

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.

“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.”

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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 suggestion, 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 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 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 whisps 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 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 spurted 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.

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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 question. 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 folksongs 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 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 robocopter 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.

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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 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.

“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 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 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.”

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 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 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 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 tendril 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 members 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 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 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 native 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.”

*

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, 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 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.

“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 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 ...

*

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 surface 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.

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 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.

*

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 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, through which could be discerned a tightly-rolled coil of some kind of tape. Both the box and the tape were cracked, and a 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.”

*

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.

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 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 autocratic 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 soughing could still be heard. The place was 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?)

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.

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.

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 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.

