

*Behind the Veil
of
Pilash*

A Novel By David Wayne Conklin

Behind the Veil of Pilash
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Cover design: Dave Conklin. Background image by Chase Preuninger
<http://www.rawastrodata.com>

1st edition: November 2016, UL 7/01/18

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About the cover: Although the nebula that represents the Veil of Piliash is never specifically mentioned in the story, my original intention was to place an image of the Blue Horsehead nebula on the cover of this novel. However, it made for a lackluster book cover. When it comes to nebulae, you just can't beat Orion for impact, and I then happened across Mr. Preuninger's "accidental" image on the net, which makes Orion appear more like a reflection nebula—perfect.

We shall sell no time before it is wine.

Preface: As I sit here in my apartment, in the pyramid village of Jan, in the city of Uragal, writing this manuscript, I look out my window at an alien sunset, and my gaze inevitably drifts upward to a couple of barely discernable stars high in the sky. Neither is Sol (the sun is not nearly bright enough to be seen this time of day, and through the mist of the Pilash nebula, at that). But by using the two as a reference point, I can extrapolate where Earth is and cover the entire solar system, and then some, with one finger at arm's length. By some miraculous twist of fate, I have been granted a return visit to Earth. And although I have been gone from Earth for fifty-three years, I have only been conscious of my situation for the last three, so a part of me is still a bit homesick. So you may find this surprising, but I do not have any intention of staying on Earth once I get there. For you see, after all the hype and the TV interviews are over (assuming there will be some interest in my adventure), I am returning to Tapiria. I am not going to try and explain why here, or during the TV interviews; my hope is the book will accomplish that. I am also working with a graphic artist here on Tapiria to catalog all of the fantastic things that I saw during my time inside the Pilash nebula. The finished illustrated book will describe many of the creatures, places, and people that I encountered in more detail than I wish to focus on here, and from what I gather, it will no-doubt be a welcome addition to the scraps of information that the Pilashians have thus far been spoon-feeding everyone. The only unfortunate aspect to this endeavor is that the Comptasur has insisted on reviewing my completed manuscripts. And there were a few alien technological secrets that I had to agree not to divulge during my visit to Earth, but as you will learn, each was a small price to pay. I would like to thank my daughter and her family most of all for giving me a place to stay and helping me adjust to modern technology. And I hope they, most of all, will understand why I have to return.

—W. Furste

Behind the Veil of Pilash

Dr. Wesley Furste

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1 Milias

I found myself dreaming: reliving my last few waking hours. I was so naïve back then, so unsuspecting and comfortable in the belief that I was merely part of another nearly routine field expedition across the far side of the Moon. Then there was Alex, telling me he was really on a mission to deliver a pouch full of stolen diamonds and some stolen alien technology to an alien Moon outpost. A few things in my dream got a little twisted, of course; such as when Alex—sitting at the galley table, telling me about his earlier adventure at the Moon outpost—morphed into a tiny gray alien that in turn tried to sell me car insurance, but the high points were generally intact. Any disbelief I had in Alex’s story was officially crushed when I found myself falling into the Moon down a dark shaft and into the lair of the alien grays—the kushaqua. Alex eventually informs me he is a clone and sends me back to the surface while carrying an alien monolith, with instructions to drive it away from the outpost as fast as I can. As I was floating upwards, through the large chamber of what the kushaqua refer to as main exit, I happened to see something very strange: My body happened to be angled so that I could see, for a moment, directly into the control booth for the Main Exit. Centered along the back wall was an entranceway, and something in this entranceway was moving away from my direction, as if trying to hide from my line of sight. Imagine a large camera lens

surrounded by many sunflower-like petals or filaments. Then imagine a half dozen or so gray, octopus-like tentacles extending out from behind that, which followed its surroundings much like you see an octopus feel and maneuver its way across a corral reef in search of food. That is what I saw. After that, my dream skipped ahead a bit. I was back in the rover, driving away from the outpost. I remember making it at least twenty kilometers out, just driving, maybe checking the exterior video monitors every so often out of paranoia. I'm not sure what happened then, a bright flash, a popping sound of some sort. It was then that I opened my eyes, out of breath, my heart pounding.

Confused? most assuredly. Was I really awake? seemed like it, but all I could see was blurry redness. As my eyes focused, it suddenly occurred to me what I was looking at . . . flames. Despite all of the fire retardant materials, there was a fire perhaps a meter and a half to the right of the foot of my bunk. Some part of the rover near the science station was burning: What could be more terrifying for the most isolated man in existence? The flames were not large; it was more of a smoldering fire, really, with tiny red and blue flames here and there. And it was making a subtle hissing sound accompanied by the occasional spark, but I never thought for an instant it could be anything but burning plastic and wire insulation. Aside from the glowing fire, it was completely dark, and I could not detect a single lighted switch, meter, or display screen anywhere. The emergency lighting was not lit, and obviously the smoke alarms were not working. It seems like a silly thing to do now in light of a complete electrical system failure, but the first thing I did was reach above my head to flip the switch for the reading light above my bunk. However, my arm just flailed about, as there was nothing there. Assuming the rover was filling with smoke, I quickly gave up on the light and rolled out my bunk. I had assumed that I was in my bunk, the top bunk, but found my feet encountering the floor much too soon. With no time to ponder how I had ended up in the lower bunk, I laid down flat on my stomach and began scooching towards the back of the rover, where I knew there was a wall-mounted extinguisher. At least, I thought that was

what I was doing: I ran head first into something that felt like the base of a wooden chair. I shoved it aside, intent on getting to that extinguisher first, and sorting everything else out later. I found the rear wall of the rover, where the airlock hatch should have been; made my way over to the left corner and reached up to find—nothing! In desperation, I stood up and began to run my hands up and down the corner of the compartment. Nothing felt familiar; the surface textures were completely wrong, and the corner of the compartment had a huge recess several feet up that should not have been there. I knew that just to the right of the extinguisher, between it and the airlock hatch, was a scientific device called an X-ray spectrometer—one of several aboard the rover. But instead of the knobs and switches that I expected to find there, I ran my fingers over a smooth surface—smooth except for a large unfamiliar knob. The knob felt like a large wooden pull knob, so I pulled it. It was indeed a simple pull knob, as I could feel a door swing open much the size of a typical kitchen cupboard. Can you imagine my dismay when I reached inside this cavity that should not have existed and felt round dinner plates and drinking cups, none of which matched the dinnerware that I knew to be on the rover. And where was the acrid, choking smoke of burning plastics and electronics that should have been filling the air? In fact, the air actually had a freshness to it that was so unlike the air aboard Seeker One after a lengthy mission with two people aboard. Finally, it dawned on me that wherever I was, I was not aboard Seeker One.

Only a few hours later, I found myself settling in, more or less, my newfound digs, which turned out to be a roughly 5 by 7 meter log cabin composed of fairly sizable logs perhaps 45 centimeters in diameter. And judging by the provisions, including some slightly out-of-date can goods, I imagined it to be located somewhere in North America. How wrong you can be sometimes—how utterly wrong. According to my wristwatch, one year and five months had passed since that October day that I visited the alien Moon outpost with Alex. I passed it off, at first, as some sort of malfunction.

Feeling around the room in the nearly complete darkness, I had come upon a lamp hanging from the ceiling joists near the center of the room. I didn't realize it at the time, but the lamp was actually much more than just a lamp, but I will get to that later. The lamp had a swinging handle on it much like a barn lamp; however, the lamp itself was shaped like an artillery shell. The entire lamp emitted light, which could be made quite intense by holding one's finger on one of the two small pressure-sensitive areas located on the very top of the unit. Turning it on was a revelation: The fire that looked like smoldering wood embers was just that, the remnants of a fire in the pit of a large stone fireplace that took up a good portion of one end of the cabin. The cot was, of course, in the corner to the left of it, along the back wall. A crib-load of firewood took up the corner to the right. The cabin appeared to be well furnished (for life in the 19th century): The lamp would be the only thing I would end up ever finding of a high-tech nature.

Despite a good supply of brand-name food packages, I could find virtually nothing else from the industrial age. A lot of stuff looked familiar, yet unfamiliar at the same time. My clothes were different. And I could only shake my head at the round stump-like commode jutting from the cabin floor next to the foot of the cot. An Eskimo suit hung from a wall hook just to the left of the cabin's only door, and while investigating the loft that extended over the kitchen, I noticed a nice pair of snowshoes among a host of other miscellaneous items. Of these items, the one that intrigued me the most was a very large treble hook, of all things, about forty centimeters across. The cabin—and much of the furnishings—had an aged and well used look (this was not a recently built structure), rustic perhaps, but the place did have a lot of character. Along the wall to the right of the door, between the door and the kitchen cabinets, was a small antique-style icebox, complete with ice and a few perishables. What can I say? I was hungry, so the first thing I did was polish off a can of Dole peaches before getting into a box of Wheaties, which I wetted down with some fresh milk I retrieved from the icebox. While munching away, it suddenly struck me that all of the foodstuff in the cupboard was food that I liked. The place might have been very primitive, but someone had sure gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I

was comfortable. I began to wonder: Could this place belong to me? Did I leave NASA to become a hermit in the north woods for some mysterious reason, only to fall victim to amnesia? No, the place couldn't belong to me; I would at least have reading material, and so far I had found none.

After eating, I rinsed out my bowl in the kitchen sink, which was a single large basin recessed into the counter top next to a hand pump. The sink was behind one of the cabin's five small four-pane windows. However, I could see nothing through it, or any of the other windows, for that matter, but pitch-blackness. My wristwatch, ambiguously enough, read 2pm. I decided not to bother venturing outside until daybreak, so with my belly full and nothing else to do, I threw a couple more logs on the fire, wedged a chair against the door—after all, someone had to have made that fire, and I didn't want them sneaking up on me in my sleep—and promptly went back to bed.

When I awoke, I was still in darkness. My watch said four hours had passed. I must have been awake at least four hours prior to that, so daylight could not be too far off. Being in such a rustic setting, I could not help, I suppose, but to think about a nice stack of flapjacks for breakfast. In addition to the fireplace, the cabin was equipped with a small iron cook stove located in the corner to the right of the hand pump. And there was an assortment of iron skillets hanging on the wall behind it. So before long, I had a good fire going in the stove, using coals from the fireplace, and was cooking pancakes from a box of pre-mixed Aunt Jemima pancake batter. I found syrup in the cupboard, and about a quart of fresh OJ and a stick of butter in the icebox. Except for the perishables, I figured there must be a couple weeks supply of food in the one cupboard that contained food items.

An hour later, and I was already beginning to get a little bored. I wanted to know what was outside. So I grabbed the lamp and opened the cabin door. What I found on the other side was a bit of a shock, but then, at this point, I was getting used to surprises. The door opened to a vestibule about two meters long leading to yet another door. The short passageway had an

arched ceiling and was of a starkly different construction than the log cabin. The walls were made of a smooth white material—synthetic, by the looks of it—in total contrast to the interior of the cabin. A simple pull handle on another door at other end of the passageway invited a yank, but I had only gotten the door partially open, when I was met with a blast of frigid air that threatened to chill me to the core.

So a short time later, this time with full Eskimo suit on, lamp in hand, I ventured into the vestibule and once again pulled on the outer door, which proved to be quite thick—ten centimeters perhaps. The door led to an even longer corridor, which I judged to be about ten meters long. A few meters in, I found a door in the side of the corridor with a wheel on it, much like a watertight door one might find on a ship. I turned the wheel and the door popped open, to reveal a solid wall of snow from top to bottom. Moving on, about half way through the corridor, I came to a ladder that led upward through a round tube, ending at a hatch about four meters above the floor. Feeling like a claustrophobic submariner, I climbed up, undogged the hatch cover, and thrust it open. Popping my head out, a gust of wind blew straight into the hood opening of my suit. The air was so cold it froze the lining of my nostrils instantly; blowing snowflakes stung the skin. Except for snow, I could see nothing by the light of the lamp beyond the structure that I had just exited. I decided to douse the lamp, let my eyes adjust, and take one more look around before my skin froze solid. This time, I saw something—a tiny spec of light off in the distance, but with the same sterile hue as my lamp. It was hard to judge how far away the light was, though; two kilometers perhaps?

Retreating, I turned my attention to the door at the far end of the corridor. The door opened to a windowless space somewhat larger than the interior of the cabin. The floor was rectangular in shape, but the smooth ceiling curved from one side to the other like a Quonset hut. I could see one end of the room had a nice stack of firewood in the far corner. Otherwise, the space was filled with what appeared to be provisions packed in cubes about a meter square, some stacked three high, with an empty area towards

the center of the room. In this empty area was the only feature in the room that I could see: a large metallic square in the floor, a little larger than the cubes. I noticed one cubicle container sitting just left of the doorway that was full of what resembled Styrofoam packing peanuts. I plunged my mittens into the peanuts and came up with a liter-size chunk of ice—perfect for the little icebox. I immediately began pawing through stuff, looking for information as to who might have put it there, but only found markings that did not resemble any written language that I had ever seen before. By this time, my face was feeling warm—already half frozen by that gust of wind—so I thought it wise to get myself back to the cabin.

Back in the cabin, the water in the stove reservoir had gotten good and hot, so I made myself a cup of hot chocolate. Hunkering by the fire, I could not get the light I had seen out of my mind. It was a beacon in the night, but would the place be so obvious in the daylight? Or would it become lost in a forest of trees?

Hours passed, finally a hint of daylight. The snow let up a little. The sky was partially overcast. Another hour; still about the same light, and no sign of the sun. Poking my head out once again, the sky appeared most unusual. The fierce wind was gone, and I could now see stars, but something was obviously not right. I found a few patterns that looked familiar, but it was as if the sky had been scrambled and the stars shifted about. Not only that, the few stars that I could see appeared partially obscured by an ethereal blue haze, which I convinced myself to be sunlight reflecting off high-altitude clouds. And then there was the strange line of evenly spaced specs of light that rose straight up over the western horizon, gradually fading until the line ended at about thirty degrees. The light was still there, so I decided to try and mark the exact direction of the light to give me some reference point to go by once it was daylight. I made some strips out of some foil food packaging, grabbed a couple stick fishing poles out of the loft, donned my Eskimo suit and snowshoes, and set out to mark the exact direction of the light. The idea was to tie the strips to tree limbs or makeshift posts to indicate a line of site. However, venturing out onto the snow, which I

estimated to be at least two meters deep, I could not find a single tree branch anywhere. Everything was white, as if I was far above the tree line. I could only wonder where the logs came from for the log cabin and how they got there. Incidentally, upon investigating the exterior of the cabin, imagine my surprise when I discovered nothing but the rounded exterior of a Quonset-hut-like structure approximately the same size as the storehouse. The cabin was entirely enclosed within it. The white exterior surface of these structures was polished-but-corrugated, the windows smooth and flush. I came upon a couple pipes sticking out of the ground on the other side of the cabin-hut. They rose up a couple meters above the snow before reversing course. I imagined air intakes to some sort of subterranean complex, but then I realized the huts needed a source of air from somewhere, so perhaps I was jumping to conclusions.

Moving towards the light, I found myself going down in elevation. I had only made it a hundred meters or so from the cabin, when the snow gave out from under me. The fall knocked the wind out of me a bit, and I found myself in the dark, but after a minute or two, I realized that both incidents happened only because I had landed on the lamp. Raising the lamp, I found myself to be in a spherical cavity about one and a half meters in diameter, with walls of some sort. Ribbed veins began at the bottom of the igloo-like structure, at the center, and decreased in size until they came together at the apex. In between these ribs were seams. When I examined the seams up close, to my utter astonishment, I noticed movement: Thousands of tiny tendrils were locking themselves together. I was being imprisoned.

I would like to say I stayed calm, but that would be a lie. I panicked and began clawing at the seams, trying desperately to pry them apart, but it was useless. There happened to be a large hunting knife back at the cabin, but I had left it there, seeing no possible use for it out in the snow. I had nothing with me but my wits—and one of the snowshoes that fell through along with me. So I grabbed the snowshoe and cupped one end in my right hand, with the intention of bashing my way out. I managed to unleash two forceful blows, but the structure I just fallen through moments before proved incredibly strong. I suddenly began to feel light headed. Not only

that, the temperature seemed to be getting warmer. Taking a second look at the floor, I noticed hundreds of small pores had opened up along each the ribs, and a warm odorless gas was pouring out. It was carbon dioxide. I remember trying to get my coat off, with the idea of using it to cover the pores, but that is the last thing I remember before waking up back inside the cabin.

Everything had been meticulously and methodically put back in its place, including me. The parka was back on its hook, the lamp was back in its place, and I found myself comfortably tucked in my cot. There was one thing missing, though—my watch. I couldn't be sure exactly how much time had passed, but the sun was now shining brightly through the kitchen window. Upon standing, I discovered an addition: A hardbound book was lying on the table. It was titled "A guide to surviving on the prison planet Miliias." No author, no copyright, or publisher information, only a title, then text. The following is my attempt to recreate that text from memory.

As you, a prisoner of the Comptasur, may have already discovered prior to reading this passage, the title of this book is a facetious one, as there is no death on Miliias not followed by rebirth. Whether accidental or intentional, there is no escape from Miliias through death. There is a positive aspect, however, to staying alive, as each incident of reanimation will only add time to your sentence. This book is meant to be a guide for staying alive in one of the most erratically hostile environments in the entire Pilash nebula that is capable of supporting life. If you choose to follow the advice presented here without deviation, you should be able to avoid any fatal accidents during your sentence.

History of the planet Miliias: The planet Miliias lies approximately 2.53 light years from Cinisius, in the same star system as the engineered planet, Tapiria. At one time, about a hundred and twenty thousand Earth years ago, the climate of Miliias was a much like Earth during the peak of Earth's last ice age. As Miliias has no tilt along its axis of rotation, life

was mostly confined to a narrow band along the planet's equator. But then came along an ice giant planet from the depths of space. There are a number of theories as to where the rogue planet might have come from; it could simply be an accretion of gas and dust from a star system that never was, drifting through space with no parent star of its own until captured by the gravity of Kees 3. Accelerated by the gravitational attraction of Kees 3, the planet barreled into the Kees 3 star system. After wreaking havoc on the Kees 3 system—not by collision, but by gravitational interaction, and mainly on the smaller planets of the system—the planet is thought to have been captured by one of Kees 3's much larger gas giants. But before that occurred, Milias was robbed of angular momentum by the ice giant and entered into an elliptical orbit with a plane approximately 13° askew from Kees 3's elliptical plane. The resulting climate change killed off virtually all animal life on land except for a handful of creatures that lived in caverns, could burrow deep enough into the ground, or lived near geothermal areas. Some sea life hung on—those organisms that could escape the wildly varying temperatures and solar radiation by hiding out in the deep sea. Life continues to adapt to the new climate.

As you might have witnessed already, the surface undergoes a rapid transformation as . . .

It was about here that I threw the book down in disgust. I was certain I was the victim of an ongoing prank, and I had had enough. As soon as I could get my act together, I was setting out find the source of the light I had seen the night before and get to the bottom of the entire charade, once and for all.

Without eating breakfast, I hurriedly threw on the Eskimo suit and popped my head out once again. The sun had risen above the horizon, a little ways north, I judged, of the light I had seen. Only a few bands of stratocumulus clouds crossed an otherwise clear sky. And still no Moon to be seen. The complex was sitting on a bluff in the middle of a vast and barren terrain of gently rolling hills covered in snow, with the morning sun

reflecting off a truly majestic mountain range to the west. And it was still bitterly cold. I donned my snowshoes and jumped down onto the snow.

I made a complete circle of the entire complex to find the tracks that must have been left behind by whoever rescued me from the pit. However, and disturbingly, the only tracks I found were my shallow snowshoe tracks from the night before. So I followed my trail in the snow, stopping a ways short of the place where I had fallen through, and setting out a couple markers along the way, which I could then use to point myself in the right direction for some distance.

After the trip around the complex, two omelets (yes, there were fresh chicken eggs in the ice box), and few more pages of the book (there wasn't much else to kill the time), I would judge about an hour and a half had passed. Earlier, I had found some eye protection while fumbling through the pockets of the parka; however, it was an unusual affair: a cloth-like material imbedded with flexible plastic lenses, but it worked. I tied it around my head and ventured out once again.

What a truly eerie feeling it was, when I looked towards the sun, to see that it had hardly moved twice its diameter. I couldn't remember ever having really paid much attention the Sun's position over a given amount of time; it was just one of those things, I suppose, that's in a person's bones—a cog missing from the old circadian clock, as it were. The sun could not possibly be that low, yet there it was, and there was no refuting it. I might have been in complete denial at that point, but the truth was, I was beginning to have grave doubts that I was on Earth, at all.

