

Ghostbringer

David Vickery

When the tribe moved onto the hill Andon knew a kind of peace. At night the great cold fell swiftly as usual, but Andon could see the sky lights more clearly than ever before. Many of the tribe grumbled because the new camp was exposed. But Hu had decided, and as always his decision was final. What decided him was the water, which was sharp and less sick than before; but more, there was just a handful of men in possession of the hill and they were mostly old and feeble. Overcoming resistance much greater than their toothless snarls and senseless gestures was beyond the tribe, as Hu well knew.

In the evenings the tribe sat around the fire. Their position was fixed by their standing in the order. Hu naturally sat nearest to the heat, with Ehrek a precisely defined distance from him. Then Beton, and so on down the line. Andon had never worried much about this ritual seating, and it struck him as a shock to realise that he was only barely in the top half. That meant fifteen men were ranked higher than he was. He also saw it was only his native intelligence that justified even such a place as that. In terms of strength he was not a *force* – not part of the team which played the key part in trapping the thin but wiry animals they ate.

Another strange thought came to Andon as he looked around the tribe on the fifth day of their coming to New Place. The men of the tribe – and the few women – were somehow caved in. They were *not* men, *not* women – not as they should be. This was a strange thought indeed since Andon had never known any other way for a person to be. The lined faces, the grimaces, the sudden clutching of stomachs and mouths as one or other would rush out of their place in the circle – all this was as familiar as the deep hunger which lined his belly like salt lining a wound. But what of that? They survived. But again, some bizarre vision of the tribe standing proud, not skulking or running, facing off the next challengers – and here was the really strange notion, which caused Andon's face to work into frowns at its unthinkableness – taking them in. Adding them to the tribe. Making it stronger.

One glance at the dour profile of Hu grimacing at his Head Share of meat was enough to convince Andon that this was mere raving. It was a day longer than usual since Andon had eaten. But the thoughts kept coming. Hu is wrong. He will not listen, so he must be killed.

"Kill him," Andon suddenly said, a look of hate boring towards Hu. Hu looked up and around at that point. Andon quailed when the look fell on him even though he could not have heard. But Sparsek heard, a half-senile but still strong man who was Andon's neighbour. He chuckled, a strange goatlike sound, and went back to binding his spear shaft.

Feigning sickness – which in fact needed little pretence – Andon left the circle. Sparsek greedily scabbled a few inches nearer the fire. Andon's mind seemed to clear as he made his way down to the stream. A small cascade

bubbled out of the rocks, glittering even in the grey light. It seemed good beyond its wetness and thirst-cutting. Another strange idea. But Andon had no concept of beauty other than the lights in the sky. Certainly not the few withered women of the tribe, none of which was ever likely to be given to him. He gasped as he plunged his hands into the icy coldness and drank.

The next day the force and its hangers-on such as Andon went out on the hunt. The search for the scrawny sheep led them far from New Place. Even Hu looked uneasy as the trail drew them on. His grim face scoured the sky as the day rolled past. The trail was sharp stone and cut through Andon's flimsy boots many times. He fought for breath as the force pounded onwards.

Suddenly, men were all around them and their warcries filled Andon's head with terror. A knife scraped his arm but he dodged confusingly away, his hand clapped to the wound. The force was already in retreat. As their position demanded, Hu, Ehrek and Beton traded a few thrusts before joining them. Beton got a spear through his leg for his trouble. Turning and looking back, Andon saw the ambushers more clearly. They wore skins over their jeans and their boots looked strong. They were thin, all right, but fitter looking than those others, those Herons, at Last Place – and they had beaten the tribe too.

One from the victorious tribe strode forward as Hu's men fell away.

"We are Gomer's tribe. We lead here. You come again – we kill you all." He rattled his spear in his clenched hand. Hu, from a safe distance, glared back at the tribesman and made the gestures his tribe expected to see. It would give them a finger of comfort later as they huddled around the evening fire. But Andon did not join the ragged cheering of the tribe. He kept his eyes on Hu as he turned back to lead them home and saw for a moment the look of blank despair in his leader's face.

The tribe caught several small birds and a rabbit on the way home. Everyone would eat, but everyone would remain hungry – even Hu. Andon felt giddy as he sank into his place in the circle. It was the sixth night.

The night he dreamed, a dream born of hunger and hopeless days. He was walking in the Taboo Field over from New Place and fell into a deep hole. It was dark, but it was warm and there was food. A voice was calling him. It called "Anderson," but Andon knew it called for him.

He woke in the grit of the dawn. Sparsek lay close by, gently shivering but unaware of it. Andon reached out and shook lightly the fragile bones. Another new feeling: affection.

"What?" came the cracked voice in answer.

"I must go to the Taboo Field."

Sparsek did not look up, keeping his gaze on the mist at the end of the field where the trees came down.

"Do not go," he said.

"Why not?"

"There are ghosts in the taboo places. They take the living and force them to join them."

"Have you seen them?" asked Andon, pushing away terror.

“Yes.”

Andon again felt a strange longing. A longing, it seemed, for no known desire. “I must go.” He scrambled up, the wind knifing through him.

“You cannot, Andon. It is taboo.”

A strange pride gripped him. “I am Anderson.”

The old man breathed wheezy laughter. “Who are you, to have such a name?”

He followed the path to the Taboo Field. Short stones sat like listening dwarfs, ranged in a circle like the tribe’s circle. Mist clung to his heels and seemed to float the stones toward him. It was the seventh day.

Again the giddiness came. Andon stepped unsteadily inside the stone circle. A strange quiet seemed to fall over him. Birdsong had stilled. His eyes were held by one stone, jagged and ancient like the rest but somehow distinct from them. He walked over to it, possessed with the urge to touch it. His hands went through the stone as they had through the water of the stream, and he flowed downward through the earth with that same sharp feeling of satisfaction.

He stood in total darkness, without sensation, but still felt calm. A sound came then, rising into a quiet hum, and soft light flooded from the walls. He stood in a small chamber. Against the opposite wall stood a bank of metal objects. *Machines*, they were called by the fireside dodderers. Andon had seen them himself on scrap-heaps or rusting in abandoned dwelling places. These were different to those machines, though: they flashed soft lights and had an air of purpose.

Then, out of the pale light of the chamber, something insubstantial and fluid floated. Andon’s strange relaxation snapped, terror swarming in on him as he cowered against the room’s edgeless corners.

“Ghost!” he wailed, one hand covering his eyes, the other warding the spirit off. But again a warm ease washed through him and he lowered his hands. The shape of a man, youngish, bearded, dressed in soft clothes, wavered in front of him, the machine lights winking through his body.

“Who are you?” Andon said at last.

The image looked him in the face. His eyes were a distant green. “I think you would call me Webber. Yes, call me Webber.”

Again the unreality pressed down on Andon. “Are you a ghost?”

Webber’s hazy shape seemed to ripple. A thin smile crossed his face. “I suppose I am a ghost. But don’t worry, you’ll understand it better later. I’m not going to recruit you for haunting, as Sparsek believes.”

Andon started. “You know Sparsek?”

“I know all about him,” said Webber. “In fact, I know more about him than he does. I know all about you, too. That’s why I chose you.”

“Chose me?”

“Yes, Anderson. I searched for someone like you, then I brought you here.”

Andon frowned. “Why do you call me that name?”

“It *is* your name.”

Anderson was silent. The ghost of Webber pointed to a machine. "Time is running out, Anderson. There is something I need you to do for me. I can't force you. But I can offer you rewards. Pull the tube from the top of this machine and I'll show you."

Anderson rose and walked dumbly to the machine Webber indicated. He drew out a long, thin metal pipe from the top. The black marble-like surface of the machine was unbroken when the pipe left it.

"Now hold the tube to your stomach."

Anderson looked at the ghost, but there seemed nothing to do except trust it. He parted his mangy skins and held the cold tube against his stomach.

"Turn the end of the tube with your other hand,"

Anderson did so. Suddenly his whole body was filled with a delicious warmth. Well-being, such as he had never known before, suffused him. Tears sprang from his eyes, blinding him. When he was able to speak again, he said:

"What is that feeling, Webber?"

"That," smiled the ghost, "is warmth, it's health – it's cure, in fact."

"It's more. Something more."

"Oh yes," agreed Webber. "It's no more hunger."

Anderson introspected. Yes. It was incredible, mind-shattering, but yes. "I'm not hungry. I don't want to eat!"

"Better get used to it. If you want, you need never be hungry again."

An unguessed-at strength filled Anderson as they spoke. The sickness which had dogged his entire life had shut off completely. The weakness in his body was dropping from him second by second. He felt renewed, exalted, like –

– "Like a man should feel?" Webber completed his thoughts. "That's right. Men weren't born to live like animals – and you can help change that. But if you're going to help me, we must act quickly. Are you willing?"

"Tell me what I should do."

Webber's outline seemed to be breaking up. "Listen then. Go into the next room and climb into the ship. Put the headphones on your head. They'll tell you all you need to know." The face of Webber turned pale then and he winced. "And now it really is time for me to die. So long, Anderson." The ghostly image cut out as the last word was spoken. Webber vanished from the room as though he had never been.

Anderson stood immobile for some minutes. The machines still winked at him. But the rest of the pearly-grey chamber was empty. There were no doors to other rooms. How he got in, how he would get out – Webber hadn't explained that...if he had ever existed at all! But his body remained strong and his stomach still had that sweet singing feeling.

He walked around the room, touching the walls with his cure tube. The wall behind him was hard and unyielding, as was the right-hand wall. He moved over to the left and reached out. His arm disappeared as if going into a hole. Taking courage, he pushed through the wall, his eyes tightly closed. His flesh tingled as though insects were playing on it. And then he was through.

In front of him was a large bulk of metal, a door open as if in invitation. The room was lit with the same iridescence as the last chamber. Was this the *ship*?

And what were *headphones*? Inside, as he peered over the door, he could see a seat and a panel with controls. He stepped into it. As he lowered himself into the seat, a whirr started up from deep within the ship and lights leapt on in the panel. The door sucked shut and Anderson felt another surge of panic. He scrabbled for the door handle but the door seemed to have merged seamlessly with the wall. He decided to sit back in his chair and wait.

Immediately, a compartment on the panel, previously opaque, lit up and a partition slide away to reveal a metal object. The light ran like liquid on the curved surface. Anderson reached in and took out the object, two rounded canisters joined by a connecting strip of flexible metal. The *headphones*?

Seated in the impossible ship, many feet below the place taboo to the men of Hu's tribe, Anderson cautiously lowered the headphones over his head. They fitted naturally over his ears. Without warning, a voice began talking. It told a story such as old men of the tribe told to children and which grown men laughed at. The lights in the sky, said the voice, were giant balls of burning gas called stars which gave heat and light to worlds like this world. Webber came from a world far distant.

Anderson heard the story of Webber's ancient race: how they had advanced in knowledge and power. They had sent Webber and others like him to other worlds, there to use their mind-force to steer races away from using awesome weapons called nuclear bombs. If a world could survive this fateful time, the voice said, its people could go on and eventually develop as Webber's race had.

But Webber himself had failed. All his great mental strength had not stopped a war from devastating this planet, which its inhabitants called *Earth*. Life had all but ceased, and great civilizations had declined to mere tribes of savages. Anderson himself was the heir of this race of giants and dwarfs in this year 2193, old Earth dating.

Now Webber was dead. Anderson was being asked to take his body back to his world in the ship.

Anderson sat unmoving in his seat. His whole world had been torn down around him. But that meant that all the nonsensical ritual and conflict of the tribes was unnecessary. Men weren't born to live like animals.

The door extruded itself once more from the wall of the ship and swung open: a chance, he presumed, for him to change his mind if he wished. He continued to sit, the door closed again, and the voice told him which buttons to press on the control panel.

He did so: and instantly, the universe roared around him.

Perhaps he passed out for a time, because the next thing he was aware of was that the universe was stable once more. Again, the door detached itself from the wall and swung open. Anderson looked blearily upwards – and was stunned by the view that met his gaze. Lush vegetation filled his vision. Birds flew, calling, above him. Bright colours, unknown on Earth's grey surface, shouted in his face.

There was a movement in the corner of his eye, and he turned to see two men.

"Welcome," said one. "I am Sabri, this is Vorsahl."

“You have brought our brother home,” said Vorsahl. “Come, and receive our part of the bargain.”

They helped Anderson from the ship with firm hands. Sabri reached inside and pressed a button on the control panel. A gleaming block of metal emerged from the ship onto the grass. Carrying the block, they led Anderson through the tangle of foliage until they reached a cleared area.

A white building shone with the light from their sun. It was open to the sky with many arches and open portals. People were walking about and some smiled or made gestures of greeting to Anderson, but none seemed surprised to see him.

The two men asked him to wait. He watched them walk away then stood, breathing in the clean air for a time. After a while they returned and sat down before him.

Sabri said, “You have questions, Anderson?”

Anderson nodded. “How did I see Webber as a ghost? I thought ghosts were things for the old and crazed. And why did he want so much to return here?”

Sabri’s serene grey eyes looked out over the great clearing. “We don’t die as your race dies, Anderson. Sensing death coming, our minds shut down our bodily functions and we live in a kind of limbo. Webber lived like that on your world for many of your years. When his machines found you they activated him again and he was able to operate in the disembodied state for several days before that last energy gave out. Now you have brought him home. And here he is.”

Anderson followed Sabri’s pointing finger. Emerging from the building was a younger-looking and beardless man who yet was unmistakably Webber.

“The loss of even one life is almost unbearable to us,” said Vorsahl. “We have regenerated him and he lives again – thanks to you.”

“Yes,” said Sabri. “We no longer create new lives. There is no need. We are perfectly attuned to the way. But losing one of us diminishes us all.”

Webber joined them. “I promised you rewards,” he smiled at Anderson. “Here they are.” And he took from his robes three tubes.

Anderson took them. “Are these cure tubes?”

“This one is,” said Webber. “This with the red coding is a seeding tube. It will plant food for your people and make you healthy again.”

“And this, with the blue?”

“A killing tube,” said Webber. “You will need it, for a time.”

Anderson stepped from the trees and walked towards New Place. When they saw him an excited muttering ran round the group. Hu stood up and walked towards him, a crowd of the force following. He stopped and pointed his spear.

“There he is, the taboo-breaker! Now he brings ghosts among us! He must die!”

Before Anderson could speak, Hu had drawn back his spear and the others were hefting theirs. In sudden resolution, Anderson levelled the killing tube

at Hu and twisted the end. There was a crack, and Hu seemed to rush in on himself, leaving nothing.

The other hunters stood transfixed.

"Sparsek, take their spears," ordered Anderson. "Get ready to move: we are going down into the valley."

There was a murmur among the tribe. But they had seen what had happened to Hu. Only Ehrek said in a surly voice, "It is not yet time for Next Place, Andon."

"It is time. And my name is Anderson."

And Sparsek, hearing this, let out a thin braying cackle of laughter that carried far over the fields.