trading algorithm. No! Within the blink of an eye, whole simulated economies will go through multiple cycles of booms and busts. Currencies popping in and out of existence. All within a fraction of a nanosecond! AIs managing AIs all the way down!"

Mystical looking charts flashed by as the man droned on.

"...absolute chaos at the attosecond scale. But zoom out into our timescale, and it becomes a very smooth ride. Leading Modern Financial Historians have joined our team. For just 150k sats a month, you too will profit from their expertise! Our patented technology..."

Finally Flint managed to shut the thing up.

The game reappeared. "Now it's my turn," Iris screeched as she tried to snatch the device from Flint's hands again. It crashed to the ground. Various modules popped off, and the screen cracked. "Hey!" shouted the shopkeeper. "If you break it, you buy it!"

Muttering blame to one another, they started picking up the pieces as the man stomped over. "Broken screen. You gotta pay," he said flatly.

"It was just an accident." Iris stuttered.

"I don't care. That is a vintage machine. It will cost you at least 750 millisats." His face turned red in anger as he peered down at the kids, still pickup up the pieces. "We only have 500," Flint said. The vendor grumbled. "Fork it over right this minute and get the hell out of my sight!"

Reluctantly, Flint opened up their savings jar and scanned the invoice the man held out to them.

"Now pick up your crap and get out!"

Iris continued gathering the scattered pieces as Flint stood up holding the main body of the ModPad. The cracked screen had come loose. As he lifted it up, a small piece became unstuck between the Pad and the screen module. It was a rectangular piece of circuit board with a hole in the rounded end. The other end looked

kinda familiar to Flint. He picked it up and examined it in his hand. He turned it over. On the other side, he could clearly read, in bold, uppercase font, the word "OPENDIME." Below it, in smaller print, the word "bitcoin" could be read. Flint's face lit up. "Look!" He shouted at Iris, as he stuck the thing in the air. Iris got up to look.

The shopkeeper had seen it too. "Euhm. That is not included in the sale." He reached for the object.

Flint, however, was too quick for the tubby fellow, and he backed off. "No," he said. "We bought it fair and square!" That was another one of those obscure expressions he had learned from some old cartoon.

The man made another approach and grabbed Flint's shirt. "Hand it over!" he shouted, visibly angered.

Iris looked on, confused by the whole ordeal. "Hey, let him go."

"You keep out of this," the man hissed, clenching his teeth. This sudden change in demeanor scared her. She took a step back, fearful the man would hurt her.

Flint kicked the shopkeeper's shins, hard. The man's face reddened. Flint grabbed Iris's hand and yanked her towards the exit. "What about our stuff?" Iris pointed towards the pieces still on the floor. "Never mind. Just run!" shouted Flint. They both sprinted towards the exit. Looking back, Flint could see Jerry giving him an angry stare, then his eyes focused on the ModPad on his wrist. He mashed a few buttons, and the doors of the shop started to slide shut. Jerry stomped after them. It was going to be close. Flint flew below the shutter and pulled his sister with him. It snapped shut behind them just a fraction of a second later.

Hurriedly, they made their way to the airlock. "What happened?" Iris asked, breathing heavily. "Just run. I'll explain later." They drew angry glances and the occasional remark as they brazenly cut in line. Onlookers would mistake the two for adults, because of their off-world height. Most eased up when they realized they were just two young tubers.

Only when they had arrived back in the helix, cruising along on the double conveyor, did they dare catch their breath. "An Opendime Iris. We found an Opendime!" He said conspiratorially.

"What's an Opan Daime?" Iris asked, puzzled.

"It might be nothing," said Flint, who had only ever read about them and had seen a picture once. He was fiddling with the ModPad, trying to slide the thingy the shopkeep got so angry about back into it. "What does it do Flint? Tell me!" Iris tried again.

Flint ignored her and kept messing about with it. Finally, the thing slid in such a way that the screen would click in place over it. "C'mon, c'mon." He waited to see if it would still boot. The broken screen came to life. "Where's the drive...here, found it!" He tapped once. Then again. The screen blinked. The display read 0.25 BTC. Flint's mouth dropped. He gasped.

"What? What?" I don't get it," Iris said, annoyed. She had never seen the BTC abbreviation. All she knew were sats and millisats.

"Wait till Mom sees this," Flint murmured.

Iris performed little hops of excitement, shaking her brother's arms. "See what?!"

Flint replied, "Treasure…" He let the word expand in silence before adding. "A quarter bitcoin…" His sister stared at him perplexed. Not yet grasping the immensity of the find. "We could buy ten Steadfasts with this. We… we could do anything."

Source

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