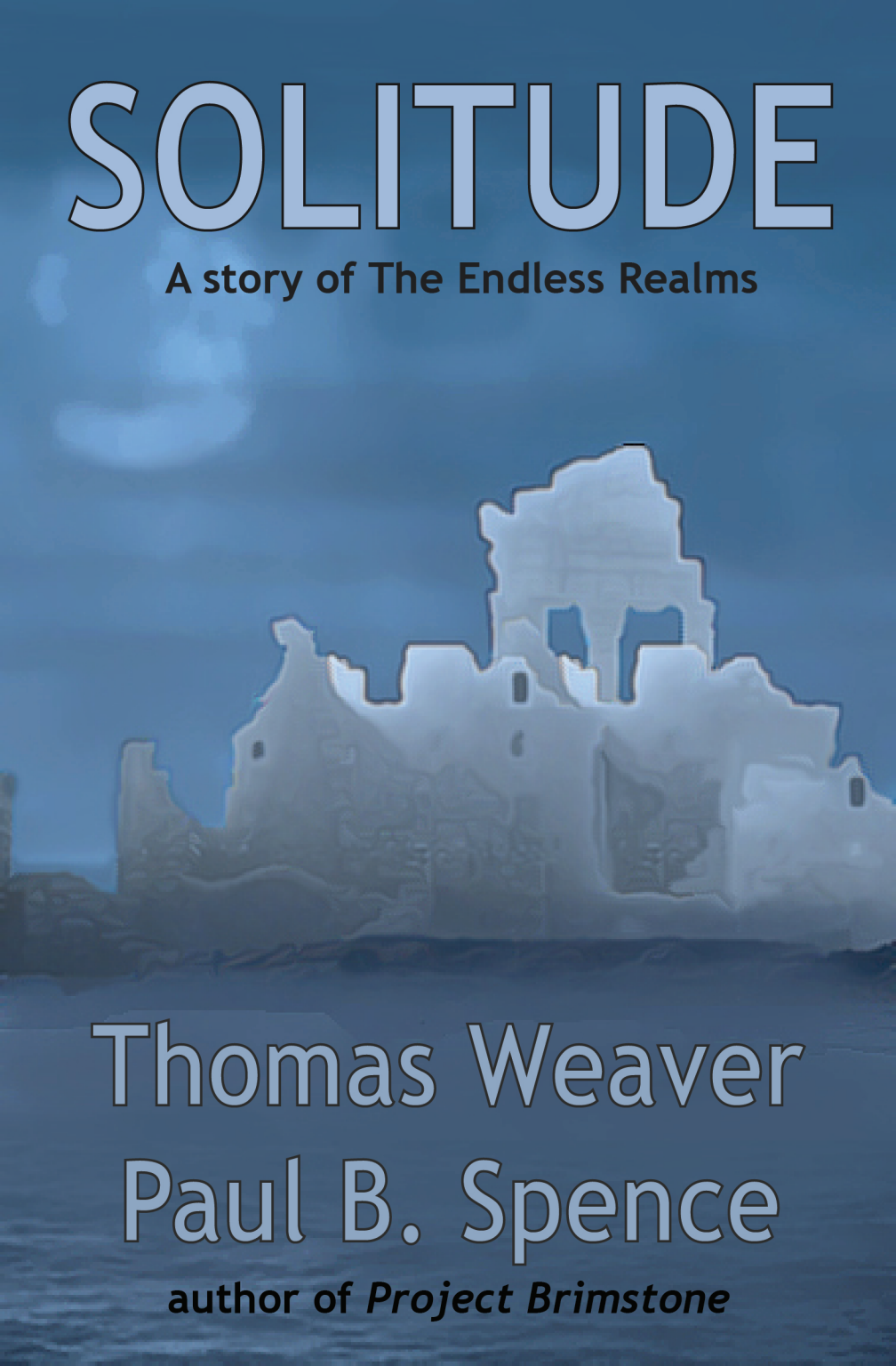


# SOLITUDE

A story of The Endless Realms



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# SOLITUDE

Where do I begin this story? In Threnendar, in my youth? Too unconnected to the here-and-now, and too painful. My home is *gone* -- I'll never see it again. Do I begin with when a team from the Jellico Research Complex found me, lost amidst nameless mountains, and recruited me to join them? Too much has happened since then; too much of it doesn't matter anymore.

No, I think maybe I'll start where it all began to come apart: the mission to Atlonglast.

To say that mission was a failure would be the greatest of understatements. It was a disaster. We were told to help the locals with their revolution: get involved, win their trust, and make sure the people of that world overthrew their tyrannical overlords. We got involved, all right, but I wouldn't describe what we did as helpful. Even if some... *thing* hadn't been leading the people to ruin, our interference would have made the entire situation worse. It wasn't the first time we'd screwed things up, either. Even in the cases where we thought we'd been successful in our mission, and all seemed well when we departed again, I suspect we simply hadn't known what a mess we'd made.

Simone didn't agree with my assessment.

"Raven, I understand that you were traumatized by your encounter with Cassandra, but you have to stop expecting monsters around every corner."

Monsters... Maybe I ought to tell you a little bit about my past, after all. That's what Cassandra used against me: memories I shouldn't even have anymore, but somehow she found them, and the fear that I'd thought I'd long since conquered... Fear and pain and memory of the night the invaders came, and Mistinghill burned.

I really had thought I was over that, before she showed me that I wasn't.

Cassandra had tortured me. Worse, she assumed the forms of people I knew while she did it. People I loved, once or twice. The pain of breaking bones was no worse than seeing their faces worn, each in turn, by that monster, their eyes gleaming in dark glee at the screams I couldn't suppress.

Needless to say, I had a lot of trouble trusting my teammates for a time after that. It wasn't that I'd never met shapeshifters before. I had. This was different. This was nightmare made flesh, and it fed on pain. It *twisted* everything in me, and I was lost inside old memories and new fears... I don't even know how I got away. I think Cassandra had her minions dump me somewhere, and then one of the locals who knew us found me and carried me to where the rest of the JRC team had holed up. I tried to shoot my teammates when they tried to help, they told me later, but eventually I came to my senses, remembered who they were and why we were in that city, in that world.

Simone later credited Deegan with talking me down, although she didn't know what he said to me. We were lucky, I guess, to run into him again in that place. As it turned out, he was there hunting monsters; it's what he does.

Then Kendell had gone and blown himself up, and Simone and I barely made it out before the sky fell.

*Simone.* I don't even know how to begin describing how I feel

about her. Did I love her? Do I still? Of course, even after... No, this isn't the place in the story for that. I've had a long life, and I can't say that I've ever felt anything as deeply as what I feel for her. Leave it there for now.

After our return from Atlonglast, I spent some time in the library of the JRC, seeking information about things like Cassandra. We needed to be prepared, I reasoned, for the next time we faced such a threat, because surely it would happen again. I found hints, references to demonic entities, but nothing that I would call solid facts. That, in itself, was information of a sort. The library contained books from *thousands* of worlds, no doubt brought back by the teams that had gone and wrecked them. If there was no information in all of that about what Tonya Harris had referred to as *Theta entities*, then it had been deliberately removed. I was sure of it.

The JRC is a strange place. I think it's underground somewhere; there are no windows at all, and no doors leading outside except the Doors leading to other worlds. There had to be hundreds if not thousands of people living there -- refugees from various doomed worlds, tasked with saving others that hadn't fallen yet -- all isolated in small groups. The different teams all knew *of* each other, but we didn't talk. It wasn't encouraged. The others weren't hostile; they just kept to themselves. Kendell was the only one from our team who seemed to move freely through the installation, recruiting those damned soldiers of his.

Did I mention that Kendell is immortal? Seems like I should have... Well, maybe not immortal as you'd think of it. He can die. Does so rather frequently, in fact. I'm not sure how he manages it, but his mind is stored at the JRC, and they grow him a new body each time he dies. Except something was never quite

right with him after that first time. It's almost as if, each time he dies, a little bit more of him is lost. He's always been a bit prone to violence, but he's a soldier – you sort of expect that. I counted him as a friend, once upon a time. That made it even worse when he tried to kill me.

You see, I had begun to suspect that the Old Man who ran the JRC might be something similar to Cassandra. No one had ever met him, except maybe Kendell. It was maybe two weeks after Atlonglast when the lie we'd been living fell apart. I'd been asking people from the other teams about their missions and about the Old Man, when Kendell suddenly appeared in the doorway and asked me to follow him.

Of course I followed him. Why wouldn't I? We were still friends. At least, I thought we were.

He led me along old corridors, through areas I hadn't visited before, where the air itself smelled forbidding, the lights creating hostile shadows in nonexistent corners.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"You've been asking a lot of questions. Questions that you shouldn't be."

I had shrugged. "What business of it is yours?"

I didn't miss the flicker of anger in his eyes, and something else. Like madness, but darker. I realized then that he intended to kill me.

"You should know better than to ask about some things. I understand that got you in trouble on our last mission. It even got me killed."

"You died because you wanted to kill the thing sabotaging the revolution, there in the city. You carried a nuke into the monster's lair, and you blew it and yourself up."

"That isn't what I was told."



"By whom?" I asked.

"Your girl Simone, for one. She told me it was *your* fault." He drew his big steel knife.

I flinched, as much from what he said as from the metal, and he'd grinned. He knew that I'm afraid of anything ferrous, with good reason. Looking into his eyes, I knew that he wasn't my friend any longer, and that he intended to make my death slow and painful.

"Kendell, it doesn't have to be like this."

"You brought this on yourself. You should have kept that pretty mouth shut and done what you were told. Now... Now I get to do what I've been wanting to do since I first met you."

I'd been looking for an escape since he'd first led me there, and at those words, I turned and ran. There was a service door on my right, and I bolted toward it, slamming it in Kendall's face as he gave chase. I knew I only had seconds, and my mind raced as fast as my feet.

At the bottom of the stairs, I slammed my elbow into the glass over a fire axe, cutting my hand as I grabbed the haft, and swung it blindly behind me. The axe caught Kendall in the shin, and blood covered us both as he cried out. I didn't stay around to finish the job; I didn't have the stomach for it. I left him there cursing me and ran to the closest embarkation room I could find.

I didn't have a device that activated the Door, but I knew there was often some residual energy left after someone came through. If I was lucky, the Door would work. Suffice to say that it did.

I slept in someone's tool shed on a pile of canvas sacking, that first night after I made my escape. I didn't think I was entirely safe, but... safe enough, surely. They would have no way of knowing which Door I'd gone through, or even that I was no

longer in the JRC, until it was too late.

That was what I told myself, anyway.

I was awake well before dawn, anxious to get more miles between myself and the place where a Door opened into that world. For a world a team had visited recently, things were fairly quiet. There was evidence of a massive battle, but I stayed away from those fields. The stench of the corpses sometimes followed me for miles, though. I didn't think the locals would be happy to see me. Whatever the JRC team had done here had probably resulted in many deaths.

Just in case, I left town and road behind, and set off across country. I miss the smell of the woods, the blue sky over my head... Have ever seen a sky without clouds or rain? *Soon*, I told myself, *soon I'll find a place to stay for a few years, until they forget or give up*. But I didn't think it was going to be that easy, and I was right. They caught up with me on the fourth day: my onetime colleagues, sent to take me back to the JRC.

They were led by Kendall, his leg either fixed or replaced. The man who'd once taught me to use a rifle, just as I'd taught him to use a crossbow, now faced me with my own preferred weapon at ready. Light glinted like ice and fire from the steel-tipped quarrel.

"If I hit you, you die hard," he said, as if I didn't already know. "Don't try to run, Raven."

*This used to be my friend*, I kept thinking. We had saved each other's lives a half-dozen times on as many missions. I don't know what had happened to him. What did it take to turn a good man into this?

"Go ahead and kill me. I won't go back."

Pure bravado on my part. I was still hoping to make good my escape. But I had no intention of surrendering. I could never make Kendall – even the Kendall who had been, which this most

certainly was not -- understand what was so wrong with what our little band of exiles had been doing for the past several years, could never make him understand why I had to get away from the JRC. None of them had understood – except maybe Simone, and even she thought I was mistaken.

Kendall shook his head. "To bad my orders are to bring you back alive if we can. But don't think I won't shoot if I have to."

Simone moved out from behind one of the men Kendell had brought with him. Those men had rifles. If it had been just Kendell and a crossbow, I might have taken my chances, but against these... No.

Simone was so beautiful, it broke my heart to see her.

"Raven, please." She held out a hand to me, and I was lost in those dark eyes of hers all over again. "This isn't really what you want. It's... like that time on Atlonglast, when that *thing* got into your mind and twisted your memories to make you not trust us. You attacked Kendell when he trying to talk to you about our next mission. He didn't try to kill you. You don't need to run. You're having a relapse, that's all."

Her voice was soothing, almost hypnotic, and I found myself thinking that maybe she was right. Something *had* gotten into my head on that mission; something made me so paranoid that, though badly wounded, I had held my teammates off at gunpoint rather than let them near me to help. Could I have misread what had happened? Or even hallucinated some of it? If my current state of mind was a recurrence of that...

Bad move, as Anton would have said, to remind me of that last mission, when I realized that we were doing more harm than good – exactly as the Old Man had intended. There was something about Simone that didn't quite seem right. For that matter, there was something about *me* that didn't quite seem

right. I was having trouble thinking clearly, and I doubted it had anything to do with PTSD.

It was then that I felt something burningly cold stab me below my right shoulder blade, and a moment of extreme pain, before everything went dark. I wasn't sure if it was a dart, and my last thoughts were surprise and hope that whatever it was, it wasn't steel.

I'm fairly certain I have a new scar there now, by the way, because *of course* the dart was steel. Anything else wouldn't have hurt as much.

I was back in the JRC before the drug wore off and consciousness returned. I thought I already knew what would happen: a trial – if you could call it that – and imprisonment. Maybe they thought I would plead for mercy or claim temporary madness.

I was wrong.

Kendell again led me through strange parts of the JRC, until we reached an area near the center. The Old Man was there, looking tired. I'd only heard of him, never seen him in person. He didn't look like a monster, but then, neither had Cassandra at first.

"You've been a lot of trouble, young man," he'd said.

*Young man.* As if I were human. I'm centuries old, even if my appearance is more or less that of a human not quite three decades in age. I didn't correct him. If he didn't know, I wasn't going to tell him otherwise. Somehow, I thought he knew and was amused. I also didn't think he was even remotely human. There was something about his voice that chilled me, that clawed at my nerves.

"Not that I ever had a contract, but I quit. I'm done with this place, and with you," I told him.

"You're done when I am finished with you."

"You can't make me serve you, and I won't."

"Oh, I believe you. But that doesn't mean I have no use for you. There are ways to use you that don't require your cooperation."

I think I tried to run again then. It's a little foggy. Blame it on the number of times I was hit as they subdued me. Kendell stood back and grinned. Simone, blessedly, was nowhere to be seen.

They didn't lock me in a cell or torture me, as I'd expected. Instead, I was taken to a embarkation and cast through another Door, into rain and howling wind. The Door shut the moment I was released.

I was alone.

And so they left me here on this tower of stone with nothing beyond but a dark and raging sea. I circled the island twice to be sure, but it was quite isolated. It might even be the only land in the entire world. I could not escape because there was nowhere to escape *to*. The only way out was through the Door that brought me here, and I would not choose that even if I could.

I hurried to find shelter, if there was any. Soon I discovered a narrow cleft in the stone that somewhat hid a door – an ordinary door, I was certain, and not a means to leave this world. It was not locked, and I did not stop to consider where it might lead before letting myself inside. It was out of the rain, wind, and noise, and that was good enough.

There was a small chamber just beyond the door, with corridors branching off from two sides. I chose one, and began a search for who might live here, or a clue about what this place was, or anything else I could learn. The corridor was long, with more rooms, some large and some small, opening off from it, as well as more corridors that I did not explore at that time. No sign

of recent habitation in any of them. I went back and began again with the other corridor from the entry room, and it was the same as the first. However long the time I would be here, it would be spent alone.

As punishments went, it seemed mild. At least at first. I had nothing else to do with my time, though, so I set about searching through the rooms, and the corridors, and the rooms beyond those. It was something to do besides think about what had happened to me, and why I was here, and how long I was likely to remain.

Most of the rooms were empty. I found one that contained a narrow bed and a chair. Another had shelves with a few hundred glass jars: preserved vegetables and fruit, mostly, and some meat. That told me something about the nature of my captivity. Either they didn't intend to keep me here long, or they were going to just let me die when the food ran out. Water, at least, I would never lack.

Although the wind abated from time to time, the rain never ceased entirely. Water crashing from below and water falling from above, and barren stone between. Everything in shades of steel and iron. If I tired of the endless corridors of my prison, I could go outside and watch the waves hurl themselves against the sky and wonder what it would be like to fall into that cold sea.

A few days passed, I think. Whenever there was only moderate rain and no wind, I went outside, no longer looking for an end to sea and sky but only... wondering, maybe, how long it would be until I forgot that I had ever lived anywhere else, and knowing this isolation would accelerate the fading of memory. It is the blessing and the curse of my people that we forget after a time, almost like dying and being reborn as someone else. I think the memory of Simone tormented me the most. I didn't want to

forget I had loved her, no matter that she had betrayed me in the end. If she truly had. I'm unsure it *was* her there at the end, now that I think about it, and if so, she must have been misled.

During the worst weather, I explored my prison. There were, it appeared, far more rooms and corridors than my original search revealed. I found a cache of torches, flints and steel. I was oddly pleased at the last item. An alternative to drowning, if it came to that. Maybe my jailers would come to check on me years later and find my body, my dead hand still pressing a piece of cold metal to my heart...

There is, at times, a strange comfort to be had in knowing that one can always die as a last act of defiance.

I began losing track of time's passage. I slept when I was tired. I ate when I was hungry, and tried to count days by how many jars of food were gone. I stopped talking to myself. Why bother? I already knew what I'd say in reply.

I almost missed it when it first happened: a sound that was not wind or water, was not the hiss of a burning torch or any other sound that belonged as part of my present experience. Soft and even, not quite a tapping sound, it went on for a moment, paused, and then resumed.

It was the sound of someone else's footsteps.

That sound changed everything. It didn't occur to me until later that anyone else on this island of stone was likely a prisoner, too. Nor did I consider that I could be imagining it. All that mattered was finding the person whose footsteps I heard.

I grabbed up a torch and ran to the main passage. The acoustics of this place played tricks with direction and distance – the sound came first from near the door to outside, and then a moment later from the chambers beyond the right-hand corridor. I ran, pausing frequently to listen, and torchlight flickered and

flowed over stone walls and blind doorways. My leg ached from the never-ending cold and damp; I cursed the old injury that slowed me down now.

After a time, the footsteps ceased and did not return. I listened... Five minutes, fifteen... Finally I had to admit that I had lost the direction. For now. I searched the rooms in that area, though. If there was someone else here – and I could not let myself think there wasn't – surely I'd find some sign of their presence...

Room after empty room. Fear crept in that this was some new cruelty, an elaborate deception, that my jailers, having failed to break me – perhaps – with despair, were now trying hope instead. A branching in the corridor, and six more rooms...

The next one was different.

I would have sworn this room was empty before, as were most of the chambers that riddled this island. Where had these crates come from? I pried the lid off one and looked inside. Metal cans, sacks of both heavy paper and rough cloth, plastic bottles and glass jars... Food. I opened another crate, and another. Some contained more food – a few years' worth, by my quick estimate – and some contained other things. Woolen blankets. Oil lanterns. Clothing. A black iron kettle – I was careful not to touch that – and a folding tripod to hang it over a fire. I was almost grateful.

But I would have sworn this room was empty.

Sometime later, well-fed and wearing entirely clean clothing, I thought maybe I should make this chamber my residence now. It contained nothing *but* these crates, though, and the room with the bed and chair was considerably closer to the outside door. I made a pack from a blanket, filled it with food and a couple changes of clothes, picked up a now-lit lantern, and stepped back out into the corridor.



*Flicker.*

For maybe three seconds, the corridor was... different. Pale walls, dark floor, neither made of the familiar rough stone. Bright, steady light with none of the warmth of fire – or sun, for that matter. Blank, grey-painted doors.

*Flicker.*

The door I reached out to touch turned to cool stone under my hand. I stood unmoving, not knowing if I should weep or scream or laugh. All and none seemed appropriate.

Then I lifted the pack again and went back to my room.

The footsteps did not come back that day, or the next, or the day after that. My feeling of hope was fast deteriorating. I moved more supplies from the room with the crates to the rooms I thought of as mine. I was not surprised to discover that all of the clothing was my size.

I went outside, thinking of doors, and Doors. Another day of storms. Even if other land existed beyond this never-silent sea, how would I get there, or anyone else get here? No ship could survive this weather. Thunder crashed, sharp and immediate as gun fire. I stood with my back to the outside door, listening to the wind. Sometimes it cried a name, but I don't know whose.

Times like now, when the footsteps are very close, I sometimes tell them my story, but who knows if they listen or care? I'm not even sure *I* care anymore. How much time has passed? My hair has grown long, and I don't bother to cut it. There's no one here to see me, no one here to humor me and pretend to be fooled by my nonexistent disguise. It must have been months, maybe even years, since I came here. I think I talk to you, wandering ghosts, so I won't forget. It would be too painfully ironic if, only now, the fading came upon me, and I woke one day to discover that I'd misplaced my past. Listen to me, please, so that maybe I'll at least

remember who I am.

Other footsteps grow closer now, and there is something different about them this time, some quality of sound that I hadn't even realized was missing from yours. I think I'll step out into the corridor for a moment... I'll be right back. Always am.

Do you see him, too, ghosts? A man dressed in black, battered and worn? Has he come to kill me? Do I care if he has, at this point?

"Don't go," I plead.

I hope that he is real and not some new torment, but only time will tell.

## About the Authors

Thomas Weaver is a writer, editor, and blogger. He currently spends his time blogging at *North of Andover*, reading, editing, and fending off his six cats who like his desk better than his twin's.

Having discovered that he greatly enjoys writing and editing, he's been putting his uncanny knack for grammar and punctuation, along with an eclectic mental collection of facts, to good use ever since as a Wielder of the Red Pen of Doom. A much shorter version of this story was the seed for *Project Brimstone*.

Paul B. Spence is a practicing archaeologist who hopes to one day get it right. He currently lives in New Mexico, where all the cool kids hang out, with too many cats.

Like most authors, he had an eclectic career path. He's worked as a retail gofer, a food service monkey, brute laborer, a rennie, a writer for the RPG industry, and many other rewarding jobs that didn't pay enough to feed him or his cats.