

# Tales of Crazy Scientists

**Paul S. Wesson**

## **Tales of Crazy Scientists**

There was a time when I shunned short stories, preferring the wide-ranging saga of the sort I wrote about in *The Interstellar Undertakers* and its two companion volumes. However, there are certain subjects which find their natural place in the short story. And sure I was occasionally accused of being a (mild) example of the type when I was a Professor of astrophysics, I was drawn to the vintage problem of the crazy scientist. There follows a collection of a dozen stories with this as theme.

Some of the stories are, I admit, dark in tone. As reader you can of course take them in any order you wish. But for those who desire a lighter treatment, the first and last have a measure of levity.

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## PLAN M FOR MERCURY

My chief engineer, Ron Wick, sauntered into the office, perched himself perogatively on the corner of my desk, and announced “I quit.”

I felt another frown add itself to my sunburned forehead. However, I was not particularly worried by Wick’s comment: he had threatened to quit twice before. The first time was on account of what he considered to be the unreasonable male/female ratio at the camp. Back when we started excavation for the Mirror, there had only been four women on staff; and after working himself sequentially through three of them, his sexual appetite became ravenous. (The fourth woman – our computer chief Charlotte – had slapped the engineer’s face and told him to go fry himself, which on Mercury would have been easy to do.) Now we had 123 men and 82 women working on the project, so Wick’s amorous problem was obsolescent. The second time my chief engineer had said he was quitting, the reason was more mechanical. He had pointed out, quite rightly, that a quake under the Mirror would cause its liquid metal to rush out, pouring downhill and engulfing the camp. I had avoided that issue by appealing to his manhood. What mining camp in history has been free of risk? And anyway, we were all being paid very well for living by the side of a million-ton pool of the metal after which the planet was named: mercury.

So when I looked up from my annual report, my voice was weary but calm. I simply asked “Why?”

Wick hopped off the edge of my desk and began walking up and down in front of it, making a good show of being agitated. “I’ll tell you the truth, Stu.”

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I leaned back in my chair and suppressed a yawn. This, also, I had heard before. For some reason, Ron Wick felt obliged to preface every argument he made by a claim about his verisimilitude. There was actually no room for serious falsehood or error on Mercury. The temperature outside the dome where we lived was high enough to melt the softer metals, like lead, silver, zinc and (of course) the mercury that we were using for the Mirror. Anybody who did not do their job right was likely to cause the death either of himself or a coworker. The morale in the dome was in some ways more like that of an army base than a mining camp. And the Sun never let us forget our fragility. Its glare slammed through the thick window of my office like something solid. The hot air shimmered around Wick's gesticulating figure and turned him into a blurry phantom.

"It's about the robots, Stu."

I groaned. *Not again*, I thought. We had 1,326 active robots on the project. The number was clear in my mind, because I was including in my annual report a request for an additional 428 of the many-functioned creatures. We needed them. Desperately. No ordinary man, even in a thermal suit, could work outside the dome for any length of time before getting dehydrated and disoriented by the thudding weight of the Sun. We absolutely needed the help of the mechanical creatures with their androidal brains to upgrade the Mirror. Presently we were receiving about three zigawatts of light from the Sun, bouncing it off the Mirror, and sending it in a tight beam to Earth. But the Earth's population demanded even more energy, and it was up to us to provide it. And for that, we needed the robots.

I suddenly felt irritated. After all, concern about robots – in one form or another – had been around for eons. It was passé. I

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accused “You’ve been reading that silly story, *Fondly Fahrenheit*, haven’t you?”

The temporary blank look on my chief engineer’s face showed that I had over-estimated his erudition. The story I referred to was a classic. It concerned a man who owned a very capable robot, whose androidal brain unfortunately became erratic when the temperature climbed above some critical point, causing it to commit mayhem, much to the anguish of its dedicated owner. Sort of a space-age Frankenstein story. I could not remember the conclusion of the tale, and promised myself I would visit the camp’s library to find out what happened in the end. Thinking about this, I realized that if I could not recall all of the story, there was really no reason I should expect Ron Wick to have read it at all. In fact, I had never seen Ron in the library, in the many years we had been on Mercury. This was in contrast to our computer chief Charlotte, who was often to be seen rummaging through the files, presumably looking for something to entertain her off-duty time. I thought that this was a bit of a loss; since as a bachelor, I was sure I could have provided more entertainment than some old book, and would gladly have...

“... so *that’s* why you need to consider the robots!” Ron concluded.

“Interesting,” I muttered, covering my inattention. I groped for a sentence that would cover my ignorance and allow him to restate his argument. After all, Ron Wick was a good engineer even if a little paranoid, and I would prefer to keep his services. I picked up the gold nugget from my desk – a frozen blob from the dark side of a boulder that was the first thing I noticed when I arrived on Mercury – and began to turn it over between my fingers. Lowering my furrowed forehead, I said in a suitably concerned tone: “Do you consider the problem to be serious?”

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Charlotte waltzed into my office later, her bosom bouncing in the funny gravity, but with a half-serious expression playing around her usually laughing lips.

“Boss”, she announced, using the term in an ironic way which implied that she could replace me anytime as field-head of Mercury Mirror Incorporated, “I want to talk to you about the robots.”

“Sure,” I replied. Instinctively, I adopted my paternalistic/ but-not-quite-over-the-hill attitude. Charlotte was an attractive but mature woman. I knew from her file that she had two children back on Earth. For some reason she had chosen to isolate herself on a ball of metal that cringed under the blast of the Sun, and was about as remote from the green fields of home as could be imagined. But that was her business.

By the same rule, it was between me and the file on Ron Wick, that if he returned to Earth he would probably be shot by an irate but long-remembered husband with an old-fashioned prejudice against adultery. I was grateful for the security system of Mercury Mirror Incorporated, because it protected not only the histories of my employees but also the past misdeeds of its Head of Operations (i.e., me). Feeling secure in encryption, I invited Charlotte: “Please tell me what’s bothering you.”

My computer chief sucked in a chestful of air, as if about to make a major speech. Then her eyebrows arched over her mischievous eyes and she said “Stu, I think it would be better if you came Outside and actually *looked*.”

I groaned. None of the human population at the camp went Outside unless it was necessary. It meant a lengthy process of donning a suit, clumping about among cinders under a ton

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weight of sunlight, and then a period of recuperation over a beer. Only the last part of the procedure held any attraction for me. I said defensively, “Ron Wick has already talked to me, and he doesn’t think that the problem with the robots is critical.”

“Bah!” Charlotte exclaimed, her eyes flashing with contempt. “Ron Wick wouldn’t know the difference between a fart and a hurricane.”

Interested by her choice of words, I quietly sniffed the air of my office. The atmosphere inside the dome was recycled, of course. And a low hum told that things were running normally, presumably dealing with the flatulence I had experienced during the long time I had spent on my annual report. The component parts of *that* lay scattered over my desk, interspersed with old coffee stains and the remains of my lunch. Ancient files were stacked against the curving wall of the office, which was broken at eye level by a thin horizontal strip, through which the Sun shone in an intense fan of yellow light.

Blinking at this evidence of the Outside, I must have looked undecided. For the woman urged: “Come on, Stu! You’ll be able to write in your report that you made a special survey.” Seeing that this did little to defray my reluctance, she grinned and added: “You’ll also be able to watch me strip.”

I did not know whether the last comment was a come-on or the placing of a boundary. But suddenly I laughed. “Okay. Let’s go.”

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The Sun hit like a hammer as soon as I stepped out of the airlock. Almost immediately, the visor on my helmet darkened, leaving me squinting at imaginary stars against the black sky of Mercury. There is no atmosphere on the planet, and the jagged

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horizon seemed unnaturally near and sharp – resembling a scene cut out of cardboard. The terrain nearby seemed at first to be a jigsaw of fiery rocks and pitch-black shadows, depending on the direction of the Sun. The latter was an intense blob, strangely large at only a third of the distance as seen from Earth, its outline made hazy by the automatic screening provided by my visor. As my eyes adjusted, the scenery went from having the quality of a black-and-white photograph to showing colour: predominantly browns and yellows, with splashes of glinting blue where the sunlight bounced off pools of liquid metal. It was hell.

“Don’t get your feet wet, Boss.” The sound of Charlotte’s voice, tense with awe, sounded clearly inside my helmet.

I looked down, and saw that the boot on my left foot was half into a puddle of molten mercury. Stepping back, the quicksilver ran off the boot’s toe, setting up ripples in the pool that ran about with the same agility as water on Earth. And beyond the ridge which formed our horizon was a massive ocean of the same stuff, carefully designed to bounce the Sun’s light to the tiny blue spot in the sky that was the energy-starved Earth. Oppressively aware of my responsibility, I waved to Charlotte. A track lead upwards between the jagged rocks, beaten into sand by the passage of many human feet and the stamping of numerous robots. Charlotte was right: it was my duty to investigate the problem that had developed with our mechanical brethren; and I was damned certain I *would* mention our trial in my report, because the brief beauty of the woman’s naked body while we changed was hardly recompense for the stifling heat which was building inside my suit, and the first uncomfortable trickle of sweat down my spine. “Come on,” I muttered.

What seemed like a geological age later, I emerged on top of the ridge, scouted around, and plonked my perspiration-soaked

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bottom onto a convenient rock. My thighs were shaking with exertion, and my lungs gasped for air inside the microclimate of my suit. My dull gaze swept indolently about my feet. This was not only a desert – it was a *dead* desert. The desolate places of the Earth have a certain charm, for despite their emptiness they offer meagre signs of life, in the form (say) of a nub of cactus or the skittering of a tip-toeing lizard. On Mercury, there is no natural life of any kind. Nor has there ever been life. The planet is just a ball of hot rock and metal, whizzing around the Sun in the killing drench of its radiation. Mercury is a place that makes a man feel lonely and scared.

Charlotte may have also felt the intimidation of the place. Staggering on to the top of the ridge, she sprawled in the sand at my feet and rested her head unemotionally on my knee. I could see her shoulders heaving through the padding of her thermal suit.

After a while, the panting of her lungs in my earphones became more regular. She said unnecessarily “God, it’s bloody hot!”

I grunted in agreement, but my attention was fixed by the scene at our feet: a gigantic plain of liquid metal lay shimmering in the sunlight – vast and silent.

This was the Mercury Mirror. It filled a shallow crater with metal of the same name, and its very size made it the greatest technological achievement of mankind. Indeed, its overwhelming brightness meant that the Mirror not only fed energy to the Earth, but also formed a kind of interstellar beacon: it put our solar system on the cosmic map, making us visible from the dark reaches of the Milky Way.

Perhaps, even as Charlotte and I lounged on its shores, the Mirror was being viewed from the end of one of the Galaxy’s spiral arms – maybe by an alien couple, messing about with a telescope on their patio after an extraterrestrial dinner party. Con-

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ceivably, the couple saw the strange disk among the ordinary constellations as something romantic, causing them to hold hands under its silvery glow, before going to their bed...

I chuckled at my own flight of fancy. Charlotte raised her head, peering into the darkness of my visor. Her own was near-black also, and went an even darker shade as she turned her gaze onto the Mirror.

To us, the surface of this sea of metal looked flat. But really it was a shallow paraboloid, designed to reflect light in a narrow, tight beam. In fact, the Mirror was a gigantic version of an old idea for making telescopes on Earth: a rotating pool of quicksilver went automatically into a concave figure, in effect a ready-made telescope. That technology had been superceded by others at Earthly astronomical observatories. But here on Mercury, it had proven itself superior as a means of reflecting power to the factories of London, Tokyo and New York, which passed by turn under the terminus of the beam, carried by the Earth's rotation. The spin of Mercury was low by comparison, but careful engineering had created an ocean of liquid metal that was bent by just the right amount to provide a safe, continuous source of energy.

Safe, that was, unless something was to go wrong ...

I must admit I was somewhat concerned by what my engineer Ron Wick and my computer person Charlotte had told me about the robots whose job it was to maintain the Mirror. However, I must also say for the record that I was not outright worried. I knew, better than either of them, that the failsafe devices in place were close to fool-proof. Even if the 1,326 robots we presently employed all went crazy simultaneously, the worst that could happen would be a shutdown. There were protocols in place that would ensure against any malfunction of the energy beam that was dangerous to the billions of energy-consuming Earthlings. Even

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in the most risky case those people would only suffer an interruption of power. No, the sketchy accounts I had received from my colleagues about the behaviour of the robots pointed not to something dangerous, but to something *peculiar*...

Polarizing the right-hand half of my visor allowed me to block out the light from the Mirror, so that its rocky shores leapt into visibility. There were robots there. Lots of them. Some seemed to be walking idly alone. Some were standing in small groups. Some were collected into a sizeable crowd not far away, sitting by the liquid lake and apparently involved in some deep discussion. The point was: *none of them was working*.

“The lazy bums!” I exclaimed.

“Maybe it’s their day off?” Charlotte suggested.

I growled, and stomped off down the hill towards the Mirror and its neglectful workers.

The first one I encountered was a large bucket-headed individual who appeared to be smoking a pipe. At the opposite end of its metallic body, the feet splashed idly in the mercury sea. The barrel-like torso lounged against a large red boulder, but on the dust-covered back of the robot some joker had inscribed “Clean me”.

Approaching his apparition with care, I said “Hello there!” The bucket head swiveled slightly in my direction and two platinum irises brought me into view. “What are you doing?”

The silvery-grey eyes (which I recognized as top-of-the-line F-1000s), regarded me as if I had less intelligence than the standard positronic brain (which I knew was the ubiquitous I-100). After a while, the robot’s mouth opened, and I noted that due to neglect or some act of vandalism, several of the carborundum teeth were missing, causing an old-man-like smirk. There was a stutter of static in my earphones, as if the robot was clearing its

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throat. Then a slow drawl replied: “Jest sittin.” This statement of the obvious was in line with the brain powers of most of our mechanical staff at the Mirror. As was the further statement: “An smokin...”

I turned as Charlotte arrived. Switching to a circuit where only she could hear me, I explained “This robot talks strangely.”

The woman crouched down beside us, we looking at the robot with interest and it looking at us with disinterest. The ‘pipe’ it held between articulated metal fingers was actually a tube which I recognized as coming from one of the remote-sensing arrays that surrounded the Mirror. The tube had been fitted with a crude bowl at one end, and the other had been flattened to form a mouthpiece. We watched perplexed, as the robot slowly put the pipe between its snagged teeth, pretended to inhale, and let its hooded eyes half close in imaginary ecstasy. A puff of yellow smoke emanated from the plastic lips, spreading without disturbance into the airless space over the flat surface of the mercury lake.

“It’s smoking sulphur!” I exclaimed.

“Right, Einstein,” Charlotte replied sarcastically. She waved a hand over the heat-blasted rocks around us. “There must be loads of it around here.” And then, getting to the more important issue: “But *why?*”

Miffed by her superior attitude, I decided to ask the robot a different question. “Are you going to do any work?”

The creature lowered its pipe to rest on an angled knee, regarded me with a neutral stare, and eventually replied “Byenn by ...”

I scrambled to my feet. “This thing,” I said on our internal circuit, “is delusional. It talks like Huckleberry Finn.”

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Charlotte, who was still sitting on eye-level with the robot, seemed to be more sympathetic. “What’s your name?”

The detoothed mouth bent into an ingratiating grin. “Dey call me Rastus.”

“Figures!” I muttered, and walked away. My companion dusted off the knees of her thermal suit and followed, her head bowed in what might have been thought, or the wish to pick the easiest route between the rocks that formed the shoreline.

In the hills which surrounded the Mirror our remote-sensing units were located at regular intervals. They looked like black boxes, but were really quite sophisticated devices. For example, each contained an argon jet. The punch from one of these, undiluted by any atmosphere, was enough to bend the liquid mercury surface like a physical blow. Ron Wick and his staff used them to correct deformations in the figure of the Mirror, bringing it back into the optimum shape to reflect light from the Sun to the Earth. Now, I examined each in turn as I picked my way along the beach, looking to see if any of them had been cannibalized by the robots. I could not detect any signs of this, but made a note to have the whole array checked out.

Turning a corner, Charlotte and I found ourselves in a small bay. There was a large group of robots on the far shore, doing some activity whose details I could not make out. My attention was in any case caught by something else: a crude hut of stones, with a black shadow for an entrance, in which a figure appeared to be smashing an object on a boulder which projected from the sea. Moving closer, I saw that the robot was a buxomly type. As I watched, she scooped mercury onto what looked to be a piece of cloth and then worked the liquid into the garment, before flailing it onto the rock to remove the excess fluid.

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“She’s doing the laundry,” Charlotte said. “The old-fashioned way.”

“Well, at least she’s doing *something*,” I growled. And then, realizing that my blood pressure was going up and that this was not a good place for a heart attack, I suggested: “Why don’t *you* talk to her? Try to find out what the heck’s going on.”

Charlotte, with a look of concern, stumbled over to the hut, leaving me to sit looking in the shadow of an outcrop. This was ridiculous, I thought. It was as if some epidemic of insanity had taken hold of our robotic corps, turning it from a precision workforce into a dull-witted group of peons. I tried to reason it out, but not with much success. Staring uncomprehending at the stone hut, I saw that its lintel was chalked with the words *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “At least they got the spelling right,” I thought.

Charlotte returned. In the shade of the big rock, her visor went transparent and I saw that her face was covered with bafflement. “Her name’s Emma.”

“Emma what?” I countered derisively. “Don’t slaves usually have a second name, like Chambers or Grandmaison?”

“Calm down, Stu,” said Charlotte patiently. “Her name’s just Emma, and she says that most of the robots now see themselves as members of The Tribe.”

I guess I must have looked apoplectic through my visor, because Charlotte put a comforting hand on my knee. “Stu, this is more serious than we thought. Emma says that nearly all of the robots – even the ones with low intelligence – have *Seen the Light*.”

“What?!” I shouted. The volume of my exclamation inside my companion’s helmet made her flinch “What *Light*? Does she mean the Sun? What’s going on here, in God’s name?”

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“That,” said Charlotte quietly, “is a pretty good choice of words.”

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Back in the dome, the sound of many voices reverberated from the curved wall of my office. It was hot and sweaty, even though the horizontal window was narrowed to a yellow slit. All of the section heads were there. Normally these people worked well together, dedicated as they were to the smooth functioning of the Mirror. But my oral report on the activities of the robots appeared to have caused a split, and there was definitely no consensus on how to deal with the problem.

McKee, head of chemistry, was openly skeptical of my account. I could not entirely blame him for this, since it had actually taken a while for me to admit that our mechanical workers had somehow caught religion. McKee was a short, bald guy who compensated for his lack of physical stature by talking too much. He also thought he could sing, and at one point in my account had broken out in a mock-spiritual voice with “Dat old man ribber, he jest keep rollin along...” Charlotte, who was seated alongside, told him to shut up.

Ron Wick, our long-standing head of engineering, saw the problem with the robots as deadly serious. He was scared sick that they would disrupt the workings of the Mirror. However, his reaction was overly dramatic. I heard him say to Charlotte, “I tell you the truth – the only good robot is a dead robot.” To which her reply was the same as before.

Charlotte and I had actually worked out a plan for dealing with the problem, which we viewed as a kind of compromise. It was the result of long, close deliberations. (This was why when the worried Ron Wick had called her last night, he found she was

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not occupying her own bed; but that's a different story.) We could not just stay idle. Already, the activities of the robots were causing disruptions, even though they were confined to the shore of what they were calling the Sea of Galilee. There had been a large jump in the amount of argon used by the units around the Mirror to blow out deformations in its surface, and keep the sunlight reflected from its surface tightly collimated. However, we could not be too aggressive in dealing with the robots. For example, if we were to try and shut them down, they might take it as persecution and conceivably react with violence. And anyway, what we really wanted was to get them back to work, so we could maintain the Mirror and its beam. Any plan we adopted had to avoid – at all cost – a break in the energy supply to Earth.

As I tried to quieten the hubbub of voices in my office, it was clear to me that a priority was to get the differing factions to work together. In fact, Charlotte and I would need the cooperation of all the project's sections if we were to realize our plan. I would talk to McKee and Ron Wick later, in private. Now I needed to stop the squabbling, and try to establish a common sense of purpose.

“Colleagues,” I announced, “please adjust your eyes for our major feature presentation.”

The room fell into puzzled silence. Charlotte came forward and adopted a lectural stance. I hit the control on my desk, and the slit of sunlight along the outer wall of the dome snapped shut, plunging everything into darkness.

Flash! A picture appeared on the wall. It showed a jumble of Sun-blasted rocks, with waves of mercury lapping around a couple of boulders that protruded above the surface of the Mirror, whose shimmering expanse stretched to a sharply-defined horizon. It might well have been the Sea of Galilee – except that the distant

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sky was black, punctuated only by the bluish dot of a distant Earth.

“This is a video of the last encounter that Stu and I had with the robots,” explained Charlotte. “We had earlier talked with a couple of them, Rastus and Emma.”

A snigger from the audience showed that the chemist McKee thought that the names were amusing. But a groan from the engineer Ron Wick showed that *he* thought the waves in the liquid mercury to be anything but funny. The movie had been cobbled together from the surveillance cameras in three of the remote-sensing units around the edge of the Mirror. As we watched, the viewpoint switched from one camera to another, and zoomed in. Quicksilver splashed up onto an ochre rock, and began to dribble down, leaving a few sparkling splotches in the rocky crevices. It might have been the seaside at some Earthly resort.

“In a moment,” continued Charlotte, “you will see where the waves originate.”

The third camera gave more of a panorama. Two figures in thermal suits were picking their way along the shoreline, detouring around large outcrops and climbing over the smaller boulders.

A crackly audio circuit cut in: grunts and inaudible curses in a baritone, plus deep but regular breaths that ended with a soprano voice saying “Hold it!”

I watched my own image on the film, as it bumped into the other figure and took a step backwards. The two humans stood still, staring at a group of a dozen robots in the medium distance. The picture was slightly out of focus, and showed only that the mechanoids were clustered in a rough circle at the sea’s edge, intent on something in their midst. But whatever was happening there must have been clearer to the human observers, because suddenly the male voice said with feeling: “Shit!”

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There was a short titter of laughter from the audience. Charlotte explained “This video has not been edited.”

Actually, this was not completely accurate. At my insistence, a piece of the record had been omitted. It showed me falling on my arse off a rock, being helped up by Charlotte, and receiving a pretend get-better kiss. However, nothing of *scientific* value had been left out.

Abruptly, the scene shifted as it was taken up again by camera two. It had managed to reprogram itself, and was now shooting in a narrow focus through the legs of a massive robot which was stooped over the surface of the sea. Drops of silver cascaded from between the mechanized fingers, as the right hand took a scoop of liquid. The fingers of the broad left hand were splayed, and in their cusp there rested – a baby.

The viewers gasped. Charlotte, in charge of the presentation, might have said something in way of clarification at this point. To the effect that the ‘baby’ was really a tiny robot of the sort we use to clean the air ducts at the dome. But sensitive to the moment and its impact, she kept quiet.

Audio, which for some reason had been out, now cut back in. It carried the sound of a dozen mechanical voices, singing in unison: “Rock of ages, cleave for me...” The feet of the robots tramped up and down, in time to the tune. A confused barrage of waves of mercury converged on the baby, which was now being held half-submerged in the lake. The big robot’s right hand sent a cascade of quicksilver onto the forehead of the baby, which started to struggle, and let out a very human cry.

“Christ!” Ron Wick exclaimed from the front row of onlookers. I did not know whether he was offended by the disturbance to his holy sea of mercury, or if he objected to the nature of the

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ceremony. For there could be no doubt that we were witnessing a baptism – Mercury style.

Camera three came back on. A spindly, long-legged robot on the edge of the crowd pointed a long arm at the two human figures, which were slowly approaching along the edge of the Mirror. Some of the attendees at the baptism looked up from the subject of the ceremony. Confusion spread among the congregation: gesticulating limbs, rotating heads and the sound of wailing. The thin robot suddenly started to run along the shoreline with remarkable speed, to meet the human intruders. A couple of the other mechanoids, more hefty in construction, followed. One of these, passing by the site of camera three, abruptly stopped. It seemed to be thinking.

An accusing finger pointed directly into the camera, backed by a fierce expression from red eyes and a yell of anger. The audience in my office shrank from the scene, as if they had been there in reality.

The red-eyed robot stooped and picked up a jagged rock. Its companion mechanoid, whom I recognized as Rastus, laid a restraining hand on the other's raised arm. "Cast not the first stone, lest..."

The appeal was lost, however. Something blurry occupied the centre of the picture, which abruptly exploded into stars and went blank.

The silence of the audience was total. As I walked back to my desk, I could even hear the usually inaudible hum of the air conditioners. I passed Charlotte, and we exchanged a look: we knew that we had them, and that there was no need to explain anything else. It would be near to a formality to get the agreement of the assembled section heads to the plan we had hatched.

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I opened the dome window again, letting in a fan of glaring sunlight. In its illumination, I saw that Ron Wick was sprawled in his chair, stupefied; while the garrulous McKee sat hunched up, looking quietly at the floor. The rest of them resembled robots themselves. But ones on which a bomb had been dropped.

“Colleagues,” I began; and then stopped, remembering that I had used the same ingratiating term earlier, and realizing that some members of the audience needed more time to reprogram their minds. When the majority of eyes were focussed on me, I continued: “We are in a difficult situation, but I would remind you all that we have a duty to Mercury Mirror Incorporated, and that...”

“What do you want to *do*?” McKee interrupted.

I thought, this guy is a genuine pain in the backside. But then, I never liked speeches. And the attentive looks of the other heads of section showed that I could dispense with loyalty-inspiring rhetoric.

“I would like,” I said, “to present to you Plan M.”

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Plan M was audacious. Even as its inventor, I gave it only a fifty/fifty chance of success. In the first place, it depended on several technological things over which we lacked complete control. And in the second place, it depended on the cooperation of the section heads, which was proving more difficult than I had expected. McKee the chemist showed himself surprisingly dedicated in trying to modify the viscosity of liquid mercury, which with a density relative to water of about 14 is an awkward substance. I eventually had to order him to take a break and get some sleep. Ron Wick, by comparison, was irritatingly recalcitrant. He could not see that – even if we could do it without a major revolt – cut-

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ting off the robots would not solve the problem of how to maintain the Mirror. In fact, the question of the robots' psychology was a second thing that bothered me. Even with an average intelligence of only 100, they were too canny to be fooled into submission by some old-fashioned missionary-style trick, such as an eclipse. Anyway, there was nothing of any size between Mercury and the Sun which could be used to engineer a solar eclipse. This notwithstanding the fact that a long time ago some astronomers had hypothesized a planet near to the Sun called Vulcan, which was supposed to explain the puzzling orbit of Mercury. That idea was made obsolete by Alby (Einstein) and his theory of general relativity, and passed into history, along with corsets and spats. However, while Plan M was technologically and psychologically as robust as we could make it, I knew that it was a gamble.

"Don't worry," insisted Charlotte as we made the last preparations. "I'm sure you'll pull it off."

I grunted doubtfully. The oversized galoshes, as I pulled them on over my suit, seemed to sum up the silliness of our approach. But I did appreciate Charlotte's support. And her humor-inducing smile. And other things about her, which I had recently come to appreciate but which would not find a place in my annual report. "At least," I thought to myself, "if Plan M succeeds, I won't have to rewrite that whole damned report. An appendix will cover matters. And then..."

My mind started to speculate, as Charlotte checked the seals on my suit and McKee thrust the Book into my gloved hands. It was really a laboratory manual, one of only a few actual documents still to be found in the dome. Its crinkly pages were so profuse with chemical names and symbols that it might just as well have been written in some dead language of Earth. And what, I wondered, would Earth be like when I returned?

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For I had decided to go home. This irrespective of whether Plan M was a success, or (as seemed increasingly likely to me) a spectacular failure. The only thing that still nagged at me, in connection with this decision, was whom to recommend to Mercury Mirror Incorporated as my successor. I reluctantly came to the conclusion that it would have to be McKee. Because the chemist's volubility, shaven head and strutting small figure represented less of a threat than the lanky engineer with his pseudo-honesty and shoot-em-up attitude. Naturally, Charlotte would have been the better choice by far to be the new boss. She was a good computer person, and had a quiet self-confidence that made her male rivals look like social misfits. But it was precisely these qualities which made her unavailable to the new person in charge. For Charlotte had decided to return to Earth with me. She had gotten things organized back there, and her two teenage kids would be vacating the family home in order to go to college. I was looking forward to lounging on the porch at the farm, at long last able to contemplate something green and growing...

"Wake up!" Charlotte exclaimed. "You're all set." She gave me a kiss on the visor, leaving a smudge. The shapes formed by her lips faded as I waddled out into the battering sunlight of the Mercury landscape.

I was on the far edge of the Mirror, with the darkness of the semi-permanent Mercury night at my back. The immense expanse of quicksilver in front of me was glittering but sullen. It might have been solid; but as I walked into the metal, two interfering circles of disturbance spread out, racing each other to the far shore. There lay the dome and its hundreds of human workers, most of them still unaware of what was planned. Between myself and the dome – gathered in random groups along the shoreline of the Mirror – a thousand or so robots were going about their new-

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found religious business. I felt abruptly sorry for the misguided creatures: even if there *was* a God, this Sun-smitten hell was no place to find Him.

“Don’t drop the book!”

McKee’s tedious voice crackled in my ears, and I looked down to see that my improvised prop was in danger of falling from my gloved grip. Not that it would matter much if it did. The book would probably sink no more than its cover thickness into the dense metal. The same unnatural buoyancy kept my own weight supported, and I moved steadily across the surface of the sea with the quicksilver splashing sluggishly around my knees. But I had a long way to go, and turned up the argon thruster in my backpack. I was doing all right, and expected that Charlotte and McKee would shortly be heading back, using the company vehicle to jounce their way around the periphery of the Mirror.

“We’ll see you later,” came the woman’s voice inside my helmet, in confirmation. There was a pause, and I could hear the remote whir of an electric motor and the complaining tone of the chemist. Then Charlotte said “Good luck, Stu.”

Click. Things went silent, except for the slosh of liquid mercury around my shins and the rasping of my own breaths. It was getting hot. Sweat began trickling down my back. And my slogging thighs were already starting to ache. “Oh well,” I muttered to myself. “If Jesus could do it, then so can I.”

\*

The sun-filled bowl of the Mercury sky was split by the lightning of an amplified electronic command:

“Repent!”

A thousand robot heads went motionless, and then swiveled to look out to sea. Two thousand crystal eyes focused on the figure:

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clad in shining samite, holding a real book, and walking on the waves. This last was by itself a miracle, as no metallic creature could be so buoyed.

“I will read to you from the Book!”

Robots remote from the apparition started to amble along the shores towards the point of closest approach, mesmerized. Those already close to the figure forgot what they were doing: artificial clothes in the process of pointless washing fell unheeded into the mercury waves; pretend baby robots who were being shamelessly baptized slipped from the large mechanical hands into the quick-silver, from which they scrambled squalling onto land.

“Chapter One,” boomed the figure from the sea. “On the noble gases.”

There was a pause, necessary to translate the ancient laws about helium, argon and xenon into edicts relevant to the present situation.

“They are noble,” lectured the voice, covering the repetitious nature of the comment by turning a crinkly page. Exposed to the direct blast of the Sun, the leaf started to turn brown. In a short act of self-immolation, the page burst into flame. But with no atmosphere to support the conflagration, the page shriveled and became black. The reader – perhaps surprised but with quick responses – ripped it from the volume and dropped it onto the silvery surface of the sea, where it lay as an accusation.

“And *you* should be noble,” continued the voice, piped with exquisite stereo and timbre into every listening circuit among the spellbound robots. The voice took on a sing-song, hung-up quality which was reminiscent of an ancient cathedral but was in practice the result of electronic tremolo: “For there is no more noble purpose than to maintain the Mirror – which is holy in His sight.”

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Another page of the Book went up in brief flames, and was hastily dropped from singed fingers onto the surface of the sea.

“And for those who do not listen,” threatened the figure in a steel-spring voice, “there is Chapter Two, on the Horrors of the Halogens.”

Some of the robots began wailing. Others, unsure how to show penitence, scooped up handfuls of mercury and rubbed it onto their dusty heads, seeking to cleanse both their metallic bodies and the imagined sins of their positronic brains.

“Chlorine and fluorine shall eat thy joints!” yelled the voice. “And iodine will bite out yer dammed eyes.”

By now, half the robots were in despair. They ran purposelessly up and down the shore, pulling at figurative hair and trying to dent their invulnerable bodies with sharp-edged rocks. The sermon was working, and the floating figure on the lake seemed to take pity on the misguided members of its flock. The voice shifted into the vernacular version of robot speech, though with a note that urged its listeners to action:

“Be fleet, be fleet!” And then, staring directly at the nearest and largest robot: “Jeet thy seat!”

The massive mechanoid bent at the knees, pushing out its posterior, like a cartoon figure ready to depart with a *whoosh!* But it still seemed reluctant...

Suddenly, the shining, gowned figure floating on the sea snapped shut the Book. An appropriately-placed microphone broadcast the sound as a clap of thunder. The right arm of the spectre raised itself in admonition. “Go!” was the order. And then, in a forgiving but still authoritative tone: “Go, and return to your true callings.”

Robots streamed away from the Mirror, heading for the dome and reprogramming which awaited them there. A few, obstinate

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ones hung around for a while. But finally they, too, followed their fellows through the broken rocks of Mercury. The Mirror finally lay deserted and quiet.

“I quite enjoyed that,” the lonely figure said to itself.

\*

I was sitting in my office, enjoying a hefty drink, when Charlotte bounced in. I must admit that I was in a self-congratulatory mood, so it took a while before the meaning of what she was saying penetrated to my brain.

“What d’you mean, they found a Bible?”

Charlotte sighed, like a mother who has to repeat something unpleasant to a smug child.” Ron Wick and McKee found a *real* copy, on the shores of the Mirror.”

I shrugged. The discovery was hardly surprising, given what had happened. Indeed, the only remarkable thing was that such an old book could still cause so much trouble. I was not especially concerned: the recent problem with the robots had been solved, our bags were packed, and I was ready to board the ship back to Earth. But I made a note to remind McKee, as my replacement, to make a search for more copies of the subversive text. “Why so serious?” I asked.

Charlotte looked at me with a quizzical, mixed expression. Her luggage was stacked by the side of mine, near the door. The slit of light from the office window cut across our mutual belongings, and I would not be sad to see the last of that yellow glare. Shortly, Rastus would arrive to lug our baggage to the ship. But like most women, Charlotte had a big purse with her personal and ‘essential’ things in it. Looking nervous, she opened this and delved into it, pulling out a dog-eared volume. “Take a look,” she invited.

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The copy of the Bible was dilapidated. There was no cover, and a robot footprint was stamped in dust across the dense writing of the first page. I read "*In the beginning...*" But something seemed wrong, and I skipped through the text with a premonition of a new problem.

Somebody, or something, had deliberately removed the New Testament...

HELLO, WE WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT...

The image of Istar 370 – located at the edge of the observable universe – winked out of existence on the screen. Simultaneously there was a vague rumbling, felt in the gut rather than the ear, as the massive telescope slewed and found its new target. A fresh image – that of Istar 1402 – appeared on the screen. It was noticeably blue, which was strange, given that most of the objects in the survey were ruddy because they had been exported by the expansion of the universe to its far shores, dimming their adolescent bright faces. Also, the new image was pulsing. It was a blue beacon – the kind of thing that was supposed to send astronomers wild.

Sylvia Blanovsky scowled.

Keeping her eyes on the image of the Information star, she removed the sandwich from between her white teeth, and raised it to her well-shaped nose. It smelled as it had been presented: ham with lettuce and beluga caviar. The caviar, especially, was a sharp aroma in the dead, reprocessed air of the control room. Still feeling annoyed, she put the thing back in her mouth and resumed chewing.

She was not irritated with the food, but with the message which now repeated itself from Istar 1402. The signal was depressing enough to spoil even a gourmet lunch.

As the message from far away filled another redundant file in the Observatory's archive, Sylvia swung her feet off from the instrument panel. Her bare toes scrunched up on the grey floor as she bent forward to scrutinize the blue speck on the screen. The image of the source pulsed mesmerically, its brightening and dimming finding a response in the irises of her brown eyes.

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She now knew what the message meant. But her joy at decoding the first definite message from another civilization had been short-lived. The message was not what she or the teeming billions on Earth had expected. And the fact that it kept repeating was something of an anticlimax. In addition, she was unsure if she should inform Glen Haggerty – her fellow observer – about the discovery.

With a frown on her usually clear forehead, she abruptly shook her curly hair and walked away from the screen, leaving the remains of her lunch on the console. A trail of sweaty footprints followed her to the viewport.

It was hot in the observation room. She would have preferred to go completely naked, but out of consideration for the maleness of her companion she wore shorts. The sex thing, she thought, would also have to be resolved. But right now, Sylvia was preoccupied with the problem of whether or not to tell Glen about the message.

The woman put an arm across the transparent material that broke the grey monotony of the walls. Resting her forehead on her arm, she stared through the viewport, letting her eyes seek the horizon.

Inspiration, however, was not easily found in the blasted terrain outside. It consisted of boulders: big ones whose valleys were filled by medium ones with gaps jammed by small ones. Their tops were rounded – the result of ages of alternating hot and cold which had chipped their surfaces, so that the landscape now resembled a dump of geological eggshells. The mounds of climate-baked rocks made for a near, hummocky horizon. This was broken by a larger structure than usual, which because of its resemblance to a bear had been dubbed Yogi. It was actually a large boulder which supported a smaller one, the whole topped by a

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mast. This relayed environmental data to the control room, and their results back to Base.

Sylvia suddenly pulled her arm away from the window, wincing. The viewport was hot, and the land outside even hotter. It was approaching midday. Somewhere on the other side of the Observatory, light was pouring down from a sky that no person could bear to look at.

This was a place where humans did not belong.

Sure, there was air out there. Mainly nitrogen, and even some oxygen. But there was no – *absolutely* no – water vapour.

The humidity was 0.0, always. No water during the searing days, and none during the freezing nights. A person might manage a few steps among the brooding boulders (indeed, Glen had tried it). But the parching atmosphere meant that human lungs shriveled like sponges in a blast furnace. It did not matter whether it was day or night: there was just not enough water to enable a person to survive.

Which was exactly *why* the Observatory was there.

No water vapour meant no absorption of the signals. And this was crucial for observing the Information stars. This class of astronomical sources was very weak, and so had only recently been discovered. A typical Istar was on the limit of what technology could detect, both distant in space and far back in time. The radiation, traveling vast length-eons through the universe, arrived at the Telescope as feeble pulses. The wavelength was typically about the width of a man's finger – which meant in energy terms that the radiation from an Istar was billions of times less than in a ray of ordinary light. In fact, the radiation from an Istar registered on the gigantic collecting surface of the instrument with less than the vitality of a melting snowflake.

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Not that a snowflake would be tolerated by the Telescope's massive banks of sensors: picking up the signal from an Istar at all meant that there could be no absorbing water at all.

Sylvia turned her well-muscled back on the viewport and walked with determination back to the control panel. She stuffed the last piece of the sandwich into her mouth, leaving her hands free to adjust a number of instruments.

The blue image of Istar 1402 disappeared from the screen. There was a faint jarring motion as the telescope turned, and then the red image of Istar 1907 came up. It was not winking, but stared at her with the dead eye of a defunct intelligence.

For of the approximately 2000 such sources known, only the blue Istar 1402 was still sending a message. The other stars had complex spectra, which appeared to contain remnants of structure, but they were no longer broadcasting. They were like a string of lighthouses around the periphery of some cosmic ocean – their lights left on, shining steadily but uselessly into the sea of space-time. What had happened to their population of keepers? Why had they died out and stopped signaling?

More importantly, would Istar 1402 meet the same fate? As it was, the message it was sending was simply repeating, as if its keeper had only had the strength to switch on some automatic device.

And Sylvia – who had responsibility for the sources numbered 1000 and up – new from her observations that the strength of the modulation in Istar 1402 was gradually decreasing. The ups and downs around the average value of the signal were slowly fading. It was as if she was watching the credits roll at the end of some cosmological movie which mankind had missed. And even for that summary, the lights in the cosmic theatre were going out ...

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The woman spun suddenly on her heel as a noise interrupted her reverie.

A man entered the control room, yawning. He was older than the girl, but his torso rippled with the muscular evidence of systematic exercise. Paradoxically, he limped – the consequence of three missing toes on his right foot, which had been amputated following frostbite. This was itself the result of a foolhardy (if successful) attempt to fix the antenna on top of the formation of boulders known as Yogi. The expedition had been carried out at night; but it was not so much the bone-numbing cold which had caused the damage, but the ravenous sucking of moisture out of the skin by the bone-dry atmosphere. The mission had been both heroic and stupid: the one because they relied on the antenna for contact with Base, and the other because the telescope's water-contaminated sensors had taken some time to recover.

Favouring his right leg, the man walked over to the vacant seat in front of the console and flopped into it. "Good morning, Sylvia."

"Good afternoon, Glen."

This was their standard opening conversation, done in a neutral tone of voice. Whoever had fixed the protocol for the mission must have liked symmetry: the working day was split into two parts, and each of the two observers had care of half of the Istars.

The only break in the routine of the Observatory came at the times of crew replacement. But even the manning schedule was like a closely-interlocking chain, with virtually no gaps. At long but fixed intervals, one new person arrived and one old one departed. In this way, each observer experienced two companions during a run.

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Glen Haggerty had been there longest, and Sylvia Blanovsky knew that she only had to put up with him for a certain time. Nevertheless, she found the man incredibly irritating.

Even now, at the start of his shift when he could hardly be fatigued, he sprawled rather than sat in the chair. His casual attitude to the job bordered on indifference. Also, while he had agreed to wear shorts, his wide-legged position revealed a hairy testicle which did nothing to excite her.

Aware of the woman's disapproving look but not meeting it, the man leaned forward and swung his hand over the surface of the console. A cascade of bread crumbs fell to the grey floor, landing near the knobs of the man's amputated toes.

Disdaining any comment on the remains of her lunch, the woman stalked from the room, leaving the man in charge.

Sylvia turned left out of the control room, to take the long way back to her apartment. The Telescope was of a new design, and looked like a gigantic clam shell buried in the boulders, its concave surface pointing to the stars. Around the edge of the installation were the rooms with windows where the crew lived, each with ample space. There were also places to carry out activities, including a well-equipped gymnasium and a small swimming pool (the water had cost a fortune to get here). The central regions of the installation, by contrast, were dimly lit and given over to machines and computers. These were the guts of the Telescope. For its enormous bowl was formed from over a million units, each of which could be independently adjusted to make the most perfect possible surface on which to receive signals from the Istars. The whole thing was mounted on a super-conducting foundation, so it could swing around to view in various directions, like a mammoth merry-go-round.

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The girl began walking fast, and then broke into a jog. The exercise felt good, and after a while she started sprinting. She only started to slow down when the bouncing of her bare breasts caused them to ache. By the time she arrived at her apartment she was gasping for breath and covered in sweat.

Ordering the door open, she entered a living room that was decorated in unmistakably feminine tints. Peeling off her sweat-drenched shorts, she threw them into a corner and entered the shower.

“Yikes!”

The water was unreasonably cold. But it took away the heat generated by her run; and the following air blast left her skin pink and fresh.

Passing by the full-length mirror, she was young enough and vain enough to stop and admire her figure. It was trim. The skin was well-toned, with a few chocolate-chip freckles above her breasts. By some matching of genes, the same dark-brown colour appeared in her curly hair, deep-set eyes and the triangle between her legs.

It was a pity that Haggerty was such a retard. Because she suddenly felt like having sex.

She went to the door of the apartment and locked it. (Though she realized that this was something of an empty gesture, insofar as there was an over-ride in the control room for use in medical emergencies.) She was not really worried about Haggerty, who despite his jockish character did not drink or do drugs excessively, and was very unlikely to force his way into her room. And anyway, she could probably outrun him, given his gimpy leg.

Picking up a bottle of oil from the bathroom, she lay down on her bed. Languorously, she began moving her fingers between her thighs, watched only by Yogi through the window ...

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In the control room, Glen Haggerty finished his run on Istar 0083, and sent the data to the antenna atop the bear-shaped pile of rocks, for rebroadcasting to Base. The complicated antenna was the information life-line for the Observatory; and while its well-being had cost him three toes, the man was not resentful. (He would replace the digits anyway after his tour of duty was over.) However, he did resent Sylvia Blankovsky's casual attitude towards that and other pieces of their equipment. The situation had been better with the woman's predecessor, whom Haggerty had called the Old Man. That white-haired, brooding-eyed individual had loved his instruments almost as much as his daily bottle of whisky. Where the oldster had obtained the alcohol, Haggerty never did find out. Maybe he made it in the Observatory's laboratory. The Old Man dosed himself with booze from when he got up to when he went to bed. Remarkably, the delicate astronomical sensors and the quality of what they recorded had always been perfect. Also, it was the Old Man who had risked his own ageing lungs to go outside and rescue the frost-bitten, unconscious Haggerty. No simple drunkard could have manipulated the controls on the airlock – which guarded against a loss of water as jealously as that on a spaceship guarded against loss of oxygen. And no stereotypical alcoholic could have handled the autodoc – which had clipped off the three pieces of desiccated tissue that had been toes. Yes, the Old Man had been O.K. Briefly, Haggerty speculated on whether Sylvia would have taken the chance to rescue his carcass under similar circumstances. Glumly, he muttered “No. She doesn't like me enough.”

Why had Administration sent her here anyhow? Surely anybody with half a brain and a handful of hormones could see that a male/female crew was bound to have problems – sexual and otherwise. Haggerty set up the next target, Istar 0101, and started the

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observational run. This object was one of the less interesting: its image stared stolidly at him from the screen, while its spectrum on the monitor showed a maze of information-carrying lines but with large chunks missing, presumably due to some cosmic catastrophe. Absently, the man started to scratch his crotch.

Sylvia was pretty – he had to admit that; and given the chance, he would have been on top of her several times a day. But the woman had taken a dislike to him, and she was loaded with petty problems. A gritty feeling beneath the sole of his right foot, caused by stale bread crumbs and dried fish eggs, reminded him of one problem: she was a sloppy eater. Well, so what? It was not a big thing in itself. But it was one of a lot of small things that amounted to a big thing. When there is nobody else around, and there is little else in the way of entertainment, even the small things take on meaning.

Glen Haggerty's thoughts drifted through the repertoire of Sylvia Blanovsky's shortcomings. Apart from being a messy eater, she was also a *noisy* eater: her thick lips were frequently apart, emitting the sounds of mastication. These were accompanied by an equally irritating noise from her molars which clicked together with each chew, like repeating mouse-traps. The woman had a nice, sensuous mouth (for which the man sometimes fantasized a different use). But occasionally, what was in her mouth in the way of food would escape. As Glen had phrased it early in their relationship and therefore gently: "Sylvia, it's called eating when the food stays *inside* your mouth." She had not replied to this, preferring instead to wipe up an errant blob of custard on the end of her forefinger, which she sucked avidly as if afraid of starvation. There was no risk of a food shortage, however, and the woman had gained some weight since arrival. Some of this was distributed in two bands of fat – which the man called "handles" –

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above her hips. Glen regarded Sylvia's infrequent runs as a non-serious attempt at fitness. She also seemed unconcerned about other aspects of her body, such as the hair in her armpits and the over-long toenails.

"All silly things!" Haggerty exclaimed at the image of Istar 0101. Trivial, human things. Infinitesimal things – compared to the star at the furthest distances of the universe, which had once been the home of an intelligent race that had apparently died out.

What had happened to the inhabitants of the star system I-0101? Maybe the wives and husbands (if they had such) got pissed off with each other, because the toothpaste tube was squeezed in the middle rather than the end? Perhaps in the psychological pressure-cooker of an over-crowded and starving world, the petty problems had led to some kind of fluoride fury? Possibly, there had been a war of triviality, with hordes of strange creatures lambasting one another with loofahs?

Haggerty suddenly laughed. What a load of self-indulgent rubbish! But that was how the human brain reacted in isolation – it tried to fill the psychological vacuum with speculation. At least, he thought, I have a sense of humour. Something which Blonovsky lacked.

Daydreaming no more, the man progressed to the next source on his list, Istar 0239. The chair on which he was sitting moved slightly, in reaction to the telescope rotating on its superconducting foundation to find the new target. This was one of Haggerty's favourites. The star was not pulsing, but its spectrum was enormously complex. It was, in fact, a superposition of *two* spectra. It was Haggerty who had discovered this, as the result of long periods of careful analysis. He was proud of this achievement, but was unsure how to interpret it. Did it mean that one civilization had invaded another? If so, it was an argument against

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the widely-held hypothesis that intelligence implied peacefulness. Or did it mean that one civilization had come to the aid of another, in the hope of avoiding the demise of one or both? If so, it was an argument in favour of the belief that intelligence implied altruism.

Haggerty did not know what the double spectrum of I-0239 meant about the civilization whose data was frozen in the spectra. All he knew for sure was that the double star was dead, like all of the single ones, with the exception of the blue source I-1402. But that system was Sylvia's responsibility; and even though it was unique in that it was still broadcasting, Glen strongly doubted that the girl would be able to decipher its message. After all, it had taken him ages to figure out the static spectrum of I-0239, so it was reasonable that it would be even harder to translate the dynamic signal from I-1402. And then again, that only one of nearly 2000 sources was still alive sent its own sombre message: the fate of alien civilizations was (apparently) to die.

The man had his own, human-affected idea of how a dead, alien world might appear. He envisioned a globe covered in beautiful buildings of fantastic architecture. Subterranean and out of sight were colossal machines, producing enormous power from strange technology. The world's surface was always bright – the inhabitants had banished night; and while they existed had lived carefree, leisure-filled lives. But now the people were gone. Their buildings were empty. Only the machines toiled underground, sending power to the surface, where it blazed from a billion left-on lights. In other words, Glen Haggerty's picture of an Istar was something like a gigantic casino after a fire alarm.

The man's mood became maudlin. Would humanity *ever* make Contact? Find friends among the stars?

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It was not for want of trying. The first systematic Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence focussed on stars near the Sun. Those of F and G type, with similar properties, which might have attendant planets suitable for life. Paradoxically – in view of later developments – that first search was refused funding by the administration of the day. (This was a politically awkward amalgam of science and finances known as N.A.S.A.) It went ahead due to the philanthropy of a couple of individuals who had made fortunes designing the first computers. Later, the search received a boost by the discovery – using conventional optical telescopes – of a large number of planets in orbits around distant stars. A few of these even had reasonable surface conditions – but no detectable life. Then came new types of telescope, sensitive to wavebands outside that of the human eye, and capable of peering through the gas and dust which obscured the Milky Way. A few sources were found which indicated life, but *not* intelligent life. After all, you cannot have a conversation with a blade of grass. By now, S.E.T.I. had achieved respectable status. Money flowed, more sensitive instruments were built. But it gradually became clear that mankind's own galaxy – the Milky Way – was devoid of creatures who wished to communicate. It was at about this stage in history that the Loneliness Factor came in. Simply put, the human race became increasingly aware that it might be ALONE. Driven psychologically by this, and technologically by even more radical designs for telescopes, the search went outside the Milky Way. First to other nearby galaxies such as the Magellanic Clouds and the Andromeda Nebula, and then to ever more remote sources. To probe the vast distances of intergalactic space, the best waveband was the one preferred by the universe itself, that is the one of the cosmic microwave background or C.M.B. Unfortunately, this type of radiation is blocked by water vapour, which is

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common in the atmospheres of planets and in certain regions of space itself. However, a notable attempt to avoid this problem had already been made in connection with other astrophysical studies.

It was called the Atacama Cosmology Telescope, and was situated in a desert. This instrument was the prototype for ever-larger probes dedicated to studies of the C.M.B. It was these new telescopes which were gradually commandeered by the search for other civilizations. Driven by the irrational but understandable Loneliness Factor, the population swayed the funding priorities of the astronomical authorities. Eventually, as much money was going into S.E.T.I. as into all other branches of astrophysical research combined. And still no luck.

Until the discovery of the Information stars or Istars. These objects were found to lie at almost unimaginable distances; and due to the time lag associated with the propagation of light, they were seen as they were long ago. As one popularizer of astronomy wrote, it was as if an old man looked backwards through time to see himself as a child. So, the Istars were remote and young; *and* their light contained information that could only have been produced by intelligent beings. It was therefore a bitter blow to find that most of these clever races had apparently suffered an early death.

The only one of approximately 2000 Istars that still showed signs of life was I-1402. Glen Haggerty did not expect that Sylvia Blanovsky would succeed in deciphering its message, given the trouble he had experienced decoding the information in the dead source I-0101. But then, she was a strange girl. Maybe her mental closedness concealed academic brilliance. And maybe her physical repression hid a seething pot of sexual desire...

The man came out of his reverie to discover that he had a tremendous erection. His penis was rigid, its head projecting from

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the blanket of foreskin, like that of a hungry bear emerging from its lair. Surprised and frustrated, he regarded the incubus, wondering whether to encourage or quell it...

The woman, meanwhile was waking. Her pubic hair was still sticky, and she could tell from the feel that her labia were still slightly swollen. Oh for the Dial-A-Stud service back home! But here there was only Glen.

Glen the sports-fan, who thought that men colliding with each other to gain possession of a ball ranked with ballet. Glen, who spent ages working out with weights, to hone a body hardly anybody would see, and then mar it by losing his toes in a stupid attempt at heroism. Glen, the man who passing a mirror would cast an appreciative sidelong glance at himself and run an approving finger down his obsessively-shaven jaw. The man who, paradoxically, oiled the hair on his chest to make it look thicker and darker. And, again, used the laser in the laboratory to artificially whiten his teeth. The same teeth which bit precisely into his food, though that was invariably the ready-made dinners the kitchen dispensed on demand, and never a proper meal prepared from the stores of frozen meat and vegetables. Glen, the *apparent* man who had never had a long-term relationship with a woman or sired a child, because he was afraid of the responsibility. But who, nevertheless, had made a reasonable income by donating sperm to a fertility clinic, before starting his present job. In short: Glen the grown-up kid.

Sylvia, pacing about her apartment, realized she was in a bitchy mood. And she knew why. While asleep, her subconscious mind had been chewing away at a problem she had found difficult to resolve while awake. Now, however, it was more-or-less clear: she would have to tell Glen that she had decoded the

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message from Istar 1402. The thing that was troubling her presently was the follow-on to that decision. Namely, *how* to tell him.

Preoccupied, the woman entered the washroom and splashed some water in her face. She would have liked another shower, to dispel the stickiness between her legs; but water was rationed, and in any case she rather liked the residue left by her own love-making. What she did not like was the frown between her chestnut eyebrows and the serious expression thrown back at her by the mirror.

“Just go and tell him,” she said to herself.

Still pondering how to inform Glen that she had cracked the code but kept it secret, Sylvia unlocked the door of her apartment. Her shorts lay forgotten in the corner by the bed.

In the control room, Glen saw an apparition reflected in the shiny surfaces of the instruments. The vision was sudden enough and attractive enough to instantly replace all thoughts of masturbation. Turning guiltily in his seat, he kicked his shorts under the console and tried to appear nonchalant.

“Glen,” said the woman uncertainly. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Oh, yes?” Haggerty’s eyes had been on the woman’s sweaty, naked crotch. But now he moved them up to her concerned-looking eyes. Having jumped to the obvious conclusion about imminent Sex, he was having second thoughts. However, masculinity ran in his veins like electricity ran in a wire. He patted his thighs solicitously, ignoring the aggressive spike of his penis. “Come and sit down,” he invited with insincere concern.

Sylvia shook her curly hair, ignoring this adolescent overture. Then, deciding to get to the point, she blurted: “I know what the message says.”

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There was a period of silence, while the man's hormone-drugged brain strove to understand this statement. Then he said, in a voice tinged with puzzlement and disappointment, "You do?"

"Yes," confirmed the woman.

Abruptly tiring of the pantomime-like conversation, she strode over to the control board and brought up the image of Information star 1402. Its blueness reinforced those of Haggerty's eyes, which however were gloating over the girl's naked and very near body. It was as if an art connoisseur had suddenly had the Mona Lisa shoved into his face.

"And here's the message," added Blanovsky. She pointed to it on the screen, hoping that its angular script would penetrate the fog of sexual appetite which swirled around her companion.

There were only three lines of text on the monitor. Three short phrases from the most remote parts of the universe. Three bits of information that were all mankind had to show for its long search for intelligence in the cosmos.

The woman, suddenly angry that the man was more interested in one female crotch than humankind's destiny, grabbed the back of his chair and swung it around so that he was obliged to look at the message.

The first line was simple and devastating:

*Hello. We wish to inform you that you are alone in the universe.*

Sylvia, looking sideways at Glen, saw his eyes widen as the impact of the message sank in. Then they crimped, as if in pain.

The second line of the communication was more technical, but informative:

*This is an automatic broadcast, and there is not much energy.*

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The woman noted that the man's shoulders had begun to slump in the face of the awful news from Out There. However, his penis was tougher, and maintained a self-assured stance.

The third line of the message was the longest, and had caused Blankovsky some trouble in decoding. But the nearest to the meaning she could achieve was this:

*We who are gone do not have much advice, except to be nice to each other, always.*

Now the woman noted a significant change in the man by her side. However, it was a curiously mixed change. His pained eyes clenched, and a tear squeezed out. At the same time, he emitted the deepest, most forlorn sigh she had ever heard come from a human being. But even as this was happening, the man's shoulders were coming back up, and his chest started to inflate. Slowly, he stood up. With an obstinate shake of his head, the man flung off the concerns of outer space.

The woman took a step back, puzzled. She was even more baffled when a broken kind of smile appeared on his face.

"Well!"

"Well what?" Sylvia responded, not knowing where things were headed.

Glen took a step forward, dragging his lopped-off right foot as if it were a mark of honour. Indeed, his whole demeanor seemed to have changed from one of defeat to one of expectant triumph.

"Well, *they* didn't make it." Haggerty's voice was calm and careful. "But they were nice enough to tell us how *we* might get further." He was confident, a few words of wisdom from across the void supplying a new, ready-made philosophy for his soul. Like one of the prepackaged dinners he used to fuel his body.

Blanovsky blinked. There was some kind of strength here which she had not anticipated. True, it was an immature kind of

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strength. Uncertain, she realized for the first time that she was completely naked. The control room of the Telescope was hot; and while its gigantic disk gazed out into the cold depths of empty space, *here* it was warm and cozy. She licked her lips, wondering what was to come. The man's penis, immune to everything, stuck out from his loins like a sword with a challenge.

"They said to be *nice* to each other," Haggerty reminded. Experienced in philandering, he did not make the mistake of moving forward, something which would have set the girl into flight.

As it was, she stood there, rocking slightly on her feet.

There's a big universe out there, Sylvia thought. And it's empty.

EMPTY.

Nobody to talk to. No friendly aliens. No fifth cavalry to come and help if we get into trouble.

Maybe that was the problem with mankind – always assuming somebody else would come along to fix the mess. Passing the buck between themselves for local conflicts; and hoping there would be something bigger to help (God? Aliens?) if there were a global problem. But as of now, the game was different: there was no help.

Humankind was on its own.

"Hell," muttered Sylvia. "We're *alone*."

The world telescoped down to the control room with its close air and its soft floor, and one woman and one man.

Sylvia took a step forward.

Glen's smile broadened. He looked like a teenager, with his silly big chest and strutting cock. But cleverly, he kept quiet.

The woman stood in front of the man, her legs slightly open. The man extended his arms, and gently drew her in.

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“But afterwards,” she said, “don’t make me eat one of those horrible premade pizzas.”

He laughed. Then she smiled. They were reading from a new menu.

## PROSAIC ENDINGS

Rumours among his colleagues about the man's arrogance were met with a snarl and "What the hell do *they* know?" Comments about his paranoia sent him muttering into his laboratory, like a wounded animal seeking its lair. 'Manic-depression' was the later diagnosis, and explains to a certain degree why he turned from a brilliant career in microbiology to a horrible plan for murder.

Antonio Angeles was his name, a lucky (for him) accident of the alphabet which guaranteed that his name appeared first on the multi-authored papers put out by the Institute. The latter had been built not long before by virtue of a grant from the Steinfeller Foundation. That organization – interested in both science and society – caused a mammoth white edifice of laboratories and offices to rise on the site of what had been dark, rat-infested slums. It ran the full length of a block on East 49th Street, and backed onto a polluted and stinking stretch of the Gregson River. About that water-course, one of the tenants displaced by the new building said "You could walk from bank to bank on a carpet of crap."

It was into a shiny new laboratory on the fourth floor of the Institute that Antonio Angeles moved, shortly after the turn of the century, complete with a new Ph.D. and the conviction that he was God's gift to microbiology. Unfortunately, his colleagues gradually came to the belief that Dr. Angeles was less suited to a research institute than to a psychiatric hospital.

"I tell you it's a virus of the *Poxviridae* class," Angeles had maintained at one of the weekly meetings. "Any fool can see that."

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The “fools” in the room exchanged irritated glances. Most of the scientists from the fourth floor were there, from rooms numbered 402 to 462. The Institute had corralled most of the capable biologists in the country, on the theory that quantity might make up for quality in an era when pandemics were decimating the large cities of the world and humankind was threatened by a host of micro-organisms which demanded urgent attention. The head of the fourth-floor researchers was Jayant Nagyvary, a dark-skinned virologist who still retained the polite manner of the Calcutta from which he had been recruited. His bald, peanut-shaped head turned towards Angeles, a frown appearing over his deep-set brown eyes.

“The *Pox* viruses have a size of about three-hundred nanometers, and would have been caught in our filter,” he pointed out diplomatically. “This new one got through, so it’s probably something like *Parvoviridae* with a size of at most thirty nanometers.”

There was a murmur of agreement among the crowd. All of them respected Nagyvary, and most of them liked him. He was well-schooled, and while he seldom laughed, his white-toothed smile had eased the way to resolutions of many controversies.

“That sounds like something from a textbook,” retorted Angeles. A sneer twisted his fleshy lips, and he tossed back his greasy long hair with a flick of chemical-stained fingers.

A shimmer of dislike seemed to flicker over the assembled scientists. The people on the fourth floor had been working under stress for a long period and some had let out the occasional sharp remark, but this was going too far. Over time, Angeles’ corrosive nature had etched out a hole of isolation around the man, and he now sat with vacant seats on either side in a room that was otherwise packed. The person in the next-but-one seat to him was Gretchen Solly, a dumpy, somewhat unimaginative researcher, who however was not afraid to voice her opinion.

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“That’s not helpful,” she said in response to the snide comment of Angeles. “We are all in this together, and we all need to work towards a solution to the problem.”

Somehow, her “we” seemed to excise her arrogant neighbour along the row.

Antonio Angeles flashed the woman a contemptuous look. He muttered something which sounded like “fat cow”, and then closed his dark eyes and folded his arms across his chest. He maintained this dismissive posture until the meeting ended.

While the stragglers left the conference room, Gretchen Solly approached the head of the group as he collected his data. “That man’s becoming impossible,” she stated bluntly.

“Yeah,” agreed Jayant Nagyvary, looking relieved that things had not gotten more hostile. He was grateful for her bluff support. In some way, the unattractive female and the immigrant male had developed a friendship in the antiseptic atmosphere of the Institute. It was not common knowledge, but the leader of the team had confided to the woman that a few days ago Angeles had threatened several of his coworkers. This at the end of a nasty discussion about the course of the team’s research. Nagyvary had briefly considered calling Security, but Angeles had quietened down and even made a half-hearted apology for his outburst. Nevertheless, they were supposed to be fighting a common enemy, and a colleague inclined to violence was something they could ill afford.

“Maybe,” suggested Gretchen in a half-humorous effort to cheer up Jayant, “he’ll commit suicide.”

“Or maybe,” was the moody response, “he’ll kill somebody else.”

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On his way back to his own office, Antonio Angeles walked slowly, to avoid having to pass the people ahead of him in the corridor. The few he met coming the other way, he pointedly ignored. The head of the group, Jayant Nagyvary, occupied the room at one end of the corridor, number 402. The conference room where the meeting had been held was next door. All along the passageway were offices on either side, numbered alternately. Angeles' office was at the far end, number 462. As he walked along, looking at the scrupulously clean floor, it seemed to him that he was passing through some warren, its holes occupied by so many rabbits.

At his door – as anonymously white as all the others – he entered the appropriate code and let himself into his laboratory. Unknown to him, the fact that he locked his door was viewed as a sign of paranoia by his colleagues: most of them left their doors open during the day; and even at night the locked doors all shared the same code. This had been Nagyvary's suggestion – a gesture to encourage cooperation among the occupants of the fourth floor, even if it was only in so simple a matter as one person loaning a file from another. For a while, however, nobody had come to loan anything from Angeles, or even to chat.

It had not always been so. Angeles walked over to the window of his laboratory, moody in thought. A tap on the control, and the transparent pane dissolved. Immediately, the disinfectant tang which emanated from his instruments was displaced by a fetid odour that came up from the river. That polluted waterway, he thought, mocked the work they were doing at the Institute. Originally, he had been enthusiastic about his job. It was not that he was actuated by any great moral purpose, like some of his colleagues. Rather, he was motivated by the challenge of tracking down the new viruses which were scourging the great cities. It

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was a difficult task, and it appealed to his own complicated mind. The microscopic killers challenged his own ego. And he had certainly done his part in identifying them and trying to annihilate them. In the beginning, he had produced a series of solid data, to which his colleagues had added their own complementary results, leading to a stream of well-respected papers. But that stream had gradually dried up. Bickering had evolved into argument, which in turn morphed into hostility – a psychological mirror of the changes that caused the viruses to transmute into ever-more deadly strains. The viruses had changed, under the prodding of the team’s well-intentioned ‘cures’, into resistant strains that were now close to invulnerability. And Angeles had turned, under the weight of his colleagues’ growing disdain, into a man hardened by hate.

“Bah!” he exclaimed. His nose wrinkled, partly at the stench from the river and partly from the disgust he felt for his fellow-scientists. And that immigrant idiot Nagyvary was the worst of the lot. The fact he had been compelled to grovel to the project leader was still a sharp edge in Angeles’ thoughts, honed by the hint his position might be “terminated” if his behaviour did not improve. *He*, Antonio Angeles, to be fired? The suggestion was absurd. But it was also repellent. Abruptly, he felt depressed.

Leaving the window and its sordid but somehow captivating view, he walked across the laboratory. There were benches with instruments all around, but he disregarded the clicking of the D.N.A. sequencer and went straight to a plain cupboard. Inside was a collection of containers with cryptic labels. With a practiced hand he grabbed one of these, opened it and shook two pills into his palm. The skin was stained purple by the acid he was using to track the genetic makeup of the latest virus to come under his study. The two pills were yellow, with red stripes that implied

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a warning. Disregarding this, he shook out two more, and popped the lot into his mouth. Disregarding the flagon of distilled water which sat on a nearby bench, he ground the medicine between his teeth as he walked slowly back to the window. Held on his tongue in a concentrated paste formed with saliva, the drug would quickly be absorbed by the membranes in his mouth. He understood and trusted chemicals. When the depression had first made itself noticeable, he had gone automatically to drugs, with no thought of psychiatric help. The latter option was effectively fenced off, trapped between the mountain of his arrogance and the gorge of his paranoia. But he was finding, as many and more simple folk before him, that a chemical cure can develop into a dependency and then into an addiction. He knew this, but resented it only slightly. The main objects of his fear and anger were not in bottles, but in the offices that lined the fourth floor of the Institute.

Sticking his head out from the window, Angeles' malevolent stare ranged along the side of the building. None of the other numerous windows were open, as far as he could see. But then, unexpectedly, an oval brown head appeared at the end of the facade. It could only be Nagyvary, in room 402. What the hell could the head of the project be doing? Perhaps sniffing the stink of the Calcutta slums from which he came? Suddenly, Angeles' mood swung from depression to rage.

"Damn you!"

The curse was uttered with an intensity that bordered on the ferocious. Globules of reddish-yellow paste spluttered into the stinking air.

"Damn," Angeles said again, surprised at the discharge. Some of the medicine had stuck to the side of the building, down whose white walls it proceeded to ooze in ugly streaks. But it did not matter, really, thought the man. Though relatively new, the struc-

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ture was already runneled with the rufous pollution that drifted up from the river. That brownish-black stream moved sluggishly past the footings of the building, its flow clogged with pieces of discoloured plastic, the rotting corpses of dogs, and the deflated condoms of expired love.

Staring at this derelict scene, Angeles' unstable and under-medicated mind oscillated between despair and hatred. Eventually, it focussed on the peanut-shaped head of Nagyvary, which still projected from the flat side of the Institute.

That excrescence ought to be removed. The complex mind of Angeles began to plot...

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Orange light blinked warningly from the sequencing machine in the centre of the laboratory, its laboured clucking indicating the difficulty of its job. Antonio Angeles looked up from the bench near the window, his dark eyes ringed by the extra irises of fatigue. His lips thinned with annoyance, and the hiss of a curse misted the transparent visor of his protective helmet. In the wan light of the clouded sky he resembled some bloodless god of the nether world. And in a sense he was. For in the glass tube before him, he was creating a new virus. It would be remarkable in its smallness: under ten nanometres across, a tiny fraction of the size of a human blood corpuscle. But it would be swift in its action: a few heartbeats, and the blood of the victim would turn to poison.

The man sealed the glass tube and removed his protective helmet. Though tired, he was still careful. Not that he cared too much for his own life. His cunning and despairing mind had actually considered a double homicide – the murder of the project head Nagyvary followed by his own suicide. But that day the tide of his depression had been held back by a strong dose of the yel-

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low red-striped pills. And his ego had raised a bulwark against the idea of taking his own frustrated life, so his ingenuity had flowed into an intricate murder plot with only one subject.

Wearily, Angeles threaded a path through the other instruments to stand staring moodily at the stuttering sequencer. It was doing its best, mincing larger molecules which, when put together, would make a billion copies of the virus trapped in the glass tube by the window. That prototype was the result of long study and meticulous design. It was a fantastic but deadly experiment in architecture, at the microscopic scale. Hardly more than a hundred atoms across, its volume was packed with lethal radicals, like a tiny fort stubbed with machine guns. In the bloodstream of a person, it would race along, exploding red corpuscles and using their remnants to build more of its own kind, until a veritable tsunami of viruses would wash into the heart of the victim.

Antonio Angeles loved viruses. While most people viewed them as a scourge, he saw them as harbingers of change in a stagnant world. Of course, they carried things like the common cold and smallpox; but was not the broad range of their activity something to be respected, and perhaps admired? Most researchers were contemptuous of viruses, noting that they were not really "living", because they could not reproduce without the chemical help of their host cells. They were widely regarded as parasites, a mistake of evolution on an Earth where single-celled organisms had struggled for eons, along some ill-understood but benign route that ended in humans. Angeles believed in another genetic option: that the viruses had been the original inhabitants of the primitive Earth, perhaps wafted to it by the radiation winds of other stars; and that they had discovered how to use and even engineer cells for their own benefit; and that now they lay disguised in the microplasm of every living thing on the planet, quietly mutating and

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multiplying in some grand plan that cared nothing for the good of the misguided hosts called men. In short, Angeles was a proponent of that small but logical group of scientists who believed in the selfish gene. The difference between him and certain others of his profession was that he was willing to help the viruses and turn traitor to his own species.

The sequencer's display changed from orange to green, and a relieved sounding *ping* marked the end of its work.

"Good!" Angeles chuckled. He would have rubbed his hands together in satisfaction, but they were covered in skintight gloves which might carry other microscopic agents, and he did not want to disperse into the air anything that might impede the growth of the virus-laden solution he was making. Based on the prototype in the glass tube by the window, and built up from the molecular blocks produced by the sequencer, he needed enough of the serum for a lethal dose. A few cubic centimetres would be sufficient – say enough to fill a hypodermic syringe. A few drops of the liquid would be deadly when applied to the victim's skin, where it would be rapidly absorbed through the pores. The designer virus was so small that it would even pass through the membranes of a surgical mask. Damn that idiot Jayant Nagyvary and his prattle about filters! He was not, in any case, a very good director. There were filters on the doors of the fourth floor of the Institute, but they were there mainly to stop things coming in from outside. This included microscopic particles from the fifth floor, which housed the laboratories for work on known pathogenic microorganisms. That floor was maintained at an atmospheric pressure somewhat lower than elsewhere, so anything escaping from it would not move out of that stratum of the building. Security on the fourth floor, by comparison, was lax. The researchers there were free to open their windows, though it was not encouraged.

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Maybe Nagyvary believed in the benevolence of one of his Indian gods; though it was hard to believe in a god of any kind, given the state of the world and its pollution-packed heavens.

Angeles walked back to the test-tube on the bench near the window. It contained a new kind of devil. One that was tiny and would destroy a man from the inside, quite unlike the massive portents of old, that blasted the non-believer from the expanses of the sky.

It was getting dark. Weak sunlight struggled through fume-laden clouds as the day drew to a close. Already, a sprinkle of lights on the opposite bank of the black river showed where a few families tried to stave off a darkness that was not entirely due to natural causes. Angeles felt the urge to hurry, before the impetus to work was replaced by the gloom of depression. He had no sympathy for the world outside, occupied as it was by a mass of morons. Even the so-called scientists were largely ignorant of the beauty and power of the viruses with which they shared the planet.

He briefly regretted this, and then had a happier thought. In the future (if there *was* a future), the masses would learn to respect the power of his new virus. They might even call it *Poxviridae Angeles*. It would truly be an angel of death.

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A deity of a different kind – shining and smiling – looked down from its niche on the calm figure of Jayant Nagyvary. The head of the fourth-floor laboratories was working towards positive things in room 402 even as Antonio Angeles was working towards negative ones in room 462. In between, the work places were deserted, except for the one where Gretchen Solly was tidying up after a long day that seemed destined to end in a storm. She did

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not mind that: a dowse of rain might cleanse the sulphurous clouds that hemmed in the Institute.

Nagyvary was not a man who took pleasure in punishment, but as he mulled over the file in front of him it became obvious that something would have to be done about Angeles. After the earlier meeting and its acrimonious exchanges, two other members of the fourth-floor group had approached its leader, detailing episodes of bad behaviour of which Nagyvary had been unaware.

One of these cases involved the appropriation of data, and did not seem too serious (except for the individual whose information it had been, who was outraged). The other case was more worrisome, and concerned the mutilation of a laboratory mouse that one of the researchers had adopted as a pet, a nasty act that had left a cloud of bad feeling on the fourth floor. Now, skimming through Angeles' file, Nagyvary saw a record of increasing insubordination and insolence. The matter was puzzling, because there was nothing to indicate the source of the trouble, which must be hidden in the man's psyche. He was certainly clever – some might even say brilliant – and for a while had produced very good work, and lots of it. Nagyvary's dark eyebrows climbed up his forehead towards his bald head as he noted the string of original papers, all of which were multi-authored with A.A. at the beginning. But the list became thinner with time as the number of other people involved in the research had dwindled, so that the latest meagre entries were solely under the initials A.A., an indication of the increasing isolation of the virus expert from his colleagues. A fair man, Nagyvary briefly considered an order to the delinquent to seek psychiatric help; but he knew instinctively that this would be met with a refusal. Concerned, the Indian's brown eyes sought those of the idol in the niche behind his desk. While not overtly

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religious, he had carried some of the beliefs of Calcutta to his new city, and in times of worry fell back on the old gods in a kind of automatic search for solace. Now, his unfocussed stare looked into the coiling smoke from the joss-stick that smoldered in the lap of the smiling idol, trying to find some problem-solving inspiration.

A casual greeting from the doorway interrupted Nagyvary's musings. "Why so serious, Jay?"

Gretchen Solly was the closest thing to a friend that the director possessed among the staff of the Institute. Though the slight Indian and the overweight woman might look to be an unlikely pair, the man's polite nature and the woman's bluff good humour formed a comfortable counterpoint, based on mutual respect. A few of the researchers even thought that their friendship was headed towards romance.

"I was trying to decide what to do about Angeles," Nagyvary said, his frown disappearing to leave his head as smooth as a nut.

Gretchen Solly's snub nose turned up in disgust, partly in response to the mention of the name of the rogue researcher and partly in objection to the acrid smoke that drifted from the burning joss-stick.

"Fire him!"

Nagyvary's patient smile showed that he approved of the suggestion but foresaw difficulties with it. "He might jump out the window or run amok. His file shows that his troubles, whatever they are, have been building for a long time."

The woman sniffed, waving away the wreath of perfumed smoke that drifted around her chubby cheeks. "I won't cry if he jumps."

The frown reformed on the director's forehead, for he did not believe in violence of any kind as a way to settle disputes.

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“Don’t look so serious,” repeated Gretchen. “Let’s get some fresh air and talk it over. And,” she added with an artificial cough, “get out of these damned fumes.”

They headed to the roof of the Institute. They had frequently gone there to get a break from the claustrophobia of the laboratories, and it had become a kind of trysting place when they wished to avoid the babble of their coworkers.

“I’ll have to come back later,” said Nagyvary, closing the door of his office but not locking it.

“You work too much,” panted Solly as she waddled up the stairs after the sprightly figure of Nagyvary. It was only a short distance, not worth the elevator in this era of scant energy. They passed the door to the fifth-floor laboratories, a skull’s head warning of the deadly microbes to be found there. A few more steps, and the man pushed open the swing door at the top, holding it politely as the woman passed. They emerged on the roof, a cool breeze blowing in their faces, and wandered towards its edge. The flat expanse was littered with bits of refuse, blown there by some earlier storm. A new one was brewing, dirty clouds scudding across the darkening sky. Solly kicked at the corpse of an emaciated crow. There were few birds in the sky these days, and she had no idea what the few survivors of rampant industrialization could find to eat. She peered carefully over the roof’s edge, watching the dead animal pinwheel towards the black river below.

But she did not see it join the other garbage that jammed the waterway, because the dark valley was full of dense fog. Her companion took a peak into the dark depths, then moved nervously back, his thoughts returning to the equally dark problem of Antonio Angeles.

“Well,” said Gretchen Solly, peering over the chasm, “he may be a jerk, but at least he’s a hard-working one.”

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On the side of the building, at the other end where another doorway stuck up from the flat roof, there was a patch of light. It was reflected back by the fog, which promised soon to engulf it. The denizen of room 462 was at his labours. What he was doing, neither the man nor the woman could guess.

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The creator of *Poxviridae Angeles* leaned back from his work with a sigh. In front of him lay two syringes, one with a black band around its middle and one with a white. He was close to exhaustion, and he had to be careful. One tube contained concentrated poison, the other a diluted version which would cause debilitation but not death. With shaking hands he took a new pair of surgical gloves from the box on the bench, and proceeded to inflate one into a large balloon. Expertly, he moved the glove across the sensitive flesh of his wan cheek. There was no leak. He repeated the exercise with the other glove, and then pulled both of them over his hands. Gingerly, he put the syringes into the pockets of his laboratory gown, the black one into the left and the white one into the right. When he straightened his aching back, it creaked audibly in the stillness of the room. He was ready.

The corridor outside the door of room 462 was silent. The faint light marking the exit at this end of the corridor fell obliquely across his features, etching the deep lines of fatigue. There was another, identical light at the other end of the corridor; but between them was a passage of gloom, relieved only by the reflections of the door knobs at each laboratory. Removing the syringe from the right pocket of his smock, he squirted part of its contents onto the knob of his own laboratory. The droplets twinkled in the faint light, but dried as he watched. Satisfied, he stalked down the

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corridor, stopping to apply a little of the serum to a half-dozen other doorknobs. When he got to room 402, he replaced the syringe. Taking its partner from his left pocket, he held it aloft against the light. The fluid cast a small rainbow in the gloom.

“Do your work well, my little friends.”

He applied a good dose from the black-banded tube to the knob of the director’s door. His glittering eyes were looking to replace the syringe in his pocket, when his gaze went to the floor and he suddenly froze.

There was a weak light coming from under the door. He hardly believed his weary eyes, but then a whiff of incense tickled his nostrils.

Jayant Nagyvary was still in his office!

Antonio Angeles strained his ears. But there was no sound from inside the office.

What could this mean? A momentary panic seized him, his brain struggling with the contending threats of failure and discovery. The whisp of smoke coming under the door wandered around his feet, and drifted off behind him. Turning, he saw that the door at this end of the corridor was slightly ajar, admitting a faint breeze which carried the stench of outside.

Nagyvary must be on the roof!

Angeles’ mind raced, and then his mental gears clicked into a new plan. Hurriedly, he took out the black syringe and squirted half its contents into the palm of his right hand, where it dried into a milky patch on the material of the glove.

The would-be assassin bounded up the stairs, driven by a new surge of hatred. So the Indian boss wanted him off the team? Very well. He would oblige, and even give a handshake to show that there were no bad feelings. He burst onto the roof, and stopped dead in the doorway. There were *two* people there!

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Gretchen Solly turned, and her eyes fixed on the newcomer. Jayant Nagyvary was talking to her, but he stopped in the middle of a sentence at the sight of the white-coated figure in the doorway.

The apparition came to life, and began walking like an automaton across the roof, its arm outstretched. Fog swirled around its feet, litter scurrying out of its way.

“Doctor Nagyvary,” croaked the white ghost as it closed with the dark-brown man, “I have come to offer you my resig...”

Bam! The woman struck down the brown hand as it automatically rose in polite response to the plastic-gloved one. “Something funny here,” she grated.

Smack! The flat hand of Gretchen Solly wiped the ghastly smile from the mouth of Antonio Angeles, and the man went reeling to the floor. A syringe with a black band rolled from the flailing figure and disappeared into the fog.

But not before the woman had seen it, and half guessed its import.

Bedlam. Nagyvary gabbled in some Indian dialect, not understanding what was going on. Solly yelled at him to get away from the edge of the roof. Angeles shrieked in rage and fear. He dragged off the incriminating glove and threw it into the abyss, then started to run. The woman took off after the fleeing man, and for a while her fat figure and his thin one darted in and out of the churning fog. Finally there was the slam of a door and the sound of clattering footsteps inside the building.

Angeles half ran and half fell down the stairway, desperately seeking the refuge of his own laboratory. If he had been thinking more clearly, he would have continued down the stairs and into the anonymous streets of the city. But he was not thinking clearly. His cheek was screaming with pain from the blow it had received,

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his eyes were full of the dark shapes of exhaustion, and his brain was exploding with thoughts of arrest and prison.

His frenzied stare made out the number on the door and his groping hand closed on the knob. In the gloom of his office, he tripped on something and sprawled. He started to rise, but froze. Was he insane?

Grinning down at him was a golden, many-armed figure, floating on a smoldering pile of ash.

He staggered, and tore open the door again. But the number 402 is easy to mistake for 462, and his thumping heart stopped in his chest.

The villain's end might have come prosaically at that moment, in a heart attack. Life is banal, however, and his heart suddenly surged back to life.

He stared at his right hand, fascinated and appalled. He could almost see the particles of the virus soaking into his skin on their way to his blood.

Suddenly there was the bang of a door, and footsteps running down the stairs from the roof. A puffing Gretchen Solly appeared, her eyes blazing. She made a grab at Angeles, but her fist clamped only on the end of his gown. There was a ripping noise, and the man darted down the corridor, the woman in pursuit.

Angeles streaked past his real office, jerked open the door at that end of the corridor, and headed up the stairs. But the poison was in his blood, and by the time he got to the top he was a walking dead man. A curtain was falling in his eyes, a tide of disease was rising in his body, and on gaining the roof he fell and lay flat.

The man's end might have come, again prosaically, at that moment. The infection coursed through him, intent on killing its creator in a microscopic rerun of the Frankenstein legend. But the

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trickiness of life intervened a second time, and he staggered to his feet.

Fate was tiring of playing with its victim, however. His body sank lower with each step forward. Finally, he was crawling, nearly blind. His rounded back rose spasmodically above the clouds of fog, like a mortally wounded fish in an ocean of mist.

A thin figure loomed ahead – the gentlemanly Jayant Nagyvary, extending a helping hand.

A fat figure loomed behind – the raging Gretchen Solly, waving a threatening fist.

The crawling man's hand came down on air, and he disappeared. His third prosaic end became fact.

*Crump!* The muffled sound of a body crashing onto garbage drifted up to the witnesses above.

They could not see the billions of viruses multiplying with gleeful selfishness as they spread into the water.

## WHO'LL GIMME FIFTY?

I do not blame the affair totally on my rival Strangway. He was a crook, but only a glitzy one, and I do not believe he had the intelligence to achieve the stunt by himself. I do not even know whether to call it a comedy or a tragedy. But Strangway was never found.

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The mood in the auction room that evening was more party-like than business-like. Only the auctioneer appeared sober, as his rolled r's reverberated off the crystal glasses of the complimentary liquor that lubricated the tongues and wallets of the crowd. He was selling something which looked to me like a purple jellyfish in a tank of liquid, and my nose wrinkled as a strangely-perfumed mist cascaded from the container and oozed across the thick carpet.

I did not understand his rapid speech, and was wondering if I could not find a better way to spend the evening when my attention was fastened by the *smack!* of an old-fashioned wooden hammer on the metal surface of the podium. "Sold!" announced the auctioneer. "For forty-five. To the madam in the back row."

I turned slightly in my plush chair, nearly knocking off the drink which had appeared on its arm rest. In the back row, an overweight woman with carefully coiffed hair sat smirking over her purchase. Puzzled, I turned back, and noticed that in the seat beside me was an aristocratic-looking man in a black suit who was studying a list. "What is it?" I asked.

The man turned blank blue eyes on me. He had the world-weary gaze of the super-rich; but could not have been super-

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clever, because there was a noticeable pause before my question registered. He sniffed, and pointed with a manicured finger to the right-hand column of his list, where I read by an entry: *I.Q. 270*.

Struggling to comprehend just what kind of auction this could be, I covered my ignorance by asking “Is it worth forty-five?”

The man’s thin lips quirked downwards in a deprecating smile. “Well, my dear,” he murmured in a school-masterish manner, “I wouldn’t pay forty-five *thousand* for a used brain.”

My own brain seemed to seize up. What the heck kind of place had I gotten myself into?

It had been the idea of my arch-rival, Strangway, that I attend the auction. He had risen to the top of his company by being duplicitous, and had more enemies than friends. I had arrived at the top of my outfit by being honestly clever, or so I believed. Our paths had crossed repeatedly; but that afternoon I had beaten out my male rival in the deal of the century. Neither of us knew anybody in the City, and I was not interested in having him do an autopsy on my deal – and paw over my living body – at our hotel. I therefore decided to go to the auction when I learned that he had found something else to occupy his Machiavellian mind.

It was sunset by the time I found the address. I had decided to walk, because it was a clear day and the City was built on a series of hills which offered repeated vistas: jammed-together old buildings in brown and yellow stone, which now housed businesses of all kinds, with the sea and sky as a remote blue backdrop. It was the kind of place you could easily imagine in a bygone era, when the business was import/export, the harbour was full of ships, and the sidewalks were packed with sailors on their way between bars.

The last were still there, and I had stopped at one to celebrate my deal of earlier in the day with a couple of stiff drinks. I had not changed, and still wore my gold pants with the matching top and

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the epaulettes that sported my two dark-green zircons. I always wear my zircons to business meetings: they are pretty and make a calm statement about my monetary status. They also conceal my subether contact to the office, where my android secretary Ajax can supply me instantly with any data I may need to close a business deal. In the bar where I celebrated my coup over Strangway, there were the usual inquiring glances that follow an attractive, successful female who is on her own. But the place was polite, and none of the males at the bar made an overture. (Why is that you get unwanted attention on the way home after an exhausting day at the office, whereas nothing happens when you are happily unattached in a strange city?) I paid for my drinks using the subether system, and felt even more content when I saw that the hefty commission for the last deal had already been paid into my account. Now I was rich enough to pay for any item that might come up at any auction.

Except that I was not in the ordinary kind of auction. After removing the purple jellyfish, the two assistants to the auctioneer pushed in a new tank containing a fresh offering. It was a human head.

Actually it was very well presented, and the bidding went on briskly as I stared at the thing: a good-looking woman, with full lips and (closed) deep-set eyes, a forehead that was only slightly lined, and a pile of blonde hair. As I looked at it, I found myself hoping that the eyes would open, and that I would be able to ask how it came to be here for sale.

Apparently, I was not the only one who wanted more information. The bidding stalled at 33,000, pending a request by somebody in the crowd to have the eyes of the head come open for inspection.

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I must admit that the auctioneer did his job well. He was a thin man, slightly stooped, so that he gave the impression of being solicitous about the items he was selling. He twisted his gavel between long, bony fingers; while his narrow and artificially-pink lips kept up a patter of information. (“This head comes from a patrician family which rarely donates to the public market; and as you can see is in *perfect* condition, including strawberry-blond hair which is guaranteed natural.”) The auctioneer’s own hair was patently dyed an ominous shade of ochre, and swept backwards from temples which showed pleasing symmetric splotches of silver. The hair was long at the back, drooping over the collar of an old-fashioned coat with artificially-wide shoulders, and lapels that resembled the wings of a pterodactyl. The net effect was of an auction overseen by a business-like Dracula.

The crowd gasped as the eyes of the head sprang open under the action of one of the auctioneer’s assistants. The eyes were deep grey – penetrating and deeply human, but disturbing as if they held some locked-in grief. The bidding immediately resumed with new fervour.

“Who’ll gimme thirty-five?” the auctioneer asked, and was answered almost straight away. “I *have* thirty-five! How about forty, forty?...*forty?*”

The voice rattled on, the auctioneer racking up the price and thereby his own ten-percent earnings. To me, the crowd in the room was of greater interest. There were about thirty people present, most of them ostentatiously well-off. Over half were women, whose jewels flashed in the subdued light of the dimly-lit room. The spotlight over the podium also reflected off the white shirtfronts of several older men, who were dressed in very conservative fashion. The neighbour to my right was one of these, and I noticed that the protruding cuffs of his shirt were held together by

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platinum crosses. On reappraisal, I saw that the fit of his suit was uncannily perfect. This crowd was special, I realized. These people were not only perverse, but rich enough to indulge their weird tastes.

The bidding on the stately woman's head was reaching an asymptotic value of 47,000, when I made a mental connection. It was not only my gold outfit and green zircons which had gained me admission to this one-of-a-kind auction. There had been a polite but no-nonsense guy at the door, who checked identification and documented the clientele. And I suddenly realized that I was here because my bank balance was at an exceptional high. They seemed to think I would bid on something.

I started to laugh, but ceased as my neighbour turned his blue eyes on me, topped with a slight frown. But I continued to giggle. Did this outfit really think I was so maladjusted that I would spend my money on (say) a super-handsome male body (or part thereof)? Really! To help stop the giggles, I picked up the drink from the arm rest of my chair. It had a pleasant limey smell, with the nostril-bite of real alcohol, and I took a swig.

Shortly thereafter, I was no longer in a laughing mood. Whether the drink was spiked – or whether it reacted with what I had drunk earlier – I do not know. All I was aware of was a rapid kind of creeping paralysis – something like a shiver that leaves you stiff. Even as I opened my mouth to cry out, it froze.

I was not completely rigid, however. My body settled into a kind of stasis, with the limited flexibility of a kid's toy made of stiff rubber. I forced my neck muscles to respond, and eventually managed to turn my head part way towards my aristocratic companion. He, though, continued to ignore me, intent on the list of items coming up for auction. I tried to scream, but only a faint gargling noise came from my throat. My ears detected two

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sounds: the rasp of air from my super-slow breathing, and the internal thudding from my suppressed heart. At least I would not die straight away. Rather, it was like being in the drawn-out death of a slow-moving nightmare.

My eyes started to itch, since I could not blink and there was dust in the room from the thick carpet and the plush chairs. Tears began to creep from the inner corners of my eyes – an automatic response which made sense but caused my vision to become watery and surreal. I focussed my strength on the muscles around my eye socket, willing my line of sight towards my companion in the dark suit. But I could not force my vision all the way, and gave up. My field of view became stuck, showing only the auctioneer's podium and my companion's hands. Neither was in sharp focus, but I soon cared little about that. For the last item – the stately female head – had been sold and removed. To be replaced by a new object, which filled me with horror.

It was me. Or, more exactly: a hologram of my head, with my brain in three-dimensional cutaway, accompanied at the side by a list of data.

They had my I.Q. listed as only 230!

Furious, I poured all the energy I possessed into my real head, turning it more towards my companion, and forcing a roar of displeasure from my frozen throat. This emerged as a croak, and barely caught the attention of the man seated beside me. He glanced in my direction, frowned, and said: "You really shouldn't drink so much, my dear."

I clenched my teeth – very slowly – at this patronizing reply. He really must have been a fool, because he failed to note the resemblance between the hologram at the front of the room and the real person seated beside him. The auction list he was studying also showed a miniature of my face; but what they were actually

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selling was my brain, with the restriction that it was *in-situ*. Maybe this was a weight on the transaction, because the bidding became bogged down at an unacceptably low level.

“Who’ll gimme thirty?” asked the Dracula auctioneer, though without enthusiasm.

No response.

“So le’me try twenty-five!”

Still no response.

“Ladies and gentlemen”, exhorted the batwinged auctioneer, “this is a proven brain! The *face* may not be much to write home about...”

I squirmed in silent rage.

“...but the brain behind it has been tried and proven in *many* business deals!”

A flutter of interest showed in the audience. One portly, middle-aged man in the front row suddenly seemed to wake up. Maybe he needed a thinking unit in his company. Anyway, he raised a pudgy hand.

“I have *twenee!*” announced the auctioneer in glee. “Do I hear twenee-three?”

The bidding slowly moved on, picking up a thousand or so in reluctant units. Only the fat guy in the front row seemed seriously interested in buying my brain.

Desperate, I activated my zircons and tried to contact my secretary. There was a long pause, and then the androidal voice of Ajax filled my inner ear. “Hi dearie,” said my secretary. “What’s up?”

There followed an exasperating attempt at communication; until Ajax figured out that I was drunk, and switched from voice mode to brainwave mode. Then she rapidly clued into the situa-

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tion, though with some misgivings. “So you’re *not* drunk, but you still want me to buy your brain?”

“Yes!” I yelled brainwise. “And hurry up!”

The bidding was trickling to a standstill, and at any instant my brain would be sold for the insultingly low figure of 27,000 to the fat guy at the front of the room. I watched with my frozen vision, and let out a torpid sigh of relief when the auctioneer announced: “I have a remote bid of thirty thousand!”

Mister Dracula seemed to be enjoying the business; and given that he earned ten percent on every deal he closed, he got even happier as a bidding war developed between the fat financier in the room and my remote androidal secretary.

“Thirty-seven!” acknowledged the auctioneer, pointing his hammer at the fat man and using his other hand to stroke his lapel.

There was some unheard conversation, and then his thin lips bent upwards in delight. “Thirty-nine?” he demanded of the man in the front row.

The latter was stubborn. Probably he did not think my brain was worth much; but he was of the good, old disposition who cannot give up. Thinking to crush his unseen rival, he announced: “Forty-five!”

The Dracula-like auctioneer engaged in a long conversation, while the people in the room waited expectantly. They had initially fallen silent, but now were whispering among themselves as the bidding reached exorbitant levels. The auction-man pulled on the lapels of his old-fashioned coat, and said unbelievably into his microphone: “You *really* want to go that high?”

The room fell silent, sensing a denouement. Then the auctioneer called out in a loud sing-song voice: “Who’ll gimme *fifty?*”

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Everybody in the room started talking at once. The racket was painful to my ears, and I would have put up my frozen hands to cut it out, if I could have done so. The high value of the bid on my brain seemed to have caught people by surprise. Even my taciturn companion, seated to my right, was upset.

“She’s not worth half of that,” he opined, “the stupid bitumen.”

I was totally furious! I would have flowed over his nasty mouth and blocked it with tar had I possessed the macadam for the act. As it was, all I could do was sit there, glaring. Mister Dracula was quieting the crowd with shushing motions of his hands.

“I am bid *fifty*”, he reminded them. Everyone looked shocked. “Is there any raise on *fifty*?”

“Going once”, he announced, looking at the overweight man in the front row. The latter stared at the floor, apparently trying to gain knowledge from the intricate design of the carpet. If some remote bidder were willing to pay so much, maybe the brain was worth that and perhaps more?

“Going twice”, intoned Mister Dracula. The corpulent front-row man squirmed with indecision. There *must* be some hidden asset to the brain; but what was it, and was it worth so much cash?

“Going third and last,” announced the auctioneer, holding his hammer in midair, and savouring the spotlight which shone lavishly on his slicked-back ochre hair and his dinosaurial lapels.

“Sold!” The gavel smacked down with finality, bringing a release of tension. People started to talk, stand up, and move.

I would have thrown up my hands in happiness if I had been able. As it was, I slipped out of my chair, and my field of view moved abruptly to being that of the floor.

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The authorities moved in as the last of the clientele dissipated into the darkened streets of the City. The scene dwindled to me, my trustworthy Ajax, a crew of truculent policemen, and the auctioneer. The last proved to be a really special individual. His eyes, up close, were penetrating and alive with humour. It turned out he was about half as old as I had assumed, and that his cadaverous appearance was the result of makeup, designed to aid his job. He also possessed a rapid mind and a sense of diplomacy. The latter he needed, because I told him bluntly that I was not going to pay his commission on the 50,000 sale price. We haggled for a time, while the police carried out a desultory examination. They found no evidence in the files of my rival Strangway. Eventually, the auctioneer and I reached a compromise: he agreed it was “tantologous” to sell my own brain to me, and I agreed to go out for dinner with him.

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THE UNUSUAL EVIL OF JONATHON HEDWIN WHITE

The most dangerous person in the world was Jon H. White.

Mass murderers have always fascinated people, but there is a penchant for pouring over the grisly details of their acts. It is more important – and more interesting – to look at the psychology of such individuals. For without motivation, the mechanical means of mass murder would be merely so much junk, and nobody would die.

Regrettably, there are shards of insanity in many of us. As we delve into the case of J.H.W., you may possibly find yourself looking back over the shoulder of your own psyche. Do not worry – this is perfectly normal.

At the time of which we speak, White was in middle-age, a tall man but with a stoop due to long periods of study and an aversion to physical exercise. His hair had once been yellow, but was now faded to grey. There was still enough of it to fall over his washy blue eyes, from where he pushed it back with long fingers terminated by dirty, overlong nails. He was not a person who put much credence in cleanliness, and in periods of stress had a habit of picking his nose. In an effort to curtail this activity, his mother had once warned him that continued attention to his nostrils would result in his nose taking on the appearance of that of a pig, which it did. With fleshy wax-like lips and a scrawny neck, the upper portion of White's body was not attractive. Neither was the lower portion, which included a concave chest and shuffling, over-large feet. In fact, the only reasonable part of his cadaverous form was

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his waist, which was trim enough to support a military belt, from which he liked to hang a repeating rifle.

Of White's history, only little is of interest. He attended an all-male school, where by dint of unremitting study he obtained the top academic standing and was automatically designated Top Boy. It is symptomatic of his narcissistic character that he used this to justify a place on the front row at the annual school picture, where he sat beside a weak-willed Principal who would have been better advised to give the boy a kick in the arse. It was at this morally rotten school that his mates coined his nick-name *M & M*, referring to the two things in which he excelled: mathematics and masturbation.

At University, White entered what was known as the 'nerd stream', and studied mathematics and physics. His nick-name followed him from school, by virtue of another boy who made the transition between the same two institutions and whose name was Maglington. The latter was a sociable fellow, who kept a small dog in his rooms. Maglington, who was studying geography, once remarked that White had "no more moral strength than a wet noodle." This may or may not have been correct; but next day the owner found his dog nailed to his door.

At the Institute of Physics, Jonathon Hedwin White finally encountered people with academic skills the equal of his own but who could not be bullied. In fact, White's first attempt to put down one of his fellow academicians resulted in a peremptory punch in the nose, which thereafter resembled even more that of a pig. This response came as a surprise to White, and there is no record of any reprisal against the other person involved.

Also about this time, White became interested in girls. This might, in a less introverted soul, have presented a route to salvation; since as many men have discovered, women will put up with

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any number of character flaws so long as there is some prospect of love. In White's case, the female road to normalcy was unfortunately cut off quite soon, because none of the seven girls he asked out would take the chance. The male theoretical physicist had by now quite a reputation in things academic, but still no sense of things practical. He had drawn up a list of females to approach, based on the premise that his own I.Q. would find a response in (at least) one of the female members of the Institute. He was so sure of this hypothesis that he was baffled when it utterly failed. He was particularly puzzled when he was declined by number seven on his list – the librarian at the Institute, whom he regarded anyway as not really an academic, and had only added as a remote stop-gap because she had large breasts. This librarian, whose name was Molly Quadron, felt vaguely sorry for Jon White; but her experience told her not to consider him even as a one-time date. She had worked at a mill in order to put herself through college, gotten casually pregnant in her last year and decided on an abortion which had caused her major depression, obtained her degree and a job, and was now secretly sleeping with the Institute's head gardener, whom she was trying to turn into a husband. She had been surprised when the physicist White had asked her out; but as she put it: "I'd rather be seen dead in a ditch with a lamp-post." Whatever this meant is obscure, but her female friends found it amusing, and made mental notes to decline White if he should ever come asking for dalliance. As for the man himself, he retreated to his apartment, confused and resentful. There was something here which he did not get. Or in his interpretation, something which the *girls* did not get. He slouched around his room for several days, working on quantum field theory and playing with his penis. When, on emerging, he overheard a passing remark to the effect that Molly Quadron was to be married to the

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head gardener, he felt both shamed and angry. Impotent, he sneaked out that night and deliberately trampled some tulips.

Telekinetics was a big corporation with a small pure-research group headed by a spinster of indeterminate age called Gwenyth Garris. Maybe she saw something in the sexually-repressed Jonathon White to which she could relate. Anyway, she hired him and he became one of Gwen's 'bright boys'. It was at Telekinetics that Jonathon Hedwin White was one day to obtain access to the technological equipment which – in conjunction with his own metal abilities – would put him into a position where he could change the world. It is therefore important to understand what happened at Telekinetics over the period of White's tenure. Please appreciate that the following comments are not intended as an *apology* for the corporation, but rather an account of events which led up to W day.

Gwen Garris was a nice person, whose major fault was that she tried to minimize or cover up bad things. For example, during the introductory talk to the new group of hirees (of whom White was one), her necklace of amber beads broke, showering the hardwood floor of the auditorium with bouncing brown baubles. A more self-confident lecturer might have exclaimed "Oh, shit!" and kicked the offending gems into a corner before resuming the talk. But Gwenyth tried to act as if nothing had happened, plucking up the stones one by one and stowing them in her meagre cleavage, while attempting to keep her knees together to preclude the view of the mainly male audience up the space between her innocent thighs. History might conceivably have taken a different course, had Gwen Garris been a confident woman who wore pants. As it was, Jonathon had a view of palpitating pale thighs up a maidenish skirt, which reawakened old lusts and the memories of bygone insults. In some people, perceived slights do not

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disappear with time, but merely accumulate, to form a burden which is destined for ruination.

With the dozen new recruits, the Garris group numbered around fifty. They were all theoreticians, with backgrounds in physics, chemistry, electronics and mathematics. There were also a couple of astronomers, thrown in for good measure. As it happened, the latter two members of the research group at Telekinetics were both female. Their concerns about White during his period with the company are now available as declassified documents. Both girls detested White. Though his chronological age was in the 30's, his attitude towards the other gender was typical of a 14-year-old. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the man's problems had only to do with sex (or the lack thereof). The records show White was significantly upset by the death of his mother. That harridan had supported her son financially throughout his life; but her passing revealed an essentially worthless estate, which obliged White to remain at Telekinetics just in order to make a living, a situation which turned up the temperature on his resentment against society.

Of White's father, little is known. The single-family house was sold in anticipation of the parents moving into a condominium when Jonathon left to attend University. However, the father apparently decamped with the proceeds of the sale plus the pretty, plastic-smiled real estate agent.

At Telekinetics, White junior made many novel contributions to science and caused even more arguments of a social kind. It is a strange fact, that people will put up with more insults from an individual, the more the latter is perceived as academically gifted. This topic is, however, more suited to the pages of a Ph.D. thesis than the present journalistic account. Here let us merely record the main factors which led up to White Day.

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Scientifically, White helped solve two of the major problems with the teleportation of objects from one point in space to another. These were: *first*, the massive energy cost; and *second*, the loss of coherence between source and destination. These problems are illustrated in the declassified briefing notes of an experiment which involved Gwen's 'bright boys' and the corresponding practical team known as Ronald's 'wrenches'. A refrigerator was decomposed atom by atom into wave functions, sent from the laboratory at Telekinetics to the intersection of Main Street and Union Boulevard in the local town, and reconstructed. Unfortunately, the town was plunged into black-out, and the door of the refrigerator materialized half-way across the sidewalk from the freezer. The latter example of decoherence explained why nobody at Telekinetics wished to try the experiment on themselves, despite the obvious commercial appeal of personal teleportation.

Sociologically, White's character was a desert of emotions, broken here and there by poisoned oases of turpitude. He lacked for example, any discernible sense of humour. Most people possess *some* appreciation of humour, though there are wide variations in type and amplitude. Jonathon W. appeared to have no sense of the concept of silliness. He was once asked, at the end of the company's annual party. "How many theoretical physicists are needed to install a light bulb?" (The neanderthatic nature of this joke attests to the dreary nature of year-end company parties.)

White was stumped for an answer; which was supposed to be something like: "Half-a-dozen, with one to hold the bulb and five to argue whether it has a right-hand or left-hand screw." Looking puzzled, he said, "That makes no sense. I've got fluorescent strip lights." There is something about this response which attests not only to a lack of humour but also to a surfeit of self-importance. White's conceit was also evident in his disregard for the feelings

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of his fellows. Who would not be repulsed – even at a boring party – by an individual who picked his nose and surreptitiously mixed the fruit of his nostrils with cream cake before gulping down the combination?

This kind of disregard for his colleagues was particularly pointed when it came to women. The two female astronomers who were attached to the Garris group were pleasant girls, unphased by their peripheral status at Telekinetics. It did not really matter to them that teleportation over planetary distances was an intangible goal – though one of potential significance. They were happy to work out parallaxes against the possibility of a future experiment, while in the meantime dating the male members of Ronald McLewan's group of engineers. There was, naturally, a friendly rivalry between the thinkers of Gwen's 'bright boys' and the workers of Ronald's 'wrenches'. It was a productive tension, resulting in a counterplay of research which kept both groups focussed on what Telekinetics wanted: a practical means of teleportation. Unfortunately, while White contributed more than his fair share of brilliant ideas to this aim, he also acted to thwart it by an excess of antisocial behaviour. Events came to a crisis one weekend in spring.

The Telekinetics complex is situated on the edge of town, and is surrounded by gardens and small groves of trees. The sap was rising in the latter, and what may have passed for the same process appeared to have afflicted White one sunlight-filled evening. He had already checked out the academic affiliations of the two girls, hoping to find that their refusal to go on dates with him was correlated with a lack of academic standing. Disappointed, he found that both girls had published several erudite papers, and were both Fellows of the Astronomical League. The A.L. was not a trivial organization. Indeed, it was on par with the P.L. – the Physical

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League – to which White had been elected a Fellow after a process that could only be termed cantankerous. White, blinkered by academic matters, could not understand why the two girls had refused his repeated advances. He decided to renew his attack, using a pictorial approach. This was suggested to him by the emblem of the Astronomical League, which was a large sky-pointing telescope flanked by two wheel-like supporting mechanisms. On his computer, he proceeded to alter this image. The telescope became a penis, and the wheels became testicles.

White sent the image to the girls at about dinner time, with an invitation for them to visit him in his apartment at midnight. (He seemed to assume that they, like him, had nothing better to do on a weekend evening in spring.) White was proud of his computer-assisted picture. The saggy testicles were resplendent with hairs, and the taut penis shed a life-like globule of semen.

The physicist lay down on his bed, awaiting midnight. A habitual night-owl, he filled in the time by re-reading one of his own papers, *The Deconstruction, Transfer and Reconstruction of Wave Functions, with Possible Applications to the Teleportation of Real Objects*. As midnight approached, his mind wandered from the algebra of quantum mechanics to the practical usage of two girls in a bed...

Midnight arrived.

There was a knock.

White, dressed in a night-gown, opened the door to find two beefy security guards.

The next day there was a high-level meeting between Gwenyth Garris, Ronald McLewan and the Director of Personnel, Roger Strange. The last's name had nothing to do with its bearer being odd. Rather the name was a linguistic throw-back to an era where it meant "strong". Living up to this, the Director of Per-

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sonnel started the meeting with a bluff statement: “Have you got anything to say as to why I shouldn’t fire this misfit?” Strange was technically in control of all the personnel at Telekinetics, whose production and marketing divisions greatly outnumbered the research and engineering ones, so he was understandably off-hand about White. There followed a long discussion. Gwen Garris, who valued White’s ideas, had thoughtfully asked for the assistance of Ron McLewan, whose practical work benefited from the insights of the “misfit.” At the end of an exchange of views which encompassed everything from the Big Bang to a portable refrigerator, Strange went quiet. Then he pronounced: “You can keep him til the end of his contract. But if he does anything else stupid, he’s out. *Also*, for the interim, he’s on probation, and has to meet with Gwen at least once a week, so we know if he’s got any more weird ideas up his cranium.”

Gwen Garris, coming away from the meeting, looked deeply troubled. Ron McLewan tried to lift her gloom, noting that she had won a reprieve for one of her ‘bright boys’. He even went so far as to put an arm around her thin shoulders. But the woman was worried. “Putting White on probation is only going to make him worse,” she predicted.

This prophecy was eventually to be proved accurate.

There followed, however, a hiatus during which White was oddly quiet. He did not, for example, pester the two female astronomers any more. As it later transpired, his apparent lack of interest in inter-office sex was due to his discovery of a part-time prostitute in town who called herself Flamingo. Certainly, she had long, thin legs and spindly arms; and some of her less appreciative customers, referring to her nose, called her “Honker”. We cannot be sure, but it may be that these beings on the edge of normal society found some mutual solace in their nasal attributes.

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For a while, Flamingo with her honker and White with his pig's nose got along, albeit they only saw each other twice a week. But eventually their relationship foundered on two of the rocks which have fractured even traditional marriages: money and philosophy. The money issue was trite. White was a lousy and inept lover, in addition to being a cheapster. But as a regular visitor, he came to believe that he deserved a rebate, something which the lady was not willing to grant, since as she put it "I do all the work anyway." The philosophy issue was more complicated. White was an exceptional physicist, but could not understand that the local hooker was indifferent to his latest research on quantum mechanics. He stormed out one evening, omitting payment but leaving a paper on wave functions instead.

Fuming in his apartment back at Telekinetics, White set about putting the results of his researches into a new order. It was as if he was marshalling his equations to fight some academic war.

A short calculation, found afterwards, showed how its author had prescribed the events of White Day. Unlike the massive files of teleportation physics, the note about their application to people was on a scrap of paper, written in an unpracticed, spidery scrawl:

*Let there be  $n$  steps. Assume decade agents and a total population of 10 billion. Then  $10^n = 10 \times 10^9$  implies  $n=10$ . Neat! Can count on fingers. According to R. McCrap's data, assume each step takes 10 seconds. Then total time is  $10 \times 10$  seconds – a bit under two minutes. They won't know what hit them!*

This time estimate, and other factors, have led some analysts to draw a parallel between White Day and the day which saw the end of the Second World War. In that case, a great military establishment led to one man dropping an atomic bomb the size of a car battery on a city; killing directly (by the explosion) and indirectly (by radiation damage) something of the order of a million people.

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The time of the falling bomb in the air was of the order of minutes. In the case of White Day, a great science organization led to one man, being in possession of a compact device which by an unforeseen application made it possible to kill billions in short order.

The question of *how* White was able to act is, however, much easier to answer than the *why* of it. This is because, while reams of analysis exists on the man, little is actually known of him. In fact, what you have read above is a compact version of almost everything in the public record. He left us no accounts of teenage angst, no records of a troubled twenties, and no note explaining what was in his mind as he approached his fortieth birthday. Various comparisons have been made between White and other despots who have attained notoriety by their evil actions. Much of this didacture involves military people, such as Ghengis Khan, Attila the Hun, Napoleon Bonaparte, Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler and that most recent of villains Abdullah Alright. However, apart from his habit of hanging a rifle from his belt beneath a raincoat, White showed little propensity for things military. An objective analyst might focus less on his rifle than on the dirty raincoat used to conceal it. This because there is one (unsubstantiated but reliable) account of White using his raincoat in the traditional flasher mode, to reveal his sex organs to an unsuspecting child.

Cutting away the superfluous speculation of psychologists, there are only a few plausible reasons for why White did what he did. There are pros (and cons) for all of these. Thus:

(a) He did it for money (though there is no record of any payment).

(b) He did it an attempt to reduce the world's over-population problem (though he did not otherwise care about the people of the planet).

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(c) He only *planned* to do it, and events got out of control (a possibility, though he had previously shown no forbearance in his other egocentric acts).

(d) He did it as a means of getting his name recorded in history as the most famous murderer of all time (along the lines of Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of John Kennedy and that man's version of democracy, Pol Pot's extermination of his subjects to form pyramids of their skulls, and Abdullah Alright's decapitation of 365 members of his parliament and the subsequent use of their heads as a day calendar).

(e) He did it because he just hated people.

This writer believes – insofar as it is possible to give a logical explanation for White's actions – that the last reason is the most plausible. However, you (the long-suffering reader) are of course free to make your own judgment, after we review the happenings of White Day.

The stage-managed woods which surrounded the buildings of Telekinetics Incorporated were lashed with rain that morning. The coppice outside White's window alternated between dark green and watery silver, depending on how the wind shepherded the leaves. Over the horizon of subdued hills there struggled a lacklustre sun.

It was a suitably miserable day.

Jon White – whose soul had never been uplifted by a ray of sunlight anyway – ignored the weather and rolled out of his dirty bed. Feeling under it, he pulled out his rifle. The chamber showed ten bullets, which were actually mini-bombs, each capable of great destruction. He repeated to himself "They won't know what hit them!"

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The room was cool, so he drew a dressing gown over his naked form, noting with satisfaction that he had a small erection. He put the rifle on the table, and from a drawer drew a box of ammunition. The rifle was actually capable of carrying eleven bullets in its breach, if they were squeezed in. He lifted one of the small torpedoes, but decided against trying to force it into the weapon: he did not wish to take the risk of a mechanical malfunction; and in any event there was something appealing about the powers-of-ten strategy he had planned. He dropped the extra round of ammunition into the pocket of his dressing gown.

In the bathroom, he peered into the mirror, undecided whether to shave. Behind him, the shower gave off a faint musty smell – the olfactory signature of neglect. Studying his face, he noted that his habitual weak growth had only produced a surface stubble on his chin. As well, shaving would necessitate maneuvering around the spots which had plagued him since youth. He decided against, and merely splashed some water into his pale eyes.

Donning his raincoat over the dressing gown, he exited his apartment, leaving the rifle on the desk inside the locked room. It was quiet in the corridor. This was the first day of a long weekend, and many of the other tenants had left on mini-vacations. Also, as he was reminded when he emerged into the damp dawn air, it was still early.

Scowling against the rain, White walked quickly to the nearest entrance of the Telekinetics building. Inside, he walked even further along deserted corridors, before stopping at the door of the laboratory complex occupied by Ronald McLewan's 'wrenches'. Using a code pilfered from one of the engineers at the company's year-end party, the 'bright boy' entered the complex which housed the teleportation equipment.

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Ozone tingled his nostrils. Slightly excited by the alien nature of the place, White paused and rehearsed the line he would tell if he were discovered: delivering a new calculation on the transmission of objects around the world which needed practical verification. He felt the reassuring equation-filled foil in the pocket of his dressing gown, by the side of the bullet. The excuse was plausible, and without the rifle, he could pass as an innocent, over-eager geek.

Which, of course, he was not. In fact, his planning was meticulous. He rapidly located the room which housed the latest version of the Teleporter; and in an hour, his sharp theoretician's brain had absorbed every aspect of the practical side of the machine. It was a gigantic thing – rearing up to the ceiling where it ended in a shiny dome, this above a refrigerator-sized cavity that sat on top of a neutrino generator, the whole shrouded in sensors and wires. It was an impressive invention. To a liberal-arts scholar, its bald head and tangled leads might have suggested a modern Medusa, whose snakey locks had been the victim of an inept barber.

But to Jon White, the Teleporter was merely a machine. One he could control. A convenient experiment he could use to enable extermination.

Certain that he understood the practical side of his mission, White left the laboratory and headed back to his apartment. He made no effort to wipe his fingerprints from the various levers he had handled. Likewise, he did not clean up the DNA-carrying mucus from the control panel of the Teleporter, where he had sneezed on it.

Paul Tibbets – the pilot of the plane which dropped the atomic bomb that ended the Second World War – might have been uncertain as to whether his cargo would function or not.

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Jonathon Hedwin White – by comparison – was sure that his scheme would work, and that there would be no need for a forensic follow-up to his planetary fratricide.

In his apartment, White picked up the rifle and checked it carefully. Though of modern construction, it still had considerable mass. This would require the use of significant energy, but his research had shown how this problem could be solved. The other result of his theoretical labours – the problem of lack of coherence of a teletransported image – he also knew how to circumvent, by a fine-tuning of the Teleporter. Also, the rifle was of relatively simple design, so that its reduction to hologramatic wave functions would be easy. The same comment applied to the transponder. This device was a modified version of the one many people bought at their local electronics store, designed to direct power from one room to another in the typical energy-efficient home. Using his long and dexterous fingers, White bound tape around the transponder and the barrel of the rifle. Then he used the heat from the apartment's food-preparation unit to fuse the two things. The result looked like a gun with an overly large telescopic sight. Hefting this hybrid weapon, White knew that if there were to be a hitch in the teleportation process, it would not lie in the rifle but rather in the more intricate challenge of projecting his own body around the globe.

White left his apartment, re-checking in his mind the calculations he had performed on the computer about the teleportation of human bodies. He was certain that his equations predicted coherent imagery; but even if by some quirk this failed, his own body here at Telekinetics would be unscathed. In fact, his calculations would – if they had ever come into the possession of Telekinetics Incorporated – have secured his future there. For he had essentially side-stepped the technical problems of teleportation by the

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brilliant device of sending a *copy* of the subject, not the thing itself. This is why Jonathon White was sure that his own body would be unharmed in the experiment he was about to perform.

He was thinking about the theoretical problems he had overcome when he ran – totally unprepared – into a practical one: Gwenyth Garris appeared around the corner of the building.

The rain had abated, but was still strong enough that both individuals were walking with bowed heads. White saw Garris coming, and stopped, uncertain what to do. The woman, however, did not look up. The result was a collision that sent the female sprawling onto the gravel of the sidewalk.

White was suddenly seized with panic. His plan was based on the assumption that nobody would be around this early on the start of a three-day break. It had not occurred to him that employees like Gwen Garris – who had few friends and were dedicated to their jobs – might turn up to finish outstanding work. What to do?

The woman – confused – started to scramble to her feet. As she did so, she showed again the view between pale thighs which White had experienced several years before, when her necklace had broken and she was intent on recovering both it and her innocence.

The man – also confused – felt a physical tumescence between his legs which fought with a cautioning mental clangour.

It was (again) one of those occasions when an apt phrase from Gwen Garris might have eased the situation into insignificance. Unfortunately, she looked up, saw Jon White, and became scared.

The blood drained from her face in some automatic response to his history and reputation. She stuttered “Oh! It’s *you*...”

White heard the fear in her brittle voice, and simultaneously realized what a threat Garris was to his mission. He opened his raincoat and unhooked the rifle from its belt. His penis poked er-

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rantly from between the folds of his dressing gown. It was a question of which would shoot first.

The rifle spoke, and Gwentyth Garris dissolved into a biological mess.

Leaving the woman's blood to spread in the steady rain, the man turned and marched with determination to the Telekinetics building.

*Accelerate*, he thought.

The project was too important to be derailed by the discovery of a corpse, or the arrival of yet another early worker.

White fumbled at the door of the laboratory which housed the Teleporter. *Nerves*, he reasoned. *Shut them down*.

In front of the machine, now calmer, he set the controls. "All I need," he muttered aloud to himself, "is two minutes."

He began to clamber into the compartment of the device which held the object to be copied. Already, there was a deep hum that reverberated from the smooth walls of the laboratory: the klystron building energy for the first transmission.

Suddenly, he stopped, thinking.

Then he climbed out of the Teleporter's cubicle. Opening the breech of the rifle, he looked at the nine slugs which remained after the destruction of Gwen Garris. *No good*, he thought. *Spoils the pattern*.

Rummaging in his pockets, he found the extra mini-bomb. Shoving it into the rifle's energy chamber, he felt a renewed focus. The fates were on his side. *Ten times ten times...*

He climbed back into the chamber, his head bent and the rifle stowed between his concertinaed legs. Closing the door, it stuck on the hem of his raincoat. "Damm!"

There was not much time. Preprogrammed, the Teleporter's energy source was thrumming, beating in his intestines with

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steady insistency. Overhead, a faint blue light surrounded the shiny dome of the device, shedding superfluous energy as it prepared to discharge its main power around the globe.

White dragged the blocking bit of his raincoat into the cubicle, and slammed the door. Somewhere, a siren started to wail – warning of a massive power drain.

Then... ZAP!

In Times Square, New York, a copy of White appeared from nothing, complete with dirty raincoat and rifle. In that crowded thoroughfare, his ten shots easily found ten victims, and ten people died.

Precisely ten seconds after the first White, ten others materialized. Some of these were near to the original, while others were more remote. All had ten rounds in their rifles. A hundred gunshots produced almost as many casualties.

The wave of death spread out inexorably, like the wave which had originated in the first atomic bomb to be used on people. But unlike that, the new wave did not diminish with distance. Fueled by new apparitions of Jon White, the teleportation wave forged across the continent. Until it met the Chicago wave, coming from the opposite direction. These two crests coalesced, and with combined force spread outwards with even greater strength. Eventually, they met the wave of death-dealing Whites propagating from Los Angeles, and again there was a joining...

Bubbles plus bubbles makes bubbles. This was a new kind of war, waged with the fizzy generals of Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola. And it was a *fast* war.

In Tiananmen Square, Beijing, the first White to appear was so ethnically strange that the Chinese looked on – stupefied – while the apparition killed the standard ten people. The next gen-

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eration of Whites appeared and did their deeds before the government had time to blame the West. The Beijing wave met the Shanghai wave, and soon the most populous country in the world was being decimated. Inside of two minutes, China's population problem was history.

In Trafalgar Square, London, things went less smoothly. The first White to materialize did so on the edge of one of the famous fountains, where a startled but gutsy kid pushed it into the water. The discombobulated copy floundered for a while, cursing the fact that the original had never learned to swim. In the meantime, the child's minder – who by chance was an army reservist earning extra weekend money through babysitting – grabbed the rifle and clubbed White on the head with it. There followed a furious fight.

The girl had basic combat training, and the kid had teeth – which it sank into White's left ear. The thrashing in the fountain alerted one of the policemen who habitually hang around the Square. He arrived as the exhausted girl gave a last kick to the groin of the nearly-unconscious White. The policeman said "What's all this, then?" However, a second White had materialized ten seconds after the first on the steps of the National Gallery. He callously shot the policeman, the babysitter and the child.

England, uninvaded since the Battle of Hastings in the year 1066, was doomed ...

Jonathan Hedwin White, when he staggered out of the Teleportation unit in the laboratories of Telekinetics Incorporated, did not really know if his crusade had been a success or a failure.

All he knew for sure was that he felt very sick, with a stomach which seemed to be pressing up into his mouth.

Along the sidewalk between the company building and the one in which his apartment was located, he came across the re-

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mains of Gwenyth Garris. As if the bloody corpse was taking what revenge it could muster, it caused Jonathon White to throw up.

Leaving behind the mess of vomit-covered entrails, White lurched along the path. Somehow he got the outer door of the building open, crawled up the stairs, and entered his own place. He collapsed onto his bed, breathing heavily through stinking lips.

After a while, he was startled by an authoritative knock at the door of the apartment.

Sighing with self-pity, White slid out of his smelly bed and lurched over to the entrance.

He opened the door, and saw...a copy of himself.

White was raising a hand in protest, when his doppelganger shot him through the heart with the ten-billionth bullet.

## MERRY CHRISTMAS

Bob Rodriguez closed the squeaky door of the Observatory, and walked across the dusty parking lot towards his jeep, breathing in the smell of juniper.

The door of the jeep bore a circular emblem – *Los Altos Solar Observatory* – in red letters with a simplified picture of a telescope in the middle. But it was obscured now with the dust borne by the fall winds. In fact, the moan of the winter air over the side of the mountain was quite audible as Bob paused before turning on the ignition. There was also a cold edge to the still air in the vehicle's cab; and before long there would be a layer of frost between the greenish-gray cactus that dotted the hillside.

"Christmas is coming," muttered Rodriguez, as he waited for the old jeep's sputtering engine to warm.

He did not like Christmas: too much hoopla, too much pressure to buy things, and (after losing his wife Serena close to two years ago) too much *ache*.

But, Bob reminded himself, Christmas was a happy time for children. His eldest, Sam, was a too-wise child whose disavowal of Santa Claus put a notch in his otherwise considerable popularity at the local school. His youngest child, Serena, was named after her absent mother but luckily did not understand the details of death or skin cancer, and was only too happy to accept Santa Claus as a real being and look forward to his coming.

Introspecting, Rodriguez shifted the gears of the vehicle at the edge of the parking lot, so that it could coast down the mountain side in neutral. He had done the trip so often that he could negotiate the twists of the gravel road that led into town with only an occasional dab on the brakes. He belonged to that special cadre of

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people who worked at astronomical observatories, and whose location was such that they could drive home at the end of the day using no energy source but the Earth's gravity.

As the jeep gained speed, it entered the shadow cast by the telescope. This was not what most people understood by the term, but rather a metal box that slashed down the mountain side like an engineer's ruler discarded in the sand and mesquite of the desert. For it was basically just a square-sided tube, designed to catch the image of the Sun at its top and magnify it into a scientifically-dissectible object at its bottom. The offices and main parking lot of the Los Altos Solar Observatory were at the top end. This was mainly due to the geological accident of an outcrop of hard limestone, which formed a kind of anchor, as if stopping the massive structure from sliding down the mountain. Also at the top end of the observatory was the cover, opening at sunrise and closing at sunset, directing the Sun's rays into the guts of the instrument. Along its lengthy trajectory down the hillside, the sunlight was purged of local contaminants – including those from the streetlights of Los Altos – and entered the scientific barrage of instruments at its lower end as pure star energy. There the machines got to work: dissecting, refracting and focusing; extracting every nuance of information from the rays of the local energy source which mankind condescendingly refers to by a simple three-letter name: the *Sun*.

There is a colossal amount of information in sunlight. And Bob Rodriguez briefly considered this as his silent jeep neared the lower end of the observatory on its way into Los Altos. There were of course the lines in the spectrum, which ran from the ultraviolet to the infrared, with much of it outside the range of the human eye. And then there was the polarization – the twisting of the electric and magnetic components which make up all light. And

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then again there were the “strange” things (as he liked to call them): the blips in the spectrum of sunlight which had no rational explanation. Rodriguez briefly recalled an off-the-cuff opinion by that doyen of theoretical astrophysics, Hoyle. Though a man of limited mathematical knowledge, Rodriguez had seen thousands of solar spectrograms in his short career, enough to tell him that there was a lot in them that was not understood. So he was sympathetic to Hoyle’s guess: There was hidden information in sunlight.

Rodriguez yanked over the steering wheel, causing the old jeep to slew around a large boulder. The latter had not been there yesterday. But as winter increased its grip, the cliffs were fracturing. Cursing, the Director of the observatory made a memory to re-send his last email to N.A.S.A. *The Los Altos Solar Observatory is dependent on a 1-in-3 slope road. This requires regrading. In lieu of the decision not to surface the road (see previous memos), I wish to remind Administration that the Observatory can only continue to function if the gravel surface is kept in good condition. Otherwise, access will be impeded and good data, particularly on sunspots, will be lost.*

Angry, Rodriguez braked the jeep, and it came to a sliding halt in front of the building at the lower end of the observatory. This was a structure of corrugated iron, whose surface was dented by the side of the entrance, where a delivery truck had lost traction on the pebbly surface while delivering equipment some time before. It was only a small thing, but it caused the scowl on the face of Rodriguez to settle even deeper. Administration in its financial shenanigans had given them an even million for a new coronoscope to make better views of the Sun, but would not part with a peso to fix the road on which the Observatory’s operation depended.

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Suddenly, Rodriguez realized he was being too serious, and gave a short sarcastic laugh. This was heard by a thin man bearing a backpack, who happened to be leaving the building at the end of his work shift. The figure sauntered over, to rest a tanned elbow on the edge of the jeep's open window and a sneaker-shod foot on its battered running-board. "What's the joke?"

"Nothing much, Lance" replied Rodriguez. "But there's a big rock in the road a ways up that'll have to be removed."

Lance Percival's close-cropped head swiveled slightly, his blonde eyebrows puckering as he looked up the mountain. He made no effort to shade his blue eyes, which seemed to be bleached by the Sun which he had spent most of his life studying. By comparison, Bob Rodriguez had deep brown eyes set in a sallow face which bore a slight but permanent squint, due to years spent looking not at the Sun itself but at its spectra as recorded in the gloom of the Observatory's laboratory. Both men knew the Sun, but in different ways – the practical and the theoretical. And on a personal level, the two men hardly knew each other at all. Rodriguez had only once been in the bachelor apartment which Percival rented in town. It had been a visit demanded by protocol, when Rodriguez as the newly-appointed Director had called on the more senior Percival to ask him to stay on, though without the promotion that had seemed to be a given. The one thing that registered in the memory of Rodriguez was (of all silly things) the collection of empty beer bottles which adorned the balustrade of Percival's balcony. However, those bottles were not the mementoes of some alcohol-fixated adolescent. Rather, they were in the nature of an experiment. For at this altitude, the unseen ultraviolet part of the Sun's radiation was intense. It was strong enough to change the colour of the bottles used by the local beer store. Arranged by age, the new ones were brown and shiny; while the old

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ones were white and criss-crossed by numerous tiny cracks, as if the glass was ready to fall into dust.

Framed in the vehicle's open window, Rodriguez noted that the skin of Percival's face was also criss-crossed by a maze of fine lines. But if this was due to the Sun's ultraviolet, the change must be only superficial. For the Director's second-in-command was enviously fit, as evidenced by the bicycle which stood against the wall of the building that housed the coronoscope. Percival, with a nod of farewell, started to walk towards his chosen form of transport, which Rodriguez thought must be a joy to ride home but an agony to ride to work.

It was apparently taken for granted that the boulder in the middle of the road would be taken care of, because Percival's parting comment was about a different matter. "Bob, you should take a look sometime at the last batch of sunspot data." The saddle of the man's bicycle had been drained of colour by the high-altitude sunlight, and now matched the khaki of its owner's shorts. "They don't look completely random to me."

Rodriguez grunted an acknowledgement, and waited while Percival accelerated down the steep road, disappearing round one of its numerous switchbacks in a cloud of dust. The Director gave his vehicle a short burst of power, before slipping it into neutral and coasting downhill, his mind musing on randomness and information.

The town was noisy, with end-of-day shoppers taking advantage of the coolness of the evening air. The Avenida was packed with both locals and tourists. The former were shopping mainly for the staples – tortillas, meat and red wine. The latter were shopping mainly for the knick-knacks for which Los Altos was famous – arrow heads from bygone civilizations, and artifacts made by the modern indigenous population. Particularly popular

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were the constructions of rawhide and feathers known as dream-catchers, which cost almost nothing to create but sold at a premium to superstitious city-dwellers, who believed that when suspended over their harassed owners they would protect from the nightmares of a materialistic world. Most of the tourist stores also displayed over-stuffed Santa-Claus dolls made from some artificial material of a shocking red colour. Rodriguez did not care either for the dream-catchers or the Santa-Claus dolls. This even though he was  $\frac{1}{4}$  Indian by descent and had been brought up in a traditional family where Christmas was the major event in the calendar. His mother had once chided him when as a nine-year old, he had ignored the Christmas presents from his immediate family in preference to one from a seldom-seen uncle: an astrolabe. It was a mystery where that iconoclastic relative had obtained this antique instrument, which has been used in bygone times to determine altitude from the objects in the heavens. But to the young Rodriguez it had been a marvel, and in middle age it was still his most valued possession, after his children.

The dusty jeep negotiated its way down the Avenida, slowly displacing the season-frenzied shoppers for whom the connection between Christmas and the Sun's place in the sky was merely an abstraction. Los Altos, as its name implied, was located high up in the mountains. It was situated on a small plateau, which must have been a godsend to its founders, who inhabited a hostile terrain of spiky Sun-blasted peaks and deep, gloom-filled canyons. Even today, it was a difficult place to access. The plateau was too small to provide an airstrip, and the helicopter pad was only for use by the medical services or the local self-important politicians. A long, sinuous, steep-sided road notorious for accidents connected the town to the nearest city; but that represented the best part of a day's travel. Nevertheless, Los Altos flourished. Its

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spectacular and remote location made it a prime tourist goal; and its altitude and clear, thin air made it an exceptional place for an astronomical observatory. Sometimes, Rodriguez wished that it were possible to dispense with the first part of this deal and retain only the second.

“But you can’t have everything,” he sighed, as he turned from the Avenida into a narrow lane known as the Embarcadero. Why it was called this, he had no idea, since no traffic of any significance had left or come in his memory. Indeed, there were only four houses on the street. It dead-ended with a low wall, beyond which was a dizzying drop into a ravine whose sides were populated by a handful of tenacious bushes, between which skittered a variety of large-footed lizards apparently immune to vertigo.

Rodriguez eased the jeep into the narrow garage, its close walls shutting out the soaring scenery and providing a homely sense of security. Before the noise of its motor had died, the confined space was filled by another, more-welcome sound: the high-pitched cries of children over the staccato sounds of their footfalls.

The side door burst open, restrained by an old lady who watched indulgently as Sam and Serena clambered into the jeep to greet their father with overlapping enthusiasm.

Sam started flipping the switches on the vehicle’s control panel. Water squirted onto the windshield, turning its patina of dust into sludge that was whisked away by the wipers. The headlights went on and off, on and off; until the boy found the audio control, and the garage reverberated to the sounds of *The Who* singing at excruciating volume “*I can see for miles and miles and miles and...*”

Serena ferreted about in the jeep’s interior, quietly searching its hidden recesses for the piece of candy which somehow and miraculously always appeared, day after day...

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This was the start of the evening routine which usually occupied the Rodriguez family. While not rigid, it was a convenient sequence of events which maximized the time that the father and the children had to interact with each other. Marianne, the old Indian lady who had largely taken the place of the dead mother, had made the dinner which awaited the father and kids. She was already pulling over her simple homespun dress the incongruously thick space-age anorak which protected against the cold of winter in the mountains. With a smile to Bob, she disappeared into the grey of dusk, which at this altitude rapidly became the black of night.

Dinner was taken on the low table in front of the fireplace, where mesquite branches popped and sang, encouraging conversation.

“Daddy,” said Serena as she rotated a piece of cheese between her teeth, taking an occasional bite, “are we a *boring* family?”

Rodriguez continued to chew on his mouthful of chili, refusing to fall into the cliché of the father surprised by his child’s question. Finally, he responded carefully “What do you mean?”

“Well.” Serena waited to swallow her piece of cheese, respecting the table manners she had been taught, before answering. “*Some* people say we’re something out of a book. Like, you have two kids – a girl and a boy – and that you don’t want to have any more and marry anybody else because Mommy was too good. And that she died of the cancer thing that’s from the Sun, but you look at it all day and are friends with it. And that Marianne isn’t really our grandmother. *And* you’re clever, but like most Dads you don’t believe in Santa Claus.”

Rodriguez stopped chewing, unable to act nonchalant in the face of this babbling barrage. His dark eyes became even more

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shadowed at the implications of his daughter's comments. However, she did not notice.

"*And,*" she finished triumphantly, "we live in a tourist trap!"

Rodriguez put down his fork with a clatter. Outwardly he looked calm, but inwardly he was dismayed. What the *hell* was all this about? He was marshalling his thoughts for a reply, when he was cut off.

"*Stupid!*" Sam yelled at his sister. The son had noticed his father's look of concern, and while usually quiet, now burst out with an emotional defence. "Dad's all right. Maybe he doesn't *like* other ladies! That cancer thing wasn't *his* fault. And only a dumb little girl would believe in Santa Claus!"

Abruptly the boy stood up, tears pouring down his face. He bolted for his room...

Rodriguez was appalled. What was going on? What had he missed? But he did not get the opportunity to consider the matter, because his daughter was also in distress. Her lower lip started to quiver; and her face – which so reminded of her mother – crinkled with pain. She sobbed "Sorry," and also ran from the room.

It was some time before Rodriguez threw off his shock and stood up. Then, he began methodically to collect the dirty dinner plates. As he washed them, it occurred to him that: Yes, he was a pretty boring person...

But: he still did not believe in Santa Claus.

Next morning, the familial storm seemed less doomful. Rodriguez got up at dawn, and over a large cup of strong coffee had a long talk with Marianne while the children still slept. The old lady's opinion was both simple and confusing: "You will find love again one day, Bob. It will hit you like a bullet, and then you will know it was meant. In the meantime, why not Santa Claus?"

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Sorting through these sentences, Rodriguez directed the jeep along the deserted Avenida. He passed three hotels, behind whose shuttered windows slept the visitors who kept this “tourist trap” alive. The ancient inns sported balconies constructed from gnarled pieces of oak, whose like was no longer to be found among the denuded hills which surrounded modern Los Altos. In between the vertical members of these old balconies were stuffed, at random intervals, figures which displayed red costumes and white beards.

“Oh well,” muttered Rodriguez, smiling slightly and thinking that he could afford to lighten up a bit. After all, Christmas was imminent. On the other hand, there was work to be done; and his mind slipped into technicalities as the jeep slipped into first gear and began the long climb to the Observatory.

He parked the vehicle outside the lower of the Observatory’s two buildings. As the dust settled, he searched the passenger-side glove compartment for his sunglasses. These were not ordinary spectacles, but made of two very thick pieces of welder’s glass, so black as to be almost opaque. Carrying this instrument, he walked to the edge of the road and looked back down the mountain. The view was long and terrific: the road winding downwards into a maze of canyons which marched away into a distant jumble of sharp peaks. For a moment, the man swayed, the vista trying to suck him off the road and into the clear morning air, to join the condors which floated effortlessly in the warming atmosphere. Far, far away there was a glowing white gem wedged between two mountains: the rising Sun.

Wincing, Rodriguez donned the special sunglasses. His pinpoint pupils dilated, and he saw that the Sun was about a quarter way up – a segment of white circle, filling the vee-shape between grey hillsides. It grew in size slowly, like a blob of luminous

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toothpaste being extruded from some cosmic tube. When it had grown to about half, he saw that the disk was splotched with several dark areas that resembled ink blots. Percival was right: there was an unusual display of sunspots.

Rodriguez stowed the spectacles in the breast pocket of his thick shirt and walked purposefully towards the building which housed the coronoscope. The air was chilly, but he was thinking about heat.

Most of the visitors to the Observatory were not aware of it, but the Sun was really a small core of incredibly hot fusing plasma, surrounded by a large atmosphere of cooler material whose surface was at a temperature about equal to that of an industrial iron furnace. Sure the surface was hot by conventional standards, but not that high by astronomical standards. The top layer of the Sun – which the tourists saw – was underlain by a wound-up series of magnetic lines of force, something like a clock spring. At certain places, the magnetic lines poked through the surface, allowing plasma to spew out into space. The places where this happened were cooler than their surroundings and appeared dark by comparison: sunspots. Overall, however, the density of the Sun was slightly greater than that of water. Basically, it was a huge fluid blob, quivering under the strains of its own energy.

In the time it took for Rodriguez to walk from the road's edge to the laboratory's door, the Sun lost about ten times the mass of his jeep, in the form of light.

Stepping into the dark interior of the laboratory, Rodriguez reminded himself that his job was pretty unique. It consisted, basically, in monitoring an energy monster.

It was as if an ant had been appointed zoo-keeper to an elephant.

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The Observatory of which he was Director was one of the best – and arguably *the* best – of the handful of such institutions on the planet. Its status was due largely to the largesse of N.A.S.A. and the new coronoscope. This hung above him in the rafters of the building, and as he turned on its controls, Rodriguez reminded himself to be careful. A mistake, and a million in money would be down the drain, as well as many years' worth of future science.

The fact that the coronoscope was so valuable often puzzled the visitors to the Observatory, which was open to the public on weekends but was only enjoyed by those with lungs able to function in the thin mountain air. It was, to casual inspection, only a disk of metal. But its size and edges were machined to fantastic accuracy. When placed in the way of the light from the Sun, it blocked out the star's disk exactly, allowing the study of the corona, the physics-rich layer above its bright surface. Lots of things happened in the corona, but they could not be seen in the blinding light from the Sun's surface. When the Sun's disk was blotted out, there was revealed a boiling region of plasma whose study had occupied Rodriguez most of his life. It was in the corona, for example, that the solar wind was born. This stream of particles from the Sun eventually intercepted the Earth, affecting activities on it daily, in a manner of which the average person was sublimely unaware. Via the solar wind, the corona was ultimately responsible for the Northern and Southern lights, drop-outs in radio communication, and flashes in the sight of astronauts when strange bits of the Sun penetrated their eyeballs. And to study these and other phenomena, Rodriguez and his team needed the coronoscope.

It was with a certain tension, therefore, that the Director jockeyed the massive metallic disk into place. The whirr of electric motors, mounted on girders under the ceiling, echoed from the

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corrugated-iron walls of the laboratory. Finally satisfied, he locked the coronoscope's controls and shifted his attention to a different part of the instrument panel. After releasing the safety switches, he pressed a button and another, higher sound filled the room: that of the shutter moving aside. Suddenly, a bar of intense white light appeared on the concrete floor. The energy of the Sun was pouring down the metal conduit constructed along the side of the mountain. Light flowed into the gloomy laboratory, filling it with liquid silver. Rodriguez raised an arm to shield his eyes from the glare, but the heat pounded into the skin of his cheeks. Sweat began trickling from his armpits, but the soaring temperature was brought under control by a bank of massive fans whose artificial breeze ruffled his hair. After checking the coronoscope controls one more time, Rodriguez cut in the spectrogram, which would dissect the light of the Sun into its components and tell what was happening at the centre of the solar system.

He muttered "Okay" to himself, satisfied that the new day's observations were under way, and headed for the door.

It was already noticeably warmer outside than it had been at dawn. Rodriguez, who never used an alarm clock, noted from the position of the Sun in the sky that he was earlier at work today than usual. In confirmation of this, a man on a bicycle appeared, slogging slowly but certainly up the hill.

Lance Percival hopped lithely from his machine, leaned it against the wall of the laboratory, and lounged over. "Morning, Bob." The fit second-in-command of the Observatory was not sweating, something which caused Rodriguez to feel slightly envious. "You're up early."

"Yes," replied Rodriguez. "I wanted to get more data on the iron lines in the corona, before Christmas."

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Percival looked at Rodriguez with the bleached blue eyes which always seemed to indicate casual assurance. “More iron outside matches the increase in sunspots on the surface.” There was a pause, while both men digested this. “Did you look at the spots?”

“Yes, I did,” confirmed Rodriguez. “Though only by eye.”

It was a curious fact, that throughout the long history of astronomy, there were very few reports of naked-eye observations of sunspots. The renowned Hoyle – whose textbooks occupied a good section of the bookcase in the Rodriguez house – had commented on this, and had himself only seen one sunspot with his own eye during a long and observant life. For this paucity, Hoyle had advanced two possible explanations. One, that seeing a sunspot with the unassisted human eye required an unlikely combination of natural factors, including very large disturbances on the Sun and a thick atmosphere on the Earth – which looked through near sunrise or sunset would diminish the otherwise blinding light from the Sun’s disk and make the spots visible. Second as a possible explanation was the simpler but enigmatic one, that sunspots were only visible to the naked eye when somebody or something wished to send a message between the Sun and the Earth. This second hypothesis had never been taken seriously by astrophysicists; but then, neither had they been able to prove the first...

Rodriguez refocused his attention on Percival, realizing that he had missed a part of the other man’s conversation.

“... So, I thought it might be a good public-relations thing to have the kids from the local school up here on Christmas eve, so they can see the Sun.”

Rodriguez was slightly resentful that this idea had not been voiced earlier, but had to admit that it was a good one. After a brief hesitation, he said “All right, Lance.” Then thinking that the

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suggestion needed more support, added “I’ll bring *my* kids. It’s ages since Sam and Serena really saw the Sun.”

At that moment, a truck came into view around the lower bend in the road. It was packed with labourers wielding crowbars and shovels. Presumably, this was the (over-large) contingent whose job was to remove the boulder which blocked the upper part of the Observatory’s road. As the truck’s wheezing engine slowed, Percival walked over to negotiate the task, while Rodriguez headed back to the laboratory.

It occurred to Rodriguez – not for the first time – that it was a good circumstance that he and Percival had different scientific interests, he in spectral lines and the other in sunspots. That not only covered both sides of the Observatory’s function, but also prevented the two men from stepping on each other’s academic toes. The dozen or so technicians who made up the complement of the institute’s staff also divided roughly into two groups, those who split the light of the Sun into its microscopic parts and those who measured the gross features of the surface. Over the years, it had evolved that on each clear day Rodriguez would use the scope for his spectra in the mornings, while Percival would use it for his spots in the afternoon. It seldom happened at this high site that the weather was cloudy or that the wind was so strong that it shook the scope and made the “seeing” bad. Hence there was an abundance of data; and shortly the rest of the staff would arrive, to carry out the routine analysis which lay behind the Observatory’s monthly reports. Occasionally something special happened – like the recent transit of Mercury, when the solar system’s innermost planet had passed across the Sun’s disk. At such times there was frenzied activity, in which all of the staff participated and which resulted in a special publication. Writing these latter was a chore which, as Director, usually fell to Rodriguez. The result was that

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most of the Observatory's academic papers were authored by Rodriguez, Percival *et al.*, an order which went against the alphabetical one but which appeared to be acceptable to the laid-back observer of sunspots. To the other astronomers around the globe who read these papers, it must appear that the two main authors were bosom research buddies. In truth, not only did the two men not know each other on a personal basis, they also had little idea from day to day about each other's scientific work.

As he re-entered the laboratory the thought struck Rodriguez that being a professional astronomer was probably the most lonely of professions. He often spent the whole morning in seclusion, his only companion the massive telescope that hung over his head like some metallic god that demanded his attention to the exclusion of all else. Maybe it was the long periods of seclusion which cause most astronomers to develop an almost anthropomorphic attachment to their telescope – like when bereaved people became obsessed by their dogs.

Rodriguez gave one of his short, sarcastic laughs. After the slow, agonizing death of his wife from the skin cancer which had burrowed ever deeper into her body, there was nothing he did not know about bereavement. With an unexpectedly vicious movement, he shifted the lever which controlled the position of the coronoscope. There was a squeal of gears set into too-sudden motion, and the massive disk of metal began to move. Ponderously, it shifted out of the beam of sunlight which had made its way down the evacuated tube that stretched along the mountainside. The pure light of the Sun – unaffected by air or dust – formed a growing yellow pool on the concrete floor. It grew in size steadily, overlapping the corner of the laboratory and climbing up the wall. The image, because of the optics involved, was larger than a

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man. The blob shivered spasmodically, driven by its own energy, like something from a horror movie.

But Rodriguez was not scared of the glowing blob. He fished his special black spectacles out of his pocket, and donning them, turned himself into a caricature of the mad scientist.

The sunspots Percival had mentioned were plain to see: a straggly series of blobs trailing across half of the Sun's disk in a pattern which suggested impending order. As he watched, another spot drifted into view while the Sun rotated slowly on its axis. But like an archaeologist with only a fraction of the hieroglyphs, he could not make sense of the symbols.

The circular edge of the Sun was trembling, where massive explosions were throwing matter out into space. What they contained in the way of possible information was already recorded by the coronoscope's computers. He watched through his bulbous fly-like spectacles as a burst of energy bigger than the Earth erupted from the Sun's surface. It stretched into a taut bow of plasma, and then broke – sending a flood of particles into the solar system, some destined to reach his own small planet.

Rodriguez was standing, a black stick-man in the middle of the Sun's white-hot circle, when the door of the laboratory opened.

“What the hell are you doing, Bob?”

Percival's voice was calm, but concern for the other man's health made his arm strong as he pulled Rodriguez out of the pool of radiation.

This incident, which Rodriguez admitted was out-of-character but which he regarded as unimportant, could have passed away; had it not been that it had been witnessed by one of the rock-removal crew. That individual, despite the fact that his view over Percival's shoulder must have been minimal, apparently blew the

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matter out of proportion to his mates. Hence the story that the “gringo” boss had been “dancing on the Sun.” Percival himself regarded the incident as a kind of bad joke – observers did not normally wade into a magnified image of the Sun, even wearing eye protection. The assistant Director suggested that Rodriguez might wish to get tested for radiation damage to his face; and expressed concern about stress, given that it was coming up to the anniversary of the death of Rodriguez’s wife from skin cancer.

Rodriguez, however, was unmoved by the reaction to his experiment. It was, after all, *his* laboratory; and if he wished to try to reconnect in a primal way with the object of his lifelong interest, then that was *his* prerogative.

The only thing he noted in his own emotional state was a steady rise in his dislike of the numerous images of Santa Claus. These proliferated along the Avenida as Christmas approached, causing him to look grimmer and grimmer on his daily commute. He was, in fact, on the verge of detesting Santa Claus.

At breakfast on Christmas eve, though, things were happy at the Rodriguez home. Serena chomped dutifully through her cereal, and smiled at her father when he entered the kitchen. Sam, who was not interested in his second sausage, said self-importantly “Good morning, Dad.” Marianne, their old guardian, nodded a greeting from the corner of the room, and poured Rodriguez a large cup of coffee.

It was Saturday. In the old language, it was Saturn’s day, which was slightly paradoxical, because while most modern people saw it as a day for young and lively activity, in olden times it had been identified with the god of old age. Tomorrow was Christmas day or Sunday, which meant exactly what it said: the Sun’s day. This would be followed by Monday, the Moon’s day.

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And so on. Rodriguez, sipping his strong coffee, wondered why people were so ignorant of their calendar, and what it meant.

However, the feeling in the room was not academic, but distinctively festive. It was not only Christmas – it was also the day of the Open House at the Observatory. Rodriguez, though the Director, had not spent any appreciable time organizing the open day, leaving that to others. Indeed, he had spent the previous days in the dark-room at the laboratory, scrutinizing the maze of spectral lines which the coronoscope had yielded from the last run of observations. He had spent intense periods of time on this activity; but apart from confirming the over-abundance of iron, he had not been able to detect any message in the forest of data. It was as if something with iron in it had run across the surface of the Sun but left no other trace of its nature. Percival, the assistant Director, had by comparison been out in the town, promoting the public-relations event, while also keeping track of the sunspots. He had even gone so far as to obtain a supply of welder's glass, and had distributed two hundred of the black lenses to the children of the Los Altos school, so that they could keep track of events on the Sun. The town was in a hum. Even the mayor – a swarthy, semi-corrupt individual who resented the fact that the Observatory as a federal institution was beyond the reach of his nepotism – had gone on local radio, urging the townsfolk to attend the Open House.

It was therefore no surprise to Rodriguez to find a milling mass of humanity around the usually deserted laboratory, when they arrived around noon. Sam and Serena bounced out of the back seat of the jeep as soon as it stopped, disappearing into the crowd to find their friends. Rodriguez helped Marianne out of the passenger's seat, before getting back in to find a more convenient place to park the vehicle.

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The normally empty road was dense with cars, some of whose wheels were on the edge of the deep drop to the canyon. Slightly irritated by this congestion, the Director elected to drive to the end of the road, where he parked the jeep by the side of the top building. As he left on the downward walk, he noted that the cover at the Observatory's upper end was wide open. The Sun's energy was pouring into the tube which slashed down the side of the mountain, where after purification it would provide an impressive image at the lower site.

Slightly wearied by the knee-jolting walk down the hill, Rodriguez pushed his way through the chattering crowd, looking for Percival. That person had sensibly opened the other side of the laboratory door, something they only did when large equipment was being moved in or out by truck. This meant that about two thirds of the crowd was now inside the building, leaving the other third to crane their necks from the periphery.

What did these people expect to see anyway? Rodriguez was not sure, but hoped they would not be disappointed. The image of the Sun – with a size bigger than a man's – would be projected onto the wall of the laboratory. It was a crude set-up, but the best that was achievable for such an affair. At least, thought Rodriguez, those attending would get a taste of real science at the solstice – in contrast to the superficial flummery of a commercial Christmas.

The crowd went quiet as the motors in the laboratory's ceiling cut in, removing the coronoscope's disk to let the Sun's light shine into the building. There was a prolonged "Oh...!" as the upper part of the white disk was revealed. Then a muttering, as the middle section came into view. This was crossed by a straggly set of dark splotches – the sunspots – which stretched from edge to edge. Rodriguez found himself mouthing letters with the members of

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the throng, as everybody tried to find sense in the ill-formed symbols. There was a feeling in the crowd of puzzlement and awe – almost as if a miracle was taking place.

Suddenly, there was a pulling on his pants, and Rodriguez looked down to find his children. Serena was beaming with joy, while Sam had a small, resigned smile. He did not know where they had been, but it looked as if they had already made some inference which his adult brain had yet to comprehend. He hoisted them on each an arm, and together they watched as the last part of the image revealed itself.

The Sun was a perfect yellow circle, across whose centre there was scrawled with imperfect script a short message.

As the meaning of this seeped into the minds of the assembled people, a few cheers went up. Then some began to clap. In a short time, the crowd was in full applause.

Rodriguez, baffled, squinted and brought the rough-hewn sentence into better focus. The message, written in sunspots, was simple:

MERRY CHRISTMAS

SANTA

After a while Rodriguez turned away from the message, strongly puzzled but strangely happy. Percival passed by, trying to shoo the crowd away. He sent a wink, and called “Merry Christmas, Bob. *And*, a Happy New Year.”

Rodriguez, with a smiling child on each arm, replied “Yes.” And that was enough.

GNASH NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR  
YOU, BUT WHAT YOUR TEETH CAN DO FOR YOUR  
COUNTRY!

I became aware of a possible threat to our country's security when, during his annual dental checkup, I discovered that Chief Big Eagle had a message inscribed on one of his molars.

My first thought, in this age of post-war paranoia, was that Big Eagle was some kind of spy, and that his molar was packed with cyanide, so he could take the silent way out if he were captured and put under interrogation.

However, as the old Chief lay in the dentist's chair like a dead whale from the nearby ocean, I realized that there must be more to the matter than this movie-induced explanation.

Firstly, Big Eagle was not the kind of person that the enemy would recruit as a spy. Apart from being even older than me, he was fat, out of shape and forgetful. Definitely not the kind of guy you would entrust with secret information. In addition, his ability to make contacts must be seriously impaired by his physical shortcoming – of which I was now reminded and caused me to open the window. Namely, that he suffered from chronic flatulence.

Secondly, if some foreign power wished to nurture a spy, about the last place they would choose would be Rock Ridge. In the recent war, the half of our town which faced inward to the continent and its major cities had been wiped out. Luckily, the half which faced outward towards the ocean had survived unscathed. My clinic, with my living quarters above, was on the good side of the divide. As I opened the window to let out the cloying smell of the Chief's farts, I could see the blue glint of the sea in the distance. The blast which had removed the other half of

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our town had also removed the Government Laboratory, making what remained an innocuous collection of houses, with no strategic importance. Those of us who had survived the sudden white explosion in the night sometimes referred to our dismembered community as *Half Town*.

Thirdly, as to why I did not think Chief Big Eagle could be a spy, was the fact that Sheriff Bradley would know about it. Bradley was about my age, and in kinder times we would have been retired by now. As it was, we both laboured on, me keeping teeth in order and him keeping the law in order. Both of our families were gone. (By the way, just so you know: I HATE the Enemy for that; but as Bradley said: do not think about it, and keep going. Which is sometimes easier to say than do, however.) Sheriff Bradley and I have known each other since childhood. Nowadays, with only half the population to occupy us, we frequently find the opportunity to meet on the deck that surrounds my place. There, usually in the evenings, we smoke and drink whiskey. Not too much of either, but I like the pungent smell of the one and the biting taste of the other. They act somehow like sanitizers for the senses... Anyway, the point is that Bradley would tell me if there was a spy in Half Town.

So, you can understand why I was puzzled by the inscription on Chief Big Eagle's molar.

As he lolled back in the horizontal chair – making its old structure creak – I inserted my dentist's eyeglass into his mouth in order to get a better look. Putting together the magnified words, I saw that the message read: *Danger. Only to be serviced by qualified personnel. DOD/2096/4-NEPT.*

"They don't make numbers like that any more," I muttered in admiration.

*Paul S. Wesson*

“What are you talking about?” Big Eagle asked lazily. “Are my teeth okay or not?”

“Pretty good,” I replied. “But you should cut out that pipe you smoke.”

This was admittedly two-faced on my part, given that I smoked cigars most evenings; but the Chief literally stank of methane and marijuana.

“There’s nothing else to do,” replied the Chief, referring to his smoking.

This reply, delivered in a kind of matter-of-fact but forlorn tone, reminded me that the aboriginals had lost not only one civilization – by the advent of the white man – but also another, due to the recent race-inspired war. I declined to give further advice, and instead inquired casually “Have you had any work done on your teeth recently?”

“Yeah,” answered Big Eagle. “I was back east for a conference of chiefs, and a guy in the city put in a new crown for me.” He started to struggle out of the dentist’s chair, looking slightly dazed after lying flat on his back for the period of the examination. “Isn’t it any good?” And then, answering his own question: “It *should* be – he had me asleep for quite a while.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. I had indeed noticed the crown, though it did not look particularly new, being stained already by tobacco juice. My mind was, of course, working on the likely scenario that the eastern dentist had done more than simply replace the top of a tooth. “Your teeth will last as long as you do.”

The Chief cackled with laughter at this. We were both well along in age, and belonged to that cadre which took a perverse pride in outliving our contemporaries. Big Eagle paused in the doorway, already fishing in the pocket of his bead-decorated

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waistcoat for his stubby pipe. He also produced a deerskin pouch, from which he began to decant dark-brown strands of tobacco. Apart from the red beads hemming his jacket, the man's dress, possessions and face all seemed to be washed with deep hues of mahogany.

Satisfied with the pipe's load of weed, he looked at it for a while from under tufted eyebrows. Finally, he said "It's a pity about the War, Doc."

I stared at him. This was a simple man, quietly overwhelmed by the recent disaster; but not knowing how to express his feelings about it. I was sure he was *not* – at least willingly – a spy.

"Yeah," I agreed, giving my opinion to the majority, who now saw the whole conflict as utterly stupid.

Chief Big Eagle shuffled out of the dental clinic, omitting to pay (as usual). For myself, I stood for a bit looking out at the horizon, noting that whitecaps were starting to appear on the usually flat blue of the ocean's surface. It occurred to me that I had not asked Big Eagle for the name of the dentist he had visited back east. But in the post-war environment, all inter-city travel was documented, so it would be relatively easy to find where the old man had been. Wondering if I was over-reacting, I ducked back into the shade of the clinic, having decided to call the Sheriff.

Brad – as he liked to be called – came over just before sunset. The clomp of his cowboy boots on the wood of the deck woke me from my after-dinner snooze. The screen of the television had gone blank, after the two hours' broadcast which post-war conditions allowed. Switching off the blind device, I picked out a cigar from my dwindling supply, and went outside.

Sheriff Bradley was already in the rocking chair, rolling himself one of the small but powerful cigarettes he favoured. I dropped into my easy chair, noting that while the air on the ve-

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randa was calm, the distant ocean was now in ruckus from a gathering storm.

Brad and I knew each other well enough that we did not need to exchange pointless comments about the weather. Right away, I told him about the message I had found inscribed on Chief Big Eagle's tooth. He listened well enough; but when I had finished, started to chuckle.

"What's the joke?" I growled.

"Nothin' much," was the reply. "Except, it's kinda funny you've lived all yer life as a dentist – perhaps the most boring profession a person can think on – and only now do you find yerself in the middle of a Terrorist Plot."

Miffed, I was quiet a while. But there was something in my friend's tone that caused me to jump to a conclusion. "So there *is* a plot?"

I suppose my voice must have implied scepticism, because Sheriff Bradley drew deeply on his cigarette before plunging into something akin to a lecture.

"Doc," he said by way of preamble, "you should get out more." Then after a pause: "There are always plots."

I looked at his face, wondering if he was serious, but found only sincerity. Brad has a tanned, lined face with straight blue eyes that make people inclined to trust him. His sun-bleached hair sticks up vertically, cut off level in a no-nonsense manner. Long association has taught me that the only sign of emotion he shows involves his Adam's apple – which jerks up and down inside the scraggly confines of his neck when he is excited. It was doing so now.

"We live in a time of change," he said. And then, realizing that this was trite, got more to the point: "There are three Indian reservations on the doorstep of Rock Ridge. The one headed by

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Big Eagle is quiet, and the Chief is a peaceable man. But even in *his* tribe, the youngsters have no affection for us whites. And then there is Crooked Leg, and his lot. The Chief there will listen to reason, and so far we've managed to keep him on-side about things like the water supply. But in *his* tribe, the young-bloods are challenging his authority, and there is trouble ahead."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. I was vaguely aware of what Bradley was discussing – especially the arguments about apportioning Half Town's water, which came from a spring near the top of the ridge, and ran downhill through the white community before wending its way through the Indian reservations on the plain below. However, since the local newspaper had ceased publication, I had not kept up on the issue, and was now disturbed to find that it had become a focus of argument.

"Then," continued Bradley, "we have Billy Bob. *He* hates the guts of the white folk, even though he is only a half-breed himself. But his young people call themselves *warriors*, and they're violent. I caught two of them trying to dynamite our water supply last month. *They're* still in jail."

He uttered the last sentence with a strange combination of satisfaction and worry – glad to be able to restrain the felons, but unsure how long he would be able to hold them.

"Huh!" I explained as Bradley fell silent. Things were worse than I had thought. In fact, I had not thought about things to any significant degree, I realized. I was still ruminating on the implications of the Sheriff's speech when my attention was drawn back...

"...So," Bradley was saying, "your next step is to get Chief Crooked Leg into your clinic, and see if he *also* has a terrorist tooth."

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“Yeah,” I replied absently. A waft of cold air – harbinger of the coming storm – knocked the ash off the end of my cigar, where it had grown over-long while my mind was elsewhere. “Yeah,” I repeated. “I’ll do that.”

A definite breeze started to blow. Some of the cedar shingles had been removed from the roof of the clinic, by the suction which followed the explosion that had removed the other half of Rock Ridge. Now, the wind from the sea was probing the gaps, rattling the remaining pieces of wood with a sound of castanets.

Bradley stood up, the dusk shrouding his normally reassuring blue eyes. I had previously thought of him as a big man – with his Cuban-heeled boots and Stetson hat perched on top of his spiky hair – but now he seemed to have shrunk. I suddenly realized that it was only the shiny badge on his khaki shirt, backed up by the gun on his hip, which made the old man a figure of authority. And minus those symbols, he was no stronger than me.

“Bye, Doc.”

He gave me a light and perfunctory slap on the shoulder, where I sat in my easy chair with my dead cigar. Perhaps it was the wind, but I felt chilled.

Next morning, I called Chief Crooked Leg. My conversation with him was what they call “elliptical”. We both beat about the issue of his teeth for a while, before I prevailed by pointing out that he was entitled to a free checkup by virtue of his Indian status. Slightly puzzled, but willing to take advantage of anything that was free, he eventually agreed to come to the clinic at noon.

He arrived an hour late. I forbore to comment on this, and instead gave him a welcoming smile as I ushered him towards the dentist’s chair. Perhaps because he was small in stature, I came close to ruining the appointment by using the phrase I normally reserve for children. “Let’s have a look at those toothy-pegs!”

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Crooked Leg shot a suspicious look at me, obviously thinking I was trying to make fun of him. I saved the situation by switching to my professionally-concerned mode. “We sometimes take our teeth lightly, but we *have* to take them *seriously*, you know.”

My solicitous tone seemed to calm him, and he allowed me to lead him to the chair. Unlike Big Eagle, this new aboriginal chief was thin as a stick, and the chair did not complain as he lay down in it. He was wearing a traditional vest of woven goose-quill, which only partly concealed a scrawny chest. He also had an eagle feather in his hair, which I considered asking him to lay aside while the examination was in progress. However, I decided against this. Partly because of what Sheriff Bradley had told me the previous evening about the resurgent nationalism of the natives; and partly because the Chief’s head was covered by a thick, drawn-back ball of woolly hair, which was so thick with dust and other stuff that to disturb it might present an hygienic hazard.

The Chief’s eyes flitted about like those of a captured bird as I peered and prodded inside his mouth. His teeth were excellent. This was partly because of his age – he had only half the years of me – but also because the remnants of food between his molars showed a nutty, grain-filled diet.

And, Yes: the back molar on the left-hand side bore a message. This time, under the magnifying glass, I read: *Danger. Only to be serviced by qualified personnel. DOD/2097/5-NEPT.*

Noting that the words were the same as with Chief Big Eagle, but that the numbers were different, I committed the latter to memory. Anticipating a similar story from Chief Crooked Leg about a visit to an eastern dentist, I said casually: “Your teeth are really good. The few bits of work you’ve had done are really expert. The kind of thing you only get from a high-priced orthodontist back east.”

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The response to this was surprising. The Chief sneered, and replied “I wouldn’t pay those carpet-baggers a penny. And anyway, the future of our people lies in the west.”

This appeared to disintegrate the idea of an eastern-based terrorist plot. However, the existence of *some* kind of conspiracy was kept alive by the next comment of my patient.

“I don’t go off the reservation much,” continued Chief Crooked Leg, scrambling out of the dentist’s chair and re-aligning the eagle’s feather in his hair. “I only go up the coast for our annual pow-wow, to Circle City.”

“Ah, yes,” I commented. I had not thought about Circle City for ages. Because, while it was the only sizeable community left standing west of the mountains after the War, it was too far north to exert much political power in Rock Ridge. Apparently, however, while Circle City exerted negligible influence on the local white population, it drew the attention of the aboriginals.

“When’s the next pow-wow?” I asked casually.

“In a week’s time,” replied Chief Crooked Leg. His ready answer made me think again – as I had with Chief Big Eagle – that if there were native spies, they were unknowing ones. Then my new patient added: “But you can’t come. It’s only for Indians.”

Wondering if that meant that the half-blooded Chief Billy Bob would be allowed to attend the pow-wow, I bid my visitor goodbye. I felt I had gained good information, and that I needed to talk again with Sheriff Bradley.

That evening, the storm which had been threatening seemed to be waiting. A steady but strong wind was blowing from the frothy ocean, but the glass panels along the clinic’s deck provided a prism of calm air. I put a thick-bottomed tumbler on the small table by the side of the rocking chair. Cracking open a new bottle

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of whiskey, I poured myself a generous measure and then put the rest within easy reach of my awaited guest.

I might have dozed off, but in any event I was brought back to my senses by the sound of a body relapsing into the rocking chair.

It was Brad all right, but looking mightily worried. “Hi,” I greeted. “What’s up?”

“The natives are revolting.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’re *that* bad,” I replied mischievously. “Some of them are quite decent.”

“No, no!” Sheriff Bradley exclaimed, “I *mean* that they’re...” He stopped, as he realized the joke.

Abruptly, he reached into the pocket of his beige jacket and pulled out a snub-nosed, blue-steeled revolver. “You might need this.”

I weighed the weapon in my hand, all thought of levity gone. “Things are getting serious, then?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Bradley. “You remember the two guys I locked up for trying to dynamite the town’s water supply?” He hurried on without waiting for a reply, his Adam’s apple working overtime. “Somebody sprang them last night. Demolished half the jail.”

“Wow!”

As if to confirm the worsening state of affairs between the aboriginal and white occupants of Rock Ridge, the strong wind moving up the slope carried to us a few beats of drum music.

“It’s like something from an old Tarzan movie,” I observed, pushing the gun under my chair, still unconvinced that there was a serious problem.

“Don’t joke, Doc.”

I studied the face of my old friend carefully in the gathering gloom. He looked tired. But despite the lines in his weathered

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face, his jaw still jutted forward in the no-crap manner that had won him constant re-election as upholder of the law in Rock Ridge. However, it suddenly dawned on me that most of the people who had voted for him were white. What about the natives?

“What do they want?” I asked.

Sheriff Bradley hunched his shoulders. “I don’t think they *know*.” He took a large swig of whiskey. “All they *know* is we had the War – which was none of their doing – and that things are worse now than they were before.”

“Ergo, they blame us?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Bradley. He took another mouthful of whiskey, which was unusual for him. He clearly needed to talk. “I don’t think the natives were ever really on our side, anyway. We fought a white-man’s War, and now they blame us for what it brought.”

“But we *won*,” I pointed out.

Brad looked at me for a while, before saying “*Did we?*” Then he flung an arm up, gesturing towards the ridge. Its ragged line cut across the view uphill of the clinic: stars above, and the lights of houses below. Uncomfortably, I realized that my own location was somewhere around the divide between the two civilizations – whites above and natives below. But my guest was continuing: “Do you know that after the War, because half of our town was wiped out, the natives actually *outnumber* the whites?”

I had not known this, but it did not surprise me. What did give me pause, as I thought about things, was that the same situation must exist in numerous other towns along the western edge of the continent. For the first time, I realized that in what we had traditionally regarded as our own country, the whites were outnumbered by the redskins. “Holy John Wayne,” I muttered.

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“What?” Sheriff Bradley snapped, apparently irritated by my calm attitude. And then, passing over my comment: “Things are going to get worse before they get better.”

“That’s a cliché,” I observed.

Bradley, for the first time in our long friendship, glared at me.

I simply looked back at him, seeing here a sign on the white side of the same kind of short thinking which he deplored so much from the red side. However, we were both holding glasses of whiskey. And after a brief standoff, the absurdity of our conflict became obvious to both of us. He gave a short laugh, and I started to chuckle.

“Cheers,” he said.

“Buttocks up,” I responded.

After that, we proceeded to finish off the bottle. During this process, we were accompanied by the beat of drums from down the slope. I could not tell from which of the three Indian reservations the sounds came. The steady wind bore the insistent throb to us, where we sat like colonial potentates on our enclosed veranda.

But the alcohol eventually thrust the threatening drums into the background of our psyches, and we exchanged views in a loose fashion on a number of things. He told me about the raid on the town’s jail, and I told him about the new message I had discovered on Chief Crooked Leg’s tooth.

“I don’t get this molasses about molars,” complained Brad. “A local revolt is one thing, but this tooth thing looks like some kind of state-wide plot.”

I shrugged, recalling the letters NEPT which I had found on the back teeth of both the band leaders I had examined. I had already formed the opinion that those letters were shorthand for the highly-explosive element neptunium, and was proposing to investigate this. It was with an attitude of small knowledge emphasized

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by much alcohol that I said: “Don’t worry, Brad. I’ll figure it out.”

CRASH!

One of the glass sheets surrounding the veranda shattered into fragments. Simultaneously, an ugly black hole appeared in the woodwork of the building.

“Goddamit!” Brad yelled. “They’re shooting at us!”

He surged to his feet, overturning the rocking chair. Fumbling for his gun, I realized that he made a clear target against the lights of the clinic, and dived for his legs. He came down with a tremendous crash, upsetting the whiskey bottle, which gurgled its last into the gaps between the porch’s planks.

For a while we lay on those planks, waiting for another shot. But none came. The only sound was a drunken laugh, fading into the night.

Peeking around the support, into the space where the glass had been, I could see a fire blazing at the bottom of the hill. Black figures danced across its red glow. The wind brought a faint sound of burning wood to my fear-astute ears.

“Wow!” I muttered, for the second time that day. “Things are really hotting up.”

Sheriff Bradley, dusting off shards of glass from his tunic, struggled to his feet. He gave me a look composed in equal parts of disdain and puzzlement, and stomped off into the night.

\*

My research into neptunium eventually paid off. I learned that while the basic element is relatively benign, if loaded with extra neutrons it becomes extremely explosive. For example, it takes a backpack-full of plutonium to cause an atomic explosion; but a handful of neutron-enriched neptunium will do the same

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thing. As many folks know from the War, it does not need a flame or anything to cause a thermonuclear explosion. All that is necessary is enough radioactive material in a small enough space.

Then the neutrons can wander around, and in next-to-no-time there is a chain reaction. It all happens so fast, it's effectively an instantaneous blast.

There was, however, a basic problem which faced anybody wishing to cause a blowup whether with plutonium or neptunium: the necessary amount of the stuff had to be brought together, so starting the chain reaction which caused the explosion. How were the natives planning to get their neptunium together in the same place?

Well, you do not need to be Einstein to figure that out, do you?

It was shortly after *I* had figured things out that I was visited by a woman who claimed to be an agent of the (now almost defunct) Central Authority. She gave her name as Delilah Sampson, which I considered to be a poor excuse for a pseudonym.

Delilah, like her namesake, must at one time have been attractive. She still had well-formed legs, a trim waist and a perky bosom. But her face – while pretty – was marred by a patina of harshness. I thought: this person looks like a genuine female spy.

I offered her a glass of wine (I still had a half-bottle in the refrigerator, where it had languished since the War, in deference to the whiskey which my male friends preferred.) She agreed to a glass of water; but after a perfunctory sip, left the rest, as she settled into the rocking chair on the veranda. We exchanged some innocuous remarks, but I could see that she was feeling around in a conversational way, waiting to ask me something significant.

The only substantive point she made in her discursive remarks concerned the genetic division which had been caused by the War.

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She basically repeated the point made to me before by Sheriff Bradley: the War had preferentially exterminated the whites in their huddled cities, leaving the reds initially unscathed in their pastoral reservations. The result was that *they* were now in the majority, at least where the west was concerned.

I listened politely. She watched me carefully – I suppose predisposed (because of my skin) to believe I was on her side, but still unsure.

Finally, she looked pointedly at the bits of glass that still protruded from the wooden uprights of the porch, and then at the revolver which still lay under my chair. I had simply forgotten to take the latter indoors after my last evening with Brad. However, she seemed to read more meaning into the broken glass and the gun than did I. She said: “I’ve heard that you are having trouble with the natives.” Then after a pause: “We can help you with that.”

This is what she actually said, in plain words. However, if I was to repeat it, with the *tone* and *intention* included, it would read: “I’ve heard that you have been victimized by the stone-age scum. We can help you get rid of them.”

In a way, I admired her: she had said one thing and meant another. She was good at her job – in the same way as a realtor who sells a quaint cottage which is actually a dump.

I lay back in my chair, and grunted non-comittedly.

“It’s happening all along the western coast,” she prodded. “We have to do something.”

I looked into her brown, gimlet eyes. One of the few advantages of being old is that expression does not come naturally to the tired muscles of the face. I think it was my poker expression which led her to believe that I was sympathetic to her cause.

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“We need to stick together in these difficult times,” she said, rising from the rocking chair.

“Yes,” I replied facetiously, noting that she had not specified the “we” with whom I was expected to show solidarity. I was in fact just as inclined to side with the gun-happy redskins as I was with the acidly-superior whiteskins. However, I decided not to say anything, one way or the other. The result was that Delilah Sampson, when she left, had the wrong idea that she had gained my support – something which (like subscribing to a crummy magazine) I might come to regret.

“Goodbye for now,” was her parting comment. The tone implied that I might need the help of her and her friends sometime soon. Leaving, the threat of a mob of neo-nazis hung in her wake, like one of Chief Big Eagle’s farts.

The visit by this female representative of the Central Authority bothered me, because it confirmed that the trouble we were having in Rock Ridge with the Indians was only part of a bigger concern.

While we had only spent a relatively short time together, the woman’s gravitas afflicted me, like a weight on my back that could not be shed.

The question naturally occurred: how many natives up and down the coast had teeth packed with explosive neptunium?

I had stumbled onto the problem via Chief Big Eagle, and showed another case in Chief Crooked Leg. What about Billy Bob, the half-breed chief of the third local reserve? I could not – given his reputation – expect to examine his teeth for the same explosive substance. Nor was I interested in this. Because it would be naïve to think that only the Chiefs were involved. *Any* Indian who had visited a dentist in recent times might – unwittingly –

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tingly or otherwise – be carrying a small but dangerous dose of neptunium.

How widespread was the threat?

I spent several hours toying fruitlessly on this problem, until a new method occurred to me. Do you remember those kids' games where there is a maze, and you are supposed to start at one of several points on the periphery and see which route leads to the centre? The trick to solving that game is not to start at the edge, but to begin at the centre and work outwards.

It took me only a few minutes, with this new approach, to work out how many neptunium-packed teeth would be needed to create a critical mass that could cause an atomic explosion.

The answer (depending on the neutron dose) was between 30 and 50.

Aha! Madame Curie move over. I now knew how many natives it would take (not to screw in a light-bulb as in the old joke) but to create a thermonuclear disaster.

Excited by my discovery, I called Sheriff Bradley. The channel was busy, but knowing thereby that he was in his office, I closed the clinic and headed up the hill.

The half of Rock Ridge which survived was dilapidated. Most of the houses were made of wood, but the forests which had stretched down the eastern side of the cordillera were gone – replaced by slopes of fused quartz. With no ready supply of timber, the town was slowly disintegrating. The roads, however, were in fairly good shape. This was simply because there were not many functioning cars left. An exception was the old all-wheel drive pickup truck which was parked outside the Sheriff's office. I sat for a spell on its tailgate, mopping the sweat from my forehead after the climb up the slope. From here, I could look westward, with a longer perspective than from my clinic. The three Indian

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reservations at the bottom of the incline fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, tacked onto the bottom of the rectangular pieces formed by the up/down and sideways streets of the white community. Smoke was rising from the longhouse on Chief Big Eagle's reservation, and the pungent smell as it was pushed up the hill by the wind told me that they were burning cow dung. Through the haze formed by the smouldering shit, I could make out far away the remains of the government dock. A few small fishing boats were clustered around it, kept idle by the rough sea. Even further away, the horizon was a dim line, separating the white-crested waves below from the scudding grey clouds above. The ocean, at least, had proven big enough to survive the War.

Stepping onto the worn porch of the Sheriff's office, I was surprised when the door opened and Delilah Sampson emerged.

The representative of the Central Authority recognized me immediately, with the assured look of somebody whose business it is to deal with people. "Good afternoon, Doctor."

"Hello, Miz Delilah," I replied smoothly, wondering if she had been giving Bradley the same spiel she had delivered to me. "Been cutting the Sheriff's hair?"

The woman's pretty but somehow hard face looked confused. Then, remembering the biblical story, she gave an insincere laugh. Without any further comment, she headed off downhill, swinging her hips.

I entered Bradley's office, and found him with his nose in some documents, scowling.

"Hi," he greeted, with a note of relief in his voice, as if he had been wary of another visitor from the government. Without preamble, he announced: "I don't like that woman."

"Hmm. She certainly doesn't have much sense of humour."

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Bradley, it transpired, was pissed off with Delilah Sampson because she had attempted to pull rank on him, trying to get him to arrest the three Indian chiefs. "It's ridiculous!" he expostulated. "I can't throw people in jail without good reason."

"Of course not," I agreed. I did not know what kind of pressure the female agent had applied to the man, and it distressed me to see his frustration. "Did you tell her about the teeth?"

"No!" Sheriff Bradley exclaimed. But the harassed look on his face clearly told that he was worried about his omission. Feeling slightly guilty about adding to his burden of secret information, I proceeded to tell him about my research into neptunium. He listened carefully, the furrow between his blue eyes growing deeper as I outlined the potential problem.

"You see," I summarized, "it would only take thirty to fifty people, close together, to cause a thermonuclear explosion."

Bradley groaned. His eyes wandered unseeing over the documents on his desk, and I could see that he had been doing his homework, because a couple of them showed the telltale triple-triangle symbol that was shorthand for radiation danger.

There was a long silence, while we both thought hard about the bomb-stuff hidden in my patients' teeth and what it might imply. Like I said, Bradley and I have known each other for a long time. So it was not surprising that we came to the same conclusion. It was Brad who finally drew our suspicions together and put them into words.

"Doc," he said, "the Indians may be planning to use their pow-wow to blow up Circle City."

"Right," I concurred. I tried to sound somber, but to be honest I was feeling excited and ready for action. Dentistry may be a remunerative profession, but it is fundamentally a boring one. This was the most fun to come my way in a long time. However,

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my voice was serious when I said: “It’s our job to save civilization.”

Somewhat puzzled by my pomposity, Sheriff Bradley looked at me closely. Then he said: “Okay. I’ll pick you up at dawn tomorrow.”

The Sun was barely above the ridge behind town when Sheriff Bradley drew up outside the clinic next day. I was ready! What I needed for a few days was packed into one bulky bag, which I threw into the back of the truck. Approvingly, I noted that the vehicle was already loaded with extra fuel and various other things, including two boxes which by their dimensions I guessed to contain shotguns. The revolver which Brad had given me was stuck raffishly into my waistband.

Noticing this, my friend frowned – in the manner that a scoutmaster might use to admonish a cub – but said nothing. “Let’s go,” he growled.

My enthusiasm about our mission to save Humanity (or at least the citizens of Circle City) was doused in the middle of the morning. We had been speeding along the black-topped highway, when suddenly Brad stomped on the brakes, and the pickup slid to a halt.

There was no more road.

It stopped.

We both got out, and stood on each side of the car, our hands sheltering our eyes from the already-intense sunlight. Far away, on the flank of a ridge, the black ribbon of the highway resumed. But at our feet there was only sand.

“Godammed War!” Bradley muttered.

I recalled reading how the low pressure following a bomb blast could literally suck geography into the air. As I stood there at the end of the highway, I could readily imagine how a long

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piece of it had been siphoned upwards, and then carried by the blast wave, to be dumped into the ocean – where it had no doubt astonished the fish.

I looked down at my feet. “Brad,” I pointed out, “there are tire tracks, going forward.”

We got back into the pickup, and Bradley eased it over the ragged lip of asphalt, onto the sand. Engaging the extra drive, he followed the tracks of whomever had gone before us. But as we crawled across that saharan landscape, Circle City seemed to be as remote as the Moon.

In the middle of the afternoon, the heat became so intense that the truck started to falter. We had negotiated several sections of black highway and yellow sand: the route resembled one of the lines on a kid’s map, made of short and long dashes. At this rate, it would take us ages to get to Circle City, and a sense of time-induced stress added to our worry about the truck.

The latter eventually expired on an uphill climb. We both got out, irritated and sweating.

“It’s bloody hot!” I said, completely needlessly. A lizard skittered into the shadow cast by the stranded vehicle, seeking shelter. In the middle distance, the blacktop highway beckoned to us over the desert, flickering up and down in heat-induced chimeras.

Bradley squirted a small amount of water over his baking red face from a flask, and then offered it to me. “Be careful.”

I listened to his advice, husbanding the life-giving liquid before handing it back to him. The heat was terrific: it beat on me like a hammer, dulling my senses. Bradley, however, apparently retained more mental powers than me. Yelping as he burnt his fingers, he raised the hood of the pickup, and splashed some of our precious water onto the intake manifold. Cooled, the air flow-

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ing into the engine brought things back into the realm of normal engineering. The truck sputtered, then burst back into life.

“Yahoo!” I yelled.

Bradley shook his head. Only our long friendship kept him quiet. We pushed on.

Dusk came as a relief. I had taken over the driving in the late afternoon, while Bradley slumped in the passenger seat with closed eyes. I quickly came to appreciate his sacrifice: even with sunglasses, the glare of the desert was painful. It was especially bad in the spaces between the mountains. In the gaps, the energy from the bombs had spilled over, rushing down to the valleys and turning them to cinder. Nothing grew there – not even cactus – and I began to long for the sight of something green.

Darkness was settling when I spotted a tree sticking out of a collection of protective boulders. My eyes were smarting, and even though we were at that time on a section of sand rather than highway, I decided to call it quits for the day.

The sound of the engine died away between the boulders, dissipating itself into the scree. I opened the door of the truck, and was surprised to find myself wobbling. Dehydration, I thought, and took a long drink of water. Brad was asleep in the passenger seat, gently snoring. I left him to enjoy his snooze, and made camp.

Things change quickly in the desert, and as the Sun disappeared I found myself shivering. Luckily, the oak tree under which we had stopped had been bypassed by most other travelers, and it provided a bunch of fallen branches. By the time Brad woke up, with chattering teeth, I had a fire going and a dinner ready of beef and beans.

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He looked surprisingly respectful. Like him earlier, I said nothing. But like him, I was worried: the pow-wow in Circle City was tomorrow, and we were only half-way there.

The stars came out, blazing. At last, I thought, no stupid human War can affect *them*. (I repeat: I HATE the War and those who started it.) Staring at the cold but virgin sky, I snuggled under my thick blanket. The fire gave a sputter, and collapsed into a pile of red embers.

“Doc,” said Brad out of the darkness.

“Yeah?”

“Are we doing the right thing?”

I thought a bit. Eventually, I replied: “Probably.”

Coffee next morning was an elixir. Bradley drank his first mug while still ensconced in the folds of his poncho. I drank mine staring into the red depths of our rekindled fire. Neither of us said it, but we both felt the urgency of the clock. We were not sure what was planned by the terrorists for the pow-wow in Circle City; but whatever it was, today was the day.

Brad finished his coffee and threw off his covering. He had been sleeping in his socks like an old soldier. Sitting on a boulder, he pulled on his boots, and then started stamping around the fire, flailing his arms against his body. “It’s cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey!”

I nodded. The cold and the hard ground had caused my hip joints to ache with a wearisome intensity, and I knew that my companion suffered from a bad back. Rummaging in my bag, I found a couple of pain-killers, one for me and one for him. As we swallowed our medicine with a second cup of coffee, I suddenly saw us for what we were: two old men, in the middle of nowhere, en route to a place only on the basis of a suspicion, and unclear as to what we would do even if our fears proved justified.

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However, people do not normally go around with bomb stuff in their teeth, do they? At least, if it turned out that we were on a wild-goose chase, nobody would know about it except ourselves.

As we pulled out of the campsite, the grey light of the pre-dawn sky showed a collection of tracks in the sand. Most of them had been made by horses and burros. This made sense: a sure-footed animal would make almost as good time along this compromised road as could our ill-adapted vehicle. I presumed that Chiefs Big Eagle and Crooked Foot – and maybe Billy Bob also – were ahead of us. The pow-wow was an annual event, so they would know the route into Circle City, as did the other chiefs from the reservations south of it. The fact that we had not seen another soul on the derelict highway meant that we were late.

Emerging onto black-top, I gunned the motor of the pickup truck as the Sun cleared the ridge on my right hand. We sped along a snakey section of the road, and emerged from behind a bluff to be reacquainted with the ocean. It filled a broad bay, twinkling blue in the morning light but white-flecked by the strong onshore wind. I have always liked the sea, and the vision lifted my spirits.

Sheriff Bradley, by contrast, slumped in the passenger seat, looking serious. It was obvious that he expected trouble: the two boxes in the back of the pickup had turned out to contain not shot-guns, but those new-fangled laser rifles.

However, if the redskins were planning to blow up the whites, I could not see how a couple of old men with lasers could stop them.

Bradley, though, proved to be ahead of me in his thinking. As we approached Circle City, he began fiddling at ever shorter intervals with the truck's communication console. His first attempts picked up only a hum on the radio band and a zig-zag pattern on

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the video band. Then, brief snatches of conversation came in, but still with no picture. Finally, as I steered the vehicle around the bluff at the end of the big bay, we got a barrage of sound and a medley of images.

Ironically, the first communication we received where the sound and picture coincided was a commercial. It exhorted us to buy a certain brand of toothpaste, and I thought it to be particularly inane. (“Your smile can be as white as the sands of Los Alamos.”) At this, Bradley laughed. Then he attempted to tune in to the office of the sheriff in Circle City. This, however, was unsuccessful. He settled for one of those newscasts which repeats itself indefinitely, but at least provides a snapshot of local events.

The part of the newscast which interested us was short but pithy. It was presented by a young and attractive yellow-haired woman, who had Delilah Sampson beat by a mile for character. What she said, together with the images, went like this:

*Circle City is host today to the Pow-Wow of Chiefs* (picture of about forty natives on horses and donkeys, riding incongruously down a street between highrise office blocks). *The chiefs are mainly from reservations on the west coast, but hope to send a message back to the government in the east* (image of bomb-damaged but still functioning Capitol building). *I talked earlier with a group of chiefs, to find out what their message might be* (shot of half-a-dozen brown-faced and stern-looking Indians, all with eagle feathers in their hair). *They told me that...*

“Bradley!” I exclaimed, pointing to the chief at the back of the group. “Isn’t that Billy Bob?”

My friend bent forward to scrutinize the tiny image on the truck’s video screen. He sucked in his breath, and said with distaste “Yeah. That’s him, all right!”

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The hostess of the newscast was saying: *The white citizens of Circle City I spoke with do not accept the claims of the chiefs* (picture of the pretty girl in conversation with an animated grocer in front of a store, standing by a crate full of apples). *The fact that the reds now outnumber the whites on the west coast does not – it seems – make our citizens ready to accept a change in power, and some even suggest that the natives have gone too far and should be punished* (image of the grocer, now obviously enraged, drawing a hand across his throat in the well-known gesture). *We can only hope that sanity prevails, and that some reasonable policy will emerge from the chiefs' pow-wow* (shot of the interior of a large building, apparently a sports arena, where hundreds of natives occupy the stands; while on the centre court a circle of about forty chiefs sit, pounding in unison on a vast drum). *I now hand you back to the studio in Circle City.*

Sheriff Bradley let out a yell of frustration, and suddenly punched the truck's dashboard with his fist. "Goddam it all!" he exclaimed. "We missed it!"

"Well," I reasoned, trying to concentrate on the road and ignore this commotion from the passenger seat, "maybe they only just started."

I squinted at the Sun through the pickup's side window. It looked to be around lunch time; and whatever plot the aboriginals had against those of European descent, it might be planned for later rather than sooner. I thought Bradley was showing too much anger, and told him so: "There's not much point flying off the proverbial handle, like a teenager on his first date who was hoping for a grope and finds he's missed the show at the local movie-house."

Bradley glared at me, and I immediately regretted what I had just said. However, I detest random violence, as he well knew.

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And on looking at the truck's communication console, I saw that the blow from his fist had broken it. The blank grey screen of the video monitor stared back at us like the eye of a sadist. Brad looked suitably ashamed.

Thankfully for our friendship, something happened then which made us forget our argument and was much more serious: a gigantic hole appeared ahead.

In fact, it was not just a hole. It was a crater. A slag-sided excavation left by an atomic bomb.

We stepped out of the truck, and walked tentatively to the edge of this vast blemish in the Earth's crust. It was so deep that we trembled with vertigo. Far away, the early afternoon light reflected from a cluster of highrise offices: Circle City.

Neither of us said anything. We both knew that our trip was at an end.

But we were stubborn. A ragged track led away from the road, skirting the crater. It seemed to be headed for a nearby ridge, so we took a bottle of water and a pair of binoculars and headed out. As things happened, we could have dispensed with the water. For about half way to the peak, the storm – which had been threatening for a week – abruptly broke, wetting us to the skin. We slogged on. The rain commenced to run down the steep mountain side in rivulets, wiping out the marks of the burros and horses who had gone before. It stopped as suddenly as it had started, however. We emerged on top of the ridge to find a clear if remote view of Circle City.

I sheltered in the lee of a big boulder (the wind was still blowing strongly and coldly off the ocean), while Bradley examined the City through the binoculars. Apparently seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he slid down the gravelly slope and handed the glasses to me.

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Sitting on the ridge, I focussed the instrument, and neat buildings came into crisp outline. Everything looked calm, though the resolution was not enough to show people, only structures. I identified the sports hall, where the chiefs' pow-wow was in progress. A dark smudge in front of it might have been a crowd of folk, but I was not sure.

I lowered the binoculars. This was lucky, because it saved my eyesight, as a bizarre series of events happened.

An intense white spot of light drew my attention back to the City. It shuddered, as if I was looking at a mirage.

Then the ground underneath me jumped. I looked around, thinking about earthquakes, and recalling with a flash that waves in rock travel faster than waves in air.

My ears popped as the pressure dropped, but by then I was already scrambling down the hillside. I banged into Bradley, and together we burrowed for cover under the big boulder.

The awful, deafening noise came next. It carried on for a long while. Accompanying it, the apparition of the mushroom cloud climbed steadily into the heavens...

\*

Most people think it was the fault of the Indians trying to get at the white folk. However, given the presence of individuals like Delilah Sampson, I think it may have been the other way around. I do not care, anyhow. Sadly, Sheriff Bradley was shot a month after the destruction of Circle City. The whites in Rock Ridge made up for in ferocity what they lacked in numbers, and lynched Chief Billy Bob. Now I sit – alone – on the veranda of my clinic. On the border between two nations who hate each other: the whites up the hill and the reds down the hill. I repeat (for the third time): I hate war. It just does not *work*, does it?

*Paul S. Wesson*

## AS TIME TENDS TO INFINITY

Earth

The year? Twenty Thousand (New Time)

Subject? Anniversary Meeting

On Venus, the last signs of human habitation are cracking under the intense pressure of the atmosphere, the organized atoms hopping out of their lattices as they absorb the energy of the high temperature, to return to the amorphous rocks of the original state.

On Mars, the people who colonized the planet of the ancient God of War are long extinct, and red dust is burying their battlements, proving the folly of trying to fight hostile nature.

On Earth, however, things go on, albeit in a new fashion. For example, there is now only one city, called Diaspar. It is named after an old chronicler, who foresaw that one day mankind would tire of conquest, and retreat within high walls – the product of amazing technology, but directed by passive psychology.

Zabon, one of Diaspar's oldest but fittest inhabitants, stood atop the city's encircling wall. He had climbed there, but panted only slightly as he looked downwards and backwards to the centre Oval. There, a multitude of pinpricks marked where the majority of the population was gathering. Between Zabon and the crowded Oval was a high building – the Khedron Cube – which was topped by a lush garden. Standing on the edge of the Cube, half-obscured by foliage, was the girl Alvina. She was the youngest of Diaspar's 4,321 inhabitants.

While the distance between Zabon and Alvina was large physically, thoughts flashed between them almost instantaneously.

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“I do not accept the need for a meeting.” This from Zabon.

“I agree,” replied Alvina. “And anyway, they would not listen to me.”

Zabon, smiling slightly, turned away, losing his gaze in the jungle which pressed tightly against the city’s walls. The Council which had approved the birth of Alvina would now have to tolerate her, rebelliousness and all. In the same way that they had tolerated the older man; who however had come into existence with a biologically well-machined middle age.

Suddenly, Zabon let his smile grow into a grin. The gathering crowd in the Oval was unlikely to generate new ideas from its meeting to mark the twenty-thousand (old year) Anniversary. Let them talk. He preferred to look at the magnificent forests which marched down the mountain to embrace Diaspar. The old man laughed – the sound spreading into the void without an echo.

At this time, the Earth is pristine again. Its forests breathe air free of aerosols. Its rivers flow fast and clear of sewage. Its animals, while recreated from stored DNA, live wild existences; so there are no two-headed fishes struggling for existence, or shaggy-maned but spermless male lions trying to procreate. The Earth is free. But its human population is not.

The reason for this rebirth, so history tells, is the invention of something known by the short slang of the age simply as the “H.D.” Apparently, a penurious but brilliant physics student, who was obliged to take a job as a garbage collector, built the prototype. It created a perfect but negative image of an object, so that when the copy was merged with the original, they annihilated each other. The object concerned simply disintegrated, falling back into its constituent atoms. This invention might have ended up only as an advanced form of garbage disposal – or conceivably

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a short-range weapon – had not the student’s supervisor been not only a physics professor but also an environmentally-charged politician. Occasionally, it happens that a new technological device ends up in the hands of powerful people who are willing to use it. The atomic bomb was like this. Old books tell of how this relatively simple invention was viewed at the time either as a godsend to finish a nasty war, or as an agent of the devil designed to murder thousands of people. A similar historical ambiguity hangs over the Holographic Destroyer.

It was used first on a shanty town in the mid-west. The inhabitants were warned to get out of their illegal and ugly habitation. And then three hovercraft moved in, each mounted with an H.D. Between noon and dusk, the machines criss-crossed the area, like a barber’s blade moving over the head of an army recruit. When the Sun set, there was nothing left of the shanty town: no rusty sheets of corrugated iron, no cloudy pages of polythene, no half-decayed turds in the makeshift latrines. The town was simply removed, and in its place was original nature.

The first experiment was judged a success; though history is silent as to what happened to the approximately 100,000 inhabitants of the former colony.

Other countries took up the technology, during a period when concern about the environment reached an almost hysterical level. The slums were the first to go – victims of what later became known as “ecocide”: the destruction of human habitations in order to preserve what remained of natural ecology. And then the practice became more widespread, as the nervous upper classes strove to preserve their own standard of living by abolishing the polluting, urban-sprawling and over-breeding segments of their societies. In a decade, half of the world’s cities had been expunged. The planet’s population began to fall, as the rich discovered that

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their well-being increased in inverse proportion to the number of people. After all, machines were now capable of doing nearly all jobs, and there was only a limited amount of fresh water and clean air on the globe.

The biggest shift in the meaning of the word “population” was in progress, justified by the need to save the planet.

Mexico City was obliterated in a month, under the onslaught of a fleet of 200 H.D.’s of advanced design, imported under the pretext of ridding the country of a drug-infested plague spot. The government returned to the hills, satisfied that they had saved the tottering economy.

Old Delhi’s tortuous streets and cave-like shops were reduced to dust in a week. New Delhi, with its broad roads and strategically-placed statues that told of British rule, was given a respite. But when the new part of the city was invaded by the displaced hoards from the old, it also was leveled. The country’s governors took up residence in the cool mansions once occupied by their colonial masters, sure they had done what was necessary to preserve civilization.

London proved more difficult. Massive riots erupted in the city’s poor east end, where Shakespeare had once put on his plays for the common man. A battle between the plutocrats of the west and the labourers of the east laid waste to Mile End Road, as the two forces surged backwards and forwards along the thoroughfare. But even as the fight preoccupied the two sides, the prime minister in Downing Street authorized the use of super-H.D.’s under the War Measures Act. Ten of these advanced destroyers sneaked along the Thames, coming silently on-shore among the marshes of the river’s estuary. Dagenham – the slum of old car-assembly plants – was gone before the evening’s newscasts. And the eastern one-third of London had disappeared before dawn.

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The survivors of the battle, who were used to cracked and filthy sidewalks, found themselves on the day after wandering back to their vanished homes with something new underfoot: soil.

Plain, simple soil.

For the Holographic Destroyer only laid waste to man-made things. A piece of the I-beam from a factory went back to iron oxide or rust. A cracked window reverted to silicon dioxide or silica. Biological material fell apart into its constituent atoms, enriching the new soil with minerals. The H.D. was in essence a benign device for terraforming, without the hazards on which scientists had speculated. There were no bomb-craters or pools of radiation. It just deconstructed the complicated creations of men, and recreated the simple ones of nature.

In so doing, the Holographic Destroyer pushed back large parts of the world's surface into a pre-industrial state. Thus the survivors of the Battle of London found themselves obliged to return to a kind of subsistence agriculture. The few patches of sedge which had lined the factory-clogged banks of the Thames quickly repopulated the brackish inlets. In time, the shellfish re-established themselves in the rich mud of the shore. This was followed by the return of the plovers and other birds, whose eggs provided a new/old source of food. The few people who came through that age found themselves thrown back in history – inhabiting a country not much different from that which greeted their ancestors when they first sailed up the river to explore Britain. In succeeding years, what had happened in that country was repeated in many others. Vast parts of the world reverted to a natural ecology. Meanwhile, the planet's population continued to decline.

Something was happening to humankind. It was slow, but biological and inexorable. It was like when an organism splits into two, except in reverse. The race's technological nucleus

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seemed to draw into itself, even as it made ready to shed its large burden of the uneducated. Some historians blame the H.D.'s for this; but the majority regard those machines as only a catalyst. The real cause for the split was something deeper: the drive for survival among the few who realized that civilization was threatened by the mediocrity of the many.

But what is civilization, anyway? A convenient answer is that it is defined by *things*: artifacts and antiques which the majority view as special or beautiful. This answer is, however, superficial and obscures social injustice. Thus the Ghiza pyramid was a monumental building, but constructed by thousands of slaves who toiled under the whip. A Faberge egg was a handful of precious beauty, but manufactured for a potentate whose wealth was due to serfs. The Mona Lisa was a nice picture, but it was commissioned by an oligarch who sat atop a feudal crowd. Even Newton's book *Principia* was the result of the sinecure bestowed upon its author by a clique who controlled a populous peasantry.

As a definition of civilization, the founders of the city-state of Diaspar rightly discarded *things*. This was easier to do than might have otherwise been the case, because most of the objects in question had disappeared in the period which followed the Destroyers, known simplistically as the Interregnum.

That lengthy dark age – when the nucleus of intelligence in the world amoeba was shedding its unenlightened protoplasm – produced little of value. In fact, its only notable achievement was the launching of the omega ships. Who designed these interstellar vessels, and how many were built, is unknown. How many escaped the H.D.'s and got off the Earth, in the final cathartic division of humanity, is also a question. Some estimates are as low as the hundreds, while others suggest that millions of these craft set out to seed the Galaxy. The only sure thing is that they were

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crewed by the disenfranchised, who left with bitterness in their hearts.

What happened to the omega ships and their proletariat is in any case irrelevant. No message has ever been received on Earth from any one of them.

Shunning the stars, Diaspar looked inward, and grew both physically and intellectually. There were, of course, humans on Earth left outside its soaring walls. These were not exactly rejected, and certainly no violence was done to them. But after a while, they did not appear any more to beg for food at the bottom of the staircases which laced the outer side of the city's ramparts. The savages simply stopped coming to ask things of their technologically-powerful brethren. Later, the lower halves of the exterior stairs were removed, effectively cutting off Diaspar from its surroundings.

For the members of the city, while they might not know how to define civilization, knew how *not* to define it. In a sentence, civilization was *not* to be defined by diseased humans eating maggoty meat half-cooked in water laced with their own excrement, who slept on lice-infested mats and procreated without love, to bear children who were unwanted and whose small, innocent bodies were often discarded into the nearest cesspit.

Diaspar knows better.

If it has a rigidly-controlled population of 4,321 this is because it makes up for in quality what it lacks in quantity. Besides being an easy number, it is one backed by the most intricate demographic studies. It is a modern realization of an ancient Hoyle comment: What is the point of having more people than you can get to know in a lifetime?

This is worth thinking about. However, as a demographic policy the stabilization of the population of Diaspar at 4,321 is

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only possible because of technology. The DNA computers now do what the old process of birth, procreation and death achieved by more primitive means. Yes, the method is sometimes criticized by some citizens as simple – even banal. But simplicity has its own elegance. If a citizen is too physically old and feels tired, or too mentally worn and feels bored, then they choose to be reabsorbed. None of their essence is lost. And for every absorbed individual, a new one is produced. As the Meetings repeatedly affirmed: It works. Please do not indulge in easy criticism before you have made the effort to think.

Zabon, in his relative old age, turned away from gazing over the forests outside Diaspar, and looked inward. The slim figure of Alvina was still to be seen in the distance, strolling between the plants on the roof of Khedron's Cube.

Abruptly, he felt mischievous. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he let out a full-lunged yell.

"Hello!.." The sound, after a pause, began echoing at intervals from the higher buildings distributed about this part of the city. The crowd gathering in the Oval for the Twenty-Thousand Anniversary Meeting was too distant to hear his cry, and showed no reaction. Alvina, however, looked up uncertainly. Her face turned in his direction. Zabon raised his arms where he stood on the top of the wall, and flapped them up and down vigourously, like a bird. Alvina raised a doubtful arm, and gave a half-hearted wave.

Almost immediately, a brainwave from Alvina registered in Zabon's mind. What are you *doing*?

"Shouting," replied the man.

There was a pause. Then the girl asked "Why?"

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Certainly, with the exchange of thoughts the commonest form of communication in Diaspar, shouting must seem anachronistic. However, sound was still important. Singing was particularly prized, as were all forms of music. A specific segment of the population even stuck to speech as a means of communication; and there was even a fringe group who did writing.

However, Zabon was in a light-hearted mood, so in answer to the girl's question about why he had shouted, he simply replied "For fun."

Alvina's response was a mental hum which rose and fell – the brainwave equivalent of laughter.

Pressing home the contact, Zabon waited until Alvina's chuckle died down, and then asked: "Would you like to come on a hike with me later?"

There was silence on the mental band. This was not due to the implications of the growing understanding between the old man Zabon and the young girl Alvina, but to the fact that people did not go on hikes any more. Indeed, the word had a medieval connotation.

Finally, the woman's thought came back, fragile with concern. "Where to?"

"To the upper edge of the city," responded the man.

"Oh!" The exclamation was heavy with relief. "I thought you meant Outside."

Now it was Zabon's turn to feel young and inferior. That Alvina had even considered an expedition exterior to the walls of Diaspar was startling. While viewed as a bit of a revolutionary by most of his colleagues, the middle-aged man had never seriously considered going Outside. It was the kind of thing citizens only contemplated when they elected to have a Sleep with its conse-

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quent dreams. Maybe the man's increasing friendship with the young girl was going to lead to problems...

"I was thinking of just walking from the Oval, up to the top edge of the city," explained Zabon.

"Oh yes," was the immediate response, perhaps touched by a slight tone of anticlimax. "Sure."

They exchanged a few bits of information, and then the man finished the conversation by saying "See you later."

As he turned back to the jungle which surrounded Diaspar, Zabon felt uneasy. The tops of the close-packed trees were far below. Birds could be seen, flitting along the crown of the forest.

It was a long way down. And it was even further down, to the jungle floor, where almost anything might exist. Even animals.

It was not the hypothetical wild animals which bothered him, however. His concern was more personal: Why was he scared of the Outside?

Diaspar was, after all, a city designed to be cosy and protective. With the whole of Earth to choose from, its forefathers had decided on a location sure to bring variety to its citizens. The outer wall lay like a golden necklace on the side of a mountain, the inside of its loop encompassing all types of geography. At the lower end was the River, which as the seasons dictated was either clear and cold or muddy and warm, but always fast-flowing and broad enough to deter a crossing. The River's banks were swampy, and by consensus not populated. The marshlands gave way up the slope to pastures of thick grass, where a few non-human species grazed, more for the amusement of the population than to serve its appetite for protein. The first buildings were located further up the mountainside, and by virtue of foundations which went down to bedrock were designed to be permanent. A two-thirds majority was needed to remove any structure in Diaspar

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and replace it with one judged more desirable. Further up the slope, where the climate was equable, the buildings became more dense. Their juxtaposition was aimed at satisfying the primeval urge for closeness and a sense of community. Some of these structures were simple and elegant, some complicated and pretty. But who got to inhabit them was allocated by lottery, and there was negligible sense of property rivalry. The buildings around the Oval were reserved for government purposes. The Oval itself was a flat area, lodged into a natural declivity, and designed to accommodate all of the city's 4,321 inhabitants should they choose to congregate at one time. The meeting place was covered in massive blocks of stone, whose interlocking joints were as tight as the day they were constructed, though the plaza was vertically dented by the zillions of feet that had crossed its surface. Up the mountainside from the Oval were located most of Diaspar's oldest structures, including the Cube of Khedron (one of the forefathers). Many of the buildings with flat tops supported roof gardens. Some of these sported fountains, whose constant supplies of water were drawn subterraneously from the River. The heart-shaped Fountain of Godilar was an isolated water structure, set into the side of a cliff, which provided a trysting place for those experimenting with hormones. At approximately the same latitude, and effectively on the edge of the community, was also located Auryx, a natural amphitheatre where most of the city's musical events took place. Above that the climate became cooler. The hillsides were dotted with only the occasional building, and eventually there was only short grass and altitude-stunted trees. Even further up, where few people ventured, the air was cold and crisp. In the topmost cusp of the all-encircling wall was a segment of white, dazzling snow.

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It was on the edge of this snowfield that Zabon and Alvina collapsed, exhausted after their long hike. How long it had taken to climb up here, it was hard to say, objectively. But the man's aching thighs told him that it had been a lengthy trip, subjectively. The woman's panting, and the rapid rise and fall of her naked breasts, showed that the journey had also affected her younger body. It was Zabon who, after taking a swallow from their container of water, finally levered himself up onto one arm and looked back down the mountain.

Diaspar lay open to view below. It was strangely quiet, and a slight breeze blew with a low, moaning sound over the short grass. A few flowers scented the air, which was cold with the tang of the nearby snow.

The city, as seen from here, seemed small and somehow vulnerable. This might be because from this altitude one could see that the River was backed by vast expanses of jungle-clad terrain, which marched away towards a vague but enormously distant horizon. From here, it was also possible to see clearly that other special aspect of Diaspar: it was divided – top to bottom – by a line that separated what one might loosely call day and night. The division was not sharp, and the day side was not completely bright just as the night side was not completely dark.

There was, after all, still weather in Diaspar. Its founders had declined to cut off the city from its surroundings in the vertical direction, though they had circumscribed it completely in the horizontal direction. Even so, the infrequent rainstorms were ameliorated by some mechanism which Zabon and most of his fellow citizens did not understand. Control of the weather – like the presence of the day/night line – had its origin in history.

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Following the reorganization of life on Earth at the mechanical hands of the Holographic Destroyers, the succeeding Interregnum saw it necessary to alter the dynamics of the planet. The reasons had to do with energy balance. While open to criticism for the bizarre action which they eventually took, one should recall that the scientists of Diaspar – while clever – were not omnipotent, and could not alter the immutable laws of physics. Specifically, their brilliance did not allow them to circumvent the laws of conservation of energy and angular momentum.

During the long Interregnum, the temperature of the Sun had been increasing slowly but steadily. The laws of astrophysics which predicted this proved to be only too accurate. The atmosphere of the Earth had, of course, become more transparent as it shed its load of contaminants following the abolishment of industrialization by the Destroyers. However, the consequent decrease of the world's temperature due to this was not enough to offset the increase caused by the Sun. The net result was an expected rise in the heat budget of the Earth which the founders of Diaspar – the eternal city – found unacceptable. Given that they were now effectively in control of the planet, the forefathers of the city took a predictably egocentric decision: they would move the Earth away from the Sun.

This is possible in theory, but took millennia in practice. The trick is to take the spin angular momentum of the Earth around its own axis, and transfer it to the orbital angular momentum of the planet in its path around the Sun. This cavalier escapade was in accordance with cosmic codes, but resulted in a drastic debacle in which the day was dethroned. The end result was an Earth which did not spin, but orbited further out from the Sun at a distance which made the planet's surface temperature comfortable. Indeed, the configuration of Sun, Earth, Mars represented a certain magic

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triangle, in which the three bodies formed a kind of astral pact first outlined by an ancient astronomer named Lagrange. The Earth, at a so-called Lagrange point, found itself adjusted into a state where the dividing line between day and night was fixed – running right through the centre of the city.

Ancient explanations aside, Zabon found himself staring at Alvina on the day-side of Diaspar, while a short distance away the night-side beckoned. Both the older man and the younger woman were sweating from their long climb up the side of the mountain. The cool breeze from the close snow scrunched Zabon's testicles, even as it puckered Alvina's nipples.

The idea of primitive sex hung on their thoughts as an insistent throbbing.

It was the girl who took the lead. She stared at him from un-schooled eyes, and opened her mouth to put her feelings into rough words. "Do you want to..?"

Zabon, feeling slightly ridiculous but with an obvious erection, paused. Today, there were no rules about sexual attitudes of the kind which had plagued more primitive societies. So, there should not be a problem with Alvina and ...

The girl, in control, ran her hand down between her legs and withdrew it. Wetness gleamed on her fingers. "Do you want to go to the dark side?"

The man abruptly stood up, grabbed the woman, and marched into the nearby night.

Omega-05472 picks its way through the debris on the edge of the solar system, searching for its target: Earth.

The ship is massive, but crude. Most of its almost unbelievable volume is dedicated to weapons of various types. The only

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significant space not so occupied is taken up by a battery of cryogenic compartments. These have exactly one million (minus one) soldiers. They do not have names, because they are identical. And each is programmed to kill.

There is one vacant compartment in the row of death-bringers, because its occupant is taking his turn as the captain. During its millennia-long voyage, many captains have served. All have been motivated by a sense of wrong which is now buried in their genes. And all are intent on revenge.

Captain no-name is humanoid but not exactly human.

Physiologically, he is super-human. His eyes are set deep into sockets surrounded by extra-thick bone, and shine like gems in caves. The lenses are protected by an added nictating membrane, so that when he blinks the surfaces are swept upwards and downwards alternately. His head, neck and shoulders are massively muscled. The skin of the torso is abnormally tough – able to deflect a subsonic bullet. Legs which look as if they are derived from a reptile end in feet with claws – designed to disembowel.

The only truly human aspects of the creature's physiology are its hands. They, at least, look normal. But as the pink fingers flicker over the ship's controls, they are causing destruction even here at the sleepy edge of the solar system. For the ship is so heavy with energy that it has no use for finesse. If there is a minor planet in the way, it is not to be avoided but just blasted to bits.

Psychologically, the acting captain of Omega-05472 is sub-human. His brain in its thick cranium works well, but has no room for thoughts unrelated to the mission. If the Mona Lisa were to appear on the walls of the cramped control room, he would remove it as it were a patch of rust. However, he is not stupid. So when he fails to find the target in its old recorded orbit, he orders

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a scan. And finds the blue-green Earth near to blood-red Mars, both moving in Lagrange-tandem around the yellow Sun.

He presses a crude but effective relay. The million (minus one) soldiers start to stir in their compartments. In a short while, they will be fully functional and ready to regain what they once lost.

The proletariat is back.

SEVEN WAYS TO OBLIVION

(1) Maddox extended the middle finger of his right hand into the whiskey glass, fished out the offending fly, and smeared its corpse onto the coarse fabric of his shorts. Staring at the tumbler with equally glassy eyes, he muttered “I’ll have to cut back.”

But not now. These were stressful times at the Station, and the ominous thudding of the indians’ drums was louder in his ears than the beating of his own alcoholic pulse. “The natives are revolting” he said to himself, and giggled. At least he had not lost his sense of humour. Though the other trappings of his culture had been absorbed long ago by the dense mist that lay like a disease among the unfamiliar trees of the jungle.

It was dusk, and the slime-ridden forest was a dark blob outside the rectangle of the cabin’s only window. A yellow light shone fitfully from the bedside table. It made the mosquito net more like a white pagoda than the tattered tent atop a sweaty mattress that was the miserable reality. Maddox planned to sleep shortly. But only after he stunned his senses with a final drink.

Rolling his glass between grimy palms, the man stared dolefully at its beige contents. The fumes from the liquor pinched his nose, and he scowled in momentary disgust – partly at the rotgut smell and partly at the demise of his own character. The previous manager at the Station had said to Maddox that death had its own smell. That was just before the final exhalations from the livid wreckage of what had once been a fine human frame. Now, Maddox wondered if the gasoline fumes of the cheap whiskey were not the precursors of his own death smell.

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The curved surface of the tumbler reflected back an image that he hardly recognized: grizzled hair with premature shots of grey, a furrowed forehead that shone with perspiration over deep-sunk eyes, and a slack mouth from which booze ran into an unintended beard.

A streak of stubborn pride, however, still survived inside an alcohol-fuzzed brain that had once been famous for its sharpness. He would *not* give in to the fetish-driven demands of the natives. And if they insisted on playing rough, then so be it...

Maddox shifted the glass of whiskey to his left hand, and patted the revolver in his belt with his right hand. The metallic bulk of the weapon gave him temporary courage, and the sunken eyes took on briefly the glint of determination. "*Damm* them," he growled.

But the surge of his old allegiance to Civilization died almost as quickly as it had been kindled. He sat for a while, thinking; and staring at the glass. An alcohol-induced tear formed in the cusp of his eye and began meandering down the mottled skin of his cheek. Irritated, he brushed it away. In that instant, a shadow moved across the surface of the glass...

Maddox reached with surprising speed for his gun.

He was too late. The dart had already passed from the figure in the window to his exposed neck, where it buried itself with a slight *thunk!*

Maddox dropped the glass, sending its contents splashing onto the rough planks of the floor. His right hand grabbed the gun from his belt, while his left grasped the dart and yanked it out. The tip glistened in the yellow light with the oily sheen of poison...

Already he could feel the fire of the alkaloid rushing down the artery in his neck towards his heart.

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Maddox raised his gun towards the window, and the *Bang!* of its discharge shattered the silence of the jungle with a futile clap of thunder...

\*

(2) She walks towards me, a beautiful naked form, with the dancing eyes that promise *everything* sensual in return for my own insignificant life.

I am eager, if slightly guilty. But why shouldn't I finally do everything that lies within a man's fantasy, if all I have to give up is my already proscribed existence?

The thick, puckered lips need kissing. The trembling mounds of her breasts need fondling. The smooth inside of her thighs need licking – upwards, to the damp wellspring of her being; and then inside...

I feel the heavy stiffness of my maleness, pointing the way. But I am cautious, not wishing to throw away the promised long ploy of passion for the quick squirt of merely animal release.

My strutting organ touches her rounded body. Her bright almond eyes transfix me; but their magic does not completely capture me, and I notice that her perfect white teeth are too long and too pointed, and growing...

Puzzled, I realize that she is eating me.

\*

(3) I bowed to acknowledge the applause of the ten thousand spectators, including the King and Queen, who together with their odious Prime Minister sat in the first row, clapping sedately. My black coat-and-tails outfit felt like a straightjacket; but the crowd was enthusiastic, and I sensed that we would not be allowed to leave anytime soon. By my side, Gomez held out his violin at the

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end of a thin arm, and caught my eyes as we rose from our second bow.

“No encore, Maddox.” The words were clear to read on Gomez’ lips, though they were drowned by the audience, which clearly wanted a response.

Puzzled, I held the tips of the violinist’s fingers in the approved fashion, his other outstretched hand holding the Stradivarius and mine holding my conductor’s baton. We must have looked like some weird bird, about to launch itself into flight from the stage.

“Why?” I demanded silently, as we rose in unison from our third bow.

I was annoyed. Not that I had any great desire to do an encore. I was uncomfortably hot in the penguin suit, and had that tingling in my jaw which meant that my face would soon go embarrassingly red. By comparison, Gomez’ face looked white – even ashen – as if he was struggling with some bad dream. And for all I knew, he might be. Always a rebel, he had spent the previous day at the Ministry of Security, at the “invitation” of the Prime Minister. However, he had been released in time for the regular rehearsal with the orchestra. And there could not be anything seriously wrong, as he continued to be trusted with the Stradivarius on loan from the State Museum. Both the instrument and its custodian had just performed brilliantly: Furtwangler’s First Concerto for Violin was notoriously difficult, and Gomez had just given a flawless performance. One enhanced by the dulcet tones of the centuries-old fiddle, which he now proceeded to raise to his lips. In front of the adoring crowd, he planted a bloodless kiss on the rich, russet wood. Then he made a condescending gesture in my direction, inviting me to make a solo bow.

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Baffled, because this was not the normal procedure, I bent low for the fourth time. And on rising, found the priceless violin being pushed into my hand.

Instinctively, I took it.

Anger, flared in me. What the hell was Gomez doing? Trying to pull some juvenile trick, designed to show that *he* was the star and that *I* was merely a conductor who could not handle a violin? Fuming, I stared at the Stradivarius. However, there were ten thousand eyes focused on me, and the applause was still terrific. So I did the only thing I could think of – take yet another bow.

Rising, I noticed that the King and Queen had stopped clapping and that the Prime Minister was looking at me from the front row with an unfriendly stare.

Gomez had disappeared.

There were sounds of indecivness from the members of the orchestra behind me; and the audience in front of me was slowly falling silent.

In the growing quiet, my ears detected a mechanical *tick! tack!* sound. It was coming from the violin.

My last thought, as the blast did its assassin's work, was that it was a pity we had lost the Stradivarius.

\*

(4) It was high noon, and the Sun lay as heavy as a stereotype on the dust of Main Street.

At the east end stood "Blacky" James, the more evil of the two brothers who had been terrorizing the town. His face was pockmarked by the craters of indulgent disease, through which cut the canyon of an old knife wound. The black juice from the che-root which inhabited the edge of his leering lips ran indolently

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down his chin – mirroring the darkness of the soul within. Only yesterday, Blacky had *kicked* the school-mistress’s pet hamster...

At the west end of Main Street stood “Madman” Maddox. He was clean-shaven, with a neat parting in his freshly-washed hair. Properness radiated from every pore of his cherubic skin. He knew that the townsfolk had faith in his invulnerability. In addition, he was sure that he could not be killed, because this scenario was patently artificial. It was the result of a not-very-well-adjusted false reality, of the kind known as ‘total immersion’ video. The fact it was not real was evident in numerous ways. For example, the six-shooter on his hip looked authentic, but lacked the revolving chambers into which bullets could be inserted. Also, history told that the James brothers of wild-west history had been of Caucasian ancestry, while Blacky lived up to his name by being a misplaced negro. Full of assurance and bravado, Maddox walked forward and stopped about twenty paces from his imaginary enemy, an assured smile on his lips.

Blacky said: “This town ain’t big enough for the both o’ us.” His voice had the raspy, drawling quality of a cheap movie whose writers had as much imagination as a flock of pigeons.

Maddox regarded him calmly. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” he said in a compromising manner, “We could agree to subdivide – you take the east end and I’ll take the west end.” Then, remembering the protocols, added: “Always assuming, of course, that Town Council approves it by a vote.”

Blacky James commented on this succinctly – by spitting a blob of tobacco juice onto the street, where it lay briefly like a guilty memory, before slowly being absorbed by the dust. “You don’t seem to git it, Mister Fancy-Pants.” The drawl now had a distinct edge of threat. “One of us ain’t gonna walk outta here alive.”

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“That statement lacks logic,” pointed out Maddox, reasonably. He was clearly the mental superior to this simulacrum. However, in the interest of making progress, he decided to reduce the intelligence measure of their conversation to the level of his adversary. “You-all jest drag yo’ sorry butt outta town by sundown, else’n I’ll come an’ chew it off myself.” Proud of his command of the vernacular, he added recklessly: “An I ain’t no hamster!”

The effect of this challenge on Blacky James was electric. The thug flexed at the knees, his hand moved like lightening to his hip, and as if by a miracle of slow-motion photography the six-shooter was pointing at the heart of his opponent. The gun barked, and a death-laden bullet sped on its unerring course.

Maddox nonchalantly raised his palm against the incoming projectile.

By the force of knowledge, the bullet hit his hand and dispersed into a harmless cloud of leaden dust.

Maddox laughed. So much for the effect of a second-rate reality show versus the logic of the coolly-functioning mind. He turned, his hand resting on the top of the gun he had not even been obliged to draw from its holster. He took three swaggering steps, and stopped.

Blacky’s brother stepped out from the false front of the town bank, a shotgun cocked and ready. Its blast took away both the head of Maddox and its illusions.

\*

(5) I usually enjoyed the atmosphere of power which suffused the boardroom; but today the oxygen of profits was in short supply, and the Company gasped on the edge of bankruptcy. The dozen members of the governing board regarded me with distrustful looks, and Pogers was openly hostile. It was known that he

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owned nearly a third of the Company's stock – which was now almost worthless – but instead of trying to come up with anything positive, he sat in a sulk at the other end of the table, doodling.

In exasperation, I spluttered “Doesn't *any* of you have a good idea?”

None of them would look at me. Some stared at the boardroom table, which despite its rich brown burls could not be all that fascinating. A few regarded their expensively-manicured nails. And the rest seemed to find something interesting in the artwork of the ceiling. The latter had been sculpted at the start of my presidency into a suitable symbol: the world, cupped in two supporting (or some claimed, grasping) hands. But the meaning had gone from the artwork, and so apparently had the intelligence of those who sat beneath it.

Angry at their silence, I grabbed a couple of candies from the bowl in front of me and popped them into my mouth. Crunching the sweets made me feel a bit better – as if I was grinding up the bones of the useless crew in front of me. Everybody has their own way of dealing with stress. It could be alcohol, food or drugs. For me it was candy, and my predilection for what the supplier called *bon-bons* was well known in the Company. The trouble was that today, for some reason, my custom-made sweets did not taste right. Disappointed, I turned an even more sour gaze on my main opponent, Pogers.

The second most powerful person in the Company sat at the opposite end of the boardtable, the sharp seams of his pinstripe business suit etched by the light from the window behind me. That light had gradually faded during the course of our long meeting, and without turning round I knew that the Sun would shortly be setting. The fact that the boardroom was on the two-hundredth

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floor might buy a short extension of daylight, but the symbology of the setting Sun was not lost on me.

Pogers, under my prolonged stare, finally stopped doodling and looked down the length of the table at me. His normally light-brown eyes picked up a reddish tinge from the pollution-bloodied Sun. Feeling abruptly uncomfortable, I found myself looking into the eyes of a demon.

Whatever juicy rhetoric I had intended to spout seemed to dry into a blob of phlegm in my parched throat. I tried to swallow, but there seemed to be a constriction in my neck; and when I attempted to speak, the only sound that emerged was a kind of defiant croak.

Pogers watched me carefully. The attention of the other board members appeared to have revived also. They regarded me with a mixture of disdain and pity. Gone was the respect and subservience of former meetings, when as manager I had rammed through decisions over their objections and carried the Company forward. Now, all I saw in their faces was the pent-up distaste of numerous old feuds. Pogers, in particular, stared at me as if I was the human equivalent of a junk bond.

I sneered, emitting a strangled growl of contempt. For even if the worms had turned, they were still worms.

Pogers, taking advantage of my temporary problem with speech, stood up. "You are through, Maddox."

I staggered to my feet. Something was wrong. Both with the meeting, and with me.

Pogers walked slowly but assuredly from his end of the table to mine. He was holding something in his hand. But his first action involved something else: he picked up the bowl with my remaining candies, and dumped them into the pocket of his pinstripe suit. "These have served their purpose."

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Then he plonked down in front of me a circle of paper, which had been cut from the Company's letterhead but had been carefully covered with dark ink.

The Black Spot!

So that was their game. Mutiny in all its nastiness. I opened my mouth to protest, but no sound emerged. Looking hate at the board members, all I saw was the stony contempt of those who had gained the upper hand.

A sound at my back caused me to turn. Pogers stood by the side of the window, which he had opened. His hands were clasped over the front of his pinstripe pants, as if protecting his gonads from the evening air which pushed into the hot atmosphere of the boardroom. His red eyes were fixed on me, and his face was expressionless. "Maddox," he said, "you will do the honourable thing."

I growled my defiance, and tried to stop my feet from moving towards the open window.

"There's no point," explained Pogers. "The dose of Trumacin in your candies is more than enough to guarantee your compliance." An ironic smirk wrinkled his lips. "It is, after all, one of the Company's few products which you failed to wreck."

All I could do was spit out a useless "Grr.." My leg muscles moved against my will, controlled by the animal part of my brain. I was no more in control of my body than a well-trained dog who is ordered to perform a circus trick.

My hair ruffled in the wind as I clambered awkwardly onto the sill of the window. Two hundred floors down, the dots which were the Company's employees were debouching from the building in a flurry of home-destined dots. The nausea of vertigo swept over me, momentarily overpowering the influence of the drug.

"*Go On!*" Pogers ordered.

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Vomit, from the nausea I felt, backed up behind my teeth. By a tremendous act of will, I forced myself to look backwards into the room, cursing the board members with my gargoyle grin. It was painful – like a toy robot whose head is twisted around by a malicious child. My breath exploded, carrying foul-smelling stuff onto Pogers' neat suit.

Unnecessarily, he reached out and gave me a push...

\*

(6) As long-time companion to Master Maddox, during an age when the Empire appears to be crumbling, I have developed a considerable respect and admiration for him. You, dear reader, will doubtless also be aware of his dedication to justice, from the occasional accounts which I have been able to lay before a long-suffering public. If I have been reticent of late, it is because Maddox has been recuperating from the injuries he sustained during the affair of the exploding toilet. His latest exploit started in iconoclastic fashion, with a telegram.

It read: *Need your help. Come if convenient. If inconvenient, go to hell.*

I chuckled. Typical Maddox! Turning over the crumpled, yellow paper, I saw that it had been dispatched from Paddington at noon. Glancing at the sundial nailed above the fireplace, I saw that the missive had been delivered post-haste, and grabbed my bowler hat. Outside, traffic rushed by No. 221 x 10<sup>6</sup> B. I hailed a cab and was soon tearing along the streets of the metropolis, headed for the railway station.

The luncheon room at Paddington offered a quiet haven from the cacophony of roaring trains, and a pool of fresh air relatively free of their sulphurous emissions. I lounged at the counter, re-

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garding the meat sandwiches, whose curling slices of bread provided a convenient manner in which to view their contents.

“Don’t touch ‘em, young man,” warned an ancient woman, dressed in a shawl and headscarf, who hovered by my side.

I turned, meaning to offer some paltry assurance, and ... found myself staring into the mischievous eyes of Maddox.

Swaying, I would have swooned in surprise; but my companion grabbed my wrist in an iron grip and hurried me out of the luncheon room. “C’mon,” he yelled above the din of the locomotives. “I’ve ordered a special train. It’s the only way to catch Moriaty!”

In the richly-appointed carriage, I finally had time to draw my breath. I would have preferred to relax among the plush cushions, but Maddox was quivering with excitement. He had extracted a map from beneath his cape, and spread it on the vacant seat. The mouthpiece of his reeking pipe stabbed at a place where two hatched lines ran side by side. “That’s the place to catch him!”

“What’s he done, then?” I asked. In truth, I was somewhat confused. It felt as if my brain were rattling around inside my skull like the ball in one of those infernal kids’ games. I knew that Maddox regarded Moriaty as his arch enemy, and that the two had frequently crossed paths in the past. However, I had not kept informed about recent burglaries and murders by the criminal classes. Partly, because the whole State had been fixated on the diplomatic consequences following the disappearance of the top-secret plans for a submarine dreadnought; and partly because I had been fighting an attack of the chicken pox.

Maddox replied: “Moriaty’s got ‘em!”

“Got what? I asked innocently. “The chicken pox?”

“No, you idiot!” Maddox said in his jocular manner. “The plans for the secret submarine.”

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“Oh!” I replied, and would have said more, except that the carriage just then gave a fearful lurch that sent me careening over to the window. Outside, the trees and bushes of an otherwise sedate countryside were streaming past in a blur.

I opened my mouth to express my concern at our prodigious speed, but Maddox had grabbed a brass speaking-trumpet and was shouting into it, presumably to the engineer in charge of the train. “Can’t you get more speed out of this tin can?” he demanded.

There was a muffled sound of protest from the other end, and the only thing I heard was the terrified voice of the engineer saying “... going as fast as we can!”

The carriage was swaying from side to side in a most alarming manner. Feeling sick, I staggered to the window and opened it. I stuck my head out, but the rushing wind forced the air back into my lungs. My watering eyes could make out the shape of another train, running on a parallel track, at a speed almost as breakneck as ours.

“It’s him!” I yelled. The head of a man protruded from the carriage on the other line. Its long hair was flying over a high, domed forehead from which a pair of frenzied eyes burnt like the cinders that packed the air. I fell back, coughing from the smoke and ash of our wild ride.

Maddox leapt to the window. In his hand he gripped his trusty army revolver, and I saw the spurt of flame from its muzzle. Almost instantly there was an answering shot from the other train. Maddox reeled back from the window, crashed into the far wall, and collapsed.

I scrambled over to him, horrified to see red blood oozing onto the purple plush of the cushions. “I’m hit,” he said simply.

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Tearing off his cloak, I heaved a great sigh: the bullet had gone clear through his shoulder, scraping the scapular and missing the lower part of the carotid artery.

I turned, consumed by fury. In the window of the opposite train, Moriarty's demonic face writhed with laughter. But our carriage was going faster, and his evil visage was slowly falling behind.

I made a grab for Maddox' gun, but it slithered out of reach as the floor bounced beneath me with a stomach-turning lurch. Immediately, there was a screech of metal from under the carriage, which continued in a banshee scream as the train started to rock violently. Were we off the rails?

Somehow I managed to get to the window and stick my head out. The train was speeding down a narrow cutting, whose rock-strewn slopes were dotted with weeds and discarded planks. In some manner, we had been switched to a side-line.

Behind, the train of Moriarty was flying down the same dis-used track. The master-criminal was hanging out of the window, as if he were attempting to clamber out of its small aperture. Seeing me, he gesticulated furiously with his arm.

I turned, and my blood seemed to curdle in my veins. Ahead, the track ended in a large, murky hole.

On the far side of the hole, a derelict gantry stooped drunkenly over a string of abandoned carts, whose final load of ore lay discarded in the dust.

I turned to Maddox. He was on the floor in the corner, trying to brace himself against the erratic motion of the racing carriage. His eyes were full of pain, but focussed on me as if asking some question. He opened his mouth, but his words were drowned by the frantic sound of the train's last whistle...

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(7) The real Maddox woke up and blinked. Instinctively, his age-mottled hand moved to the slack skin of his cheek, trying to rub away the imaginary soot from a doomed train.

“How d’you feel, Mister Maddox?” The secretary put her communications console on hold, and regarded the ageing man with a solicitude as false as the episodes he had just lived. “At *Deaths R Us*, we aim to give you an end-of-life experience that is truly unique.” Her voice had the sing-song quality of the much-repeated phrase; but its banality was lost on her still-fuddled customer.

“Er..,” stuttered Maddox. He stopped rubbing his face, and looked around with bleary eyes that peered out defensively from under silvery brows. The bags beneath the eyes resembled the prunes from which he had made a living before the cancer had taken hold of his inner body. “I liked the last one,” he said finally.

The secretary smiled encouragingly. Her eyes were startlingly blue, widely spaced, and completely lacking in empathy. Above them was a forehead devoid of wrinkles, about which fell a luxuriant thatch of shiny yellow hair. Her neck, likewise, was long and lacked lines. From beneath a shirt of sky blue that was custom-matched to her eyes, there peeked the slightly sun-tanned mounds of a perfectly symmetrical bosom.

Maddox abruptly detested her. Maybe she was an android? Defiantly, he said: “I didn’t like the second one. About the sex.”

The secretary was unphased. “I threw that in as an extra,” she explained. “And as a change from the others. After all, the ones you requested were pretty much of a type.”

“I like adventure,” said Maddox defiantly. He was significantly annoyed. It seemed to him that the choice of how he would die was entirely up to him. He certainly did not want to end his

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days in the palliative-care ward, hooked up to a pain-killing drug machine while his body was slowly devoured by the cancer. At least, this way he would go out with a bang rather than a whimper – even if it was an imaginary bang. He had thought about it for a long time, and had made up his mind. If you were going to die anyway, then why not do it *properly*? With style.

Yes, *style*. That was what it was really about... Maddox collected his wandering thoughts, and said “I didn’t have much adventure in the prune business. No *style* to it.”

The blonde girl glanced briefly at her console, which told her that she was running late for the next preview. Barely suppressing her impatience, she asked: “Did you like the first one?”

Maddox searched his memory, trying to sort out the rush of situations and feelings he had recently experienced. “Yeah,” he announced. “The poisoned dart was pretty exciting.”

The secretary made a note. Then moved on. “How about the orchestra and the violin bomb?”

The old man shifted uneasily in the chair. Its special attachments made him feel uncomfortable, especially now that they had served their purpose. Of course, if he decided to go through with things, he would have to be connected to something similar again.

Though then, he would be in bed; and the movie (as he liked to call it) would run its full length; and he would not wake from it...

“I’m not much one for orchestras and such,” Maddox explained. And then, thinking about the fifth scenario, added: “I don’t much care either for business boardrooms, though jumping out of a window is pretty classy.”

The secretary made a couple of annotations. “What about *High Noon*? It’s one of our most popular choices. You know, the cowboys, the standoff, the gunfight..?”

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Maddox looked at her stonily. Did she get some extra commission for the *High Noon* episode? Remembering the defective sixgun, and other unconvincing features of that (too often run and maybe worn) scenario, he shook his head. "It didn't work right."

"So," summed up the blonde girl, "It's a choice between the poison dart and the train wreck."

"I s'pose so," said Maddox, though without conviction. He was having strong second thoughts about the wisdom of making his death into a spectacle. The attitude of the *Deaths R Us* folk was altogether too businesslike; and there was the question of cash...

"I need to talk to you about money," he began, but stopped when he saw that the secretary was chatting into her throat microphone. The meaning of her subvocal conversation was lost on the old man, who ran a hand down the wasted muscle of his thigh, and took an unsteady step out of the chair in order to stretch his cramped legs.

The office was sparsely furnished but had the feeling of opulence. Maddox realized that this was largely due to the floor: rich hardwoods, their reds and yellows juxtaposed with barely discernable joints into the shape of a star. His experience on the farm told him that the rare lumber and the skill of the carpentry must have cost a lot. It was the kind of floor he would have expected to find in the entrance hall of a rich man's ranch. Its presence here was puzzling in a (what to call it?) funeral parlour, laboratory, interview room. Certainly the wooden floor of his own farm in the vine-covered hills had been crude by comparison. Though *it* had seen many good and happy days, with the wife and the kid and the occasional rare but valued guest. Until, that was, the quake took out the big culvert – and with it, his small family. And then there had come the second blow of a cruel and indifferent

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world: the cancer which now riddled his bones, and made every step an ache-filled effort.

Watching his own uncertain feet shuffle over the precisely-laid hardwood blocks of the floor, Maddox wondered if he had been right in spending so much of the money he had gotten from the sale of the farm on the expensive drugs administered by the state hospital. However, they had worked for a while. Giving him extra days of life even as his savings dwindled, in a barter he had thought reasonable at the time. By contrast, the money he had given to that shaman up on Indian Ridge had been a pure waste. But desperate people *do* desperate things, often calmly. And he had never been one to duck a chance or a challenge. Like the time he planted thirty extra acres on the sun-blasted side of Bighorn Canyon, during a period when the price of prunes was lower than a snake's belly. Why, if that venture had worked out, he could have...

"Mister Maddox," interrupted the secretary, "you were saying something about money."

Surprised that she had caught his previous comment, he stared at her in momentary confusion. Now sure how to interpret his look, the girl applied her fingers to the console set into her desk. A hologram popped up, displaying in cold numbers what the last fling of his life would cost him.

The old man swallowed. There was a long silence, during which a small frown of impatience grew on the young girl's forehead. "That's a lot," Maddox eventually said.

The secretary glanced briefly at the display on her desk, the wrinkle above her nose deepening as she attempted to calculate the balance between a customer in the office versus one waiting outside. Abruptly, she switched on an automatic smile and said in

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a pseudo-helpful voice: “We have our budget option: *Earth, Water and Fire.*”

Maddox, whose dislike of the androidal secretary was now almost a taste in his mouth, asked “What’s that, then?”

“It’s subsidized by the state,” she explained. “But for the best dramatic effect we recommend that the scenes be experienced in reverse order: Fire, then Water and lastly Earth.”

Talking to a very pretty moron can be a perplexing experience. But Maddox had now spent considerable time in the offices of *Deaths R Us*, and was in any case reluctant to give up on the idea of a spectacular finale to his life. Looking up from the intricate floor, he said: “What exactly is involved?”

The blonde secretary delivered the official, short-form patter: “Fire is the ebullient, cleansing agent. Water laves the material body, washing away its sins. Earth clasps the surviving form in a close embrace which promises regrowth.”

Maddox stared. Did this nincompoop even understand the words she had just uttered? A sense of unreality gripped him. He had a sudden urge to go along with this farcical set up. “Sounds great!” he said facetiously. “So you burn me up, squirt me with water to get rid of any hanging bits of skin, and then cover me with clay to seal in the works so I can be chucked into a pauper’s grave that will soon be ploughed over to grow corn?”

“Yes!” exclaimed the secretary. A relieved smile appeared on her face. This old man had seemed to be a difficult case, but he had grasped the gist of the matter, and now everything seemed to be smooth going.

Maddox was excited by his own oratory. The fire of his newfound irony invigorated his slacking veins. “It’s great!” he repeated. “Where do I sign?”

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“No need,” replied the grinning secretary. “We have voice identification. You’re all set!”

“But...” Maddox objected.

The star-shaped floor opened beneath him. For a moment, he hung over the black pit. Then a gorgeous red flame snaked up, encircled his wasted body, and drew it into the depths.

The floor shut, drowning out the last scream of Maddox. The mechanism operated so quickly and precisely that only a faint fume spread into the antiseptic air of the office.

Fanning her face, the once-again businesslike secretary turned to her communications console. “Send in the next one, please.”

## A WHIFF OF FREEDOM

Larry barked a laugh and stopped to take a rest. Ahead, the phosphorescence of the fence made its hatchwork clear against the blackness that lay outside. But a few bright stars twinkled between the mesh, beckoning. *Escape!* The word and everything it stood for coursed through the man's mind, spilling over to energize his scrawny and exhausted body. The pain he felt was partly from his own gut and partly from outside. Intoxicated with the concept of escape, he lunged forward, elbows digging into the icicle-covered surface of Pluto, his lacerated forearms leaving a thin trail of blood over the ice.

Bob, sitting on a boulder nearby, watched his buddy with admiration and despair. The latter was of his own making: a woman on Charon, who had taken his immature love, wrapped it around his neck, and thrown him aside to suffocate in his own idealism. Of course, his brain told him that it was all childish and stupid – but that did not stop the pain, which in its own way was as intense as that of his male partner. Maybe there was something better on the other side of the fence. Or maybe they would both be shot by one of the guards who were reported to patrol it regularly. He did not really care...

“Bob!” The voice, irritated, penetrated the thin atmosphere of Pluto and bounced off the towering mounds of ice which crowded around. “Wake up!”

The large man seated on the boulder looked up, as if suddenly discovering his whereabouts. At his feet lay two backpacks, their angular shapes attesting to their burdens of tools. In another existence, he could have used those tools to build a house, creating a home and perhaps...

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“Damnation!” Larry yelled. “Gimme the cutter!”

Bob started to rummage absentmindedly through one of the backpacks. Half of his mind replayed the time he had first met Her, while the other half directed his big fingers through the paraphernalia of the present effort. He relied on touch, because the only good source of light was the enormous but dim circle of Charon, which hung over the scene like a disapproving angel. The Pluto-Charon pair had been known since ancient times as a double planet. But only Pluto had been terraformed. It supported a meagre population of unique people pushed out of the more civilized inner regions of the solar system to form a mongrel colony of misfits.

Bob’s fingers located the laser cutter. The feeble light from the satellite Charon glinted off the metal casing, where a winking green light showed that the energy cell was fully charged. Judging the distance accurately, he tossed the tool through the thin air, in a parabola of reflected light. “Here!”

Larry, who had not taken his eyes off the shining form of the fence, felt behind him and picked up the cutter in cold-numbered fingers. A pretty green star, matching the display of the laser cell, shone through one of the squares of the barrier. Larry liked green stars: they predicted new life. In fact, he liked stars of all colours, except the bland yellow of Sol, with its attached retinue of tamed planets and their hordes of moronic inhabitants. Spurred on by a racial memory of being different and wanting freedom, he crawled forward, the cutter clenched between chattering teeth.

Bob, watching impassively, thought that the whole thing resembled one of those B-movies from remote history. *Escape from Stalag Sol*, maybe. However, not everything changed with time. People still fell in love, and fell *out* of love; or got caught in the trap formed by the difference. In his case, the trap had proven as

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effective as one of those old tooth-lined steel contraptions people had once used to capture animals. A kind of leg-hold trap, where the mind writhed in agony, unable to get free...

“Yoh!” Larry exclaimed. He had misjudged the distance in the poor light, bringing his prominent nose into unexpected contact with the fence. A shower of violet photons fell to the ice, which promptly melted, causing a pop-popping, fireworky kind of noise. Rings of phosphorescence spread out from the point of contact, burying themselves in the frozen ground below and diverging rapidly above. Looking up, the man could see no indication of a top to the fence. As expected, they would have to cut an opening.

Bob, startled by the noise, rose from his boulder and looked around apprehensively. The encircling mountains of ice were silent, however. No rush of guards that he could see. But then, would he recognize the guardians of the fence anyway? Only a few of the billions of people who inhabited the solar system had even seen the aliens who patrolled its periphery. Their physiology and psychology were a mystery. So also was their motive.

Why had the human race been hemmed in? And by *whom*? The plans of the race – for interstellar exploration and glory – had been rudely cut off. Now, its billions swarmed around, confined to their own few planets, like so many rats. Rats in a trap.

Larry, unencumbered by philosophy, was cutting his way through the fence. He did not understand the physics of this skein of energy, but it sure was tough. Fortunately, the information he had gleaned from the techie at the bar was proving accurate: the laser tool sawed its way slowly but definitely through the mesh of the fence. The backpacks contained other tools should they be needed; plus a couple of bottles of hooch, planned for the celebration that would follow their escape...

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There was only one bar of any significance on Pluto, which was naturally located by the side of the spaceport. Leaning on its scarred counter, Larry had learnt a lot over time from visitors and would have liked to learn more, were it not that most of the crews seemed intent on returning to Earth at the soonest opportunity. For Pluto was still a frontier world, in all senses of the phrase. Terraforming, while relatively straightforward for Mars, Venus and most of the other bodies in the inner solar system, had proven difficult on this icy outpost. Heat had been obtained from the tidal forces between the main planet and its large companion, Charon. This was sufficient to melt a lot of the eons-old, chemically-varied ice mantle. But Pluto itself was a small world, so its atmosphere had been artificially “weighted” with big molecules, which helped to keep the oxygen in place, with the bulk of what people breathed being the old standby of nitrogen, though in this case imported from Triton, the big moon of Neptune. But even with a passable climate and a breathable atmosphere, there was still the big psychological problem: darkness. The Sun as seen from Pluto was just a brighter-than-usual star; and the light from Charon was a feeble thing, compared to the illumination on the home planet due to the Moon. Living on Pluto was like being way up north on the Earth. Those who survived had the mind-set of the mythological Vikings; and like that vanished race, made their existence tolerable by a liberal use of alcohol.

The bar on Pluto was known simply as that: The Bar. It was the single most important place on the planet; and anybody of any significance had at some time or another sampled its wares. It was there that Bob – newly arrived from Earth with an irreparably broken heart – had washed up. Unfortunately, large men with placid characters have a habit of attracting the attention of small men with oversized egos. Thus had Bob found himself the inno-

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cent target of four thugs who were nasty, drunk and armed with blasters. The newcomer would undoubtedly have been charred, were it not for the intervention of a medium-sized individual who with an open hand had knocked the main member of the gang onto his rear end. Public amazement followed this act of foolhardy friendship. And it was with an air of bafflement that the bullies had withdrawn from The Bar, covering their retreat with muttered threats.

Even Fred – the longtime barman with the bald head, who through experience had developed a callous disregard for his clientele – looked impressed. The hero of the event, Larry, seemed strangely oblivious of danger. And over a long series of succeeding drinks, Bob had eventually discovered the reason: Larry was blessed or cursed (depending on viewpoint) by inoperable cancer of the pancreas. He was, as he himself put it, “A walking dead man.”

Feeling guilty, Bob stopped his introspection, and picked his way through the gloom towards his companion.

“Keep down, you lunk”, Larry hissed. The two men had the easily familiarity where insults were a staple of speech.

Bob, trying to reduce the size of his large frame, crouched down among the chaos of ice that surrounded them. Arriving by the side of his companion, the big man saw that his smaller friend had managed to cut open a section of the fence. It was, however, of meagre size. “I can’t fit through *that*.”

“Stop whining,” admonished Larry.

The man’s voice was slightly shaky. His face, in the dim light of Charon, showed grey and drawn.

“Have you taken your pills?” Bob asked perceptively. His tone was that of a solicitous mother.

“Er..,” was the response.

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“Go and take them,” ordered Bob, pulling the cutting tool from the other’s grasp.

Bob started to cut through the glowing network of the fence, enlarging the hole made by Larry. The latter, feeling abruptly tired, began crawling back towards the place where the backpacks lay in the snow. He hunched along for a bit, with awkward movements like a wounded snake, and then stopped. Suddenly, his body jackknifed, and he vomited.

The yellow stuff which came out of Larry’s mouth formed a pool on the ice. A small cloud of steam rose from it, and began spreading. Reaching Bob, the acidic smell made him gag.

Suppressing his own stomach, Bob ran – crouched over – to his partner. Larry’s teeth were clattering violently; and on being picked up, his body felt unnaturally light. Bob dumped the figure by the side of the packs, and ripped open one of them. In a neat package were several tubes of pills, plus a syringe and several differently-coloured ampoules.

“This one?” Bob queried, holding up one of the ampoules in front of Larry’s eyes. These stared, trying to focus, but without much success. Taking a chance, Bob loaded the syringe. “You idiot,” he chided, and plunged the needle through the fabric into the other man’s thigh.

The effect of the drug was miraculous. After only a few panting breaths, Larry’s features relaxed, and a silly unintentional grin appeared on his face.

Bob watched his friend carefully for a while. It was a wonder that Larry could be so consistently good humoured, when his guts were being literally eaten away from the inside. What gave him the strong bulwark he obviously had against depression? (Or, to turn things around, why was Bob so prone to it?) Larry had a strange kind of whimsical resignation to his fate. Something that

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was hard to categorise, but might be called defiant despair. Bob had watched his buddy deal with the horrible pain of the disease on several occasions, and would have given everything he owned to be able to effect a cure. But that was beyond their combined resources, and in any case only available in the more advanced worlds nearer the Sun. On Pluto, the only thing available was the temporary relief of a shot, to buy time against the inevitable. To buy time to be used in doing something foolhardy but important...

Bob picked up the laser cutter again. He made sure that Larry was comfortable: his body leaned against a mound of ice, his head encircled by the hood of his fur-fringed parka, the pain-free eyes staring up at the image of Charon as it moved across the star-speckled sky.

At the fence, its tough strands gradually gave way to the sizzle of radiation and the wrench of big muscles. Bob grunted as he worked. He cut around a portion of the barrier big enough to squeeze through, and prepared to wrench it free. On one knee, he grasped the loose piece ready to pull, steadying himself by placing his other hand on the portion above.

He froze. There was a distinct vibration in the fence. Somebody – or *something* – was coming!

Bob turned back to where Larry lay, still staring at the sky, his eyeballs reflecting the faint light of Charon.

Suddenly a shadow fell across his friend's face. Bob turned, opening his mouth to yell something. What seemed to be a massive black hand reached out and grabbed him...

\*

*Report on minor breach, Sector P. Two individuals, with primitive energy source. Repair immediate. Both subjects were*

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*found to be organically injured by prior events. Attention given, as per protocol, and subjects replaced.*

*Note: these two subjects show an unusual level of altruism (almost love) towards each other. If this were to develop into a race-wide quality, it might be feasible to lift the cosmic-zoo status. However, at present most members of the race are too quaint to be let out.*

\*

Larry and Bob were drinking beer in The Bar. Fred, the barman with the bald head, regarded them from eyes stony with suspicion. The two men appeared to be *happy*.

Larry's previously pasty face was now pink with good health, and his erstwhile gallows humour had been replaced by a more sensitive type.

Bob's large body seemed to fit the man more comfortably now; he even smiled occasionally, and showed no sign of his former lovelorn grief.

"What was that woman's name, anyhow?" Larry asked, careful of his friend's feelings.

"Funny, I can't recall," Bob replied. "Here, let me get you another drink."

Much later, the two buddies staggered to the door, their arms around each other's shoulders, and vanished into the cold night of Pluto.

Fred, who was paid a fixed wage, glanced at the clock and noted with satisfaction that there was only one customer left in the bar. That individual was clearly inebriated, and the waiter briefly considered calling him a cab, but decided not to bother. Spitting into a glass, Fred gave it a perfunctory pass of his dirty cloth and replaced it on the pile at the end of the counter. Then he expertly

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short-changed the last drunken customer and pointed him towards the exit.

The lock on the door clicked, and Fred turned back into his own world. Nothing could get in. Or out.

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## MONSTERS FROM THE ID

Perfumes of an unearthly type wafted through the half-open window, borne on the breeze which every evening accompanied the setting of the alien but beautiful green sun. I was relaxing in my chair, letting the small wind rustle my hair, when through the bare planks of the floor came the screams of Sandoval, who had gone crazy five days before.

“Why don’t they shut him up?!” Professor Keefe demanded, half rising from his seat on the other side of the littered desk. An extra groove added itself to his corrugated forehead, and his black beard bristled with new impatience.

Professor Kevin Keefe, head of Project Q, had his back to the window. If he had been facing it, like me, he would have seen that the disk of the sun was slipping behind the jagged mountain tops, sending long fingers of shadow down the valley.

“It’s dinner time,” I pointed out in a reasonable voice, hoping to calm everybody’s nerves. “He’s probably getting an intravenous meal.”

Keefe grunted. The monosyllable came out of a barrel-like chest, which a carelessly-fastened tunic showed to be covered in swarthy hair. He looked more like an ape, I thought, than the best expert Earth possessed on languages and codes.

“Susan,” he rumbled, “we can’t go on like this.”

I smiled slightly, amused at the old-fashioned phrase. For a moment I thought he was referring to the occasional nights we spent in the same bed, though they now seemed to be a thing of the past. But as his paw of a hand swept across his face, I realized he was talking about Project Q, and my smile died into a grimace of commiseration.

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“The guy from Headquarters will be here in four days,” Keefe reminded me. “And what have we got to show?” His dark eyes burned with exasperation in deep sockets under bushy brows. “By now, we should have at least been *talking* to them.”

By “them”, he meant of course the half-dozen Brin natives who inhabited the teardrop-shaped caves in the cliff which formed the opposite side of the valley. For what seemed to be ages we had been trying to establish communication with the mysterious creatures using the equipment at our own base. The latter perched like some ancient monastery on the near side of the ravine. But it was a makeshift structure, erected in a burst of scientific gusto; and our original faith in learning the language of the aliens had trickled away, like the stream which meandered along the bottom of the valley. That narrow watercourse separated not only geography, but also two civilizations, as different as a lump of iron and a whiff of hydrogen.

“We’ve got almost nothing to show,” complained Kevin Keefe, using a thumb to flick back the thick hair which threatened to cover his eyes. He glanced around the sparsely-furnished room, through whose bare floor came the muffled sounds of Sandoval being force-fed by one of the medical personnel.

“Nothing,” I agreed reluctantly, feeling suddenly gloomy. “Except one crazy man and one dead man.”

\*

Sandoval had arrived with the third and final batch of personnel, bringing Project Q’s complement up to nearly two hundred. Kevin Keefe was in charge of the lot, though only a half were science-types, the rest consisting of support people and various others with hopefully-useful specialities. Sandoval was one of these, an artist by occupation. He had been brought over on my sugges-

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tion, when more logical ways of establishing contact with the Brin had proven less than successful. Keefe ran Project Q more like a military exercise than a think-tank, and at first I had been skeptical that Sandoval would fit in. However, he was not the archetypal, dreamy-eyed, starving-in-a-garret type of artist. As I showed him around the laboratories and living quarters which made up the base, he had remarked that by joining us he could earn three times as much as his regular income, and afterwards return to Earth to create free of interruption the kind of art he “really” wanted to do.

Whatever that might be I never did find out, because shortly after arriving he met one of the female programmers, and they rapidly became a binary, moving on a private sex-slicked orbit. This did not surprise me, because there were no other humans on the planet except those attached to the Project, and the diaphanous figures of the Brin appeared to be unisexual and certainly held no physical attraction for a young man like Sandoval. By nature he was easy-going, and definitely not the sort I would have guessed to be prone to insanity.

It happened the day after the art show. Sandoval’s girlfriend had persuaded him to give an evening talk about classical and modern art, an idea which appealed to many of the Project’s entertainment-starved people. About ninety of them packed the base’s restaurant, which was normally used for straight meals that were served on a two-sitting-a-day roster. But that evening, the only things on the tables were cans of beer and glasses of wine. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the crowd appreciated the show. It had started with the old masters, and progressed through historical stages to the abstract works presently in vogue on Earth. Maybe I am too conservative in my views (or too old in age), but both myself and the audience was less enthused about the more modern pictures. This changed, however, when Sandoval showed us a

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few of the images he was using to try to establish contact with the Brin. Though the images had been created by a human, they looked alien. In fact, they were downright *weird*. It's hard to describe. Did you ever look at a painting that grabbed your attention, but whose meaning you could not pin down? *That* was the kind of thing Sandoval showed us; the experimental images which – he explained – he was flashing onto the wall of the caves on the other side of the valley. What the Brin thought of them, I cannot say; but they filled me with unease. I glanced at the faces of the other people, as they sat there in the gloom of our restaurant, staring at the images on its drab walls. Most folk looked puzzled, some showed discomfort, and a few were plain scared.

The show ended as the lights went up. There was an awkward pause, but nobody seemed inclined to ask questions. Sandoval's girlfriend started to clap, and there was a stilted round of applause, which the artist acknowledged with an embarrassed bow. I sat there for a while, before finishing my drink and following the last of the audience out of the room. Disturbed by the strange images, I did not want to go straight back to my own claustrophobic cabin.

Instead, I went up a few floors to the big office. Along with the three other senior scientists, I have the code for that office, because the personnel files are kept there. The door faded, I stepped through, and it reformed behind me. Along the opposite wall ran the long window which looked out over the valley. By the light of a hibernating console, I found my way around the boss's desk and went to the window. It was closed, but I opened a section and stood in the gap. There was a smell of unearthly soil, and I could just hear in the still air the tinkle of the unseen stream. Stars shone brightly above, but the constellations were unknown to me.

The starlight provided a faint illumination by which I discerned the dark grey band of the cliff opposite, punctuated with the holes

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of the caves. They might have been blobs of black pigment dropped from some heavenly pallet. As I watched, two of the caves disgorged ribbons of deep violet, as liquid as wisps of dissolving paint. They joined in a spiral, and drifted off down the valley. The Brin were awake.

Shivering, I closed the window. I felt a pang of loneliness, and briefly considered going over to Kevin's quarters. But while I knew he would welcome me and my body, the thought of his bluff attitude put me off. I reluctantly headed for my own cabin with my mind weighed by something that felt like depression. I got into bed, but could not get to sleep. I do not know exactly what it was, but something was nagging on the underbelly of my thoughts: maybe the slow progress of the Project, or the disturbing images of Sandoval, or the eery forms of the Brin. Eventually, I got up and went over to the self-medication kit. Boss Keefe, myself and the other three senior people had been issued these kits with the assumption that we were experienced and sensible enough not to abuse their contents. I gave myself a shot of tranquilizer, and almost immediately sank into a dream-filled sleep.

From which I was woken by the most horrible scream I had ever heard. It filled the corridor outside my room, a solid blast of fear that went on and on...

Half-drugged, I staggered undressed through the partly-open door of my room into the corridor. Simultaneously, another naked female erupted from the door at the end of the hall. She had her hands over her ears, and there was horror in her eyes. It was Sandoval's girlfriend, and vaguely I realized that the man himself must be spending the night in her room and that the screams were his. I started to run down the corridor, intending to help even though the hair was standing up on my scalp in fright. Then with a lucky thought I ducked back into my cabin and grabbed the

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medical kit. By now, most of the doors were open and the corridor was filling with people, all looking terrified and nearly all female. But I saw a big shape pushing its way through the melee, and noted with surprise that this figure sported a shockingly large penis. Perkins, the engineer's mate, dashed into the room from the which the screaming was coming, and an instant later it stopped with a terrible gurgling noise. I got to the door myself, and am ashamed to say that I dropped the medical kit, so terrible was the scene. Sandoval was writhing on the bed, which was covered in blood that spurting from his mouth, the end of his tongue flapping where he had bitten through it. I guess I must have been frozen, because the next thing was that Keefe arrived with his hairy chest bulging out of a gown, and plucked up my kit from the floor as he rushed into the room. Kevin Keefe is a strong man, both physically and mentally; and Perkins is no wimp. But it took both of them to restrain Sandoval. The thin artist was twisting and turning like an impaled eel, his eyes sticking out of a face that was the colour of a dead fish. And the blood kept coming. Keefe finally managed to stab the deranged man's buttock with a heavy dose of the same drug I had used earlier, and he gradually stopped moving. A bit later, Dr. Gomez arrived with a nurse in tow, and took over the shambles.

\*

The dead man I can tell about more quickly than the crazy man, because I was not personally involved. Nevertheless, the death of Krushnevsky, or "Krush" as folk called him, deeply affected the mood around Project Q. Incidentally, the expedition acquired that label because it was attempting to answer the big question: Could humankind communicate with a truly alien species? However, Krush was not directly concerned with this ques-

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tion. His occupation was more basic than the linguistics of Keefe or the cryptology that is my own subject. Krush was the head cook.

He and his wife, with the aid of a dozen synthesizers, produced nearly all the food consumed by the two hundred or so people at Q-base. The kitchens and eating area occupied the lower levels, with laboratories on the intermediate floors, while the administrative offices (including the big one occupied by Keefe) took up the highest stratum. Architecturally, the structure was a mess, having been put together hurriedly by a robot crew that simply plastered it to the side of the cliffs. The base was a sorry comparison to the homes of the elusive Brin, which dotted the opposite cliffside. A typical Brin cave was wide at the base, tapering to a narrow top, something like a natural mosque, the entrance framed by a portcullis of stalactites which had acquired various pastel colours from minerals in the rock face. The caverns looked like something out of a fairy tale, an analogy that was apt since the Brin were themselves insubstantial and ghost-like. The cook, Krushnevsky, was never heard to complain, even though he spent most of the day sweating in the windowless kitchens of the base's lowest level. Indeed, Krush was one of those guys who is satisfied with his lot; a genial man who would often sing Russian folk-songs while he worked.

It was odd, therefore, when his wife went to Dr. Gomez to ask for medicine to help dampen her husband's bad dreams. To that time, they had been a fairly happy couple, alternating shifts and working hard so they could earn enough money to start a family when they returned to Earth. Their work schedule meant that they only spent part of the night together, but Mrs. K. found that their time in bed was increasingly disturbed by bad dreams which progressed to nightmares. At the inquest, Dr. Gomez and the other

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supervisors had quizzed the wife about the husband's fantasies. However, she could only recount that they were formless but horrible, causing the man to wake in the middle of the night, yelling in terror. The drugs prescribed by Gomez had worked to a degree, but the problem grew. Several of the kitchen staff had recounted how the cook had lost weight, despite easy access to his own very tasty wares. The sandy hair of his buzz-cut had sprouted shoots of grey, the smooth skin of his brow had developed furrows, and the clear pools of his eyes had become shadowed with fear. As his tearful wife summed it up: "He was a living corpse."

And he ended up a dead corpse, having apparently thrown himself off the roof of the building in the gloom of the pre-dawn.

The suicide affected morale at Project Q significantly. It had become common knowledge that the work of establishing meaningful contact with the Brin was not progressing well; and half the personnel at the base stared somberly from their windows as a robotcopter recovered the limp form of the cook from the rocks at the bottom of the ravine. The operation was also watched by a different group – the silent and enigmatic Brin.

\*

With the recent history of the crazy man and the dead man hanging over Project Q, plus the near-future arrival of an inspector from Headquarters, it was not surprising to me that Kevin Keefe called an executive meeting.

On my way to the top floor of the base, I passed by the office of Dr. Gomez. Looking in, I found him surrounded by his medical apparatus, his elbows resting on the corner of an acid-stained counter on which were set out a series of images that looked like cross-sections of human heads. At these, the man was staring intently through some kind of binocular scope. His dark eyebrows

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were scrunched together and his shoulders were bowed, and he only looked up when my shadow fell across his work.

“Oh hi, Susan.” He turned a careworn face to me and knuckled his dark eyes. “I’ll be late to the meeting.”

“It looks as if you’ve been up all night,” I commented, noting that his glossy black hair was ruffled and that his usually placid face was pinched with fatigue.

“Two nights,” he corrected. “At least I can medicate myself to keep awake.”

“But why?”

He looked at me with a rather doleful and searching expression, as if trying to decide whether to take me into his confidence.

Then: “Well, it will come out at the meeting, and Kevin already knows. We decided to keep it quiet so as not to depress morale even more. Though I’m surprised word hasn’t gotten around.”

I guess my face must have looked blank, because with a throw-away gesture of his manicured hand he flopped into his swivel chair and started to explain in jerky sentences.

“There have been four more cases of nightmares among the staff, bad enough for me to have to sedate them.”

This was bad news, but it did not strike me as serious enough to cause the good Gomez to miss two nights’ sleep. Reading my expression, he added more: “And you remember Perkins, the engineer’s assistant who helped you out when the artist went mad?”

“Yes,” I replied, shuddering at the thought of that terrible night. “He was great – just the kind of solid guy you need in a situation like that.”

Gomez grunted. “He tried to shoot himself in the head with a rivet gun.”

“*What?*” I said, incredulous.

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“Yes,” confirmed the doctor. “Yesterday, just before dawn.” He paused, looking at me to see how I would digest this information, before continuing. “Luckily, his skull is pretty thick, and his girlfriend found him in time. He’s alive, but insane. I’ve put him into an artificial coma, until I can figure out what’s going on around here.” He gestured towards the series of brain scans on the counter, but with an air of hopelessness. “People don’t just go crazy, you know, for no good reason.”

“No, I suppose not,” I muttered. My own brain seemed to have seized, and I stood there, trying to absorb these new developments.

It was Dr. Gomez who snapped me out of the trance. Picking up his scope again, he returned to the counter, saying “Tell Kevin and the others I’ll be along when I can. You’d better hurry, or you’ll be late.”

I was still in something of a daze when I arrived at the big office on the top floor. Entering, I saw that I was the last to come; and from the stunned expressions on the faces of the others I divined that Kevin Keefe had already outlined the new developments.

The director himself was scowling, and as I slid into a chair he pointed his dark beard in my direction. “Better late than never.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Gomez just told me the news. He’ll be along when he can.”

“Humph!” Keefe grunted. He was obviously in a foul mood, but I could not blame him. I knew him better than anyone else at Project Q, for we had both come out with the first batch of personnel. And as we had been the only two higher-rank people until the arrival of the second batch, we had naturally preferred each other’s company. Looking at him now, as he fumed behind his desk, it was hard to believe that it was the same man whose gentle

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caresses I had enjoyed and whose warm juices I had experienced. But these were different times; and I was glad for the moment that *he* was in charge, rather than me.

“We have a quorum, anyhow,” the boss continued. “And if you three can raise your I.Q.’s above ground level, I’d like some ideas.”

Mary Yu coughed slightly in objection. “There’s no need to be rude, Mr. Keefe.”

Keven glared at her, but said nothing. These two were opposites, both in appearance and nature. Mary always wore a straight smock that camouflaged her small breasts, and usually tied her hair back in the nape of her neck, emphasizing her broad cheeks and black eyes. She had a good brain, however, steeped in history, philosophy and theology. One could imagine Mary Yu living among nuns, whereas Kevin Keefe could be pictured in a tribe of savages. The two only managed a working relationship by largely ignoring each other.

True to this convention, the boss swung his glowering gaze onto the other person in the room. “Do the sciences throw any light on the unholy mess in which we find ourselves?” His tone showed that he did not expect to find any explanation in that direction for the madness which was infecting the Project, but he was obliged to ask. “Anything like poisoned air, harmful radiation or something weird from space?”

Abron merely smiled, as if protecting himself from sarcasm with the cloak of age. Why a relatively old man should join a demanding venture like Project Q was a mystery to me, though I had heard that Abron was a keen amateur astronomer as well as an established physicist. The heavens above the caves of the Brin were richer with stars than the polluted skies of Earth; and I could picture the codger with his scrawny neck and watery blue eyes

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craning to see through an old-fashioned telescope. But he was also a practical man, with a laboratory down below that was packed with modern equipment. And he now stated: “There’s nothing noxious in the environment of the base, apart from a radon level that’s two sigma above nominal.”

Keefe’s black beard snapped into alignment with Abron’s blotchy face at this, like a compass needle pointing to a pole. Then the old man’s reedy voice added: “But that by itself cannot account for the strange happenings of the last few days.”

The boss’s beard wandered off-target at this, only to swing back as Abron resumed talking. “I would, though, not entirely rule out some influence from the stars.”

“What the hell d’you mean?” Keefe demanded.

“Well,” continued the old man, his eyes seeking the green sun which was rising behind the mountain tops, “it’s a question of cultural development.” He seemed oblivious to the lack of understanding on the other faces in the room, as he rambled on. “A young race, like our ancestors, must have been very influenced by the heavens. There was, after all, no technology or artificial illumination. The night sky must have been a thing of wonder. And we know that our forbears built temples to the objects in the sky, and even regarded them as gods.”

Mary Yu, who was seated by the side of Abron, turned slightly and blinked. A shadow of thought ran across her usually impassive face.

“The same may be true of the Brin,” the old man was saying. “They appear to have no mechanical technology. Whether that is because they are at an early stage of development, or a very late one, I do not know. But in either case, they might have a very strong connection to the stars.”

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Keefe leaned back in his chair and sank his beard onto his hirsute chest, regarding Abel with new respect. “But how,” he eventually rumbled, “does that have to do with *our* people going nuts?”

To this query, the astronomer merely shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.” Then after a pause, “You still haven’t been able to make any meaningful contact with them, have you?”

“No,” admitted Keefe. “Neither Susan nor I can seem to get through to them.”

“That’s correct,” I confirmed. “We’ve tried every trick of linguistics and encryption. The Brin just don’t respond.”

There was a period of silence. The faint green sunlight of a new alien day was gradually filling the room, and behind Keefe’s shoulders I could make out the caves of the Brin on the opposite side of the brightening valley.

The quiet was broken by Mary Yu. “It seems to me,” she said in a lectural tone, “that we need to answer one question before any others.” Everybody looked at her. “Are our people going insane because of something we are doing ourselves, or because of something to do with the Brin?”

I felt a spark of new respect for the woman: she had identified the underlying pivot of the problems we were facing. It was no secret among the personnel of Project Q that Mary Yu and myself had a somewhat frosty relationship. She had never said so, but I think she regarded my long, blonde hair and casual mode of dress as adolescent; and I was sure that she silently censured my occasional sexual liaisons with the director, Kevin Keefe. But while her mind might be prudish, it was certainly logical, and she was right in implying that the cause of recent events might not lie solely in ourselves but have some subtle link to the aliens that were the object of our studies. Normal people – and especially

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ones who had undergone psychological screening for a project like ours – do not go insane overnight. Even schizophrenics build their sad delusions slowly. Whereas our casualties more resembled the victims of shell-shock in a war. Something had invaded their dreams, turning them in a short period into nightmares which in two of the (now) five cases had resulted in a drive to suicide. What kind of thing was it that could cause such terror?

I had no answer to this, and neither (it appeared) did any of the others. Mary sat silent, her black eyes masking her thoughts. Old Abron's watery gaze was distant and directed upwards, as if he was seeking an answer in the unseen stars of this strange world.

Kevin Keefe was looking moodily at the floor, from where again sounds of distress were seeping upwards from the clinic on the level below.

"Damm that racket!" Keefe said. He swung his chair round, took a couple of steps, and activated the control of the window that ran the length of the office. A section dissolved, admitting the cheerier sound of the stream that danced down the valley below.

Just then Dr. Gomez entered the room. He looked even more disheveled than earlier when I had spoken with him; and forgetting to close the door, he wandered over to a seat and relapsed into it, a distracted look on his face.

"Well?" Keefe demanded.

"Well *what?*" Gomez retorted peevishly, quite unlike his normal, calm self. But then two nights without sleep will make anybody tense, even with the aid of stimpills. I felt sorry for him; and if *he* cracked up, we would really be in trouble. The doctor rubbed one of his manicured hands vigorously over his face, and gave a short update: "The three with nightmares are all under sedation, though their brainwaves are highly disturbed – as if they

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are being terrified even while unconscious. The young engineer will survive the rivet in his skull, which I removed; but I can't promise that he'll recover his sanity when he comes out of the coma. Sad case..."

Keefe had reseated himself behind his desk, and was opening his mouth to ask something, when the meeting was cut short by a terrific interruption.

There was an ear-splitting yell, and a ghostly figure burst into the room through the still-open door, trailing a bloody bandage from its black square of a mouth. I would not have recognized this apparition, as the facial muscles were contorted with a mixture of fear and hate, but the flying, sandy hair tripped some corner of my memory.

"Sandoval!" I shouted. But I could do nothing to stop the running figure, as my body was glued to the chair.

Keefe was quicker. Even as the artist jumped over the table, knocking things off, Kevin made a grab at the man. There was a tearing noise, but the maniac was hardly slowed. With a bound, he was over the edge of the window. Even as the lanky body began to fall, its arms stretched out with talon hands towards the dark holes of the alien caves.

I got to the window at the same instant as Keefe. Together, we followed the orbit of the flailing figure, until it stopped suddenly on a jutting rock. A short time later, a dull *crump* reached our ears.

I turned away, and promptly vomited on the shiny top of Keefe's desk. He put out one hand to steady my heaving shoulders, the other clutching a remnant of red-stained cloth.

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That night, as I lay with my cheek on Keefe's hairy chest, I had no thoughts of sex but a definite need for companionship. It was funny, but I found myself wondering what the prim Mary Yu might be doing to wash away the awful events of the morning. Although she was not my kind of person, I hoped she had been able to find some kind of support. Perhaps she was even now finding solace in the arms of Dr. Gomez? The ageing Abron, I assumed, would have found some more abstract way of deflecting the memory of the morning's tragedy.

"Are you asleep?" Kevin asked, his bass voice reverberating under my ear.

"No," I replied. "I was thinking about the others. And about Sandoval." I shuddered as I recalled the acts of the young artist, undecided if his tongue-biting fit or his leaping suicide was the more disturbing. Keefe's simian arm tightened reassuringly about my flinching shoulders. "Did you notice his hands, Kevin, when he jumped out the window? It looked as if he was trying to get something out of the Brin."

I had not explained it very well. If I had thought about it more, I might have said that Sandoval's hands and attitude were beseeching – though with what aim I had no idea.

However, Keefe understood what I meant, though he disagreed with me. "It looked to me," he mused, "as if he was cursing them."

"Oh," I responded. I had not considered that interpretation of the artist's raised arms and claw-like fingers.

Then, slipping out of bed, I padded over to the window. As director of Project Q, Keefe had a large apartment with a transparent aperture that looked out over the gorge. I had instinctively sought his room, rather than my own rather cramped cabin; and as

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I looked out, the stars were blazing over the dark crags opposite. The caves of the Brin were black teardrops in the cliff face, each one adorned at the top by a fringe of stalactites that glimmered in the starlight like a set of organ pipes. It suddenly occurred to me that we could get some sort of estimate of the age of the caverns, and perhaps their inhabitants, by measuring the formation rate of these strange crystalline formations. I was turning to tell my idea, when I stopped. Two Brin had emerged from adjacent caves. One was a whisp of violet, the other a curl of indigo. As I watched, the two creatures approached each other, and one bent over, as if communicating something to the other. Then they drew apart, the violet one calm, while the indigo one seemed to swirl in agitation. Was this a Brin argument?

Kevin came to stand beside me, and as I turned to him I saw that his brow was heavy with worry. As we watched from the gloom of our apartment, the two Brin wafted away into their caves like two coils of coloured smoke.

“We’ll go over tomorrow,” he said in a grim voice, drawing me gently away from the window and back towards the bed.

I shivered anew, and ducked under the covers. Until that moment, I had never regarded the Brin and their alien habits as anything but enigmatic. But now, my mind was touched by a tendrill of fear.

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Next morning, the space beside me was empty when I awoke. I made my way to the refectory, which was packed with people, eating breakfast in unusual quiet. The facts of two suicides and several lunatics were now common knowledge, and the camaraderie that had marked the earlier phases of Project Q had vanished. As if to put a point to the fears of the crew, the uniformed mem-

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bers of the engineering corps were now wearing side arms. Slightly surprised at this, I left the subdued crowd in search of its boss.

I stopped by the infirmary on the penultimate floor of the base, but Dr. Gomez was absent. In the laboratory, several experiments were in progress under the watchful, impersonal eye of the medivac. There was a low mumbling sound coming from one of the other rooms, and I threaded my way through the equipment-laden benches for a look. I found myself in a spartan chamber with gray walls that smelled of antiseptic. In the far corner, two body bags were lodged on shelves, their contents obscured by patches of frost. I knew these had to be the bodies of the artist Sandoval and our erstwhile cook Krushnevsky. However, I was more interested in the other occupants of the ward. These were figures draped in sanitary sheets, their chests rising and falling with unconscious breaths. Each figure was connected to its own clutch of monitors, most noticeably a large screen that recorded brain activity as a wiggling trace of mental tumult. The person in the nearest bed was a young girl – she might by her smooth skin be a teenager – with a bunch of red hair which formed the sole splash of colour in that grim room. She had freckles and a snub nose, and it was easy to imagine her face crinkled by a mischievous smile. But now the smooth cheeks were twitching, and the cherub's lips were twisting with some unseen torment. She was the source of the mumbling sound which had drawn me to the room. I could not make out the words, and if they were such then they must have belonged to some strange language. They rose and fell between horror and fear, every change accompanied by a swing in the brain trace above. As I watched, a small scream escaped her lips, and the line on the monitor shot up, to flatten at the top of the screen as the instrument ran out of capacity to register

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the intensity of the girl's mental torment. It was terrible to see. Much more disturbing than the dead bodies in the corner. For the demons were hanging around inside the girl's skull, and her mind was in there too, trapped.

Upset, I left the infirmary and walked quickly to the floor above. At the door to the big office, it was a relief to hear the sounds of a normal, out-in-the-open argument.

"Well, we've got to do *something!*" It was Keefe's booming voice, and he nodded a greeting to me as I entered and took a seat.

"But the caves have already *been* surveyed," Mary Yu objected. "There were precious few data to find, and those we did find have been examined minutely. Either the Brin haven't yet evolved language, or else they've evolved beyond it."

"Extra-sensory perception?" Keefe jibed. He was a practical man who only believed in things he could measure, and not finding anything made him exasperated and rude.

Mary's prim figure became even more rigid, and her eyelids came down to half cover her black eyes. "I'll come if you *insist*," she said. "But at least we can wait til the sun's properly up."

"Talking of the sun," interposed Abron the astrophysicist, "the one out there is peculiar not only in colour but also in age."

Everybody turned in the old man's direction. His grey hair was untidy and his clothing unkempt, but nobody doubted he could expertly take and analyse the spectrum of a star.

"Based on the age of their home star, I'd be inclined to the view that the Brin are not primitive at all, but might indeed be advanced far beyond us."

Keefe grunted, and tugged at his beard. I knew what he was thinking: according to linguistic theory, races at more different stages of education find it more difficult to communicate. And if the Brin were not only alien but also ahead of us in evolution, it

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might be impossible to bridge the social and communication gap which separated them from us. Our previous attempts at understanding them might be like an ant waving at an elephant.

“But if the Brin are ahead of us,” said Dr. Gomez, “doesn’t standard theory imply that they should be benevolent?” The medical man did not look as stressed as on previous days, but the rings under his eyes were noticeable against the wan complexion of his skin, testifying to the work load he still bore. “Why should they want to drive us crazy with dreams?”

“Maybe the dreams are a form of communication,” I suggested. “Maybe we just haven’t understood them right, or decoded them right.”

The expression on the face of Dr. Gomez showed that he, for one, did not believe this. That was reasonable, given that he was the individual who was taking the brunt of the sickness or mania that seemed to be sweeping the base. However, dreams are a kind of language. And languages are codes, albeit convenient ones; and codes are frequently misunderstood both in purpose and content. Also, contrary to popular belief, some codes are impossible to decipher. An example is taught to cryptology students which dates back to one of the ancient wars fought on Earth. It was a global conflict, and both sides put great effort into designing ever more complicated codes with which to transmit military information. But the codes were always broken eventually by the cipher experts on the other side. Until one faction had a bright idea. That side had among its folk a small group of native indians who between themselves used their own language. This employed a unique system of phonetics, and because it had been passed between generations by word of mouth, it had never been written down. There was nothing corresponding to a Rosetta Stone that could be used to translate it into the standard tongue. So the na-

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tive speakers were hired to send and receive messages, and the enemy was never able to decipher them. If the Brin were using some form of language totally different from our own, it might be as unintelligible to us humans as the babbling of the stream in the valley below.

Keefe was looking at me with one of his bushy eyebrows cocked. I did not know if he took my theory about the dreams seriously, but I guessed that he (at least) understood my meaning.

“You’re always good for a clever idea, Susan.” Keefe seldom gave complements, and I saw that he had switched into diplomatic mode. “So I take it you’ll accompany me to the caves, along with Mary. However, I think the time of Dr. Gomez would be better spent with his patients. And I’m afraid the trip may involve some exertion, so our friend Abrom should stay with his spectra.”

At this, Gomez looked relieved, but Abrom’s pendulous lip quirked with annoyance.

“I’m not *that* old,” objected the scientist.

“Nobody said anything about chronology,” countered Keefe with a bit of pomposity. “It’s a question of ergodictiy.” Then, as the astronomer’s bleary eyes showed confusion: “I don’t want to make more fuss and noise than needed. We’ll go up to the caves of the Brin on foot.”

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The expedition proved sweaty. I think that Kevin Keefe, Mary Yu and myself must have become too accustomed to the controlled climate of the human base, because as we picked our way down the unlit slope of the valley we all began perspiring. The air and gravity were close to normal, but our muscles had forgotten the incidental exercise we were used to on Earth. Keefe, to give him credit, carried our equipment on his massive shoulders,

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leaving Mary and me to pick our way through the boulders that clogged the ravine.

We passed by the stream which tumbled down its centre, gasping at the coldness of the water. Then it was on again, this time upwards, in the shadow of the peaks that towered above.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time Keefe stopped in front of one of the larger caves and dumped his load. Mopping his face, he dragged out the map made during the previous survey and sank into study.

Mary Yu was looking apprehensively at the dark mouth of the cavern. The green sun had shifted slightly during our climb and shone partly into the opening. But the cave's depths were black and impenetrable to our eyes.

"You're not claustrophobic, are you?" I asked.

The other woman looked worried for a moment, before shaking her head. She did not say anything; but while we made our preparations, she repeatedly glanced into the mouth of the cave, as if she could discern something there which was invisible to me and Kevin.

I did not push her, because I was busy with my own thoughts.

I knew that I *was* claustrophobic, and needed to prepare myself mentally for the coming challenge. The history of it was simple, and rather silly. When a child, I had gone on a seaside vacation with my parents, and foolishly gone off by myself to explore a so-called pirate's cave. I had no light, but did not really need one because the wet walls of the cavern shone with the phosphorescence of millions of tiny sea creatures. Enchanted by this, and lured on by imagined treasure, I had wandered deep into the cave.

Only to find, on my belated return, that I was cut off by a deep pool of water. I had forgotten the tide. My parents, of course, eventually figured out what must have happened. But I spent a

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long, lonely and terrifying ordeal sitting by the side of that subterranean pool. My child's sanity finally cracked when a black monster emerged from the water and lumbered towards me with outstretched, misshapen limbs. Apparently, I put up a good fight – biting, kicking and screaming – until the 'monster' pulled off the outer part of its face, to reveal the familiar features of my father. I fainted at that point. The next thing was that I woke up due to the sharp dig of shingle in my back, with Dad again removing his facemask and then pulling off the scuba gear he had wisely brought for us. My father was a clever man; but I ruined his vacation as well as my own; and I had to spend several days in hospital with brain fever before I recovered from it.

Now, I regarded the caves before me with only minor trepidation. Our little expedition had lights, other equipment, and the knowledge of their layout which Keefe had brought back from his earlier surveys. Also, *these* caves were inhabited by intelligent creatures, even if they were ones with which we had so far failed to make any significant contact.

We had seen no signs of the Brin. This was not surprising, however, since our observations had shown them to be largely nocturnal. Were they lurking in their subterranean lairs? We would soon find out.

Keefe glanced at Mary Yu and myself, shouldered his backpack, and said "Let's go."

The walls of the cavern were dry, veined rock while the floor was covered with fine, black sand. As we crossed the threshold, I looked back. The fringe of stalagmites which adorned the entrance reflected the afternoon sun, forming a shining palisade of browns and yellows. It was a pretty display of nature, framing the ugly and artificial building that clung to the opposite side of the gorge.

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“Come on, Susan!” Kevin’s voice was muffled, and as I caught up to him and Mary, I found that they were half hidden in a thick cloud of mist. Into this our leader plunged, the map in one hand and a flashlight in the other which bored a vague tunnel through the cloud.

As we progressed, the numerous side passages showed that we were not in a single passage but entering a labyrinth. The object of our expedition was an isolated picture on the wall of one of the inner chambers which had been discovered during an earlier survey. This image was familiar to all of the executive of Project Q, as a copy of it had been examined in minute detail in our laboratories. In form, it resembled a flowing garment; but its folds were composed of tiny dots, arranged in a systematic fashion. I had myself tried to decipher some meaning in these, but without success. It was Keefe’s opinion that the picture represented some kind of record, and he was eager to see if recent events had caused that record to be extended. Nobody else shared Keefe’s theory about the image, but I for one agreed with him that the plague of insanity that had infected our people warranted a new look at the homes of the Brin.

I stopped as I bumped into the back of Mary Yu. In the mist, I could make out Kevin Keefe hunched over the map, his black beard outlined by the flashlight. “Not far”, he grunted.

I put out my hand, and ran it over the rocky wall. The surface was rough and unmarked. If the Brin had made these tunnels, they had used some method unknown to humans. Perhaps, even as we stood there, the aliens were watching us, amused at our stumbling progress? The light in Keefe’s hand swept over the ceiling, and I noted that it too showed no signs of machinery. The roof of the tunnel was lower than I expected, and I felt the first finger of claustrophobia touch my mind. Determined not to give

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way to my old fear, I pushed it under the surface of my thoughts, and carried on.

The object of our search, when we found it, struck me as unremarkable. It was elegant – even simple – but it could have passed for some child’s painting of a waving flag. From arm’s length, there was no indication of its microscopic texture and the potential knowledge encoded therein. What with the darkness and the mist, it would have been impossible to take a picture of it using ordinary light. But I knew that Keefe’s pack contained a special scanner, and this he proceeded to set up.

Mary Yu was looking around, her arms folded under her small breasts, as if she was protecting herself from cold. It was in truth cool in the cavern, but not really cold. “Hurry up,” she complained to Keefe. “It’s creepy in here.”

“Ready,” announced Keefe shortly. I saw him bend over the scanner, and heard the click of the shutter.

Then it happened. There was a flash of purple in my eyes, and as it cleared something monstrous and evil lunged at me from the darkness. I threw up my arm, felt my retreating foot catch on a rock, and fell backwards. There was a terrific bang on my skull and my eyes again filled with colour – this time red, fiery stars. As I lay on the ground, I saw the roof descending on me. Twisting from side to side, my horror was intensified as the walls closed in. I heard a scream of mad terror, and was vaguely aware that it came from my own frozen lips ...

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This time, I was awoken not by the sharp poking of shingle in my back, but by the chafing of cloth on the sore skin of my side. In front of me was a vague, white shape which I took to be the reflection of my own face. Focussing closer, I saw the shiny sur-

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face of some bedside monitor. Floating in the depths was my face, which I struggled to make sharp. But there was something wrong. The eyes were still hazel, but now each was sunk in a dark hole from which lines radiated like the spokes of a wheel. The forehead was still broad, but now crossed by deep furrows. The hair was only partly yellow, marred by long streaks of grey.

There was a clench in my stomach, and a sob heaved itself out of my body and escaped through puckered lips. I was old.

Crying, I stared at the aged face reflected back at me from the clucking machine. With a sudden burst of anger, I raised my mottled hand from the sheets and punched the damned thing.

The noise of breaking was followed by the sound of rushing footsteps. The face of Dr. Gomez appeared by my bedside. But his features were also ruined: the glossy black hair was packed with silver threads, and his sallow skin had turned to an old, yellow parchment.

It took my wearied brain some time to figure out that I was not looking at another case of illness, but at one of exhaustion. Even so, I believe I would have punched him also if he had said anything stupid, like “How do you feel?”

I felt like crap, and his sympathetic eyes showed me that he knew this. What he actually said surprised me.

“Welcome back. You’re my star patient.”

Puzzled, I levered myself up on shaking elbows. The room was crowded with beds, each one containing an unconscious figure, and all showing on their monitors the snaky traces of quiet madness. There was another room visible in the distance through a half-opened door, and as far as I could see it also was filled with drugged forms.

“How many?” I croaked.

“Nearly a hundred,” Gomez replied quietly.

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The infirmary resembled an above-ground cemetery. Appalled, I realized that while I had been unconscious, more than half of the personnel of Project Q had succumbed to insanity.

My gaze wandered over the sleeping mass, and came to rest on the form in the next bed. The face was round and prim, with narrow eyes and drawn-back hair.

“Mary!?”

The figure did not respond, though the screen above its head showed that wild dreams were going on behind the flickering eyelids.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Kevin?”

“He’s all right,” assured Dr. Gomez. “He’s got the strength of an ox, and about as much imagination.”

I frowned. Obviously, if Keefe was okay, he would have told Gomez what had happened in the caves of the Brin. But I did not understand the relevance of the doctor’s last comment.

“I mean,” added Gomez, “that Kevin Keefe is not the kind of man who imagines much or dreams much. His mind is very practical, and that’s probably why he’s still all right.” The doctor’s eyes were regarding my own ravaged face with solicitude, perhaps estimating how much my blasted mind could absorb. Eventually he went on. “You’ve been very lucky yourself. You babbled a lot while you were unconscious. And I gather you had some experience when you were a kid that was similar to what happened in the cave. In my opinion, that kind of inoculated you, and saved your sanity.”

I had collapsed back on my pillow while he was talking, and now lay looking at him, physically exhausted. I might indeed have saved my mind, but what about my body? It had about doubled in age due to my ordeal. I felt a surge of bitterness. I am not a vain woman, but who wants to wake up resembling their own

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grandparent? Previously, men had found me attractive; and I had hoped with time to find a special one, and even perhaps start a family. But who would want to date the haggard, old witch I had become? I had learnt the meaning of that ancient saying “a former shadow of yourself.” Despair grew in me, and I felt my stomach clenching for a new sob.

“Please go, Gomez.”

The medic stared at me for a while before nodding.

“And, thanks.”

The tears started then, this time in earnest. I tried to wipe them away; but the feel of my lined, leathery skin only made them flow the more.

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Kevin Keefe agreed to let me move into his apartment while I recovered from the shock I had received in the caves. This decision was not based on romance. My relationship with Keefe was like an isosceles triangle: one short side of tenderness, and two long sides that represented the dominant traits of his bivalent personality. His mind was capable of the most refined flights of intellect that bordered on those of a genius, while his body could easily switch into sex mode and produce an erection with the casualness of a monkey. No, my moving into the boss’s apartment was more a matter of practicality. My nerves were raw, and my moods would swing erratically, often dumping me into deep depression. Also, I had no desire to let the surviving members of Project Q see more of my withered face than necessary. As it was, I turned to make-up, and dyed my hair, for the first time in my life. Kevin was considerate, but I could see that the change in my appearance caused him some concern. While he was not the kind of person to feel it, I sometimes wondered how far his commiseration

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tion was the result of guilt. However, he pushed aside his feelings in favour of his work. While I was unconscious and in delirium, he had analysed the new image he had obtained of the strange painting in the caves. There were some subtle changes to it from the first survey; and while he had been unable to decipher the microscopic series of dots which made up the design, he was convinced that there was some connection between the Brin and the insanity of the humans. Of the aliens themselves, very little had been seen. Nevertheless, Keefe was preoccupied with solving the riddle of their existence, to the point of obsession.

“You’re working like the devil,” I remarked to him one evening.

He leaned back from the screen at which he had been slaving, and regarded me with serious eyes.

“That’s a funny choice of word,” he mumbled.

Sunset was near, and horizontal shafts of green light were shooting through the window of his apartment, etching his craggy features. He looked older, though in his case this was the result not of sickness but of simple toil. The desk behind him was littered with all sorts of things, from samples of old rock to files of new information. From amid the clutter, he plucked up two items and handed them to me by turn.

One was an ancient book, of the type one does not see any longer. It had a discoloured cover made of some kind of animal hide, and yellowed, brittle pages of paper. The title, embossed on the spine in patchy silverwork, was *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare*. Somewhat surprised at this, I flipped idly through the leaves, before laying it aside to receive the second item. This was a small, grey box with a transparent aperture on one side, though which could be discerned a tightly-rolled coil of some kind of tape. Both the box and the tape were cracked, and a

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label in imminent danger of becoming detached bore the legend *Forbidden Planet*. Intrigued by these antiques, I handed them back to Kevin, expecting some kind of explanation.

Keefe, however, sat silent, absently pulling at his beard. He looked undecided, and slightly embarrassed. “People used to say that you could find everything in Shakespeare.” He seemed to assume I knew who this ancient person may have been. “The good things that come from the high intellect of mankind, and the evil things that come from his low beginnings as an animal.”

I did not know what to reply to this unusually philosophical statement. There did not seem to be anything to say against it, however. Keefe himself – with his fine mind and simian body – was in some way a confirmation of the truth of it.

Abruptly, the man came out of his reverie. He stood up from his desk, stretched his arms, and rubbed his eyes. The green sun had just disappeared behind the mountain tops that hemmed in the valley, and the room was filling with gloom. “Let’s go to bed,” he announced.

This was okay with me. I was still weak from my experiences in the caves of the Brin. I slipped off my robe, thinking how lucky I was to have a mate, instead of having to go to bed alone with my thoughts.

Kevin switched off the screen on his desk, and the apartment became suddenly dark. As he hoisted his muscular body into bed, he sighed and intoned “To sleep, perchance to dream.”

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There was a feeling among the survivors at Project Q that events were moving towards some conclusion or climax. What form that would take was, however, unclear.

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It might be that the scourge of madness would continue to deplete our numbers, until no sane person remained. Even the most stolid person had *some* event buried in the psyche that might be triggered into neurosis given a deep enough probe. My own childhood experiences had caused me over time to develop some mental defenses that had proven strong enough to prevent a plunge into psychosis, but I lived in fear that another jolt might send my mind spinning into craziness.

Another possible outcome was that we might make a breakthrough in our attempts to establish contact with the Brin. Kevin Keefe was working at the problem with sustained intensity; and while the drift of his current researches was unclear, I was contributing what I could to the Project's goal. The rest of the crew carried on, some expecting to find that the Brin were the cause of our troubles and threatening dire retaliation, and some hoping that the aliens would prove to be benevolent and a potential source of help.

The third and most plausible outcome for Project Q was the likely and anticlimatical one, that it would be closed down. That it had not already suffered this fate was thanks to the one bit of luck we had experienced in a long series of misfortunes. This came about because of the old astrophysicist, Abrom. He had been monitoring the light from our host green star since his arrival with the second batch of personnel. His observations had been intermittent, since his main job was supposed to be physics; but around the time of my brainstorm in the Brin caves he had noted a rise in the short-wavelength component of the sun's radiation. He had quickly determined, however, that these would have little influence at ground level, since the rays concerned were absorbed by the atmosphere. This excess radiation was, though, a cause of concern for the ship from Headquarters, which had been circling

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the planet for several days in the vacuum of space. The shuttle it was supposed to send down to the planet's surface, with its automatic human cargo, had been postponed. It had been in this way that the dismissing hand of government had been temporarily stayed. Abron had been unable to predict when the sun's flux would return to normal; and despite long periods spent poring over his spectra, the matter had been effectively shelved, because over-exertion had caused the old man to suffer an ill-timed stroke. Thus even our one flash of luck cast a shadow, reinforcing the Project's pall of doom.

I was on my way from visiting Abron when I decided to take a detour to the big office on the top floor of the base. I was depressed because the old astronomer was cooped up in his windowless room, unable to walk due to the paralysis of his left side, so I thought that a break to look at the mountains might be cheering. The big office was deserted when I entered it. Kevin Keefe and myself were the only ones of the research staff still functioning, and for several days we had found it convenient to work in the former's apartment. I was therefore uninterrupted as I stood leaning on the sill of the long window, staring at the jagged peaks. To the north, another distant range of mountains jutted up, and I had been looking at them for a while before I realized that they were vague because the sky in that direction was full of some kind of haze. This was unusual. In all the time we had been studying the Brin, the sky had been clear both day and night, with that transparency which is the hallmark of high altitude. Now, as I tarried at the window, the storm in the north moved perceptibly nearer. Did this presage some new problem?

By evening, wind was buffeting the base's inelegant architecture. In the restaurant, the noise was dampened by the floors above, but a low southing could still be heard. The place was

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almost deserted, and those few who were still healthy congregated by instinct at one table. They were largely maintenance staff, whose simple and practical views on life may have in some way protected them from the epidemic of insanity that had deranged the more complicated minds of the research people. I had gotten to know some of them in the past few days, as the ranks of my own colleagues thinned. Normally chatty, that evening their conversation was patchy and subdued. I picked desultorily at my dinner, a weight of worry on my brain that made me more inclined to listen than talk.

“I saw lightning,” commented one of the janitors, an overweight man with jowls which trembled as he shoveled food into his mouth.

“It’s not lightning,” corrected a hollow-cheeked man at the end of the table, who I assumed to be an electrician because he had taken over the instruments of the disabled Abrom. “It’s an aurora. The bright bits are caused by ions in the upper atmosphere.” He had the superior tone of the half educated. “I saw it last night, waving across the sky like a flag.”

“Huh,” acknowledged the fat janitor, looking around at the walls of the base. “I hope this tin-can of a place stands up. The Brin’ll be better off in their caves.”

I watched them, and as I did, a strange feeling grew inside my head. Never much of a talker, they ignored me as I observed them in the glare of the light over the table. It was as if I were watching their everyday actions for the first time, questioning what they did and answering myself, as if I was separate from things.

The janitor opposite cut a sausage with his blunt knife. (Was that the meat of some animal, and why not cut it with something more efficient?)

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Red fluid from both ends of the sausage. (Blood? It was revolting.)

The janitor's jowels wobbled, and his teeth bit into one of the pieces of sausage. (Why the excess fat around the mandibles, and were those incisors not typical of some beast?)

Chewing, the man got a piece of gristle stuck between his teeth and picked it out with grimy fingers. (What? Disgusting!)

Feeling abruptly sick, I shoved my own plate away. Something was happening to me. Something bad and scary.

I stood up, swaying slightly. The illumination around the edge of the cafeteria had been dimmed to conserve energy, and I suddenly found the bright yellow light above the occupied table too intense for my eyes.

"You okay, Susan?"

Ignoring the janitor's question, I turned and walked unsteadily out of the room.

I burst into Kevin Keefe's apartment, desperate for his calm mind and strong body. He was not there, and the place was unusually cool. The window was wide, and a blast of wind whistled through it and out by the open door. A horrible thought pushed everything else from my mind, and I rushed to the open aperture. Surely Keefe had not gone the way of Sandoval and Krushnevsky?

A bar of pulsating light overhead brightened the valley as I gazed out of the window. It threw the rocks below the base into stark triangles, white on one side and black on the other. I could even see the whirlpools in the stream at the bottom of the gorge. There was no corpse.

Puzzled, I turned back towards the door. On the desk, amid the clutter, the ancient book of Shakespeare fluttered its leaves, as if trying to tell me something.

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I took the steps to the roof in bounds. My heart was hammering when I reached the top. The metal door was ajar and through the gap came the growl of thunder.

Wind whipped my hair over my face as I stumbled onto the flat expanse of the roof. A figure was standing on its edge, outlined by blazing stars.

“Kevin?”

No answer. But I knew it was him by the broad shoulders and the streaming hair. He was standing rigid, staring into the abyss with his feet projecting over the edge.

Vaguely, I recalled that it could be disastrous to rush at a potential suicide. I hunkered over and crept carefully forward. The top of a ventilator was whizzing around nearby, whining in the wind, and I sneaked across the roof in its cover. I stopped within arm’s reach of the man, unsure what to do.

Keefe was standing perfectly erect. His body was swaying slightly back and forth in the gusts, but he seemed to be in no danger of falling. His arms were by his side, the hands clenched into fists. His beard was flying, and above it I made out the glitter of his open eyes.

I started to creep forward, but stopped as a flash of the aurora illuminated the scene. He was naked.

The black hair of his legs and chest was matted into a pelt by the press of the wind, so that his maleness was obvious.

“Kevin?” I called again, puzzled as much as scared.

Maybe he heard me or maybe he did not, but a spasm ran over his rigid body. I stepped forward and touched his arm – it was as cold and hard as stone. His biceps were standing out, and the muscles of his massive chest were bulging with some hidden strain. However, the eyes of this human statue were open.

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Following Keefe's gaze, I saw that there was a figure standing in front of the big cave on the opposite side of the valley. It was a very tall Brin.

The alien held its fuzzy shape, despite the howling wind. From what might be called the head, two dark pools stared out, locked onto the eyes of the human.

I had no idea how long this contest between the alien and the man had been going on, if indeed it was a contest. But without warning I saw Keefe's toes flex and lose their grip on the edge of the roof. There was a gust of wind, and the stiff body started to keel over. It fell backwards onto the flat with a colossal crash.

Instantly I was at his side. The rigidity of the muscles started to melt, and a small sigh escaped his lips.

"Kevin! Talk to me!"

I think he recognized me then, but before he could say anything his face convulsed with fear. Something evil invaded his mind, and his features started to twitch in terror. Then his great chest began to heave spasmodically, and his legs started to thrash.

I screamed. Perhaps the sound brought him back to sanity. Anyhow, he grimaced and a loud "Grrr!" escaped his lips. With a tremendous effort of will, he calmed his face and quieted his body.

But whatever it was he was fighting would not give up. I watched that horrible struggle play out in the writhing of his face and the rolling of his eyes. Back and forth went the unseen duel, first one mind on top and then the other. For a while, it looked as if the man would win. But a man is only flesh, and his brain is dependent on the flesh. And eventually, flesh tires.

Something crept into Keefe's eyes which I had never seen before: despair. I repeat that Keefe was the strongest man that I have ever known, in both body and spirit. He managed to hold the

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thing off, even as he realized that it would beat him. His hand grabbed mine, his hairy fingers clamped around my forearm.

Struggling to control his tongue, his eyes fixed on mine. A gurgling sound emerged from his mouth – he was trying to say something, even as his unseen enemy attempted to muzzle him.

“Monsters!” he croaked from between stiff lips. “Monsters from the Id.”

\*

The ship from Headquarters landed next day. Project Q was immediately closed down. The infirmary on Earth is still full of the lunatics we brought back. And the cemetery holds the bodies, including that of Keefe. But I have been training my mind, and am going back on the next expedition. I will beat the monster that lurks in all of us.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE  
MOON (PUNCHLINE)

Laughter billowed down the corridor as my space-boots thudded on the thick carpet leading to the office of the boss of *Star Films*. It was a fluke of geography that the space laboratories shared the same piece of real estate as the movie company, though the personnel at both benefited from the clean air and sun-washed hills. It was also something of a fluke that my sister, who was a slim astrobiologist with a sunburn deeper than her bank account, had married the paunchy but heavily-monied movie mogul. It was no accident, however that he had asked for my help with his planned saga of the spaceways, because besides being a qualified pilot I was also a film fan. The door of the office was a chunk of fake brown mahogany, on which in silvery gothic letters was inscribed *Bill Cotton Esquire*. Beneath this flamboyant epigram was stamped PRODUCER. I was not exactly sure what kind of work this implied; but it could not be too difficult to teach a bunch of dreamy-eyed artists about the hardware of spacecraft, *could it?*

Bill Cotton's *faux* wooden door dissolved as I approached. There one moment, gone the next, it was a spin-off from the space program. Executives loved them, because the person inside could see out but not the other way around. I took a bit of pride by not breaking my stride as I crossed the invisible threshold and came to a quasi-military stop.

"Jason!" Cotton boomed from between glittering white teeth. "My favourite brother-in-law!"

He stood up and forged through his desk, the force field of its surface flowing aside like the water in front of a bulky ship, leaving a froth of memos on either side.

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I shook the outstretched hand, pudgy but surprisingly firm. I tried to ignore the flashing jewel in the signet ring that overpowered the thin band of gold which signified an old-fashioned marriage. But I could not help but stare at the fat, brown cigar between the fingers of his other hand, which gave off a thick wreath of smoke whose pungent aroma bespoke real tobacco.

“Bill,” I reciprocated his greeting, “my favourite stereotype.”

The smile disappeared from his pink lips and his dark eyebrows ratcheted down from his bald head. Then they clicked back up and he chuckled, as his sense of humour penetrated my deadpan expression.

“Funny boy,” he said paternally. “Your sister warned me about you.” I wondered briefly what else my older sibling had told him, and it still seemed odd to me that she had fallen for this middle-aged but interesting guy. Sis was no dumb blonde, however, so her new husband must possess some brains in addition to his heaps of money. His next comment hinted at a broad knowledge of people. “I’d forgotten you’re a Limey.”

Maybe this was a get-back for my joke about his being a stereotype, but there did not seem to be any animosity behind it. Actually, I was kind of proud that my ancestors had been called limeys, because they had been the first sailors to figure out that eating limes and lemons during a long sea voyage prevented scurvy – this in some ancient age when the members of other navies were dying of vitamin deficiency. It now occurred to me that maybe my satirical, dry type of humour was also inherited. Anyway, a man who was good at making movies and knew something about history was somebody I could respect.

“How can I help, Bill?” I asked with genuine sincerity. After all, this was an opportunity to find out how the movie industry really worked.

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He seemed, from his side, to have also been doing a bit of character analysis. I was wearing my space corps uniform, but minus the captain's insignia, since I was off-base. I had gotten into the habit of letting my hair grow longer between trips, and Bill ran an envious hand over his bald pate as his face adopted a kind of fatherly look.

"Orbits," he announced shortly.

"Orbits?" I repeated blankly.

"Yep," he confirmed with a twinkle in his brown eyes. Then, with an apologetic wave of his hand that left a small rainbow in the air from the gem in his ring: "Please take a seat."

"Where to?" I replied automatically. I had, without noticing, lapsed into what my beloved sister called my *Mister Silly Joke* mode.

"Ha ha," responded Bill without humour. Yes, my sister must have told him about my lapses into juvenility.

Taking a chance, I let myself fall backwards, wondering if Bill's penchant for new technology would save me or if I would describe my own kind of orbit, ending with my bum hitting the floor. But a comfortable seat materialized before I was halfway to the carpet; and as I landed in it, I nonchalantly crossed my knees.

"What kind of orbit do you have in mind?" I asked, as if I were the owner of some hardware store and could take one off the shelf. "Elliptic, parabolic or hyperbolic?"

He smiled, but then turned serious, leaning back in his chair with a business-like air. A bit of the fluid force-field refused to detach itself from the desk top, and formed a chewing-gum strip to his bulging stomach. Irritably, he cut across it with the red end of his cigar, and the severed blob of desk sprang back into place with a slight *twang*. The cigar winked out, and he threw it across the office in what my trained eye catalogued as a perfect parabola. It

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vanished into a brassy spittoon that materialized in the corner and promptly disappeared again.

“The problem with movies,” said Bill, “is that nowadays they depend on special effects, and they’re hard to get right.”

I nodded sympathetically. During my trips between the planets, I had watched hundreds of films and many were marred by unconvincing plots and impossible science.

“It’s particularly hard to get the special effects right in space movies,” continued Bill. “People these days are pretty sophisticated, and a bad scene can ruin the whole thing.”

“I know,” I commiserated. “Last week I watched that new blockbuster, *The Revenge of the Ogrons*. Just when it seemed that the aliens were about to wipe humankind from the Milky Way by detonating a vacuum bomb, the wife of the Ogron captain convinces him that humans are just misunderstood. She flips a switch, and their intergalactic cruiser stops, turns round, and heads back to their home-world, dwindling nicely into the sunset of the big bang. *But*, a big ship like that would cross light years before it even slowed down, and anyway there were no stars around just after the big bang. It was rubbish.”

Bill Cotton stared at me. No doubt he was justifiably awed by my knowledge of celestial mechanics and stellar astrophysics. Certainly his eyes were blank, and his lips were compressed. Then he quietly stated “That was one of my best movies.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I realized that, while I watched a lot of films, I seldom paid attention to the lists of producers, directors and other personnel who made them possible. I added weakly “At least, the flick showed pathos.”

“Crap!” Cotton exclaimed. And then, seeing my disapproving look: “Not you, Jason. I mean the movie. Personally, I *loved* it. But the public *hated* it. And you wanna know why?”

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“Why?” I dutifully asked.

“Because the space stuff just wasn’t *slick*.” He jumped out of his seat in excitement, his paunch causing a tidal wave in the fluid of the desk. Unable to react quickly enough, the force-field bulged up around his struggling figure, a victim caught in a technological bog. “Damm!” he exploded. “They can’t even make a desk that works right, never mind a spaceship.”

Bill brought his fist down, but it broke through the thinned-out surface of the desk with a splash of sparks. His portly body followed, arms flailing.

Suddenly there was fizzing sound in the office, and the desk flashed out of existence. So did my chair.

Bill was crawling around on his hands and feet, an angry bulldog. I was lying flat on my back, my inverted eyes watching with fascination the corner of the office, where there was a flickering on/off image of the brass spittoon.

The entrance door had also dissolved, and it there stood a thin woman with red hair and old-fashioned eyeglasses, over which she peered at us in disapproval. “What’s the game, boys?”

Bill Cotton sprang to his feet, brushing bits of force-field off his executive suit and looking embarrassed. I rolled over and bounced upright, snapping a salute.

“This is Ida,” puffed Bill. “Ida Down.”

I suppressed my fatuous response to this bed-related and unlikely name.

“Ida is in charge of our comedy team.” And then, as if it explained why we had been rolling around on the floor, “Jason is my brother-in-law.”

“Ah,” acknowledged Ida Down. Her face was lined, with calipers running to the edges of thin lips, and completely static. Her eyes behind the medically-unnecessary eyeglasses were blue;

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but unlike mine, her own resembled those of a fish that has seen better times. Her lanky, sexless body was covered in some kind of smock, against whose greyness the crimson hair provided a frizzy but artificial attempt at frivolity. She was the most uncomedic person I had ever seen.

“We’d better go to my office,” sniffed Ida, looking around Bill’s room, which was bare except for the intermittent cuspidor. “At least it has *real* furniture.”

She turned and marched off down the corridor, Bill and I following. Briefly, I wondered who was the real boss of the *Star Films* company. My companion, however, explained as we walked. “I didn’t get time to tell you, but our next movie is going to be a new thing – a kind of sitcom in space, but with a lot of humour.” I guess I must have looked skeptical. “Don’t be fooled, Jason. It may be that Ida looks like a battleaxe, but she’s the best joke-writer in the business.”

“I thought you wanted me for my expertise about space,” I said.

“We do. But your sister says you also have a sense of humour, even if it’s a weird one.”

“I don’t think it’s weird,” I objected. “Though my last girlfriend *did* dump me because she thought my mental development got stuck in the teenager stage. But as I said to her...”

I had lost my audience, however. Bill was back down the corridor, arguing with two men who were brandishing bits of script in his face. I decided to walk on, in the wake of the imperious Ida Down. Unlike Bill, the other employees of *Star Films* seemed to shrink away from that woman. I did not know why, but was pretty sure that the reason lay with *her*, as the other folk I passed seemed normal enough. They emerged from and went into various offices, most with the mixture of preoccupation and casual-

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ness that is typical of a large corporation. They were doing their jobs in an efficient but unstressed manner. Some of the girls were attractive, and I forgot my previous girlfriend when I passed an office in which sat a topless lass who smiled at me as I passed, leaving me guessing about the part of her trim figure that was below the level of her desk. I was, I confess, a bit disappointed at the lack of theatricality. After all, this *was* a movie company. But the actors and film-shooting locations must be elsewhere. The only unusual person I met was an introspective-looking, dark-skinned chap with a purple dot between his eyes, who levitated along the passageway in a flowing gown, leaving a stench of old curry in his slipstream.

Ida Down's red head vanished into the office at the end of the corridor. She already had some documents spread out on her desk when I entered. They had wrinkled, yellow edges; and the musty smell that emanated from them implied that they were real paper. Intrigued, I sat down in a chair that appeared to be the cannibalized pew of some ancient church. What the hell was all this about?

Bill Cotton bumbled in, a bit short of breath. He wedged his tubby body into another chair, but he avoided the woman's eyes, letting his gaze go through the window that formed one corner of the office to where a lazy river meandered through sand dunes.

"Did you tell him about the orbits?" Ida Down demanded.

"Yes, dear," replied Cotton subserviently. "Er, I mean Ida."

Although I would have thought it impossible, the woman's face became even more stony, and her lips curled slightly with contempt. Still sore about my own recent breakup, I suddenly had an insight that explained the stressed relationship between Bill and Ida: they used to be mates. Maybe they had even been married; and if so, it was obvious which one felt the more aggrieved by the changed state of affairs. Myself, I would rather go to bed with an

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asteroid than the equally granitic Ms. Down, and I could not imagine what past softness of mind had possessed the jovial Mr. Cotton. I had been away in space at the time of his marriage to my sister, and apart from a couple of casual meetings at the subsequent celebrations, I had not had much to do with him. But Sis could take care of herself, and clearly Bill had come well out of the new deal.

My daydreaming was cut short by Ida Down. "The jokes are just as important as the orbits," she declared. "We need a new product after Bill's bomb."

"She means *The Revenge of the Ogrons*," explained Cotton, looking depressed.

"Well," I opined, "it *wasn't* a very convincing movie."

I said this partly because I meant it, and partly to see if I could crack the woman's concrete facade of a face. It worked slightly, because her lips quirked into an agreeing smile for an instant.

"Comedy is a fragile medium," Ida lectured. "What one person finds funny, another person finds boring. Some people don't even have a sense of humour."

"Tell me about it," muttered Bill.

Ignoring him, Ida peered at me doubtfully, like a housewife trying to identify some insect that has appeared in the bathtub. "You *do* have a sense of humour, Jason?"

"Yes ma'am," I assured her. "Genus *Python*, species *Monty*. From the south end of the vineyard, naturally."

"Naturally," she replied. My respect for her edged up, for she seemed to know about the old-time comedy classics. "However, you must have noticed that truly original gags are rare."

"I suppose they are," I agreed after reflecting on it.

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“Indeed,” she carried on, “most jokes are just new versions of old ones. Have you yourself ever invented a genuinely *new* joke?”

I opened my mouth to say “Of course I have,” but then closed it again. Ida Down, head of the comedy division at *Star Films*, was staring at me intently. There was some hidden agenda here. Quickly, I ran through a mental inventory of my favourite gags. Reluctantly, I came to the realization that while I regard myself as having a good if dry sense of humour, most of it depended on things I had heard a long time ago.

Seeing my confusion, Ida asked “Have you in fact ever met *anybody* who invented a truly *original* gag?” Then, as I did not reply immediately, she answered her own question. “I don’t think anybody writes new jokes.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” I expostulated. “You yourself have a crew of writers. What do you pay them for, if not to write jokes?”

She shook her head. “The people on our payroll are good, but they’re good at rearranging things. We have a dozen script writers we can call in to do comedy, but none of them has ever come up with anything totally new.”

I did not know why, but I felt annoyed. Probably because the comedians I liked – mostly from the old days – were somehow being maligned. But then I recalled that I had once listened to an interview with Groucho Marx, in which he had averred that most comedians stole material from each other. I still felt annoyed, however. It was as if somebody was claiming that the *Mona Lisa* was a fake, copied from a holiday photograph or something.

I got up from my hard seat and started to walk about the office. Through the window, I could see the river wending its way slowly through the dunes, destined for the nearby sea. It must be the same watercourse which, further inland, the Space Base used

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to cool its launch pads. Vaguely, I sensed some analogy – about things changing form but coming from the same source. However, I had never been very good at philosophy; and any fruitful idea I might have hatched just died away in the frigid atmosphere of the office, like a petunia on Pluto.

Bill Cotton was still sitting in the vise-grip of his seat, watching me as I paced around. He was rubbing his leg, which appeared to have been bruised during our earlier melee, and looked unhappy. It suddenly seemed to me that we were all taking things too seriously. Our meeting more resembled a funeral ceremony than a comedy discussion. My mood lifted at the absurdity of it.

Bill gave a cough, breaking the awkward silence.

I intoned: “*He gave a cough*

*His leg fell off*

*And floated down the river.”*

Ida Down smiled! “Who said that?” she wanted to know.

“I did,” was my prompt reply. “Just now.”

Bill roared with laughter, perhaps partly due to the release of tension in the room. I took a liking to him. Ida’s smile did not last long, but her face looked less grim than before.

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” I said, slightly embarrassed.

“Did you think of that line yourself?” Ida asked.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I heard something like it on *The Silly Show* when I was a kid.”

The head of the comedy unit at *Star Films* did not say “I told you so”, but she did not need to. I was willing to concede that jokes had some mysterious origin, and that the ones in circulation now were just revamped ones from before.

“Maybe,” suggested Bill to Ida, “you should tell Jason the plot of our new movie.”

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“Sure,” she agreed. “But you’re not to talk about it outside this building. In the film business, a good plot idea is like gold, and you’ll have to keep it secret. I’m dead serious.”

“I’m sure you are,” I replied. Her manner had become business-like. “But you can relax. I may joke around, but I have a serious side. Actually, most of the really good, old-time comedians were very serious people in private. Some were manic-depressives, and a few even committed suicide.”

“I know,” she said. “But if we offer you a contract, there’ll be a clause indemnifying the corporation against suicide. And insanity.”

“And invasion by aliens, too?” I asked facetiously.

Ida Down’s eyes locked on mine, as if some kind of mental X-rays were focussed by her old-fashioned spectacles in an effort to pierce my mind. Bill Cotton gave another cough, but this one sounded like a warning.

“What’s wrong?” I asked innocently.

“Nothing exactly,” replied the woman carefully. “Except that our plot involves something like that.”

I was thinking that if most jokes were old, then stories about alien invasions must be equally old. Ida and Bill, however, were exchanging glances – perhaps evaluating how much they should tell a newcomer about their precious plot.

Finally, Ida seemed to decide in favour of divulging the thing. “The story is set in the near future,” she began. “The opening scene is a large hall aboard an interstellar spaceship, where the troops are being entertained by a comedian. The audience likes his jokes, but next morning he’s found murdered.”

“How?” I interjected.

She waived this aside impatiently. “Something gory.” Then she continued, her eyes behind the glasses becoming abstracted as

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she visualized the next scene. “Back on Earth, a bunch of snobby people are watching one of Shakespeare’s comedies. It’s a modern adaptation, though. And half-way through, the main character is telling a good gag when he drops dead on the stage.”

I sat quietly. So far, I did not find the plot exactly gripping, and I failed to see where orbits came into it.

“Next, we are out in space, the camera following a beat-up mining ship as it comes in to land on an asteroid. The blue Earth is off in the distance. After docking, the pilot of the ship enters a bar. It’s full of drunken miners watching a girl doing striptease. She’s telling lewd jokes, and the men are laughing, so they don’t notice another figure who we only see as a dark shape. The girl is taking off her bra, telling a gag about sex in space, when she explodes.”

“Ugh!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, don’t be squeamish,” said Ida petulantly. “You need lots of sex and violence to sell a story these days. Any editor will tell you that.”

Bill said, “She’s right.”

“And what about me?” I asked. “Do you want me to calculate the orbit of the mining ship, or the paths of the bloody bits of the girl?”

“Both,” replied Ida. “The last murder takes place on an asteroid where the gravity is low, so you’ll have to make it convincing.”

“Okay,” I said. “But where do the aliens come in?”

“The aliens,” she explained, “are trying to invade Earth. The troops on the spaceship in the first scene are trying to track them down, but are having trouble, because the aliens are shadowy creatures who can disguise themselves as humans. In fact, several

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of the aliens are already on Earth, living amongst our people as spies.”

I did not voice the opinion, but it seemed to me that the plot had gotten bogged down in stereotype, and needed some novel ploy to lift it out of mediocrity. What the woman said now rather confirmed my opinion.

“Our counter-spy guys are led by a rugged ex-spaceman, who is helped by a fuddy-duddy professor.”

I groaned.

“Be quiet,” snapped Ida. “The Earth is going into a frenzy, because somehow it has leaked out that the aliens are about to invade. Mothers holding their babies, looking at the night sky, and all that. But our space guy and the professor cannot locate the alien spies who are carrying out the murders, because they can’t break the aliens’ code.”

“That’s not right,” I objected firmly. “It’s been proven that any logical code can be expressed as a Godel number, and that given enough effort it can be broken.”

Ida Down gave a short, mocking laugh. Her fishy eyes behind the spectacles took on life. “Not so fast, Mister Smarty Pants. *This* code isn’t like that, and it *can*’t be broken.”

I had a vague surmise, like the man who looked upon a far peak in Darien. There might indeed be a novel way to boost the plot above the plain of the commonplace. “You mean...”

“The code,” confirmed Ida, “is jokes.”

I sat for quite a while, thinking. Bill Cotton watched me, saying nothing but occasionally squirming his bum into a more comfortable position on his torture chair. Ida Down flounced her artificially red fuzz-ball of hair. She had removed her spectacles, and from where I sat I could tell from the lack of refraction of the light from the window that the lenses were plain glass, as I had sus-

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pected. However, her dead-fish eyes were even more off-putting without the spectacles. This woman was not stupid. And her idea of using jokes as a code was ingenious. In an age where jaded movie-goers were enticed by ever-more unrealistic things, this new storyline might just be crazy enough to work.

“I like it,” was my eventual judgment.

Not that my opinion weighed for much. Now that they had me hooked, both Bill and Ida seemed to recall that they had other, more important things to do. A contract popped hologramatically out of the air, and after a quick appraisal I agreed to the terms. The pay would double my income while I was Earth-side; and Bill must have consulted my sister, because the end-date coincided with my next scheduled flight. I thought “At least, I’ll be in space if the movie bombs.” Actually, I was fairly positive about the venture, and eager to learn the details of the storyline and add my contribution.

“Do I qualify for an office?” I asked naively. I really had no idea if people worked on scripts in the building, in some garret, or on the beach. The last possibility appealed, as the sun was shining outside on the yellow dunes, and the sea was on their farther side.

But then I had an inspiration. “I could also use some help from one of your regular people, especially about special effects and such.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bill said absently. He fiddled with one of his messaging toys. “I’ll get one of our computer people to drop in.”

While we were waiting, I tried to read the upside-down writing on the ancient documents that littered the top of Ida’s desk. They *were* real paper, brown and smelly with age. But the writing was in some kind of medieval script, and I could not decipher it.

“The oldest copy I can find of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*,” explained Ida.

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I raised my eyebrows, impressed by her dedication to research. With some historical ballast, plus a few jokes and orbits from me, maybe the new movie would not bomb after all. I was just going to ask what the title would be of our proposed epic, when I heard the door of the office open.

I turned, and there was the girl I had seen down the corridor. She had pulled on a blouse, but a pair of dainty nipples perked through it. Tight shorts revealed the outline of a shapely rear end. Her smile was gentle laser.

Bill, who was his usual affable self now that he had extricated himself from his chair, did a quick introduction. "Jason, this is Dawn."

"Don't look so dazzled," Ida told me cattily, noticing that I was ogling the girl's pneumatic breasts, which to me seemed like heavenly orbs. "They haven't risen yet." And she shooed us out of the room.

\*

Walking along the beach, holding Dawn's hand with the waves washing around our feet, I felt I was committing a cliché.

"Don't be silly," said Dawn. "We've been working hard, and we deserve a break."

She was right. My first few days at *Star Films* had been frustrating, but had become progressively easier as I learned the bureaucratic wrinkles of the place from Dawn. She was herself involved with special effects, her expertise being explosions. "There's no sound in space," I had once reminded her as we watched a mock-up of a crashing starship. She had replied "I know," and it became clear that she possessed a good grounding in the physics of space. I was impressed by this, but did not patronize her; and I made no effort to conceal that my hopes for our

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relationship were distinctly non-academic. However, any delusions I may have had about my own magnetic allure quickly turned to iron filings, before being reconstituted by the field lines of bipolar eroticism. Dawn's initial friendliness towards me was due to the prosaic fact that she had known I would be visiting the movie company, because she was a pal of my chatterbox sister. Indeed, Dawn and Janet had taken the same courses in astronomy. Later, the one had gone into robotics and the other into biology. Both girls were, though, distinctly feminine. Naturally, my views about my sister were coloured by the rivalries and private things that affect any siblings; but I could appreciate why Bill Cotton had been drawn to her, since she was a pretty brunette with more than an average share of brains. Dawn's intelligence was less obvious and more relaxed, and her good humour even extended to the irascible Ida Down. But as we ambled along the beach, I forgot about the office, fascinated at how the rays of the setting Sun twisted themselves into my companion's blonde hair, livening it into a golden swirl.

The bay was deserted, and neither of us gave any thought to our nakedness. There were only a couple of clues to the existence of a technological world behind the barrier of sand dunes. One of these was an ancient gantry – a remnant of the days when chemicals powered unwieldy rockets – and now a rusty red nail poking about the yellow hills. The only other sign of civilization was our tent, a one-molecule thick artificial diamond that split the sunlight into strange strands of violet that bounced out to sea to join the restless blue waves.

The tide must be coming up, since there was a band of dried-out, water-flattened sand between the dunes and the sea. Later, I knew that the Moon would rise, dragging its bulge of water around the Earth. It was funny to think that the crashing breakers

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and the shuddering of the sand beneath our feet was one end of the invisible elastic band of gravity that held the hurtling satellite in its orbit – a tether that was slowly decaying as the friction at one end allowed the rock to retreat at the other end, perhaps destined in some far future to wander off on its own path among the stars.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Dawn.

“Oh. Err...” Somehow I was reluctant to explain, but it had to be done. “My next flight has been confirmed.”

She glanced at me, perhaps trying to see signs of regret or the opposite. But I daresay my face did not show a great deal of expression. Much of the emotion in my family seemed to have drained out of me and gone into my sister at some stage in our childhood. Probably when our parents had been killed in the accident.

“Where to?” Dawn wanted to know.

“Just to the Moon. I won’t be gone long.”

What I did not wish to mention was that my contract with the Space Corps obligated me to do three trips to Pluto. They were necessary to take scientific equipment to our new base out there, and each would take a hell of a chunk out of a man’s life. Suddenly, the prospect of retiring in middle age did not seem so appealing as it did before. Sure, I would be able to buy my own space speedster and whiz around the inner solar system as I liked; but maybe there were other things to do on Earth that were more important, and best done during one’s youth...

“Did Major Mac object to you working part-time for *Star Films*?”

“Not really,” I replied. I was about to inquire how she knew about my superior Mac; but realized that it must be more of the gossip which flowed so easily from my sister, Janet. “I’m on the academic side of things, not the military. We all have a clause

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about what they call *research development*. We can use a certain amount of time to do something on the side, as long as it's scientific. Like a kind of sabbatical."

Dawn laughed. "Does he know that you're not only working out orbits, but helping to write jokes?"

"No. And please don't blab to Janet. Or at least, ask her not to talk to Major Mac. He has about as much sense of humour as a rattlesnake with heartburn."

I knew this for a fact. Once, the General's adjutant had persuaded the rigid Major Mac to approve a bit of musical entertainment for the enlisted men at the base. This was during the Army's phase of sexual 'enlightenment'. Then "Don't talk, don't tell" had become "Please talk, and chat about your friends' genital warts." The adjutant who had persuaded Major Mac to put on the evening of music was possessed of: (a) languid eyes which had never focussed down a rifle barrel; (b) brains which always focussed on something resembling a penis. On the evening in question, the musicians had set up behind the stage curtain, ready to kick things off with a bouncy tune. The men had slowly filled up the seats in the hall, ready to enjoy an evening of patriotic music. Unfortunately (though some claimed it was no accident), there had been some miscommunication. The curtain went up, to reveal a band whose members were all nude and with enormous erections. The resulting furor was headed by the very butch Major Mac; but the band was able to escape the barrage of beer cans by using their instruments to protect their genitals.

My own thoughts were, I must admit, turning towards the erotic as Dawn and I wandered back to our tent. Chocked in by sand dunes on three sides, it was a very private place. Tired by our long walk, we plopped down in its entrance. The Sun was

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descending, a great ball of yellow and red that slipped in small steps beneath the haze of the horizon.

Nobody had ever accused me of being good at small talk; but I had some foresight, and had brought along a bottle of wine. It had kept itself cold during our absence, and when I picked it up it left a patch of cool dew on the bedclothes. We drank it in silence, watching the sky turn from light blue to dark blue.

It was, of course, terrifically romantic. However, my head started to droop just as a lower part of my anatomy started to rise.

“Damm!” I exclaimed softly as I jerked my head off my chest a short time later. Turning around, I saw that Dawn was already asleep, her breasts rising and falling with a steady rhythm. Her lips were not the only things that were open. But as I snuggled close to her warm body, my fading senses told me that slumber would win, at least temporarily.

I awoke to the echo of my last snore, but sure that something else had brought me out of sleep.

Thousands of stars filled the entrance of the tent, which I had forgotten to close. The surf was a shimmering white line, and I saw that the tide must have come up and gone down again while I slept. Poking my head outside, I caught the yellow, pock-marked face of the Moon peering low over one of the dunes.

I waited. Between surges of the sea, the quiet was punctuated by the sound of voices. They were indistinct, and I could not make out any words.

Curious and wary, I crept out of the tent. As an afterthought, I grabbed the empty wine bottle from where it lay in the sand. Then I moved on bare feet in what I thought was the correct direction.

Sand slipped in silent avalanches as I climbed up the side of the nearest dune. The night was almost black, but as I peeped

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over the top of the hill I saw two dark figures silhouetted against the phosphorescence of the waves.

The hairs on my bare back stood up instinctively, and I shivered. There was something unnatural about these two figures. They were blocky, as if they had only stunted arms and legs.

What they were saying to each other was still unintelligible to me, but the tone was short and gruff. I could not see their faces, because they were facing away – looking down the beach in the direction of the space base.

I ducked behind the dune as one of the figures changed shape, and I guessed it was turning in my direction. For quite a while, I hunkered against the sand, making no movement and grasping the neck of my wine bottle. Finally, I decided I was over-reacting, and looked over the top again.

The beach was utterly deserted.

Puzzled, I climbed to the top of the dunes, and stood up far enough to get a good view. The tent lay undisturbed in its niche below, and the empty sandhills marched away to the distance.

“This is weird,” I muttered to myself. The only sound now was the *swash* of the sea as it approached low tide.

Scrambling down a cascading dune, I came out onto the flat stretch of the beach and started to walk across it in a crouching position. Up ahead there was a group of shallow marks in the wet sand, outlined in phosphorescence. I stopped when I got there, and dropped on one knee.

They were footprints all right, but not human.

\*

Major Mac was a long-standing acquaintance of mine, as I have outlined; and a person did not need movie-sharpened senses to identify him as a military stereotype. His cubical head con-

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tained a brain unencumbered by anything resembling an original thought. This was surmounted by a brush of vertically-standing hair designed to impale any enemy insects, assuming these evaded the outstanding radar dishes which passed for ears. His grey eyes were unwavering and contemptuous under the fire of any bright idea, which invariably ricocheted to inflict grievous harm on its source. The Major was married to the mousy daughter of a retired colonel, and so piteous was her demeanor that troops on the base instinctively offered her bits of their ration of cheese. He kept his wife perpetually short of money, and rumour had it that she learned to forego kitchen utensils because her husband's grizzled moustache formed a perfectly serviceable pan-scrubber. He sat now, immoveable behind his desk, his shoulders perfect right-angles and the sleeves of his uniform cliffs of cloth, unmarred by any ridge or wrinkle. For him to turn would require hidden machinery to rotate the man and his desk as one rigid unit.

Of course, I was exaggerating a bit. But what use was my sabbatical in the movie business if I could not indulge in some silent satire at the expense of my military boss?

"Did you plug'em?" Major Mac asked, referring to the two clandestine figures I had observed the previous night on the beach.

"No, sir," I replied. "I wasn't armed."

This was a trifle disingenuous, but I thought Mac would hardly consider an effete wine bottle to be a proper weapon. I was regretting having reported the incident at all, because in the morning light it had appeared less sinister; but I was aware that the base was ringed by surveillance devices, and for all I knew a report had already gone in, and it might appear odd for me to stay quiet. The troops on the base had not seen action in a long while. However, there had been rumours of recent espionage, by the fanatics who were opposed to space travel and believed that the resources de-

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voted to it would be better spent to alleviate problems here on Earth. Some of what the army brass referred to as “bleeding hearts” were even supposed to have a quasi-military organization.

“You didn’t, even though their speech was indistinct, hear the insurgents use a password?”

“A password?” I repeated stupidly, wondering how two figures who might be merely tourists on the beach had become “insurgents”.

“Yes.” The Major’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed me. By some means, he had called a holographic display onto his desk without disturbing his statue-like immobility. No doubt he was reviewing my record to see if I was reliable. His attitude conveyed the impression that, as a civilian member of the corps, I was automatically a potential security risk. But I knew there was nothing questionable in my record; and with an air of secrecy he continued: “A password like, say, *Swordfish*.”

A flash of recognition must have passed across my face, for Mac said “Aha!”

A sibilant sound emerged from beneath his prickly mustache, as if I were an enemy spy who had just admitted to knowing where the Secret Naval Documents were hidden.

I hastened to explain. “The password *Swordfish* was used in an early Marx Brothers movie, to get into a hidden bar during the Prohibition Era.”

Major Mac looked totally blank. It dawned on me that he had never heard of the brilliant comedies put out by the brothers Marx.

“One of the brothers was called Harpo,” I added, hoping that any information I could give would be used to verify my innocence on a charge of treason. “He had big, googly eyes and couldn’t talk. But he wanted a drink, and they let him in.”

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“Why?” Mac demanded, no doubt disbelieving that a dumb man could give the password, and no doubt thinking he had found a hole in my own defense.

“Because,” I added, “Harpo turned up at the bar with a real swordfish stuck in his pants.”

It sounded impossibly lame. But how do you explain something like that to a person who has no sense of humour?

Major Mac stared at me for a long time. His thoughts were almost visibly bouncing around the triangle of my innocent face, the display of my unblemished record, and the suspicion that I had been dealing with spies. Eventually, his craggy face relaxed, assuming an expression of paternal commiseration. “I thought something like this might happen, if I let you work for that crazy movie mob.”

I kept quiet, though I could have pointed out that I had every right to work temporarily for that “crazy” outfit by the terms of my (civilian) contract. Exasperated by the interview, I decided to terminate it. “Don’t worry, sir. I have only a few more orbits to work out for them, and then I’ll be on my way to the Moon.”

His face clearly told that in his opinion any orbit I worked out would look like a corkscrew. “Dismissed,” he harrumphed.

\*

Ida Down’s red brush of hair bobbed up and down behind the proscenium of her desk, as she flung grenades of verbal abuse from between two tottering piles of yellowed paper that threatened to bury her under a pile of old jokes. Bill Cotton squirmed in the jaws of his armchair, a fat and easy target whose only reply was a series of protesting squawks. My eyes drifted absently to the ceiling, looking for the strings that controlled this Punch and Judy show.

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“The pilot stinks!” Ida exclaimed, banging her fist on a shiny manuscript which was the disappointing product of a half-dozen well-paid but uninspired writers.

The word “pilot” reminded me that I would be commanding a ship to the Moon in the not-so-remote future, and that in the offices of *Star Films* a lot remained to be done. True, many of the special-effects scenes were already in the anachronistic ‘can’. Dawn was in her room even now, making the final adjustments to the big explosion, in which the shadowy enemies of mankind were to blow up the world government. I mused that the aliens would have an easy job, if the film version of the world government resembled the real thing. My sweetheart had, incidentally, forgotten my encounter with possible real spies on the beach, and Major Mac’s investigations had produced nothing of substance. Dawn and I had been able to work undistracted on the movie, she concocting space scenes and me working out orbits, with the occasional memo sent to Ida or Bill about a suitable joke. Ida had been right about the scarcity of original jokes. And it was the humour that was proving difficult to incorporate convincingly into the plot. In the original plan, the aliens were evil quasi-human creatures intent on exterminating humankind on Earth as well as in space; and our hope had been that the old plot would be given a new start by letting the baddies communicate via gags, thereby adding a humorous diversion to the usual grim scenario. Unfortunately, while this fresh slant might appeal to a blasé public, it was proving difficult to achieve without collapsing back into cliché. The pilot script on Ida Dawn’s desk contained the dialogue to be spoken by the human actors, in scenes yet to be filmed that would be interspersed between the special-effects pieces. And most of the jokes in that dialogue were as old and flat as the Sea of Tranquility. Only the inherently convivial Bill Cotton had

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tried to defend the script, but his support was waning against Ida Down's wrath.

"Even the title's boring," complained Ida, who was willing to go back to the beginning if it would get the new movie on a better and more profitable course. "*The Enemy Within*," she sniffed.

"Sounds like my liver," agreed the dyspeptic Bill, whose lunch was not sitting well in his ample body.

"Most of the jokes are even worse than the old ones," continued the woman, gesturing at the piles of ancient scripts that flanked her. Those age-ochred heaps reflected in her eyeglasses, making her resemble a lizard.

She flipped open the file at one of numerous places she had marked. "Listen to this:

"Earthman, broke and unemployed, walks into bar on Jupiter. Alien in disguise offers to buy him a drink.

Alien: *Looking for a job?*

Earthman: *Yeah. What's your line of business?*

Alien: *I'm an undertaker.*

Earthman: *Looking for a good worker?*

Alien: *No. I'm looking for stock.*

"Now, if that's funny," fumed Ida, "then I'm a monkey's asshole!"

Actually, Bill was laughing. I was smiling myself, even though I had heard the gag before. Neither of us made the obvious comment about a simian rectum, because Ida's anger was mounting.

"And," she continued, "tell me what's good with the next bit. It's about half-way through, when our guys have discovered that there's a map in existence, showing what routes the alien ships will take when they invade Earth. One of our guys has caught an

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alien spy, and is throttling him to learn about the map. It goes like this:

“Earthman: *Tell me where it is, or I’ll ram my blaster down your throat!*”

Alien (choking): *You’ll never have it, Earth pig-dog!*

Earthman (determined): *Then I’ll crush your alien balls like a couple of asteroids.*

Alien (dying): *Too late, Earth scum. I threw the map into the black hole.*

Earthman (looks off, flips down visor): *Then I am going in after it! (FX: dwindling cry) Aargh..!*

“Gentlemen, that *has* to be tripe,” insisted Ida. “Or else my brain’s turned to vacuum.”

We declined to give an opinion about the pressure inside our colleague’s head, though it seemed ready to blow.

“Even the final scene is bullshit,” spluttered Ida, her eye-glasses glittering with rage. “At the end of the movie, our hero – the Captain of the Earth fleet – sets out to revenge mankind on the planet of the aliens, knowing he’ll never come home. He’s holding his wife, with the blackened ruins of his house in the background, silhouetted against the rings of Saturn. And what does the geek *say?*”

Bill and I exchanged blank stares, then looked expectantly at Ida.

“I’ll *tell* you what he says:

*“This is not goodbye darling. It just means that we’ll have to live out our days in parallel universes.*”

“That’s rubbish!” was her judgment. “Pure recycled *crap!*” She flung the offending pilot script across the room.

Watching the flight, I made a mental note to check that any thrown objects in the final scene should have accurate orbits.

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Bill was watching the fluttering pages of the script as they expired symbolically in the corner of the office. “I suppose it could use some rewriting.”

“Yes,” I concurred. “The scenes you mentioned have mistakes in them, anyhow. The first is unrealistic insofar as you can’t have a bar on Jupiter, because it doesn’t have a solid surface. The second scene will make viewers cringe if they know anything about the size and tensile strength of asteroids. And the third is not only clumsy but also suspect, because in theory it’s possible to communicate between parallel universes – at least on the quantum level – by using phase-locked tachyon transmitters.”

Ida Down stared at me in silent awe, her anger sublimated by the brilliance of my little speech.

Bill Cotton stopped fidgeting in an effort to relieve the pain in his backside, and said with respect “Jason, you’re amazing.”

“Amazingly amazing,” I quipped. However, Ida Down still looked serious. She was surely right that our movie needed an infusion of quality humour. Indicating the piles of material on her desk, I asked “What have you found out during your researches?”

“John Donne did some good stuff a long time ago, and Shakespeare was no slouch. But nowadays, as I expected, nearly all jokes are variations on old themes. Of course, modern comedians use present politics and social changes to present their stuff; but the themes are ancient.

“Modern jokes are *sometimes* funny and original,” pointed out Bill, revoicing the objection I had made at the beginning of the project.

“A few, maybe,” agreed Ida. “The strange thing is, I can’t seem to track down their source.”

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“Perhaps they really *are* made up by aliens,” speculated Bill. “After all, just because we’re using the idea as a film plot doesn’t mean it couldn’t be true.”

“Or else,” I contributed, “perhaps the really new jokes are created by border-line crazy people. A lot of famous comedians have been certifiable loonies. And in some ancient societies, the insane were considered possessed by evil spirits, which might have been a cover for aliens.”

Ida Down, instead of squelching our comments as I had expected, turned introspective. “We could use a few original gags, *wherever* they come from. As it stands, we’re producing just another B-movie. If we could get hold of a really original gag-writer, we could make a classic science-fiction comedy. Something that will really make a mark. Something that will earn some real *money*.”

I knew she was correct. My own brand of juvenile/smart-ass humour suited me, and amused my friends. However, having worked at *Star Films* for a period, I realized that while my sense of humour was better than average, it was still derivative from something else. The movie industry, to me, had provided an entertaining and temporary diversion – like a hobby. To people like Ida Down and Bill Cotton, it was serious and permanent – a job. Their livelihoods depended on being able to produce something that the public wanted to pay to watch. Being funny was no joke.

\*

On the balcony, most of the girls were topless; and in our corner my hand rested on Dawn’s sunburned thigh, in an attempt to assuage my desire for sex. The shadow of our half-empty wine bottle pointed to the main part of the restaurant, where gowned

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women and suited men were intent on dinner, oblivious of the nearby pulchritude. Dawn's long hair fell in two yellow swathes about her eyes, which were focussed on the personal communications device she held below the table's rim trying to discern its sun-washed hieroglyphics. Dunes crowded the landscape, and sand had piled into wedges against the long line of movie sets that marked the divide between urbanization and nature. The rusty gantry on the horizon was a Cleopatra's needle that demarked the change from the familiar pharaohs of hydrogen and oxygen to the mysterious god of phase-locked gravity. None of which interested me just then because of the growing bulge in my pants.

"Do you want it now?" Dawn asked.

Her expression was a strange mixture of the coquettish and the matter-of-fact. It reflected my own daydream – which concerned a monkey casually walking up to its mate, having sex, and sauntering away eating a banana.

"Sure!" I replied, somewhat surprised. My sweetheart's grammar was a bit odd, but I ascribed that to the pheromones which I was sure were boiling off my body in unseen waves. In our short relationship, she had proven to be an uninhibited lover; but clearly there were depths to her eroticism I had not plumbed. The erection in my pants was an aching insistence. However, I was not sure a crowded restaurant was an appropriate venue for that sort of thing. "Er, maybe we should wait til we're somewhere more private?"

"Phooey!" she responded. "You're too influenced by that straight-laced Major Mac."

Shuddering at the thought of my military colleague and how he might make love to his sexless mouse of a wife, I was going to object when my own mate cut me off with good-natured abandon.

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“Let everybody see,” was her opinion. Then with a wrinkle of thought between her light eyes: “Maybe we should tell the details to your sister...”

“No!”

“... in case the spies are real and there’s an astrophysical angle to their plot.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing that we had been on different orbits. Dawn had been talking about the message on her communicator. Disappointed but slightly relieved, my visions of a public orgy began to subside, as did my penis.

“Here,” said the girl. “Look at this while I call Janet.”

An image appeared on the table top, a short block of text whose letters were blurry as Dawn’s communication console struggled to produce enough power to over-ride the fierce sunlight. The only thing that was clear was the headline:

*League for All Unusual Gags and Humour*

*LAUGH!*

The rest of the text was too difficult to read, so I only scanned its meaning. The message looked to be an appeal to members of the public who discovered – or believed they discovered – real and original jokes, inviting those individuals to get in touch and help stamp out mediocrity in the film business. There was even a hint of emolument for the rare find of a genuinely fresh gag. Staring at this strange epistle, while Dawn was busy contacting my sister Janet, it seemed to me to be too fantastic to be credible. This even in a town dominated by the film industry, and its wildly improbable products (not to mention the sometimes improbable activities of the laboratories of the Space Corps, where the quest to conquer the stars was pushing beyond science and into fantasy). However, at the bottom of the strange document there was a common-or-garden street address, which lent some credence to the

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thing. I noted that the address was within walking distance of the restaurant. It was somewhere in that block of buildings which had been used in the old days of movie production (before the era of wholesale computer-generated locales) and were now used to house the offices of actors' agents, film distributors and the like.

"Hello, Jason!"

Janet's face floated in the tiny hologram which flickered on the table. Half of the image was ballooned out of proportion by the intervening carafe of wine, but the deep-set eyes and straight brow were copies of my own. As children, we had both started with 'dirty-blonde' hair, but my outdoor lifestyle meant that mine had darkened with age less than that of my sister. As I looked at my older sibling now, pieces of laboratory equipment were vaguely visible in the background, so I guessed she must still be at work.

"Hi, Janet." Since her marriage to the movie-man Bill Cotton, I had not seen much of her, and had no idea about the current course of her research. I actually had little idea about *anything* that was going on these days in the field of astrobiology. "How are the organisms – or whatever they are – getting along?"

"They flourish," she responded succinctly. Then, assuming I knew more about the subject than I really did: "We're all fired-up and working overtime here. It might be that the explosion of life in the Cambrian period was caused by the arrival on Earth of a new organism from space, maybe carried on an asteroid or comet."

"Wouldn't everything get burned up in the atmosphere?" I asked, showing my out-of-date education.

She shook her head, but declined to explain. "I'll tell you about it another time. I'm more interested in this new thing you're working on with Dawn."

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I looked at my girlfriend, slightly mystified.

“About the aliens with the jokes,” clarified Janet.

I groaned. It looked as if the two women had been gossiping about rumours, while I had been labouring over the mechanically sound and technically vital issue of orbits. All right – they might be orbits made for a movie – but they were still *orbits*.

“Isn’t it exciting?” Janet continued. “The Earth being invaded, and spies telling gags that are really passwords. It’s like something out of a movie.”

“It *is* something out of a movie!” I responded irritably. I had forgotten that I had myself been partly responsible – via the business on the beach – for the subject jumping from the pages of a film script to the chatter of everyday life.

Dawn, who had been sipping her wine and following the conversation in silence, kicked me discreetly under the table. “Janet was the one who found the clip about LAUGH.” Then, seeing that I did not respond, said “You could at least thank her.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” I responded without enthusiasm.

“And,” added Dawn, “your sister thinks you and I should go round and check up on the outfit.”

“Oh, no,” I objected. But looking at the expressions on the faces of the two women, I foresaw that the thing would probably have to be done, in order to preserve family harmony in future (and also to ensure non-family sex that evening). However, while I knew I was being defensive, I could not let the subject pass without pointing to a defect in the logic of the whole business. “What makes you think,” I asked my sister, “that aliens would *want* to invade the Earth?”

Janet rolled her eyes in that manner typical of an older sister obliged to tolerate a younger brother. In her case, it was a mannerism which had become bound up with the maternal instincts

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amplified by the death of our parents, and I had long ago abandoned any hope of her changing or discarding it. Now, one of her eyes bulged through the wine carafe, enormous with contemptuous pity.

“Real estate!” she declaimed. My expression must have shown that while this might have been enough of an explanation for another doctorate-wielding, organism-savvy astrobiologist, it was not sufficient for a juvenile, speed-obsessed space-bum. “Planets are common in the Galaxy, but ones like the Earth are as rare as jewels. Our observations have filled in the blanks in Drake’s formula. A planet near a solar-type star, with a stable orbit and a nice atmosphere, and with *water*, is a miracle. The cosmic odds are enormously against it.”

I nodded slowly at this lecture, which brought back memories of Astronomy 101. “But what about the aliens and the invasion?”

Janet shrugged. “Say you came from a planet that was chock-full of people, and that you were lucky enough to find another one that could accommodate you and your kind? However, you discovered that this prime piece of real estate was already occupied by a bunch of nasty, war-mongering, low-intelligent monkeys. What would you do?”

I grimaced. There was no need for an answer.

Dawn was looking at me, silent and intent. So was Janet, her magnified eye almost daring me to do something about the *League for All Unusual Gags and Humour*. That artificial acronym no longer sounded so ridiculous.

I picked up the carafe, emptied its remaining contents into my glass, and drank. The last mouthful I held in my mouth, letting the tart liquid lie on my tingling tongue. Vaguely, I was aware that Dawn and Janet were exchanging farewells, promising to keep in touch about “the Plot”.

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Sullen for some reason, I walked through the dinnertime crowd in the restaurant, and down the stairs that led to the street. Outside, the air had the cool nip of early evening, and shadows lay half way across the road.

“They might have gone home,” I pointed out. This sounded banal. If we really were dealing with aliens, they were hardly likely to traipse off like so many civil servants, to watch the latest installment of their favourite soap opera.

Dawn gave a small giggle, and snuggled closer to me as we walked along the sandy sidewalk. Maybe she was nervous, or maybe she was feeling the effects of the wine. I felt slightly inebriated myself, and also slightly belligerent.

The location of LAUGH, when we arrived, proved to be a dilapidated building which looked as if it had once been used in a movie for a western-style saloon. It was a two-storey affair. The upper part still carried the lighter outline of some name that had disappeared from the dark grey facade. The lower part was horizontal boards, warped and cracked with age. Two windows, painted over with whitewash on the inside, flanked a blank metal door. Over the doorknob, a small plaque showed that we had come to the right place.

I turned the knob experimentally. It was shiny brass, and rotated smoothly. The door did not open; but it did move inwards by about a finger’s breadth.

Frustrated, I leaned my shoulder against the metal panel and exerted some pressure. The door moved reluctantly, then stopped.

Feeling foolish and a little angry, I took a step back, keeping the doorknob turned. Then I barged forward with force.

The door flew open, and I stumbled across the threshold after it.

*Tales of Crazy Scientists*

There was nothing on the other side except sand. Piles and piles of sand, merging away into the coastal dunes.

“It’s a front,” I announced.

Suddenly we were both laughing.

\*

Confabulations of the crazy kind must have occurred before in the offices of *Star Films*, but as things progressed I began to wonder if reality itself was not unraveling.

Bill Cotton’s quirky furniture was not obeying the laws of quantum mechanics (assuming such existed). Faithful to the whims of its owner – whose thoughts were clearly elsewhere – the desk had morphed itself into a pool table.

“Calm down everybody!” exhorted the harassed producer. He moved his fuming cigar over the assembly, perhaps in the hope of stupefying it. The corner of his desk promptly detached itself and reformed into an ashtray which ineffectually followed the burning tobacco.

“Don’t tell *me* to calm down!” Ida Down snapped. “I’m gonna finish this movie if it’s the last thing I do.” A black casket obligingly took form behind her, its lid half-open to reveal red satin that exactly matched the colour of her hair.

“Thank goodness she didn’t say ‘come hell or high water’,” muttered Dawn, who alone among us had a normal chair. The device which was responsible for the accoutrements of the office must have a default mode which was reasonably sensible.

My own seat was not like that, being a pilot’s couch whose arms were studded with controls I was terrified to touch in case they should prove functional. Bill knew I was scheduled to leave for the Moon that evening, and my ship was in fact visible through the office window as a gleam among the distant sand

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dunes. Aided by the furniture-making device, the Penrose effect was causing his brain to amplify a wisp of thought to a tangible thing.

“I still think we should suspend the movie until Major Mac or somebody has checked to see if there are real aliens among us.”

Bill Cotton was certainly worried – maybe for his own flaccid skin, should the mysterious agents of LAUGH decide that our film was a threat. His bald head was dewed with perspiration; and while I thought he was taking matters too seriously, I felt worried about him. My sister, Janet, had confided that she also was concerned for her husband. And while she acted academically aloof on the subject, I suspected that she was as intrigued as the rest of us about the possibility that there were alien spies around, who used arcane passwords and communicated via the medium of jokes. My own attitude was shared in a sweetheartly-supportive way by Dawn. We were both pragmatic: if there really *were* aliens on Earth, what the heck could we do about it, anyway?

Ida Down, at her hard-nosed end of the spectrum of opinion, now glared at Bill and snarled “Wimp.”

It was at that moment I decided that Ida Down not only talked nasty but *was* nasty. That her comment was not entirely accurate was shown by the materialization of an axe above the woman’s frizzy hair, though with a mercifully blunt edge.

The meeting was getting a bit out of control, I thought. It would be a relief to leave the squabbling movie business for the calm of space. Right now, it seemed to me to be timely to throw a philosophical blanket over the growing fire of emotions.

“There’s an old, oriental saying...”

Bill looked at me hopefully. Ida stared at me through her antique spectacles. Dawn gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“But I’m afraid I’ve forgotten it...”

*Tales of Crazy Scientists*

The meeting erupted again into argument. Coming to the conclusion that my skills lay with piloting a spaceship rather than diplomacy, I sneaked out of the room.

\*

The Moon was growing steadily in the forward screen when I finally relaxed from the launch.

Our load was more massive than usual. However, we had one of the new, generation S motors. The S stood in my mind – as in the minds of most members of the Corps – for Stars. If it were not for the load of instruments we were packing to the farside lunar base, the S-motor was powerful enough to accelerate us to Pluto and even out of the solar system. With its phase-locked gravity innards, it represented the breakthrough mankind had been working towards for ages. There were only seven S-ships in existence as yet. They hopefully represented the nucleus of what would one day be an interstellar space fleet. I was admittedly proud to have been put in command of one.

I assumed that the crew felt the same. Due to our super-sized load, the roster had been increased to five, including myself. In accordance with protocol, the men were still in their suits, a row of black-visored heads behind me.

I removed my own helmet, tasting for the first time the anti-septic atmosphere of the control cabin. “Okay. You can all relax.”

Clamps clicked open. Buckles were released. Cramped legs flexed and there were sighs of relief. I took a bottle of whiskey out of my suit where I had secreted it, assuaging my slightly guilty conscience by promising myself that I would only open it on the way home. Everyone started to unwind, physically and mentally.

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Except that one of the crew, now floating in the cabin, did not raise his visor. He just hung there, staring at me. The setting on his face-screen was extreme, so his blank gaze was just like that of some enormous fly.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded. There have been occasional cases of high-gee blackout. But I knew, even as we floated at arm’s length from each other, that something else was going on. Something very odd.

The other three members of the crew, drifting together at the rear of the cabin, started to understand that something completely out of the ordinary was happening. But like me, nobody knew what to do.

With illogical loudness, I shouted “Haven’t you got anything to say?”

The figure responded quietly: “Swordfish.”

“Ha, ha,” I replied automatically, though I was not amused. “I suppose next, you’ll say something out of the movies like: *Fly this ship to Proxima Centauri!*”

“Nearly correct.” The voice, coming from the speaker unit under the black visor, was clipped but not what might be called accented. “Except that we are going to Alpha Aquarius.”

At this, I *did* start to laugh. But then stopped.

The guy, whatever star he called home, was holding a blaster.

This surprised me. However, while the weapon was business-like, it appeared to be made of plastic; and if I could smuggle a bottle of booze aboard, he could have managed to bring a gun along.

Obviously he *had*, I thought to myself bitterly. Come on, brain! *Do* something.

“I’m sorry,” I heard myself say in a reasonable tone. “The age of Aquarius is past.”

*Tales of Crazy Scientists*

Bang!

The bottle of whiskey smashed into the black fly-face.

Never had scotch smelled so good. Glass flew everywhere through the brown haze. I flew backwards from the force of the blow, while my enemy whizzed across the cabin and crashed into the wall. His weapon sped into a corner, burning a mark across the control panel on its way, before going dead. Three good-sized men piled onto the would-be hijacker.

The burn in the control panel must have released some communications block, because the screen suddenly lit up.

“Where the hell have you *been?*” Major Mac’s troubled face demanded.

Vaguely, I realized from the backdrop that the soldier was in Bill Cotton’s office at *Star Films*. The producer himself was slumped in his chair, looking confused and disbelieving. My sister was flapping a towel over his sweaty bald head.

Dawn was gaping at my image, her bare bosom heaving as if she had been in a fight. At seeing my living, happy face, her eyes filled dramatically with tears.

It took me a few moments to realize that the half-human, half-alien figure in the room was Ida Down. Without the heavy disguise and the thick eyeglasses, I only recognized her by the fuzz of red-dyed hair. The creature still looked ready to make some nasty comment, but was silent under the muzzle of Mac’s laser rifle.

The Major’s block-like head was speaking again, angry now that the danger was past, wanting to know why our ship had been out of contact for so long.

I waved nonchalantly in the direction of our own prisoner, who lay sullenly in the corner. Major Mac’s face settled into its usual expression of serious obstinacy.

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“Cheer up,” I said to him. “We get the last laugh.”