

Harps

a sf short story

by John Argo

The icon hovering in Eon's dream was the face of a young woman, eyes downcast, with a tear on one cheek. Something about her brooding beauty: serene, sad, filled with possibilities.

Eon Reely slept, but lately he did not feel-rested.

He did not know the biosynth feared for her life. And his.

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Pilon P67 turned slowly in space. Its tempestuous guts were full of sound and steam, scattered light beams and screeching steel. Its power pools and rainbows of raw energy sucked up the waking hours of Eon Reely's days. Still lean of body and crisp of face, he was a maggn in the heart of Pilon P67. His tedious job, dreadful like all P67 jobs, was to keep the maggn aligned with the countless pilons holding up the Galactic Bridge. The Bridge used gray wormholes in alternetic space so 55th Century civilization could travel on the underpinnings as if distances between stellar objects were seconds rather than lightyears.

How did a man fall so far from hope? No maggn spoke of the misfortunes that brought him under the Bridge, and hardly any of the maggners had any dreams left. P67 was a vast black cylinder rotating in empty space at the rim of the galaxy, devoid of joy. Around it swept seventy polygons of polished glass that amplified the waves of the obersole as it sang like a whale in the sea of stars.

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"I know your name," the girl in the crisp uniform and rakish cap said with sensuous fondness. She sat on a fallen log in a forest among fireflies in Eon's sleeping mind. She was elegantly attractive in a way he'd forgotten women could look.

A single moon's puffy face looked over her shoulder, and the place smelled like, what?, pines in a mountain wind (what did that mean?).

Eon Reely rubbed his eyes and sat up. "I have to get my sleep."

She grinned at him. "Eon, this is very important." Her voice had dry, personable warmth. Laughter underneath. She had mischievous blue eyes and sensuous lips. Her dark hair was cut neatly, dangling to the eyes in front, over the ears, just covering the neck in back. She had a beauty mark on one of her prominent cheekbones.

"What are you doing in my mind?"

She shrugged. "Getting to know you, is all." She drew in the dirt with a stick as she spoke. Her skirt barely reached her knees, and she had fine legs, shiny black high-heeled shoes; a mossy

dark uniform, snowy blouse and smile, green-white-orange bow tie. The heavy, folded lapels had an ancient look.

"This is P67 and I must have lost my mind," Eon said. "Finally, I have snapped, this is it." But he regarded her with fascination.

She pursed her lips and shook her head, "Nope, you're okay. ? Trust me."

"But I'm sleeping!" he cried. "This is crazy. That's not a real planet, is it? That's a bright round ball with a face on it., like a man saying 000HHH."

"Yes, that's the moon. THE moon," she said, "the moon, the only moon, the moon of the old Earth. Have you really forgotten?"

Eon rubbed his eyes. "I don't know what you are talking about. Yes, there are those old stories, but nobody believes them, do they?"

"Don't be cross, Eon. I like you now that I've gotten to know you."

"Was that you staring at me out of that mandala all along?"

A whisper: "Yes. "

"You had a tear under one eye." A pretty face, he thought, too pretty to look so sad.

"Because I saw what happened to you."

He tried angrily to sit up at this invasion of his deepest pain, but his body was inert. "Nobody has a right! I may be a magner, but -- "

"Hush, my darling, I just want to make you happy." Darling. Nobody had said that to him in years. He turned away.

"It's still possible, you know. In a different way, of course." She added after a moment: "My name is Bridget. I'm sorry that you lost your wife and daughter."

He took a deep breath. That was with him every day, especially at night going to sleep. Boating on Miramair IV where they'd had a cabin on a lake, he and Lana and Lanalana. A sudden rain, a wind, had turned the boat over. Eon had somehow gotten tangled in the rigging while his two women had vanished under the glassy green water. He'd awakened to find himself tangled upright against the overturned hull. Golden sunshine silence had returned after the sudden squall, but the lake surface was opaque. Cutting himself free, he'd dived and dived for nothing. The bodies only bobbed up a day later, pale, relaxed, as though asleep. It had been quick for them, was his only comfort. He'd sat by the lake for hours, which turned into days. And dark tortured nights. He might have starved to death sitting there, an easier fate than his subsequent life. But he'd gone out of his mind. Wandered the roads, the cities, finally striking out on the Galactic Bridge. More wandering; but there was really only one last fate for a broken man: finally, this P67 pylon. "Go away, Bridget. I have to sleep,"

"I want you to take me away from here, Eon."

"Go away, I want to sleep. It's like being dead and enjoying it."

"Very well, Eon. But for your information I'm not the cause of your unrest. There is a man under all that pain trying to get out. I only take a few seconds of your sleep away each night, and I've been doing it for many nights. I'll be back, Eon." The scent of pines faded, replaced by the stink of steamy bodies. There was a constant rustle of strangled snores amid steel girders in the smoky half-light of the thousand-bed barracks.

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The maggner's lot: You staggered on glassy surfaces, carrying the heavy maggning coil which you wrapped around stray light beams to tug them back into alignment while pistons pounded and other maggners' voices chopped ragged messages among tons of gloomy steel machinery.

You wandered home each night, letting the artificial air rake dry your sweaty overalls. You thought of little else but getting into your bunk after sucking up the swill in the corporate mess. Once in a while you dawdled over an obscene holo, for there were hardly any women on P67, and even a maggner had a faint need, little more than a reflex, like the urge to urinate. Or you gazed in passing display windows late at night, when all the stores were closed but still half lit. You let the cash pile up in your cred account because you could never figure anything you wanted to buy and take back to your personal area which consisted of a bunk and a tall, narrow locker. Why buy anything? What did it matter? That was the mind of a maggner. Still, you lingered, you looked, your fingertips might touch the glass, because you were human.

"Do you like me?"

The pine forest again, and the huffy moon. She looked crisp and tall as she stood in a provocative pose on high heels. She held her arms out and rotated slowly.

"What is that you're wearing?"

"Stewardess. Aer Lingus. 2020 A.D. An eon ago, Eon." She giggled. Had a sense of fun, this girl.

"I don't understand what that means," he said. But she filled it into his mind, much as possible. Aerojets, silver, crossing cloud-dappled star-spangled night under that puffy moon. He shook his head. "But that's so long ago."

A whisper again: "Yes."

He felt a little sad for her but said matter of factly because he was dead and she was still alive: "Surely you have been dead ten thousand years now, haven't you? "

Her voice, in his mind, was matter-of-fact, reciting an oft-told tale. "We were on a night launch from Kennedy to Shannon when the aft barser dimmed. I was just getting ready trays of dim sum and let long for the sleepy passengers, when the jolt threw me down the aisle. I had been dawdling over a port window looking at the Manhattan skyline, or the crash would have killed me like it did the other folks down midsection. I should have been dead, Eon, but they saved a little of me."

"Oh no."

Again, the whisper: "Yes."

"You're one of those."

She stamped her feet, fine naked calves flexing, on the soft pine needles under the full-moon sky. She laughed defiantly. "Yes, I'm one a box brain, and I'm still here. Well, not an iota of carbo life left of me, but what got saved is truly me and migrated onto biosynth and here I am!" She twirled and ended with a half-kneeling flourish. "Ta-dah!"

"And I'm supposed to be thrilled?"

"Eon, don't be selfish. Think, is your depression a matter of self-indulgence? Look at me, I've put my troubles behind me."

"It's pretty sad," he agreed, yawning.

"We'll talk again," she said.

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The supervisor slid up close on his smoky sled. "Maggner Eon, you are not in focus," the disapproving voice said. "Your mind is not on your work lately. Get with it man." The bearded face was furrowed with worry, but there was no personal concern. The eyes had no special focus, and did not look directly at him. That was a truly old maggner. Time spent wrestling with stray light beams had irradiated him until his skin and hair turned white as sugar. That was an old maggner's fate. Either you fell apart literally, disintegrated into the light that sucked you up into the pilon, the column doling to the obersole, or you lingered as a dry husk and they made you supervise newer maggners. The relief of maggners was their sleep, which was like being dead but enjoying it. Their only hope was for eternal rest.

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Pine scent.

"How did you find me?" Eon asked. He was falling in love with her, and why not? Were they not both ghosts?

"The music store, the pawn shop, do you remember?"

He thought hard. "Yes, the music store. I pass it each night on my way from work. You are in there?"

"Think, Eon, think!"

"I walk along, thinking some strange thoughts about a sea that curls up on a shore in tall white waves that break on the beach outside the gravity drop. I walk on cobblestones and a fog coats everything with silence. Then I hear a faint music, a singing. I think it's just the music store and I pause to glance at the window. There are some statues in the dust behind the glass, some knobs and some crystals, some bows and some papers, some tusks and some watches, some trumpets and some harps."

"Harps, Eon, that's it. I thought you might have noticed."

"Two harps," he continued feverishly. "Two harps, one on each side of the showcase, a black marbled one on the left, and on the right a rich dark cherrywood."

She clasped her hands. "Yes ! Yes! The cherrywood, I'm inside of that. Oh you are so observant, you will be a fine musician for me!"

"What do you mean? I am no musician."

"You will carry me onto the Galactic Bridge and we'll be gone from here. You'll have a life again. I'll make the music, don't worry, all you have to do is bring me where I want to go."

"I am dead, Bridget."

"That's only part of you speaking, in the haze of your sleep. I'll bring you life again. Look, Eon." She rose and peeled off her suit. Her perfect young body shared the color of the moonlight, her nipples a nutty color on full breasts, her hips curved like a song. "Don't you remember?"

"I remember," Eon said remembering how the touch of a woman had felt. Lana. But when he reached for Bridget, he could not touch her.

"That's the only problem. I can't be a woman to you, not all the way. I can excite you, take you all the way by suggestion, but there is no way we can touch. Because I am what I have become. I'm not sad about that, not anymore. I'm excited by what we can do together. If you'll let me."

"Why here? Why this way? Why in my sleep? Why not in the shop window when I am awake?"

"Because I am afraid, Eon. The other one, she is a regular biosynth, a bitch of a harp. Just a biosynth, mind you, a Noma-class construct, not an echo of a real life that was, of a woman who was real, from the days when structers stole souls and put them out for song. If ever she found out -- her name is Noma -- she would kill me, and she can, all she has to do is sing High Sea and she'll fry me away, all circuits cooked like calamari squid on a Manhattan menu, but I would not expect you to understand what that means, it means nothing anymore because that's such ancient history. So I wait until the shop is closed and Noma's shut herself down for the night and then because I have a soul I can probe for a carrier. Which the soulless Noma cannot do. A musician, who can take me out of here. I fear for my life, Eon. I have survived these centuries by my wits."

"High Sea? What is that?"

"The carrier wave. The biosynths use it to tune each other. Works fine for them, but it would blow a real life person like me away into oblivion. Turn the cherrywood harp you want to own into a piece of wood with a soulless piece of software. You wouldn't want to see that happen to me, would you?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Buy me, Eon. Take me away from here."

"But I have no money."

"Sure you do. You have creds piling up. Enough to buy me and exit on the Bridge."

"And then what?"

"You could leave your sorrow behind. Look for a new life. I could keep you company. We can't go all the way, but I could be your friend, your dream, your ghost, your source of music."

"I could buy you, yes, " he said. Yes, he thought while circuits in his mind snapped on. She would be good company. Always there for him. Challenging, erotic, a personal friend. She dumped it into his mind, hard, for she was desperate.

"I'll think about it." He was afraid, yet curious.

"Don't think too long, The Nomas are competitive, vicious. Spiders without souls. I was a girl once, Eon, I still have a soul, that's all I have anymore. Don't let me be wasted after all this time."

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"Maggner Eon, this is your second warning." The supervisor's chalky face and dim eyes were faintly alarmed while the beam of light in the coil soaked color from Eon's skin. "Work diligently, Eon, or you will be disciplined."

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Pine scent, moonlight, peaceful closeness punctuated only by their separate urgencies: "Oh Eon," her voice caressed, "I'm so sorry. I've been pushing you too hard. It's just that, well, I'm scared, the Noma you see..."

He longed to touch her, and knew he never would. "I've decided, Bridget. I am going to buy the harp."

"Oh good! It must be soon, Eon, the Noma..."

"The day after tomorrow, Bridget. I figured it out. There will be enough cred left over to buy passage to one of the work worlds, maybe a farm world. I was a strong man physically..."

"You still are, my sweet."

"And I was intelligent."

"You still are, my love."

"I don't want to live without you, Bridget." It was from the heart. He ached with every word.

She regarded him with dark, thoughtful eyes. "Eon, I want you to take me from here, away from the Nomas. But you will meet a, well, a woman one day..."

"You are a woman, Bridget."

"You are sweet. A real woman, darling, and you'll want to have children with her. Will you promise me--?"

"Yes?"

" -- That you'll let me go then? Find me a nice new owner?"

"Don't talk like that! You are a part of me, like my heart."

"Hush now, get your sleep. I love you, Eon. There, there, I know, you don't have to say it, I see it in your sweet eyes. Rest now, and I'll sing to you. A lullaby. A love song. From the long ago Earth."

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The sled rushed close in a welter of dust and steam. "I will be watching you closely, Maggner Eon."

"No need," he said. "Today is my last day. I am cashing my way out of here."

The supervisor's face dulled with incomprehension. "But no maggner has ever quit." Nothing like it had ever happened, and this ghost of a man looked befuddled. For a moment he was not harsh master but fatherly overseer as he cried in a reedy voice: "We have no life left, no spirit in our souls, oh dear, what will you do my boy?"

Eon laughed kindly. "Poor old fellow. Don't worry about me. I'm physically strong, and I am intelligent, and I have more spirit than you or anyone else around here knows about. Watch me, I'm going to work hard like ten maggners so there'll be no excuse to withhold my last pay period." He muscled the light beams about like a man filled with joy. The Bridge must have functioned a trifle better that day though none of the galaxy's traveling souls might guess why.

Then, suddenly, for the first time ever during working hours, the icon: "Eon! Help me!"

"Bridget!" He dropped the coil.

"Maggner Eon, you must pay attention to your work!"

He ran across the shiny floors, dodging the light beams, hopping over shimmering power puddles. "Bridget! I'm coming."

The icon: "Darling..." There was a tear under each eye. "My darling. It's too late."

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"NNNNN000000!!!!!" he cried, running along the daytime streets thronged with citizens resentful as he in maggner's overalls shoved them out of his way.

The icon: "Too late, Eon. Get out of here, save yourself. The Noma is beginning her song."

Eon heard a high-pitched keening, filled with evil and dripping glee. "Keep talking, Bridget, I'll be there in a few minutes."

The icon (breaking up, wavering, staticky): "I love you, Eon, remember me always my darling." The icon, sentence chopped off and eyes wide open in terminal surprise, winked out.

He cried: "I'm running as fast as I can!"

He felt the silence and her absence hit him like a blow deep in his soul.

A terrible dread was in his gut, cramping him up, making him stagger. It was exactly the feeling when he'd lost Lana and Lanalana. Not again, Please, not again!

People milled outside the store window when he arrived panting and choking. People pointed through the broken window, toward the blackened corner where the burned ruin of the cherry-wood harp stood. The Noma stood unscathed in the other corner, in silent pride.

A young girl, a store clerk, stepped back holding a depleted foamer. "The damn thing just blew up," she was saying, "started belching smoke, burst into flames."

Eon hurried inside the store. "Nooo..." he cried helplessly, leaning over the ledge behind the window display. Bridget's harp was fried. Its brain box was gutted. Its strings lay shriveled, blackened. The icon in his head was gone. He felt the emptiness again, that dreadful loneliness of the soul. And cried. Cried as he had not cried since that day on the lake.

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"Maggner Eon, you have returned." Amid the steam and pounding, the old man's white face echoed the memory of human concern, a husk of emotion, a shadow of caring.

"No, I just came to cash out."

"You look beaten, Maggner."

"I am, dammit, but I haven't lost my soul. Pay me, and it's the last you'll ever see of me."

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"I'd like to buy that harp."

The girl rumpled her face at the sight of his maggner's overalls. "You're the fellow that came in earlier. When we had the fire. Cried about the harp." She said it as though he were crazy. There was a trace of fear in her voice.

"Sure, sister, here's my money. No time for talk."

"Very well then, would you like it wrapped? It's a fine Noma-class, very elegant."

"I'm sure."

She registered the transaction on her CredEx. "So you're taking up music?"

"You might say that."

Incredulity: "Under the Bridge?"

"No, I'm leaving on the evening shuttle up-Bridge. Cashed out, Going somewhere big."

The girl nodded as she muscled the heavy instrument over the counter. "Well, here it is. Her name is Noma."

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"Hi, new owner." A seductive voice. Of course.

"Yes Noma." He raked his fingers harshly across her strings.

"You must take better care of me than that." A female image frowned on the flat-screen display behind the strings, inside the backing-case. A beautiful face, of course, capable of changing to any face or any body he desired. He brushed his fingers against the strings, bowed over the big instrument, his other hand pressed against the mandolin-inlay on the back.

"That's better, new owner. But you have not told me your name or anything about you, so we can get acquainted." Seductive.

"I'm not ready to have you in my mind."

"In your mind?"

"Just an expression."

"Of course. I understand. We need to warm up together."

They were in the lounge aboard a Bridge-cruiser, a hotel moving among the stars, hustling among the wormholes in alternetic space while the obersole droned like whales, those extinct mythological cousins of the unicorn and the mermaid.

Fellow passengers holding drinks began to crowd around. Eon wore a nice suit, had his hair combed, looked nothing like the raggedy maggner he'd been.

"That's a fine looking harp, fella."

"Play us a tune, harp."

"Hey, that's a Noma, Sexy."

So he touched the strings, and the Noma sucked on his aura and plucked out a tune that made toes twitch and fingers snap. "You are one sexy fella," she told him in the back of his mind, for the Nomas had a rudimentary ability for telepathy.

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"We sure had the place hopping, didn't we?" the Noma later said fondly as he carried her through the moving, maggning ship's empty hotel corridors. "They were tapping their feet and singing right along. We'll have a good time together, won't we?"

"A great time," Eon said.

Up in the utility corridor, muffled with carpets and smelling of cleansers, there was a drunk and he said hi.

"Hello," Eon said.

"Hey baby join the party," the Noma said, pretty face behind the strings. "Say, what's your name, where are we going?"

"We're going to see Bridget," he told her.

"Who?" she laughed.

"A old friend,"

The drunk was a friendly looking guy, chubby in a well-partied sort of appearance, and he was puzzled. "Say, that's the disposal chute."

"No!" the Noma said.

"Yes," Eon said.

"I am an expensive Noma-class instrument designed to bring you lasting pleasure." Crisp, disapproving, domineering.

"I hate spiders," Eon said to nobody in particular as he pushed the harp through the force field.

The Noma screamed briefly.

Eon mused aloud: "Even software crashes hard."

"I'll be dinged," the drunk said, leaning against the wall as the disposal made popping noises. "That was a fine looking harp, man."

"Well, looks aren't everything," Eon said.

They watched on the window-wall as the harp spun out into empty space, and then exploded among a million stars.

"I can't believe it," the man said, staggering closer. "You trashed that fine instrument."

"It didn't have a soul," Eon explained, "so nothing to worry about. Say, care to join me for a drink?"

"I'm always up for a party," the drunk said. "I want to hear the story behind this."

"Oh no," Eon said, "that's my secret. Trust me, it's a sad story." On the way to the bar, he did explain: "See, the thing you never do is sell your soul. Not for any reason, even if you lose your wife, your daughter, the people you love the most."

"Life must go on," the drunk agreed.

Dancers and singers came and the ship rushed along the Bridge. The drunk passed out under the table and was carried off for the moment. People had forgotten the Noma, and nobody asked about it.

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The ship sped along the Bridge until the partiers fell into one of those blessed bright sunrisings on a world where the sky was clean and the air smelled fresh, birds warbled in bushes and butterflies clapped their wings on fields of sweet white flowers. Not the old Earth, but the universe liked to replicate its success stories, so there were plenty of such dear places if you looked for them, hidden among the Pilon of the obersole.

Eon's drunken friend, it turned out, was Emeel Dash, a powerful man on this world. He promised Eon a job, a house, a new hope. In Emeel's house, the first day, Eon met a young woman named Bryse who was tall and intelligent. She had blond hair and a clear complexion, humorous dark eyes, and small even teeth behind firm pink lips. She looked willowy in the loose white gown women wore on her world. She kept the business accounts for the estate. Bryse and Eon walked in a garden together. She seemed nervous and reserved, but he sensed there was a reason why she was making this time to get to know him. He cut a clean, handsome figure in his suit, and he began to see that she was interested and flustered. She talked about baking, about riding horses, about hiking on the mountain trails, and it was clear that she wanted to see more of him. "I have to go now," she said breathlessly, "but I hope we can talk again."

"I'd like that," Eon said, attracted to her.

"Soon," she said, and touched him. Touched him! That surprised him, made him feel happy. And at the same time, something inside him suddenly hurt as though hit with a whip. Bryse waved to him, betraying a glance of longing.

That night, his first night in this new life, Eon finally pressed his head against the pillow and fell asleep, sober but tired, drunk on piney air, treasuring the woman's touch. "Eon, your new life!" a woman's voice said in delight.

"Bridget!" He sat up under the OOH moon.

"I was hiding." The dark hair was still sleek, but her blue eyes quivered in water. There were tears on her cheeks, glistening, and her lips trembled. She lay on her side, touching stray leaves with trembling fingers. She looked handsome, tragic, beautiful in her dark uniform and white blouse.

"Then--you are still here! We can stay together!" He reached out but could not touch her.

She sniffled. "I had no idea I could stay in your mind. When the Noma fried my cherrywood harp, I thought that would be the end. But I could live with you like this until you die, and then we would die together."

"Let's do that, Bridget, let's."

"You good guy."

"It's nice having you here, Bridget."

"Yes, I thought so, until she touched you."

"Bryse? I'm -- that was just--I'm so sorry, was that you I felt? That hurt?"

"Yes, and I'm ashamed. I had no right." Bridget rose, dusted off her stewardess uniform. Graceful, desirable. "No, honey, it can't work. Look, I can't even do what I would like to do more than anything else in the world, which is take you in my arms."

"We can get by, Bridget, we survived one hell-hole already."

"Yes, but there will be no more hell-holes for you, my love. Nor for me." She blew him a kiss, turned, and walked away.

"Bridget, you must stay with me!" The realizations rushed up on him with deadly force: If she jumped now, there would be no receiving end. She'd cease to be. And he, Eon, would be the last human to see the ancient Earth. So there had been a home world, after all, it wasn't just a myth. She walked away among the pine trees, shaking her head, smiling. "I love you, Eon, That's how I want it to end. Do you understand? You will wake up and maybe eat breakfast, wash your face, yawn, all the things people do when they're alive and ready for love, real love, not this. Just tell me one time that you love me."

"Bridget, I love you! If you stay, I'll spend my life with you." Aching, yearning.

Walking away, she smiled once, gratefully, over her shoulder, very bravely. She did not look back again as she disappeared among the pine trees of the lost, ancient Earth.