

# **Cosmic Dreams**

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## COSMIC DREAMS

An anti-war memorial, where lots of bad guys get blasted to bits

Stars and sentimentality: a marriage

An account of how one man can make a difference — even when drunk

A hard science-fiction novel with a soft centre

Pride and Prejudice: a short version that is not depressing

TEACH YOURSELF sex in seven heavenly dimensions

Documents so profound they make the Dead Sea Scrolls look like bits of bog paper

A throw-back to an age to which we all look forward?

Recollections of an ebullient embalmer

The most stunning thing to happen since the Big Bang

“It may be stupid, but it could be interesting”

(Jale of Acheron)

## A CONTRACT IS A CONTRACT

Jale pushed upwards and threw off the lid of the coffin. The air that flowed in was cool, with a slight tang of ozone. Trying to focus, he saw that the blue light on the ship's biocontrol was flashing and that sparks were flying into the cabin. With wobbly muscles, he hauled himself out of the box and staggered over to the control. His hand as he banged the unit was strangely white and mottled: too long in stasis. But the sparks stopped, and he reeled over to the sofa.

Dust. It itched in his nostrils. Everything was covered: the sofa, the table, the controls. Also, the bottle of whiskey he had carefully placed ready. Disregarding the grime in the glass, he popped the bottle and poured a generous two fingers. Age had improved the single-malt Rigellian liquor. It slid down like liquid satin, igniting his stomach and brain. The latter took control.

"Back to reality," grunted Jale.

He looked around. The control panel had a display that his fuzzy brain recognized as nominal. Apart from the sparky biocontrol, things were all right with the *Rigor Mortis*.

Jale meandered aft to the ship's hold and stopped by the side of a second coffin. A click, and the lid disengaged itself smoothly. Inside, ensconced in plush, was the marvelously intricate form of Sherlock, master detective of the Milky Way. His eyes were closed under the deerstalker hat, his long nose intersecting clamped lips. The houndstooth cape lay crumpled in the depths of the box, awaiting the flush of activation.

"Awake," said Jale, pressing the control. "The game is afoot."

The eyes of the Sherlock Holmes android flicked open

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without hesitation. The hands, previously clasped over the chest, opened to reveal a meerschaum pipe stuffed with ancient tobacco.

Sherlock levitated, took a look around, and said “Howdy.”

“Get up,” instructed Jale. “We’ve got work to do.”

“More Galactic crap?” asked Sherlock innocently.

“No,” replied Jale. “The Black Hand Gang is defeated. But...”

“Our fame has spread throughout the spiral arm, opening the way to fortune and chicks?”

“No,” repeated Jale, starting to feel exasperated. “We might have a proper job.”

“Aye aye, Sir,” acknowledged the Holmes android, whose circuits were finely tuned to detect incipient criticism. “What kind of job?”

“We have to find a dream machine,” replied Jale.

\*

Jale looked at Rang, head of Rang Enterprises. He was significantly old, with a deep caliper that ran along the sides of his nose to the corners of his thin lips. His cheeks were furrowed. But from sunken sockets the eyes glowed intently. His body was encased in a shiny biosuit, whose connections kept the frail body functioning. Under the levitating desk, Jale could see that Rang lacked legs.

“I have a job for you.” The voice was brittle with age but incisive. There would be no wasted words in this interview.

“Good,” replied Jale. “My business is dying off.”

“What business?”

“Undertaking,” replied Jale.

Rang’s brow furrowed, sensing levity. The horizontal creases were deep above his eyes, fading in amplitude as they

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climbed a bald head.

Rang looked at Jale, erstwhile expert in tensor calculus. He saw a determined face, topped by a shock of too-long hair that possessed strands of gray. The eyes were steady, backed by intelligence and experience. The body was large and muscular, though the hands showed signs of stasis-drain. This was not a man who would be bamboozled. And while Rang felt slight tinges of jealousy and dislike, he knew Jale was the best person for the job.

“We have lost our dream machine,” said Rang.

“So I hear,” replied Jale. “Why is it important?”

“It’s a prototype.” The old director wondered how much to tell this young rebel, then decided to go ahead. “We have been working for a long time on a medical project. The aim is to cure the mentally ill by adjusting their dreams.”

“Mind control?” asked Jale.

Rang shrugged. His biosuit gurgled as nutrients flowed through it.

Jale said “Rang Enterprises is a big corporation. You make weapons and war robots.”

“True,” acknowledged Rang. “But I can assure you that we have no military designs for the dream machine.”

“Humph,” grunted Jale, wondering when they would get to the question of money.

Rang’s lips quirked into a small sneer. Abruptly, his levichair moved out from behind the desk and carried him to the window. Outside, a blood-red sun was descending behind a city of fantastic architecture. The headquarters of Rang Enterprises was a monolithic structure, rising from the other huddled buildings like a tusk.

“Do you know how many people — out there — are ill?” asked Rang. “How many will go to bed tonight, worried? And

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with bad dreams?”

Jale shook his head. “I usually take a couple of shots of rye before bed. I sleep all right.”

“Yes, alcohol is certainly a medicine,” said Rang. “But we can do better.”

Jale remained silent. The setting sun was filling the room with near-horizontal bars of red. Rang's desk was a floating board of glass, no thicker than a thumb; but the light at this angle showed it to be packed with sensory circuits. Was their conversation being recorded?

The old man returned to his desk, and put veined hands on its top. “Let me give you a demonstration.”

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The light in the room seemed to blur. The shiny walls turned to speckled plaster. The plush carpet became a threadbare rug with burn marks. The quietness changed gradually to a hum of drunken conversation. The old man was replaced by a young, naked girl.

Jale picked up his glass of beer, took a swig, and looked at the dancer. She was sliding up and down a greased pole with the casual indifference of the professional stripper. But when her glance met his, a spark of interest showed in her eyes. She cartwheeled over, nearly knocking his beer off the edge of the stage as she did the splits.

“Hello,” said the girl. She had light eyes, thick golden hair, and a gymnast's body.

“Hello,” replied Jale in a flat voice.

The girl pouted in mock disappointment. A flip took her back to the centre of the stage, where she went into a back-arch, her whisp of pubic hair pointing in his direction.

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Jale took a second drink of beer and yawned. His closing mouth took in a whiff of alien sweat, and he turned to see that two dark figures were seated beside him.

Without preamble, the nearer one said “We want to buy your brain.”

Jale gave a short, contemptuous laugh. The room was full of inebriated people, some human and others not, and this sounded like the start of another drunken discourse. However, as he looked at the aliens, Jale saw only steady if unreadable stares.

The girl whirled back and lay down on the stage in front of him. Her head looked backwards over the edge of the boards, and her upside-down mouth opened to reveal pearly teeth and a pink tongue. “Be careful. The *Purple Escargot* is a dangerous place.”

“Thanks,” grunted Jale. “What's your name?”

“Vestal,” replied the girl. “Vestal Virgin.”

Jale reached again for his beer.

But the scene was dissolving. The acrid smell of the aliens was replaced by the vaguely antiseptic smell of the office. The knobby rug was transformed into a soft carpet. The cracked plaster became a smooth wall. Vestal retroed to Rang.

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Jale found himself sitting again in the posh office, but his open hand was clasped around an imaginary beer mug.

“What do you think?”

“Impressive,” replied Jale, trying to look unconcerned. “But not entirely accurate.”

“I said, we are only in the development stage.”

“What's the range?” asked Jale.

“At least the diameter of the Milky Way,” answered Rang. “But it's very specific. It needs to tune in.”

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Jale frowned. There was something here he did not understand.

“Our prototype was a mobile unit,” said Rang. “We found that the best results were obtained if the unit was presented as a sympathetic human figure.”

“Was your dream machine stolen?” asked Jale. “Or did it just leave?”

Rang shrugged again, and there was a renewed gurgling as the biosuit pumped extra radicals into his shoulder muscles. “We don't know.”

“Do you have any idea where it is?”

“No,” replied the old man. “Out there, somewhere.” He raised his arm, indicating the breadth of the Galaxy. His arm was stick-like, and the exertion sent the suit into hypermode, its wearer slumping back into his chair.

Jale thought that, even if he declined the search for the dream machine, there was a potential fee here for any competent undertaker: Rang was a living corpse.

“How much?” demanded Jale, his mind running on remuneration.

“How much is the most you've ever been paid?” countered Rang.

Jale's mind started to click. Not about money, but about the fact that if Rang knew about the escapade at the *Purple Escargot* then he probably knew a lot more.

“Don't bluff, Rang.” Jale was not a haggler, and he sensed that neither was the head of Rang Enterprises. “You know. Code 4614513, for wiping out the Black Hand Gang.”

Rang blinked, slowly. “We'll double it.”

Jale lowered his eyelids as if considering, but in actuality he had decided. “All right. But under the condition that I take my android.”

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“Ah, yes,” observed Rang. “Your Sherlock Holmes master detective, late of the *Excelsior* hotel.”

Jale realized he had been right about Rang and his associates: they had done their homework.

“By the same rule,” said Rang, “I wish you to take one of *my* androids.”

Jale's face became truculent and his body stiffened in its levitating chair.

“Not that I don't trust you,” added Rang. “But I would feel more comfortable if I had an observer along. She won't interfere.”

“She?”

The door of the room opened at Rang's summons, and a pretty girl entered.

Rang started to laugh, a hiccupy sound that emanated from a spasmodic chest that his biosuit struggled to control. “Jale, meet Vestal. Mark II.”

Jale stared at the copy of his ex-girlfriend. Vestal lowered her eyes demurely, the last rays of the sun flickering in her yellow hair. Rang laughed apoplectically, then stuttered “Bon voyage. And don't do anything naughty.”

\*

The megamotors of the *Rigor Mortis* thrummed. Using the smuggler's technique of smearing their geodesic over many paths in accordance with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, they were undetectable. Jale sat in the corner of one of the two couches, looking cautious. Sherlock hovered in the background, looking uncertain. Vestal lay stretched out on the larger couch, looking beautiful.

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“You're not the real Vestal,” said Jale, taking a sip of Rigellian rye from a multifaceted glass.

“No,” agreed the girl. “But I have all her physical attributes.”

Jale ran his eye over her well-formed legs, slim hips, flat stomach and small but perfect breasts. “You have her attributes, but not her character. The real Vestal was a pain in the cranium.”

“Then why complain?” The android was self-assured. “I've been created specially for you, to do two things.”

“A and B?” interjected Sherlock. The master detective hovered nearby, protective and innocuous-looking, but with sharp eyes that were bright with ingenuity.

Jale smiled. After long association, he was used to the detective's juvenile sense of humour. However, the girl looked slightly baffled.

“What's A?” asked Jale.

“I've been programmed to get along with you,” replied Vestal. “I have a physical fidelity of better than 0.89, and a mental factor of better than 0.95. You should find me attractive.”

“I do,” answered Jale honestly. “But one of the reasons I liked the real Vestal was because her character was flawed. She was vulnerable. You don't seem to be.”

The android shifted her legs on the couch. The cabin was warm, and she wore shorts but no top. “I function well. But as I said, I'm programmed to get along with you.”

“Maybe I like people who *don't* agree with me,” observed Jale, facetiously.

The girl's full lips went into the old-remembered moué.

“If we're going to get along together,” said Jale, “you'll have to remember one thing which complicates the present situation.”

“What's that?”

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“I was kind of in love with the real Vestal.” He took a second sip of whiskey.

“I know.” A flicker of disappointment crossed the replacement's pretty face. “I won't push things emotionally if you don't want.”

“So you agree to sleep in separate coffins?” asked Sherlock, betraying signs of prudishness and jealousy.

“Do I have to sleep in a *coffin*? Don't you have beds?”

“Not now,” answered Jale. “This ship may look like an ordinary interstellar hearse, but I had the motors er... modified, and they take up a lot of room.”

Vestal did not look happy, but asked “Have you got one with pink lace lining?”

“No” replied Jale. “There are presently three coffins aboard. Mine is black with silver ornaments. Sherlock has one that is natural wood with gizmos in it for when he has to be off-line. The third is white plastic with a lining made of burgundy satin.”

“All right,” agreed the girl reluctantly. “But why can't I just off-line on the couch?”

Sherlock started to object, but Jale diplomatically interrupted. “Let's say we start you in the coffin and see how things go?”

There was a gap in the conversation, then Sherlock said “Let's celebrate our pact. Permission, Sir, to pour myself a drink?”

“You're an android,” pointed out Jale. “Alcohol won't do anything for you.”

“Not physically,” agreed Sherlock. “But I would welcome the mental feeling of solidarity.”

Jale, thinking that Sherlock was taking the old-boys-together syndrome too far, said: “Yes you can have a drink, but give one to Vestal as well.”

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Three glasses of Rigellian rye came together with a friendly clinking sound.

“Cheers,” said Jale.

“Salut,” said Vestal.

“Buttocks up,” said Sherlock, and proceeded to down the whiskey in a gulp. “Smooth as silk.”

This was not really true. Most of the liquor on the *Rigor Mortis* was rot-gut that its captain had accepted in partial payment for a burial on a ramshackle world at the end of the spiral arm. It was barely drinkable, even after the long period of stasis.

Thinking of this, Jale asked Vestal “What’s going on in the Galaxy?”

“Well,” mused the girl. “They finally figured out how to get Selipon working properly.”

“Good,” said Jale. The alien supercomputer at the centre of the Galaxy had been a conundrum for ages. Switched on accidentally by an errant schoolgirl, it had been disbursing information and acting as a central message control for as long as Jale could remember, but its full capacities had never been utilized. “How did they do it?”

“Some scientists found records of some clever programmer who had been using it.”

“What was his name?”

“Zek, I think.”

Jale did not blink. Sherlock dropped his glass.

“What happened to Zek?” inquired Jale casually.

“He disappeared. It seems he may have done stasis suicide.”

Sherlock picked up his glass, which had not broken, and his eyebrows peaked theatrically in a questioning look.

“You know,” continued Vestal. “Go into random stasis but without leaving the exit code.”

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Jale took a sip of his drink, his eyes going unfocused as his brain returned childhood memories of hunting for frogs, toads and newts in an abandoned quarry with a good friend.

“What else?” he asked eventually.

“The war seems to be heating up,” she replied.

“What war?”

Vestal looked at Jale in disbelief, then said “The war with Andromeda. Where have you *been*?”

“Away,” replied Jale shortly. “So, the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies are fighting?”

“Yes,” confirmed the girl. “At least, there's fighting in the outlying globular clusters.”

“Who's winning?” asked Sherlock.

“Apparently, they are. But I hear the Galaxy is going to get Selipon to intervene on our side.”

“It won't work,” said Jale decisively. “A race clever enough to build a machine like that would not have the moral inclination for war.”

The girl looked undecided, and then said “Rang is making millions out of it. He can hardly make war robots fast enough.”

Jale grunted. “Old men often have bitter instincts.” Vestal started to say something, but he cut her off. “And what is the other thing Rang wants you to do?”

The girl looked momentarily confused.

The master detective filled in the gap. “Article B of your instructions, Ma'am.”

“Oh, yes,” said Vestal. “That's simple: I am to give you information on the dream machine, so you can find it.”

“That would be helpful,” acknowledged Jale, who had been wondering about the shortness of his interview with the director of Rang Enterprises. “What does it look like?”

Again Vestal looked confused. “Didn't Rang tell you?”

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The girl searched Jale's blank face, turned to the equally ignorant-looking Sherlock, and then turned back to Jale. "It's a physical clone, but with the dream unit installed in its brain."

Jale had a funny premonition. "A clone of who?"

"Why me, of course," replied Vestal.

Sherlock groaned. "Trouble always comes in threes."

\*

The Andromedan cruiser slipped through space, seeding it with singularity bombs. It was a massive ship, but had a human crew of only two. The rest, numbering more than a thousand, were mechanoids produced by the Weapon Shops of Isher. The captain and his officer sat immobile on the bridge, their bodies encased in biosuits and their brains hard-wired to the craft's controls. Having gone into and come out of subspace too often, the captain's face was lined with fatigue. However, his voice was firm as he gave orders.

"Watch the geodesic. It's getting too defined."

The ship seemed to blur in its path. Ahead lay the Large Magellanic Cloud, a diffuse mass of gas and dust sprinkled with stars and civilizations. A satellite of the Milky Way, it marked the inhabited outpost of the Galaxy, which hung like a huge whirlpool beyond. Behind the ship lay Andromeda, another gigantic vortex of stars and worlds.

"How's the net?"

"Nearly complete," replied the first officer. Like the Captain, his face was haggard and his body was only kept from collapsing by the biosuit. "Three more to go."

The Captain adjusted the display, and it showed a net surrounding the Cloud, each node a bomb. "They won't wriggle out of that," he grated.

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Suddenly the display went orange and an alarm clamoured deafeningly through the ship. The display cleared, and both men half rose from their seats in panic: another craft had come out of subspace directly ahead.

“Evade!” shouted the Captain.

The first officer tried to react, but weariness dulled his brain. The gigantic ship started to turn, but slowly.

“They'll hit!”

Both men watched in fascinated horror as the Galaxy frigate rammed them. The screen exploded into bits as the armoured prow of the other craft sliced through the cruiser's bridge like a laser through butter. A piece of metal whinged through the cabin and neatly severed the first officer where he sat, the lower half of his body falling to the deck and the torso jiggling convulsively in the seat. Blood erupted and filled the cabin with a red cloud.

Wiping his eyes, the Captain stood up and staggered in the direction of the emergency console. The wires that had been embedded in his brain pulled out, leaving his skull pitted with gray-bottomed holes. The tubes that supplied the biosuit with nutrients broke off, letting his own blood leak out and add to the red mist.

The small screen on the emergency console showed disaster: the frigate from the Galaxy was stuck like a knife in the superstructure of the cruiser from Andromeda. Both craft were falling towards the Cloud.

“The bombs!” yelled the Captain. But there was no reply, except the sound of alarms and the bubbling noise from the first-officer's seat.

Abruptly, space seemed to pucker. The Captain screamed as his body was stretched by the curvature of the nearest singularity into a long, thin, writhing shape. There was a silent implosion.

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The Captain became a thread of biological material trickling along with others into the nexus.

Then spacetime repaired itself. Where there had been two ships and their crews, now there was just smooth emptiness.

\*

Jale padded quietly towards the central room of the *Rigor Mortis* on bare feet. Vestal was in her coffin, off-line and gently snoring. Sherlock was in the laboratory, recharging the blasters.

Jale carefully sealed the cabin and settled in front of the console. Their geodesic was a bit narrow, so he adjusted the probability matrix and the ship's possible paths broadened. Although he had no reason to think that they were being followed, a long time as a smuggler had made him automatically wary.

He opened a subether channel. Almost immediately, the screen cleared. He entered data into Selipon.

*You claim to be Jalaquin Algarve Lebedev Eddington?* asked the computer.

“I don't merely claim to be Jale. I *am* Jale, of Acheron.”

*Probably*, intoned the machine. *I have massive data on you from the era of the Black Hand Gang. However, a short identity check is required.*

“All right,” agreed Jale. The alien-thinking device seemed somehow more authoritative than how he remembered it. Perhaps the work of Zek and others had empowered it.

*The check begins*, said Selipon.

*What is the number in the colloquial alphabet that corresponds to the most commonly used transcendental number?*

“Blimey!” expostulated Jale. “More of this rigmarole?”

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Selipon wagged a figurative finger at him. *Come now. If you really are Jale of Acheron, you were at one time a brilliant mathematician. What better way is there to check your identity?*

“Okay,” conceded the man. “The answer is 5, for e.”

The computer made no acknowledgement of this, but proceeded. *Similarly, for the next most commonly used transcendental?*

“Conjoined?” clarified Jale.

*Yes*

“169, for pi.”

*Last question, said Selipon. How many times have you been in love?*

Jale pushed an irritated hand through his thick hair. “What kind of question is that?”

*A meaningful one, was the reply. Who better would know the answer than the real Jale?*

Reluctantly, Jale entered “1”.

*Your identity is confirmed, announced the computer. Your new PIN is 3154164. Do you wish to do another transaction?*

“Yes,” replied Jale. “Open stasis files. Key words are Zek, Acheron and BHG.”

There was a significant pause, then the computer replied *There is a file. But it has been closed for a long time. Also, there is no record of a password.*

“I request that the file be wedged open, subject to the supply of an unregistered password.”

This time the pause from the computer was lengthy. When the reply came, it was sombre and weighty. *Request granted. But file will be wedged only one-third, and protective protocols will be in place.*

“What protective protocols?”

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*To protect the file's contents, you will be mind-probed and rendered amnesiac in the event the password is incorrect.*

Jale felt sweat come out on his brow. The mind-probe was painful. He swallowed, but said "I accept."

The screen went through a series of displays that Jale had never seen before. Selipon's protective programs were multi-layered. Finally, the screen went white with only a question mark in blue at its centre. *Proceed.*

Jale licked his lips, wishing he had brought a glass of beer into the cabin. Then he uttered one word: "Newts."

The display broke into a flurry of patches that began to take on colour. The patches gradually assembled themselves into a face.

Jale said "Hello, Zek. What's up?"

"Nothing much," replied his boyhood friend laconically. "I'm glad you called. I was getting bored."

"Sorry," said Jale. "I've been in stasis myself. But now I'm out, and I have a job. Are you interested?"

"Sure."

"Okay," said Jale. "I'll get you out. Hold on."

\*

The Sphere of Civilization hung roughly half way between the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies, but its precise location was secret. Inside the darkened Sphere was a long oval table, occupied on each side by the politicians who believed they controlled events in their respective galaxies.

Garayan, head of the Galaxy delegation, was levitating slightly above the level of the table, holding forth:

"The deliberate mining of space around the Large Magellanic Cloud is a heinous provocation, whose consequences will soon

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rebound on the purulent architects of war to their eternal damnation, unleashing on them an apocalyptic destruction of supernova-like intensity that will send a moral message through the Universe that..."

Androyoos, head of the delegation from Andromeda interrupted:

"Put a sock in it, you old piece of flatulence."

This insult could, however, have been made in reverse, since Androyoos was of approximately the same age as Garayan, and both were only kept alive by biosuits that discreetly funneled away their gaseous and other byproducts to a recycling unit. The latter, perhaps due to the disinterested attitude of the service personnel, did not work well. Hence the fact that the Sphere of Civilization was referred to by the working class of both galaxies as The Rotten Egg.

"We are perfectly positioned," pointed out Androyoos, "to colonize the Local Group of Galaxies. We can take over M31..."

"Sir," quietly interrupted an aide. "Andromeda *is* M31, by the old Messier catalogue. You mean M33."

"We can take over M33," corrected Androyoos, "and from there the other forty or so galaxies in this region of space. Then, we can venture further afield, to the Virgo cluster. Eventually, I predict that we can colonize the whole Supercluster."

"And I predict," interjected Garayan testily, "that you will never be able to make love to a woman again because our agents have learned that you cannot get it up!"

There was pandemonium around the table. Various cries were heard from each side.

"Prove it!"

"Come over here, then."

"Does it matter?"

"Mind over matter..."

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Eventually the hubbub subsided under the fierce stare of Lord Landsberry, who was number 10<sup>80</sup> of his generation. Originally from one of the oldest aristocracies in the Milky Way, he had a Lee-type complex and now commanded the armed forces of Andromeda. He had enjoyed distinguished military careers on both sides, but his pugnacious character had been dulled somewhat by spending too much time near the lightweight aluminium motors to be found in most starships.

“Gentlemen!” he intoned in a sepulchral voice. Then shaking his hoary head sadly, he lowered his voice to ground level and loaded it with pathos, before repeating “Gentlemen.”

The two delegations fell silent by sporadic degrees, as Lord Landsberry swept them with his rheumy gaze. The quietness of the room seemed to placate him, however, for his voice was more collegial and indeed insidious when he said for the third time “*Gentlemen.*”

A few of the delegates started to look at each other self-importantly, of the opinion that this was the prelude to a speech of Churchillian importance that would be remembered in the annals of the Universe.

“Er...” said Lord Landsberry.

There were shuffles around the table.

“Er...,” repeated the dignitary, “Er..., I've forgotten what I was going to say.”

Pandemonium broke out anew.

\*

Jale, Vestal and Sherlock sat around the table in the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis* as it hurtled through space. The man's glass was full with red liquid, while those of the two androids rested where they had been left, unwashed. Among the other bric-a-brac on

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the table was a copy of PanGalactic Trivial Pursuit (the Singularity Version where the chance of getting a correct answer is one divided by infinity). Jale scowled.

“I don't know,” he said wearily. “What *is* the number of the rape crisis centre on Trantor?”

“It was, I'm afraid, a trick question,” responded Sherlock, who was in charge. “There has not been a reported case of rape on Trantor in living memory.”

“Well,” commented Jale, who was in a bad mood, “it always was a boring place.”

“Sir!” objected Sherlock. The android fussed with the questions, and turned to Vestal. “Miss, your category is: classical rock music.”

Jale interrupted “That's not fair. The old Vestal knew all that stuff, and the new one must know it too.”

Sherlock leaned over, cupped his metallic hand around Jale's ear, and whispered “Not to worry. She'll never get it.”

Jale thought that a game where nobody could answer any question was a poor excuse for entertainment; but knowing he was feeling grumpy, he kept quiet.

“Ready?”

“Yes, Shirls” replied Vestal sweetly. She was curled up on the couch with her traditional shorts but nothing else. So far, she also had not been able to answer a single question; but she was enjoying the intimate atmosphere of the cabin. The air was warm, the couch was soft, and she felt snugly. Best of all, Jale was acting silly.

“The song *I Can See For Miles* was written in the Golden Era,” said Sherlock by way of preamble. “It later became the national anthem of Acheron. But initially, it enjoyed only limited success, leading its author Pete Townshend to say that he wanted to spit on the fans. Now...”

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“What's a mile?” interjected Jale, whose interest had been perked by the mention of Acheron. He vaguely remembered the song being played at local meetings as a boy.

“An ancient unit of distance,” replied Sherlock. “It's obsolete.”

“Like this dammed game,” growled Jale. “What's the question?”

Sherlock ignored Jale and turned to Vestal. “On that song, who was the original drummer?”

“Keith Moon,” replied Vestal, casually massaging her right nipple. “The *Who* recorded it with Pye, but later Keith conked. Sad.”

Jale and Sherlock exchanged looks, the former accusatory and the latter apologetic.

“Well,” said Vestal. “Since I got the only right answer out of more than a hundred, I suppose I win.”

Sherlock shamefacedly gathered up the parts of the game and departed for the laboratory to finish recharging the blasters. Jale, who had exercised earlier in an effort to retone his muscles after stasis, looked surly because he had the kind of mind that required activity. Laziness was like poison to him. Vestal, considerately, leaned over and filled his glass with whiskey — which was a different kind of poison for which he had more tolerance.

There was a long silence.

Finally, the girl said sympathetically “The original Vestal must have been an idiot. You're a great man.”

Jale laughed disparagingly. “And that's why I've spent most of my life working as an undertaker, and now for your egomaniac boss, Rang?”

“You only work for one person,” said Vestal seriously. “Yourself.”

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Jale calmed down, realizing that there was some truth in what she said. Not many people have the luck, or stupidity, to insist on charting their own lines through life. He took a sip of liquor.

“But you won't get paid unless you find the dream machine.”

“I know,” replied Jale, who while individualistic to the point of pain yet appreciated the convenience of money. “I *will* find it.”

“It won't be easy,” warned the girl, with an ambiguous tone in her voice.

“Not easy in terms of geography; or not easy on me?”

“Both,” responded Vestal. “It could be anywhere in the Galaxy by now.”

“I've got a friend who will help,” confided Jale. “He'll locate the dream machine, *if* it can be found.”

Vestal looked discomfited. “That's the easy, mechanical side of the problem.”

“So there's a difficult, mental side?”

“Oh, yes.” Vestal's eyes clouded. “Do you have nightmares?”

“Occasionally,” conceded Jale.

“Do they seem real? Do they scare you?”

Jale after a pause, said “Yes.”

“Then you'd better get ready,” warned Vestal. “I may *look* like the dream machine, but *it* can do things with your mind that are weird.”

“The weirder the better,” said Jale masochistically, though he knew this comment was the result of alcohol and not logic. Curiously, he recalled a sticker that he had once seen on the back of an interstellar speedster, which opined *The world is not weird enough for me, unless I eat broccoli.*

“Don't you ever take things seriously?” demanded Vestal, looking annoyed.

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“Sometimes,” admitted Jale. “But real life seems ridiculous to me. I prefer to live with my thoughts.”

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Vestal. “I can see why Rang hired you. The dream machine and you are going to have a humdinger of a scrap.”

“Why does it have to be a conflict?”

“Because the dream machine is insane,” replied Vestal, by now annoyed. “It can cure people of mental problems, but it can also make them worse.”

“Then it's no different from the average psychologist,” pointed out Jale.

Vestal suddenly reached out for Jale's glass and poured half the contents into her own. A drink seemed to make her calmer. “The dream machine is only a prototype. Its brain doesn't work right.”

“Whose does?” replied Jale deprecatingly. He strongly resented being lectured to as if he was a schoolboy. He also slightly resented Vestal drinking whiskey for which she had no functional need.

A potential argument was deflected by Sherlock. He entered the cabin and laid two fusion blasters on the table. They were illegal, but Jale hefted one with familiarity. “Charged?”

“Yes,” confirmed Sherlock. “They'll drill a hole through anything.”

“Okay.” Jale took possession of one and shoved the other towards Sherlock.

Vestal abruptly stood up, her face openly angry. “Where's *my* gun?”

“You won't need one,” said Jale. “I'll take care of you.”

Vestal stamped her foot with enough force to set the glasses on the table vibrating. “I don't need you to look out for me,” she snapped. Her face became calmer but remained tense. “This job

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is not going to be like hunting down the Black Hand Gang. Before you get finished with this contract, you will be *terrified!*”

Jale, feeling more sober, looked at her. “I’ll take my chances,” he said. And shoved the blaster into his belt.

## SUBWAYS AND STARS

The *Rigor Mortis* settled into a warm, shallow sea. Jale appeared in the hatch, smelled the humid air, and jumped down into calf-high water. The footing was firm, and as he walked around the ship he became confident that there would be no difficulty with lift-off: the nozzles of the megamotors crackled as they cooled, but were above the gently lapping surface. He took a handful of water and tasted it — fresh with no trace of salt, though there was a slight tang of weed. This was a good place to replenish their supplies.

It was also a beautiful place. The beach curved in a long scimitar, framing a bay with a small island from which trees erupted in lop-sided stances. The waves tapped on small stones, worn into smooth coins over the ages. The gray rocks were backset by a green deciduous jungle, through which gaudy birds flitted nonchalantly. The only negative was a haze on the horizon, marking the location of the nearest city.

Ignoring this blemish, Jale sloshed through the shallow sea and walked up the beach. The flat pebbles reflected back the heat of the orange sun, and outside the shadow of the ship he felt suddenly warm. The black thermosuit adjusted automatically, but with a gesture of impatience Jale pulled it off and threw it onto a large boulder. Nude, he began to walk along the beach.

The place was quiet, with that peculiar silence that is only present far from people. Occasionally, a bird squawked in the jungle, or a bigger-than-usual wave rattled on a rock; but otherwise the beach was dumb. There was no wind: the waves, coming from somewhere far away, could have been computer-generated.

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Jale bent down to pass under a massive tree. Its roots were half out of the ground but still functioning, in defiance of some ancient storm. The trunk ran almost horizontal to the beach. The lower branches were dead and gray and waterlogged; while the upper ones were alive, vibrant with long green leaves that sucked in the light. A scrape from the hoary bark reminded him of his nakedness. But there was no Friday footprint in the patches of sand: the place was deserted.

After a while, Jale came to a narrow channel that ran from the sea into the jungle. Turning, he followed it into the bush. Here under the trees, the air was still damp but noticeably cooler. He felt his scrotum contract. Pushing aside a burst of foliage, he found himself on the edge of a primeval swamp. Edged by dense stands of bulrush, the water was open in places but clogged in others by floating lilies. A few of the lily pads were so big that they tempted to be walked upon. But he decided to forgo this: a splash and a big tail showed that the swamp harbored large life forms. Standing quietly, Jale saw dark shapes slipping through the water. A sudden smacking sound accompanied by foam showed the site of some conflict: either an inter-species fight or a co-species mating encounter.

Breaking off a bulrush, he ran his hand along the furry brown top. A few bits of it detached and fell with downy seeds to the ground. He bit the end of the stalk, sucking at its hollowness. The taste was tart, with a hint of shellfish that reminded him of an old girlfriend.

Reluctantly, he ended his sojourn and was turning to head back when an ululating cry pierced the forest. Something swung through the trees. The figure jumped from a branch to a liana, sweeping through the air with the easy skill of an athlete.

Vestal let go of the vine and landed expertly in front of Jale. She was naked except for shoes of black mud. Coquettishly, she

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bent down, wiped the mud from her ankles, and used it to draw two simultaneous circles around her nipples.

She said nothing, but her eyes were gleaming. Jale felt the onset of tumescence.

But instead of acting on it, he said "Here," and handled her the bulrush.

\*

The pumps of the *Rigor Mortis* sucked in air, scouring away old odors. The biounit sucked in water, filtering out the weed and adding it to the food store. But Sherlock was not happy.

"You should not have offended her," said the detective android.

"I thought you didn't like her" responded Jale.

"I don't," confirmed Sherlock. "But she is a necessary part of the mission, and we have to get along with her."

"I suppose so," reasoned Jale. Then: "Where is she, anyway?"

"Sulking in her coffin."

Jale adopted a man-to-man approach. "Would it help if I gave her a present? Say, a pair of crotchless panties?"

"I have difficulty with the terminology, Sir. Firstly, my inventory file informs me that we do not have any aboard. Secondly, my lexicon file informs me that I don't know what the hell they are."

"Skip it," said Jale magnanimously. "Let's lift."

The *Rigor Mortis* powered up. In the stern, the mighty motors that still appeared on the audit of the Acheron navy as 'Missing' started to throb.

"Contract," said Sherlock, sitting in the copilot's seat.

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“Contact,” corrected Jale. His deft hands flicked over the pilot's controls. The ship shrugged off water and began to lift.

“Aha!” said Jale exuberantly. “We are revived! We have water, food and coffins.”

“But, Sir...”

“The whole Universe lies at our feet!” The *Rigor Mortis* turned, blasted part of the sea to steam, and headed upwards through fleecy clouds.

“Sir, I have to remind you that...”

“Not now, Sherlock,” interrupted Jale. “We have places to go. People to meet. And we have to buy pieces of bamboo that can be twisted into furniture.”

The android, realizing that his human mentor was in one of his moods, said “Jale, you are being slightly stupid. Also...”

“This whole mission is like that,” interjected Jale. And unaware of how fateful it would become added: “It may be stupid, but it could be interesting.”

“Also,” insisted Sherlock, “your thermosuit is still on the boulder where you left it.”

“Oh,” said Jale. He suddenly realized that he was maximally naked. But as he looked at his loins, the hairs on them seemed to go fuzzy...

---

The scene blurred. The instruments on the control panel became the heads of commuters. The cabin became a subway car, hurtling not through space but through rock. Fresh air turned stifling.

Jale looked down. He was still naked, but nobody seemed to notice. “I'm not really here,” he said to himself.

On his side of the gangway was a line of single seats. On the other side was a series of larger seats, most occupied by three

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people squeezed together. The nearest trio consisted of two old ladies, who from their numerous parcels looked as if they had been on a shopping trip; plus a youth, who stared out of the window at the passing strata with a toothpick wedged in his mouth. Jale did not recognize the women. But the youth was Spyle, from whom Jale had once purchased a pool cue and a set of snooker balls.

“Spyle!” called Jale. The subway car was filled with reverberating noise. Perhaps this was why the gangly youth showed no response. However, a short time later Spyle got up and headed for the exit. His indolent gaze passed right through Jale.

“Spyle!”

No reaction.

“Well, if I'm not here I shouldn't be able to talk to him,” reasoned Jale.

But then, what was the point?

The subway car started to slow. Other people began to get up from their seats. Most made use of the two rails that ran down the length of the car suspended from its ceiling. A sharp deceleration sent the crowd surging forward, but hanging from the rails, they resisted in an automatic and communal response. Finally, the car came to a squeaky halt and the doors flipped open.

Should he get off?

People were surging through the exit, leaving the car partly empty. The air that wafted through the doors was even more hot and dusty than that inside. Jale stayed put.

The usual return surge of commuters did not materialize. Indeed, only one individual got on. He was an elderly but spry-looking man with gray, slick-backed hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee beard. He was the kind of groomed individual who

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looked as if he ought to be wearing a trilby hat. However, he did possess an antique umbrella, whose handle he hooked expertly on one of the overhead rails. He held onto the pointed end of the umbrella as the subway car began to move.

The doors, reacting slowly, clicked shut. Jale noticed that above the entrance was a display panel. The words *Mind the Doors* blinked out, and a series of numbers appeared. As he looked, they increased. The car began to sway slightly as it accelerated, the numbers matching its speed.

So far, none of the other passengers had said anything, though the mechanical noise level was high. Now, however, a boy ran down the aisle and yelled “Stop! I want to get off!”

The car just carried on gaining speed: 20, 30, 45...

Petulantly, the boy threw down the popsicle he had been sucking and headed back to his seat. The discarded popsicle did not break or melt, but disappeared through the floor. Bending low, Jale could discern no hole or other sign that told of its whereabouts. Looking around, Jale noted that the seat he was sitting on did not appear to be attached to the floor: there was no weld and there were no rivets.

“Imperfect,” grunted Jale, referring to the representation. He felt more confident. “I could get a better dream out of a bottle of rye.”

But he was soon to revise this opinion. The old man who had boarded the car was removing white gloves to reveal surprisingly sinewy hands. He laid the gloves carefully on a vacant seat, and Jale saw that they were finely stitched. Also, the umbrella that hung from the rail had neat, sharp-edged gabardine furls.

Suddenly, the old man leaped into the air. His hands grabbed the overhead rails, and he began to swing along the gangway like an ape.

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Baffled, Jale watched as he swung past, and turned in his seat to watch the old man's progress. At the end of the aisle, the man switched hands expertly and began to swing back. Jale could hear the smack of his palms on the rails as he went past.

Back in front of the doors, he did not drop down, but instead did a slow chin-up, looking at Jale over the top of the bar.

"Okay," acknowledged Jale. "You've got my attention."

However, none of the other people in the car seemed to notice the display of calisthenics. The boy sucked indifferently on a new popsicle, while on the opposite side a woman casually breast-fed a baby.

The old man now raised his feet slowly in gymnast style, eventually touching the dirty ceiling with the tips of polished shoes. Fascinated, Jale noted that he was wearing mauve spats. And dimly discernable under striped pants were old-fashioned gaiters that held up gray socks. A vague memory stirred in Jale's mind; but unlike Spyle, he could not put a name to the geriatric gymnast: he was like a combination of Colonel Ash of the *Victoriana Snooker Club* and the friend who had trained the electric crocodile.

The old man held his excruciating position on the rails, legs horizontal and arms vertical. His eyes moved from those of Jale to the display over the doors. The subway was humming along at cruising speed, and the display read 157.22. The old man's eyes flicked meaningfully between Jale and the display.

Abruptly, the car began to decelerate. The numbers on the screen began to tumble. The old man jerked, did a flip in the air, and came down with a perfect landing.

Jale felt like he should hold up a score card, but contented himself with clapping. The old man, ignoring him, calmly picked up his white gloves from the seat and pulled them on. He

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unhooked his umbrella as the car came to a halt. Turning on his heel, he stepped through the doors and disappeared.

---

The boy with the popsicle became the navigation node. The lactating woman and her infant became the large and small retro-rocket switches. The *Rigor Mortis* was in empty space, a capsule of life filled with sweet air.

Sherlock was saying "..., so I do not see how we can hope to locate the dream machine."

Jale said, "You can run the number 157.22 through the computer. See what it means."

The android turned in the copilot's seat, a slight look of irritation on its finely-chiseled features. "I don't believe you have been listening, Sir. If the machine is out to cure mental problems, it won't bother with you or me."

"You overlook," pointed out Jale, "that it's not completely sane itself. It will feed on apparently stable people in an attempt to cure itself."

"You mean, it *wants* to be found?"

Jale shrugged. "I don't know. But it wants to be cured. I say again, please analyze the number 157.22, particularly with regard to its breakdown into centi-primes."

Sherlock got up, slightly annoyed but willing to work.

Vestal entered. "Jale?"

"Yes."

"Jale." There was a pause. "I'm sorry about the scene in the forest. I guess I just felt, er...liberated."

"That's okay," said Jale, who was thinking about something else. "Vestal?"

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The girl slid into the copilot's vacant seat. She was demurely dressed in a gown, and Jale suddenly remembered that he was flagrantly naked.

But there was something Jale needed to ask.

"Vestal, who at Rang Enterprises came up with the idea of the dream machine?"

"Rang," replied the girl.

Jale frowned. Rang was a businessman, not an inventor.

The girl continued. "But it was put together by Brounlee. He's head of research. And, as I hear, owns a big chunk of the company."

"What does Brounlee look like?"

"Not as old as Rang," said Vestal. "But pretty old. He wears old-fashioned clothes."

"Spats?" asked Jale.

"What are spats?"

"Things you put on top of shoes to keep them clean."

"Oh, yes." Vestal's memory was good. "Purplish things. And he always wears gray socks. Sometimes in board meetings, when his legs are crossed, you can see that they're held up by funny straps."

"Gaiters," confirmed Jale. Then, "There's something odd here that I don't get. I've never met Brounlee, have I?"

"Not as far as I know," said Vestal. "Why would you?"

Ignoring the question, Jale mused "Why would Brounlee want to clone my ex-girlfriend?"

"That's easy," replied Vestal. "They checked your history file, and they know you got along better with her than any other female."

"No, I don't mean that," said Jale. "You are a clone of the dream machine. Why did Brounlee make his machine look like the original Vestal?"

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A frown appeared on the girl's forehead, and she shook her golden mop of hair. "I don't know. It does seem odd, from the historical side."

Jale was thinking intensely, but there could logically be only one conclusion: Brounlee was not who he appeared to be.

"But," added the girl, "they did want the machine to be an approachable, attractive humanoid. So it makes some sense." There was a pause. "The original Vestal *was* pretty, wasn't she?"

"Yes," said Jale. Then turning to the girl, "You should know."

Vestal smiled, warmly and without pretense. "You know, I *like* you."

"Well," grunted Jale uncomfortably. "If you like me enough, please go and get me some clothes."

\*

Rang levitated around the edge of his desk, revealing the stumps of his legs. Brounlee, not for the first time, said: "I can make you new legs pretty quickly."

"I told you, No." Rang was comfortable with his truncated body and his custom-made chair that could go anywhere. Who, especially when they were ancient, needed legs?

Brounlee sat in the chair occupied at a previous meeting by Jale. Patiently, he waited for Rang to get to the point.

"Will he be able to find the machine?"

Brounlee considered, before replying: "I think so. He's tenacious. But it won't be easy."

"Why the hell didn't you make the thing more obedient?" demanded Rang angrily. "If one of our competitors gets it, we're sunk."

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Brounlee flicked a speck of dust off one of his spats, taking his time to reply so that Rang could become calm. “Nobody else could have made it. You ought to be glad we've *got* one — even if it doesn't work perfectly.”

Rang scowled. He was obliged to put up with Brounlee, who was the most experienced geneticist around. But the old, bald patriarch still owned three quarters of Rang Enterprises, and he felt he deserved to be kept better informed.

“Does Jale suspect?”

“You mean,” clarified Brounlee, “about the bomb?”

“Yes!” Rang was testy with the intolerance of too much age.

“No,” said Brounlee. “He can't possibly find out. Even Vestal doesn't know she's carrying it.”

“Well,” said Rang, finally getting to the issue, “after he finds the machine, you know what to do.”

Brounlee allowed a small look of distaste to cross his face. He disliked destroying good biomaterial.

However, he said: “Yes, Sir.”

\*

The Sphere of Civilization echoed with the rantings of Garayan and Androyoos. Through the darkened dome could be discerned the shapes of the Galaxy and Andromeda, twin spirals whose civilizations were largely unaware of their potential fates.

“We,” said Garayan, sweeping his arm over the members of the delegation on his side of the table, “will not accept any base in the region of the Milky Way.”

“And we,” responded Androyoos, “will not be cooped up in Andromeda. M33 is too far away. We *need* a base!”

“You *are* base,” sneered Garayan without purpose. “You are no better than the slime on a frog's penis.”

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There was applause, and shouts of “Hear, hear!” from the Milky Way delegation, at this amphibian-related comment.

“Frogs don't *have* penises,” countered Androyoos. “They mate in water made thick with sperm and eggs, like the cesspool from which you and your spawn have only recently emerged.”

There was a hammering of fists on tables, as the Andromeda delegation appreciated this impromptu but erudite response.

The insults proceeded. One of the cleaning staff, lounging in the dim recesses of the Sphere, turned to his mate and said “I think they're both a couple of toads.”

Unfortunately, the toads had power. While the slanging match proceeded between members from both sides of the table, Garayan's chief of staff handed him a file. It was entitled *Phase Change as a Weapon*. It was subtitled *Strategies for Initiating an Explosion of the Cosmic Vacuum so as to Preserve a Balance of Terror*. Garayan considered the implications of the report, waiting for the hubbub to die down and yield an opportunity for him to announce that the Milky Way possessed the ultimate weapon.

Androyoos turned to his general in command, and received a file. It was entitled *The Doomsday Machine*. It was subtitled *Proposals for Initiating a Phase Change in the Fabric of Spacetime so as to Preserve a Balance of Power*. Androyoos smirked in anticipation of his announcement that Andromeda possessed a weapon that promised overwhelming devastation.

There was a lull in the argument. Garayan and Androyoos rose to their feet simultaneously.

\*

In the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis*, Jale put his glass of beer back on the table while Sherlock fiddled with the controls for the

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forward screen. It showed massive numbers of pin-point stars, of which one was brighter than the others.

Sherlock said “Interesting. We seem to have discovered a nova.”

Jale said “Well, there are lots of them, I...”

---

But suddenly, the pointy stars seemed to smear... The shiny android turned into a massive telescope. The dark screen blossomed into general blackness. The dream's grip this time was much stronger.

Jale took his eye away from the finder telescope and rubbed it vigorously. Was it the beer he had drunk, or was there something wrong with the nova in Serpens?

Stepping back from the small finder scope, he ran his eye over the bulk of the main instrument. It towered over him, moving slowly and silently to track the tiny dot of the new star. The light of a myriad other stars poured in a faint haze through the open slit of the dome, burnishing the big telescope with a silveriness that his dark-adapted eyes had no difficulty detecting. The hyper-tube on the end of the main instrument collected photons from the nova at a steady rate. On top of the tube, an ordinary digital clock read off the time in large, red figures: 03:15.

Jale scratched the stubble on his jaw. He had shaved at noon, which was the normal time he got up when he was observing; but his whiskers had already grown, and he had the gritty taste in his mouth that goes with the early hours of the morning. Thinking about the nova, he reached out and took a swig from the bottle of beer that stood on top of the instrument bank.

Almost reluctantly, he stepped forward and put his eye again to the finder telescope that rode piggyback on the giant.

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The dot of the new star in the constellation Serpens was still there. And the peculiar haziness of the other stars around it was still there, though more noticeable now.

There was something wrong. Either with him or the nova.

Worried, he reached out behind him for the bottle of beer; but only succeeded in knocking it off. The crash of broken glass was shocking in the silence of the night, and echoed back at him from the curved surface of the dome.

“Damm!” said Jale, quietly. He reminded himself to try and cut down on his drinking — but that would have to be another time. Right now, he had more important things to worry about.

The clock read 03:20. There was a long time to go on the exposure. Looking under the clock, he checked the readouts for the various frequency channels. There were six of these, each with a number in red that changed progressively as more photons from the nova were registered. Jale's eyes went into slits as he noted the reading for gamma channel: it was too low.

“Damm!” he said again, this time loudly.

Why should gamma channel be registering too little light? It was not even astrophysically important, recording as it did the radiation from some of the less common elements, such as carbon. But even so, it was puzzling that it should be so low.

Jale's eyes were itchy from staring at the readouts and the fatigue of early morning. Rubbing his face, he made for the narrow door at the other side of the dome. Broken glass crunched underfoot, but he ignored it.

The door rolled sideways on squeaky castors, and he stepped out into the night. The silent stars blazed overhead; it was a good night, clear with no breath of wind to vibrate the dome. Looking downwards, he noticed two dots that were not stars: the lights at either end of Main Street in the village below. The only points of brightness in an otherwise black countryside, they were the

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village's only concession to civilization. The people who lived in the village knew the value of darkness at a site used for the most sensitive astronomical observations. In fact, the village only existed because of the Observatory. It consisted of a few houses for the permanent technicians who serviced the telescope, a dormitory for visiting astronomers such as himself, and a small hotel for the tourists who turned up sporadically.

It was fall, and there were no tourists staying at the hotel now. Jale knew this, because he had been there until late in the evening before. The barman, who was also the hotel's owner, knew him well and tolerated him. However, his head had been clear when he started the nova run at 03:10 in the morning. So if there was something wrong with the image and the data, it was not to do with him. Ergo, it must be to do with the nova.

Closing the squeaky door on the quiet night, a third but highly unlikely alternative suggested itself: there could be something wrong with the scope. This was improbable, because it was a sophisticated device, loaded with self-checking mechanisms that would not even allow it to operate if there was anything seriously amiss.

However, his hand moved to the communicator, feeling his way and leaving the monitor off so as not to disturb his vision. There was a muted buzz, which was cut off after only three repeats.

"Yeah?", asked a voice, sleepy but functional.

"Hi, Quincey?" replied Jale. "I'm up on the hill. I might have a problem. Can you come up?"

A pause. "Be right there."

Almost immediately, there was the sound of a motorbike grinding its way up the mountain from the village, and soon after there was a muffled thud as the main door to the dome closed.

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A somewhat overweight figure materialized at Jale's side and joined him in a scrutiny of the red numbers.

"Gamma channel is way low," explained Jale without taking his eyes off the instruments. "And the images of the other stars around the nova are blurred."

"But..." started Quincey, then fell silent. There was not much point saying that such a thing had never happened before. It had happened *now*, and that was what was important.

This was what made Quincey the most sought-after of the half-dozen telescope technicians attached to the observatory. He had been born in a shack near the border (though on this side of it), and instead of missing half of school to pick oranges like his friends, he had done his homework and read extra about electronics. Now in middle age, he had two main interests: the telescope and his family. The latter kept increasing in size, and Jale suddenly recalled that the oldest (a girl of thirteen) had recently undergone treatment to correct a genetic defect.

Wondering if he had been rude not to ask after her, Jale said a bit awkwardly "How's your daughter doing?"

"Oh, all right," replied Quincey slightly surprised. "She came back from the city yesterday. She should be fine in a week or so." Then he added, also a bit awkwardly, "Thanks".

Silently the two men stared at the readouts as the telescope slowly tracked the nova over their heads. Somewhere in the constellation of the Serpent a new star had appeared. Or, more correctly, an old star had been reborn. The energy involved was colossal. But after passage through millions of lightyears, the signature of that cosmic event was only a trickle of photons that needed a hyper-tube in order to register.

Jale knew as he looked at the innocuous red numbers, that he was seeing the lightest fingerprint of an event so terrific that even his professionally-trained mind boggled at the energy involved.

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The nova was exciting. But the reading in gamma channel was now down to half its expected level. The nova was not only exciting, but also disquieting. What was happening to the carbon atoms out there in space?

With a grunt, Jale turned away from the instruments, saying “Better check things out. I don’t really think it’s the scope, but if we have to send out a message I want to be sure it’s the star.”

The message he referred to was the way in which members of the astronomical community used the subether to communicate major discoveries among themselves. You did not cry wolf to all the other observatories unless there really was one.

Quincey heard rather than saw the astronomer walk through the darkness towards the coffee room. He knew Jale drank more alcohol than was good for him. But as the observer crossed the dome, his footfalls were steady; and his eyes after half a night in darkness were so well adapted that he did not even come near to stumbling against the numerous pieces of equipment that littered the floor. If Jale said there was a problem with the images, then there was one.

Not that Quincey needed anything to confirm the anomalous reading on gamma channel, which shone insolently in front of him. “Crap!” he said, with feeling.

Jale, slumped in his chair and deep in thought, looked up as the clock on the wall changed a number to read 03:40.

Halfway through the program. And, if gamma channel was to be trusted, something had happened to at least half the carbon that would normally be found between the nova and the observatory. What was going on?

In the corner, the coffee machine burbled inanely. The fluid in the glass container looked black, because here as everywhere else the light was red, in order not to disturb dark-adapted human eyes. Jale rose, and ignoring the coffee machine, went to the

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opposite wall. Here on metal shelves were stored old journals and magazines, distributed in crooked piles. Discarding a copy of *Playboy* with a well-endowed girl on the front, he uncovered a pile of twenty or so copies of *Nature*. Systematically, he began leafing through them. And two-thirds of the way through the pile, was rewarded by finding the article he remembered.

It was by a famous theoretician, and had an impossible title: *On the Feasibility of a Phase Change in the Vacuum Caused by Highly Energetic Particles from Accelerators*. Jale read the paper rapidly, and soon had its meaning distilled: the vacuum of “empty” space was not necessarily stable, but could be triggered into a lower energy state by very energetic particles, such as might be produced by the planned new generation of accelerators.

Jale sat for a while, his body calm but his mind seething.

The coffee machine’s glopping noise finally broke his train of thought, and he picked up a paper cup and walked over. Through the glass, he could see bubbles forming, which expanded as they rose through the dark fluid.

If you could have a phase change in coffee, why not in the Universe?

He looked at the paper cup, and threw it unused into the garbage container.

As he stepped back into the cavern of the dome, the clock over the instrument bank read 04:01.

But Jale was thinking about times of a different kind. How long had it taken the photons from the Serpens nova to get to Earth? Answer: eons (give or take a dynasty or two). How long would it take the wavefront of a phase change to get to Earth? Answer: a bit longer, because space was not completely empty, so any change in its nature would propagate at slightly under light speed.

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“No malfunction in the hardware,” announced Quincey. His voice sounded strange — like the voice a person would use when announcing a bereavement to a close relative, the timbre not so much a sign of what had been said but of what the implications might be.

Jale turned towards Quincey. The latter had a careworn face, the combined effect of troubleshooting on a telescope and supporting a family consisting of four children and a pregnant wife. Jale had the typical bachelor’s lack of understanding of the last kind of stress; but like a douse of the liquid helium that was cooling the telescope’s instrumentation, he suddenly regretted not having had more to do with the Quincey family. They were nice people.

“Gamma channel still low?” asked Jale mechanically.

“Yeah,” was the puzzled reply. “Almost down to zero.”

The clock read 04:04. The exposure was nearly done.

And after that? Jale grunted, and turned away from the clock. His brain had completed half a train of thought, and he was striving after the rest like a child who joins up dots on a page to get a picture, and strains to realize the final image. He only had a few more dots to go...

“Jale,” said Quincey quietly, “there’s something really bad, isn’t there?”

Jale did not reply immediately. His dot-to-dot picture was almost complete: nova, energetic particles, phase change, expanding bubble, us...

But why the drop in the gamma channel?

Slowly, the logical part of his brain forced him to link up the last few dots, even though the picture they made was one of ultimate disaster: carbon, low binding energy, unstable, life...

His knees did not go wobbly, but his mind was suddenly flooded with unpleasant images. He scrutinized hundreds of

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these, like a photographer looking at a long roll of film in front of a light — before a buzz distracted him.

The clock on top of the instrument panel read 04:10. The nova program was over, and from the far side of the dome came the faint sound of servo-mechanisms, moving the telescope away from the slit in the roof to its resting position.

Jale looked at gamma channel: nothing more had come through for the last part of the exposure. The light waves were signaling next-to-no carbon left in interstellar space. How much longer before the phase change itself reached them?

He had no precise answer.

Neither did he want to answer Quincey's question, to which his shocked brain had finally reverted.

Jale looked at the technician for a while. "Yes, there's a problem," he eventually confirmed in a neutral voice. "But it can wait until tomorrow. Quincey, go home. Your wife will need help with the kids come breakfast time."

Quincey frowned, baffled and worried. He looked like a trusted dog, asked to go to its kennel when a thief arrives. But sensing something indefinable, he slowly moved towards the door. There, he paused long enough to say in a half-hopeful, half-resigned voice, "Goodnight, Jale."

"Bye, Quincey." Jale was already abstracted again. Mechanically, he began moving around the dome, putting things away and switching off pieces of equipment. Above him, the massive telescope hung blind: the sky already had a wash of twilight, too faint to be called dawn but too strong for useful observing. The stars were still clearly visible through the slit, however, and to get a better view Jale squeezed through the squeaky door onto the catwalk outside.

Down in the valley, the lights at either end of Main Street were still on. But now he could see the faint trace of the road

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that wound down the mountain to the village. Near its base, a small moving figure: Quincey on his motorbike, coasting so as not to wake the neighbours.

As if by some instinct, the figure turned around, and waved briefly.

Jale raised his arm perfunctorily. Then he turned and re-entered the dome.

The bottle that he had broken earlier in the night again crunched underfoot. He fetched the broom that lay against the telescope's support structure, and swept the glass into a neat pile against the inside wall of the dome.

Replacing the broom, he noticed that the exposure clock had stopped at 04:10 and was flashing insistently. He registered this; but then remembered something from one of his previous observing runs, and began feeling about in the space behind the girders that supported the telescope. He was rewarded by finding a dusty bottle, more than half full of rye.

Where the telescope's massive steel support met the floor of the dome, the metal curved in an inviting fashion. Here Jale settled down, half-sitting and half-lying. Through the rectangular slit in the roof of the dome, thousands of stars still shone, resisting the encroaching dawn. He had no trouble picking out the nova.

He took a swig from the bottle, and put it down carefully by his side. Then he folded his arms, and looking at the sky, prepared to wait.

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The night shrank back into the ship's screen and the hard support of the telescope became the soft cushion of the sofa. But Jale still had the taste of rye in his mouth. "Zeus!" he said, shaken but intrigued.

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“Sir?” asked Sherlock, looking at the man closely.

Jale did not reply; but catching the content of the dream before it faded, ordered “Analyse the number 04.10, and see if it fits into any prime sequence.”

Sherlock, looking puzzled, went over to the controls and started working.

Vestal entered the cabin. “Are you okay? You look a bit... funny.”

“Yerss,” replied Jale, taking a drink of real beer to wash away the taste of imaginary rye. “Your boss Rang can certainly make a nice product. But it’s still not perfect. Quincey was an old boyhood friend, but he’s been dead a long time. And *Playboy* hasn’t been published in ages. They were just memories.”

“I don’t know what...” began Vestal, but was interrupted by Sherlock.

“I think I’ve got something,” said the android excitedly. “The number you just gave me could be a declination measured in old Galactic coordinates.”

“And the first number I gave you is nothing to do with primes, but just a measure of right ascension?”

All three of them scrambled for the navigation computer. It had some trouble converting from the obsolete coordinates to the ones currently in use, but finally the screen cleared to show a supergiant star.

“Betelgeuse” said Vestal

“How did you know that?” asked Jale with admiration.

“It says so on the bottom of the screen” replied the girl innocently.

“Oh.”

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“But Jale,” said Sherlock. “It’s a *bad* place. Notorious for gangs, triads and turf wars. Half the population is criminal and the other half is insane.”

“What more logical place for the dream machine?” countered Jale. “Set a course.”

“Sir! I object!”

“Don’t,” ordered Jale. “The blasters are recharged. And I’m hungry.” Betelgeuse was renowned for its bars and restaurants.

## BRUNCH ON BETELGEUSE

The surface of the star rose up, a vast red desert whose curvature was lost to Jale and Sherlock as the *Rigor Mortis* descended. Adjusting the screen to cut down the glare, Jale noted that the blood colour was not uniform: there were darker patches where the lower temperature allowed buildings to cluster — cities in the dimples of an old sweet potato of a sun. The instruments showed that the hull of the ship was heating up; and shortly after, the cabin began to feel hot. The smell of beer hung in the air. Jale burped: he was hungry, and was looking forward to some oriental food.

The screen went blank, and then there appeared an unsmiling face with slanted eyes. “Betelgeuse traffic control. At risk of being shot down, please file landing plan lickety-split.”

“Certainly, *mon ami*.” Jale (using quasi-mode), smiled insincerely at the screen while his hand skittered over the console. He chose one of the smaller, less-prosperous cities.

“Hokay,” said the inscrutable face. “My uncle at customs take care of you. Suggest you use thermosuits.”

“Velly hot down there?” asked Sherlock, whose cape was metallically challenged. But the screen had gone blank again. “I *told* you they weren’t friendly.”

“Be quiet,” said Vestal. “You’re making me feel nervous.”

The ship came in on a long, low trajectory. It scooped out a groove in the hydrogen and helium of the star’s surface and began slowing. Coasting, it came to the edge of a large indentation in the surface of the star and began to descend towards the distant buildings. The instruments registered an increasing amount of oxygen, and by the time they slid to a halt

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they were in a breathable pool of it. Jale switched off the main motors and went aft, followed by Sherlock and Vestal.

The hatch opened, and all three staggered back as they were hit by a blaze of red light and a wall of heat. Jale grabbed his thermosuit and scrambled into it. The two androids fiddled with their thermostats. All assembled, the three stood in the hatch and peered out.

Hands. A pair of them, projecting from the dark interior of a customs office. They were yellowy-brown and adorned with enormously long fingernails.

“Doctor Fu Manchu?” whispered Sherlock. “Or is there a nose-picking contest in town?”

“Sshh!” admonished Jale. And then, in a neutral voice: “Hello.”

No answer. The hands did not even move.

“Greetings from nephew,” said Jale.

“Ah, yes.” The voice was clipped, but disembodied. “How number-one nephew doing?”

“Still employed,” responded Jale honestly. “But busy.”

“Ah. He shoot down many ships today?”

Jale laughed nonchalantly. “You know what number-one’s like: always on the trigger.”

“Yes.” There was a tinge of disappointment in the voice.

“I not get many ships come through here. My station in a... *backwater?*”

Jale’s pupils had shrunk to points under hunched eyebrows, and he could now see that the customs office was a dilapidated shed whose exterior had been singed and cracked by the heat. Projecting from behind it was a beat-up levicar. It was pointed down the incline towards town, held in place by what looked like a large chunk of tofu.

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Vestal said, trying to answer the officer's question and be positive about their surroundings: "It's very...rural. You know what they say: gold may be hidden in a piece of coal."

"Please to cut crap," responded the customs inspector shortly. "Have basic petrology course: Au never found with C."

Vestal flounced off, leaving the rest of the interview to Jale and Sherlock.

"Why you visit Betelgeuse?" demanded their invisible interlocutor.

"We are here for brunch," responded Jale. This was at least partly true, and with the remote polygraphs now in use at many places in the Galaxy it was best to stay on the side of veracity.

"Hokay." There was movement within the dark confines of the office. The hands projected slightly further, revealing wrists that were not so sunburned; and Jale could discern in the gloom a pair of almond-shaped eyes, which scrutinized them with an intense scrute.

"Probe reveals you have coffins. Why three?"

"Because two are not enough," chipped in Sherlock.

"Shut *up*," growled Jale inaudibly. Then, in a heavy and normal voice: "We are interstellar undertakers by trade. We have traveled from far Acheron, and are in need of succour."

"Ah," was the thoughtful response. "Believe you can get cup of it at local restaurant, the *Red Dragon*."

"Good," replied Jale, confident but confused. "So, can we...proceed?"

"Yes," was the surprising reply.

Jale said "Thanks," and started to turn around.

"But only after poor customs official receive usual nominal gift, aimed at non-capitalist redistribution of wealth."

Jale turned back, no longer surprised.

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Sherlock said in a low voice “Sir, I will not countenance bribery. It goes against my Victorian directives.”

“Understood,” said Jale. “But it’s a way of life here, and there’s an old oriental saying...”

Sherlock started to object, but Jale cut him off and said seriously “Go to the laboratory. In the third drawer under the bench you will find a lacquered box engraved with a snake. Bring it...”

“But, Sir!..”

“*Do it,*” ordered Jale. “And, don’t bang the box.”

The android departed, unhappy.

Jale, attempting to keep up a front of diplomacy, said “Number one android has much to learn.”

“Indeed,” was the flinty response. “But we must all learn, if we are to be safe.”

Ignoring the vague threat, Jale took the box from the returning Sherlock and handed it across. The hands took it and placed it on the shelf outside for inspection. The long nails stroked the polished wood surface, and then expertly flipped the bronze hasp. Inside, cocooned in plush, was what looked like a large, yellow jewel.

“What is?” The voice was suspicious and hard. It could not obviously, given its size, be a real gem.

“It’s a doorknob,” replied Jale honestly.

There was the sound of sucked-in breath from the blackness of the shed. Quick to head off a possible problem, Jale added: “It is made of amber. Carved by ancient craftsmen, it once adorned the portal of a noble’s palace.”

Actually, he had won it in a pool game in a bar of ill-repute on Acheron. But it *was* made of amber, carved into many facets that even in the blanketing illumination of Betelgeuse sent out an attractive coruscation.

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There was a pause, while the hidden official picked it up. Jale stared, as the benailed fingers rotated the artifact horizontally to catch the light reflected from the side of the shed. Then: “What is inside?”

This guy was no fool, thought Jale. He answered “Most amber things of value have trapped flies from ancient geological periods. This one has trapped belemnite.”

“Cannot say that word. What is?”

“A fossil animal from the warm seas of the dawn of life.”

There was an uncomfortably long gap in the conversation, while Jale and the customs officer stared at the doorknob. Finally: “Hokay”.

“Thanks,” acknowledged Jale.

He walked with the android detective back to the entrance to the ship, where Vestal sat looking bored. Jale ushered them inside and closed the hatch.

“I must object,” said Sherlock in the gloom of the hold. “There are moral laws...”

“Please be quiet” grated Jale with irritation. “We need to move.”

The *Rigor Mortis* edged forward, supported by lines of force in its hull that interacted with the magnetic field that threaded the surface of the star. The buildings of the town ahead became more distinct in the heat as they approached, including one with a large sign that said the *Red Dragon*.

Suddenly, Jale made the ship veer off.

“We aren’t going for brunch?” complained Vestal, who had entered the control room.

“Yes, we’ll go,” replied Jale. “But not here.” The ship was moving away from the town, concealed by a hummock of hydrogen. The rear screen still showed the customs office.

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Suddenly there was an explosion, and the shed disintegrated. A few of the bits clanged against the ship's hull: but then there was quiet. Sherlock and Vestal turned to look at Jale.

"Don't blame me," he expostulated, taking his hands momentarily off the controls. "There's an old saying: *don't turn a knob you don't know.*"

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The restaurant was crowded, but the decor was pleasant. There were screens embroidered with serpents, and on the wall an old-fashioned telephone in the shape of a snake.

A smiling waitress directed them to a table in the corner. Jale, taller than most of the patrons, hit his head on a paper lantern and subsided into a levichair that sank under his weight. A pot of tea and three cups appeared. Sherlock poured for them all, rotating the circular table so that each of them had a libation.

"Cheers," said the android, knocking back the tea. He smacked his thin, metallic lips. "Nothing like a good slug of Darjeeling."

"Sherlock," said Vestal, sipping on the edge of her cup, "Are you feeling all right? Maybe your ethnic files are mismatched?" Before the android could reply, the waitress came up. "You want to order now?"

Jale looked at his companions and said "Even though you folks don't *need* to eat, this is my treat."

Vestal smiled, and perused the menu. Sherlock also looked, but seemed to have trouble interpreting it.

Jale said "I'll have won-ton soup, chop-suey, and bean sprouts with fried mussels. Also, a spring roll to start with."

Vestal licked her lips. "I'll have a spring roll also. Then, chow mein; and pork, fried with ginger."

"And for you, Sir?" Asked the waitress looking at Sherlock.

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The android's eyes squinted at the menu. "Er, I'll have chicken cacciotori to start, then a whale curry, and a glass of Guinness to finish."

The waitress looked only slightly confused, and said "Golly, no got. Maybe you try something vegetarian?" She leaned over and pointed to a section of the menu.

"Okey-doke," said Sherlock. "I'll have bean turd."

"That's bean *curd*," hissed Vestal. "And since this is supposed to be brunch, why not try the thousand-year-old egg?"

"All right," agreed Sherlock. "I'll have bean curd and geriatric egg." He looked relieved to have chosen, then added: "With a bamboo shoot stuck *in* the turd."

Vestal groaned. Jale said nothing, but focussed acutely on the android, sensing something amiss.

"Sir," said Sherlock. "Everything's going blurry..."

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Selling telephone service on Betelgeuse was reputed to be difficult. But I had confidence in myself. And if I could seal a contract with Ring Wong, I would be free of financial responsibilities for some time.

The businessman lived in a petite palace set atop a ruddy hill. A short series of steps led to an ornate portal adorned with an amber doorknob.

Impressed by the abode but confused by the overwhelming redness of everything, I tried not to gawk. I advanced casually towards the oriental figure which had appeared in the doorway. Unfortunately, the lack of contrast between the redness of the entrance steps caused me to misjudge my footing, and I fell flat on my non-gawking face.

Luckily, gravity on the surface of Betelgeuse is quite low. So instead of crashing down, I descended in a slow and dignified

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fashion, coming to rest with my arms extended over the top three steps and my nose resting on the fourth. From this inclined position I was able to see my host Ring Wong looking down at me with a slightly puzzled expression.

“No need to pay homage in this gratifying but outmoded manner,” he said with a noticeable accent. “Please to rise and enter, Sherlock Phones.”

Flexing my nose, I overcame the weak gravity and rose gracefully from the steps. “We have an old saying,” I remarked as I followed my host into his home. “When on Beteljuice, do as the Beteljuicians do.”

My companion stopped, perhaps noting my shift to the vernacular name, and resumed his progress. “We also have many old sayings,” he commented. “But most of them shitty.”

I felt gently rebuffed. Clearly, selling this person telecommunications equipment was not going to be easy. I wished I had spent more time learning about the culture of the people who lived on Beteljuice. I knew that they were descended from two clans, the Wongs and the Wings, and still maintained some of the manners of their ancient forbears. But beneath the traditional exterior there was apparently some modern practicality. I would need to be alert to differentiate between cultural nuances and straight business sense.

“Please to sit,” invited Ring Wong.

I subsided cross-legged on one side of a table that was heavily decorated with dragon motifs everywhere except on its small top. Wong sank down on the opposite side, his traditional one-piece dress telescoping into itself, a collapsing pyramid with a round head on top. From the latter, two narrow eyes, made even more expressionless by the unrelieved redness of the surroundings, regarded me closely. It looked as if the all-important Brunch Ceremony was about to begin.

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My host clapped his hands twice in staccato fashion. Immediately, two bowls floated into the room from behind a screen and landed lightly on the table, one in front of each of us.

I suppressed a shudder. My bowl contained what looked to be minced-up raw liver. The fact that it was sculpted into the shape of a poppy flower did not add much to its appeal.

Ring Wong, however, had no qualms. He removed the spoon that was attached to the side of the bowl, dug into the reddish-brown mess, and put a quivering load of it into his mouth.

With reluctant fingers, I was preparing to do the same when a happy thought occurred to me. This repulsive dish, which looked like uncooked liver, might in reality be chocolate mousse. As I considered this idea, it seemed increasingly plausible. Beteljuice was, after all, a star. And while its surface was relatively cool, there were no pastures where animals might be raised for meat. I seemed to remember that food was brought into the system from outside in some unusual manner, though I could not recall exactly what. I also remembered that some of the ancient clans had been vegetarian before they travelled into space, a fact that seemed relevant in the present situation. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that what I was about to eat must actually be a cunningly disguised, imported vegetable product.

Disconcertingly, the first mouthful *tasted* just like raw liver.

To refuse to eat would, however, have been impolite at best and might even lose me a valuable contract. So I munched on stolidly, keeping the idea of chocolate mousse in mind, until the bottom of the bowl appeared.

My sacrifice did not go unnoticed by my host. "I see you like our traditional appetizer," he remarked.

I bent my lips into an acquiescing smile, though keeping them closed tight to discourage regurgitation.

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“Let us talk a bit about business,” continued Wong, “before the next course.”

This sounded promising. “Certainly,” I replied, my desire for money overriding my desire to vomit. “I have studied the data, and believe I understand your needs. The basic problem appears to be that Beteljuice is so big that to send a message around its circumference via a satellite relay system would take an unacceptably long time. The only solution therefore is to send messages directly through the interior of the star, and in that way cut down the transit time between cities.”

Ring Wong inclined his head in a courtly gesture which I took to indicate approval of my presentation.

“There are two ways to send messages directly,” I continued. “One is to shoot messages in capsules through the centre of the star to the other side. The other, more *traditional*, method is to use telephone lines laid in channels through the star’s interior.”

In making this astute appeal to Ring Wong’s traditional background, I was hoping to sell him on the idea of telephone lines (about which I knew a fair amount) as opposed to message capsules (about which I knew hardly anything). At this moment, however, I encountered some slight customer resistance, in the form of a skeptical inquiry as to how I would get the telephone lines into the interior of the star. To this I replied that I would adopt the simple but sure method of digging holes.

Wong considered this for a moment, before commenting. “Mister Phones, one of my illustrious ancestors once say to me something that embodies much wisdom. Namely: Man who digs hole in Beteljuice soon gets burned bum.”

“Ah,” I said, lamely. “You mean the temperature is too high beneath the surface for the idea to work?”

My host nodded.

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“Oh well,” I responded, trying to appear unconcerned. “Maybe telephones were not such a good idea anyway. After all, you don’t want people to Wing the Wong number. Ha ha.”

My companion looked at me with a face like an asteroid: stoney, cold and inhospitable. I realized with a bad feeling that I had miscalculated. With a name like Ring Wong, perhaps one of his ancestors had done exactly that, and passed the burden of the mistake down to the present generation. In a Galaxy where all the good names were used eons ago, many of us have been saddled with appellations that were the result of circumstances rather than choice. My own name, for example, originated with an ancestor who only took cases involving people who had been murdered by being hit on the head with telecommunications equipment. Needless to say, my predecessor went bankrupt.

“Mister Sherlock Phones,” said my host, “Beteljuice is an old star. About five billion years. But your joke is even older.”

I was embarrassed and dismayed. It was starting to look as if I had ruined my chances of selling anything on Beteljuice — even message capsules. But mercifully, it appeared that a guest could only be allowed to suffer so long. For Ring Wong gave another clap of his hands, to signal the next course of the meal.

My gloom over the failed repartee lifted somewhat as I examined the new dish. It consisted of a pile of what looked like rice, with short strings emerging from under it and running radially to the edge of the plate. There was only the one central dish, so I divined that we were supposed to help ourselves from each side.

I hesitated, wondering what to do about the strings that emerged from under the rice. Intuition told me that there must be something on the end of each string, but I did not know if I should pull one to find out.

“This,” explained Wong, “is specialty of Beteljuice.”

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“Indeed,” I responded. “What is it called?”

“Mice and rice,” was the reply. And he proceeded to pull on one of the string-like things, revealing a soggy and furry lump on the end. Holding the mouse by the tail above his mouth, he lowered it carefully in, and began to chew with obvious enjoyment.

Astounded by this, I watched speechlessly until Ring Wong’s gullet had stopped working and the mouse had been swallowed.

I was still sitting there like a piece of interstellar debris when my host said: “Please to try. Someone like yourself who values our customs, and appreciates our way of doing business, will certainly like.”

My mind raced on an erratic orbit. Was it a real mouse? If not, could I stomach it? And if it *was* real, was a contract for message capsules worth the purgatory of this meal? No, the mouse could not be real, I argued. The reasons I had mustered for believing that the first course was a disguised vegetarian one, also applied here.

I looked at Wong. His narrow eyes, normally expressionless, seemed now to hold a hint of amusement. I decided to call his bluff.

“I am honored to partake of such a delicacy,” I intoned. With hardly a tremor, I pulled out a pseudo-mouse by its tail and dropped it into my mouth. At this point in the not-so-promising brunch, I was glad to receive some unexpected help from my own suffering anatomy. For my throat muscles, sensing something bulky and nasty on the way, took charge and sucked the food down in an automatic gulp.

To confirm my triumph, I took a handful of rice, pressed it into a ball, and popped it into my mouth. Mice and rice, indeed. Poh!

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Ring Wong was no longer so inscrutable. Respect was plain to read on his face. There was a lengthy pause while he sat eating rice, before he spoke: “What price, two thousand message capsules?”

Aha! A breakthrough. The question caught me slightly unprepared, but I went into reflex-sell mode, and was able to work out a profitable price after only a slight delay. “I think we could do it for seven million.”

He blinked. I could see that the price was more than he had hoped to pay but still within what he was able to pay.

I watched interestedly while Wong continued to eat, consuming several more of the mice. For my part, I held to the rice, something which my host did not appear to notice. Indeed, he seemed to be in a reverie, and it took me a little time to figure out why. Normally, in a situation of this kind, I would have expected the customer to try to reduce the price. But in this case, Ring Wong appeared reluctant to try for a cheaper deal. I eventually concluded that the kudos I had gained from eating the mouse, combined with his own cultural constraints, made my host unwilling to bargain.

The second course had been cleared away, and the third and last one served, before Wong resumed the conversation.

“It is expensive,” he said in a neutral voice.

My optimism decreased a bit. Perhaps I had misinterpreted him. Not wishing to risk saying anything that might be damaging, I turned my attention to the last installment of the brunch.

It was a glass of what looked like blood. Timidly, I put my hand around the container. It was warm. When tilted, the blood-stuff left a greasy film on the inside of the glass that slowly congealed.

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I looked up and found Ring Wong regarding me speculatively. My eyes did not flinch, but returned calmly to the red liquid in the glass. Despite its nauseating appearance, I reasoned that it was *probably* just the local equivalent of tomato juice.

“Cheers,” I announced, and took a sip.

My throat constricted. The vile stuff was certainly so close to warm blood that my esophagus let it trickle down only with extreme reluctance.

Ring Wong, having seen me take in the red liquid, appeared not to notice that I was having difficulty with the next stage along the alimentary canal. He sipped at his own drink absently, preoccupied with thoughts about our impending deal. When he did glance at me, I was able to deflect his attention to the ceiling by looking up. It was good for me that he was primarily an eye-contact man. By the time his gaze returned to his drink, *mine* was in the aspidistra. With an innocent if blood-broadened smile I said: “Well?”

“Yes-indeedee,” he replied somberly. “A deal.”

He did not offer to shake hands, and I did not wish to lean over the table to initiate anything because I was feeling pretty sick. But I had my deal.

Shortly thereafter our soirée broke up, and Ring Wong followed me solicitously to the door. Outside, at the bottom of the steps, my levicar basked in the red light, waiting to carry me to the spaceport.

My host’s eyes rested on the car as he said farewell. “Have good trip, Sherlock Phones, and hope to see you again very quick.”

“Certainly,” I responded. Even if message capsules were not my specialty, there would be time to find out about them before I returned to supervise the installation of two thousand of the

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things, and collect my seven million in payment. “And thankyou for a delightful brunch.”

“My pleasure,” rejoined Ring Wong. “Not many visitors like Beteljuice victuals, but you exception.”

I smiled a worldly smile, my foot resting carelessly on the running-board of the levicar. “I have travelled widely and come across many kinds of strange but nutritious foods. Perhaps I could bring back a vegetable of your desire on my next visit?”

“No, thankyou,” said Ring Wong with a quaint bow. “Vegetables make me puke. But please ask captain of your ship to check bilge when you return. Mice grow fat and juicy down there.”

Smiling, he closed the door, while I reached for a barf-bag.

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Sherlock shook his head, dazed. None of the other people in the restaurant seemed to notice, but Vestal half rose from her chair and Jale leaned over intently.

“A dream?” asked Vestal.

“It was real,” said the android in a plaintive voice. “At least, mostly real. The only thing wrong is that people don’t use phones anymore.”

“There’s one on the wall,” pointed out Vestal.

Jale pushed back from the table and strode over to the phone. Grasping the snake sculpture, he put the antique to his ear.

*“This phone is only a replica. If you would like to know more, please go to Windy Widgets on Weevilholme. Repeat: Weevilholme, Weevilholme, W...”*

Jale slammed back the receiver and returned to the table. It was now covered with the various dishes they had ordered.

“I don’t feel hungry,” said Sherlock weakly.

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Jale shrugged and looked at Vestal. She slowly picked up her utensils. Jale said “Well, *I’m* going to eat. We have a trip ahead.”

“Where to?” asked the girl.

“Weevilholme,” replied the man, shovelling food into his mouth.

\*

Brounlee ducked into the washroom as he heard Rang’s levichair approaching. One of the other executives of the Enterprises was there, so Brounlee pretended to urinate. But when the sound of the boss’s chair had faded, his second-in-command left the washroom and slipped into the adjoining room. Behind a pile of cases was a subether unit.

There was an irritating wait, which Brounlee tolerated by sucking on the wooden handle of his umbrella. The screen cleared, revealing an oriental person with impassive features.

“DNA code,” said Brounlee, transmitting information.

There was a pause; and then more irritatingly the receiving person said with a heavy accent “DNA code unclear. Identity unclear. Pleasy go to oldy passwords.”

Brounlee cursed in a gentlemanly fashion, pushing a white-gloved hand through his gray hair. “Very well.” He disliked this ancient stuff. “*The proton-proton chain is running down.*”

“*But not the carbon-nitrogen-oxygen cycle,*” was the prompt response.

“*Maybe we need the r-process?*”

“*No. We have stable fusion.*” There was a break as the remote agent looked at his employer. “What you want this time, Mister Brounlee? Happy to oblige on same money basis as before.”

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“There are three individuals on Betelgeuse, not so?”

“Yes so,” replied the other. “They blow up customs shed. Velly clever way. Nobody find out how.”

Brounlee, who did not know this but saw it as a missed opportunity, asked “But why didn’t you arrest them?”

“Dead person not member of our triad.”

“Oh,” responded Brounlee, trying to understand the politics involved.

“What you want this time, Mister Brounlee?” repeated the figure on the screen.

“I want the girl,” said the individual who intended to be the next head of the Enterprises.

“What you want we do with the men?”

“Let them continue with their search for the dream machine.”

The person on Betelgeuse did not *look* puzzled, but his next question showed that he was. “You want we let men go, but take girl? What we do with her?”

“Don’t harm her,” ordered Brounlee. “Or do anything to her. You know what I mean.”

The agent nodded.

“Send her back to Rang Enterprises in stasis.”

There was another nod, but then “What if Jale don’t like? He, as you say, one tough hombre.”

“Don’t stop Jale or the Sherlock Holmes robot from continuing with their job,” reiterated Brounlee with authority. “Just grab the girl and send her back.”

A final nod, and the screen went black.

\*

Jale emerged from the restaurant into an effulgence of red that caused his eyebrows to drop like shutters. The heat was

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terrific, but his new thermosuit was the best on the market and adjusted immediately. Even so, his face was uncovered and his cheeks pricked with the unaccustomed blast of radiation from under the sidewalk. By comparison, Sherlock seemed relatively unconcerned, though his silvery cape shone like a jewel. Vestal panted a bit, but she had on only shorts and her android innards were up to the job of keeping her cool.

The inhabitants of Betelgeuse did not seem to notice the light and heat. The street was packed with people. They jostled with each other on the sidewalks, a lot spilling onto the road so that the few levicars abroad made only sporadic progress. The interiors of the numerous stores were all dark, however, and shoppers ducked into them like ants going from hole to hole. Each store advertised its specialty by the simple device of hanging it outside: the poultry store was marked by twenty or so plucked and dried chickens; outside the fishmonger's hung a bunch of smoked herring; the entrance to the local delicatessen was a curtain of desiccated snakes.

"Do they eat *anything* here?" asked Vestal.

"Apparently," replied Jale. "But everything is imported from other worlds, so it makes some sense to make use of whatever they can obtain."

The two stopped in front of a store whose ornate front offered some shade. In the gloom was a large tank, full of frogs of a kind Jale had not seen: they were fat and slimey, and their mouths seemed to be permanently open as their bloated throats quivered with incessant conversation.

"You want one?" asked the storekeeper.

"No thanks," said Sherlock, who was feeling better. "I already *have* a mother-in-law."

The storekeeper looked nonplussed.

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“Sherlock,” said Jale gently, “remind me to upgrade your humour chip from the banal to the merely silly.”

Vestal called “Look, guys! Let’s go in here.”

She walked towards a store adorned with an uncountable number of scarves. In the light from the star, they all looked red, but their designs were different. Inside the shop, however, the merchandise took on its true colours; there was everything from the most sultry orange to the most clinical violet. Vestal’s eyes became avid, and she plunged into the stock with glee.

Jale and Sherlock felt uncomfortable. The man was wondering if there was a bar in the neighbourhood where he could get a big, cold glass of Rigellian beer. The android was wondering what the difference might be between banality and silliness, and if a change would introduce a comic distortion to the memoirs he still intended to write.

The storekeeper fixed them with an unmoving stare. She was an old lady, with a lined face and wrinkled lips, who though was still supple enough to sit cross-legged on a rattan mat atop the counter. In contradiction to the usual friendly greeting and eagerness to do business, she said nothing.

Sherlock, feeling nervous under this static response, finally raised his hand in the old gesture of friendliness, and said “How!”

There was no answer; but the dark, slanted eyes seemed to acquire a spark of interest.

Encouraged, Sherlock flung an arm upwards. Speaking slowly, and enunciating every word, he said “We come from far away.” He drew a circle in the air. “We have travelled for many moons.”

The old lady shifted her position slightly on the mat.

Sherlock pointed to Jale and then back to himself. “We undertakers.” He made digging motions. “We bury dead

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things.” His eloquent eyes looked through the ceiling of the store. “Help stiffs join the Great Spirit in the sky.”

The ancient storekeeper slowly parted her lips. With a perfect east-side accent she asked: “What circus are you bozos from anyway?”

A short while later, they were out on the sidewalk again. Vestal had two beautiful scarves. Sherlock had an overload on his shame circuit. And Jale had a raging thirst.

“Let’s try this place,” said the man. He pushed open a battered door, took two steps down rickety steps, and found himself in a seedy bar. The place was half full of locals, who surveyed them casually and then went back to their drinks and card games. The air was thick with the smell of unwashed bodies and something else.

“Sir,” asked Sherlock. “Are we here to rescue Isa Whitney, the Man with the Twisted Lip, from his opium addiction?”

“No,” replied Jale. “We’re here so I can get a beer.”

Jale walked over to the bar. Vestal followed, keeping close, while Sherlock looked around dubiously. The human asked “You got Rigellian red?”

The barman nodded. He cast a glance at Vestal’s bare breasts and at Sherlock’s silvery cloak, and deciding they were not beer drinkers, plonked down one glass on the counter.

“Thanks,” said Jale, and drank half the contents in a gulp.

“Jale,” said Vestal in a low voice. “This is not a nice place.”

“Nonsense,” replied the man. “Your original used to do exotic dances in places like this.”

“Well, I’m *not* the original,” was the annoyed response. “And I don’t appreciate comparisons.”

Jale shrugged. He was used to dives. However, the bartender had disappeared, leaving the till untended, and this was

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unusual. He unzipped his thermosuit and put a hand down between his legs, feeling the concealed blaster.

“What are you *doing*?” demanded Vestal, embarrassed.

“Taking precautions,” was the terse reply. The barman had reappeared, but hung at the end of the counter trying to look busy with drying glasses that were already dry. “Maybe you’re right,” conceded Jale. “Let’s get out.”

He finished his beer and followed the girl towards the exit. The android detective fell in behind them.

“Sherlock...” started Jale.

“I have already detected anomalous behaviour,” said the detective. “I have my gat.”

However, nothing happened as they ascended the creaky stairs.

Until the door opened and they found themselves confronting four masked thugs with guns.

One of them let off a laser blast that missed Vestal but smashed the wooden door to matchwood. The next two assailants raised stun guns; but Jale had by now gotten out his illegal fusion pistol, and reduced a member of the enemy to red fudge.

Vestal screamed and ran out into the street, hunkered over and with her hands over her head. Somebody in the attacking party grabbed her, leaving two assailants to face Jale and Sherlock.

Sherlock was flustered. The android clumsily took his weapon out from beneath his cape, and seemed surprised when it reduced one of their attackers to a mess of tissue and bone in the gutter.

Jale calmly shot off the leg of the remaining assailant. He walked up to the writhing figure and hauled it upright with a shaking fist.

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“Why?!” he growled.

The thug did not answer, however. Whether this was a mental block of secrecy or due to a physical state of shock, Jale could not tell.

“*Why!?*” he demanded again, shaking the man so that his fluids sprinkled like rain.

But the victim’s face went white as his blood spurted from the stump of his leg onto the sidewalk. Jale found himself holding a corpse. The blood from three men was spreading in a large pool, red on red.

“Sir,” interrupted Sherlock.

Jale dropped the lifeless figure of the attacker into its own congealing fluids. “What?”

“They got Vestal.”

## MULTIPLY CONNECTED?

In the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis*, Jale sat quietly furious. Sherlock hovered nearby, his aquiline mouth turned down at the corners. The rear screen showed Betelgeuse as a dwindling red spot. The colour reminded Jale that there was a bottle of Rigellian rye somewhere around. He got up, stomped over, and nearly pulled the door off the liquor cabinet. The fluid sloshed into a heavy-based tumbler. Sherlock, with a questioning look, took out his meerschaum pipe. There was no objection, so he started to stuff it with tobacco.

“Sir,” offered Sherlock. “This is a problem that requires intense thought in a concentrated atmosphere. Permission to ignite shag?”

Jale grunted in acquiescence. Usually he discouraged smoking aboard ship, as the recycling unit could not easily handle tobacco, and after a bout of the weed had a tendency to produce food with a peculiar flavour.

“Sir,” said Sherlock, attempting to raise the mood with an injection of levity. “Your actions outside the restaurant saved us in the nicotine.”

Jale got the joke, but scowled. A haze of perfumed smoke began to form in the cabin. “They weren’t out to kill us,” he observed. “The guy with the laser missed, and the others only had stun-guns.”

“Ergo,” added Sherlock, sucking on the meerschaum to aid ratiocination, “they either wanted to intimidate us or they wanted to get something.”

“They got what they wanted,” said Jale with conviction. “They got Vestal. The question is: why?”

“Perhaps they intend selling her into a harem? She *is* pretty!”

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Jale barked a short, contemptuous laugh. “Those triads have no shortage of girls. Why risk a public confrontation? And anyway, she’s an android. People with harems want the real thing.”

“So they want her for some androidal thing,” commented Sherlock. “Then, it has something to do with Rang Enterprises.”

Jale’s eyes narrowed. But he could not think of any reason why Rang would send along his own representative on a mission and then (clumsily) try to kidnap her back. Aloud he said “There’s also another question, apart from the *why*. There’s the *how*.”

“You mean, how did they know we were on Betelgeuse?”

Jale nodded. “Vestal had not communicated with Rang — I checked the subether log.”

Thought has a habit of trickling towards a conclusion. Jale and Sherlock reached the same one.

“She...” started Sherlock.

“...is bugged,” finished Jale.

The man heaved himself out of the sofa with purpose, and the android followed. The subether unit came to life, and after a short pause asked *What is it that we will not sell?*

“Newts,” replied Jale.

The screen cleared, and Zek appeared.

“You out and okay?”

“Yes,” replied the boyhood friend. “Thanks. But I thought you were going to pick me up?”

“I will,” promised Jale. “But we got side-tracked. I’m in a fix.”

Zek’s face was lined with middle age, but the stubbornness of youth was still there. He said nothing, waiting.

“How do we track a bugged android through subspace?”

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“Hard,” replied Zek. “The subspace used by most ships is not flat but curved. It requires massive computing capability to track the geodesic.”

“Who can do it?” asked Sherlock.

“In this section of the Galaxy? Rang Enterprises has developed a new line of supercomputers, for use with the military. They expect that they’ll be decisive in winning the war with Andromeda.”

“I can’t use anything connected with Rang,” objected Jale.

Zek considered. “Then, you’ll have to contact Selipon.”

“Can you fix a quick contact?”

“Yes,” replied Zek, whose knowledge of the alien machine was prodigious. “Hold on.”

The screen went blank momentarily, but then lit up with a complicated display and an opening challenge.

*You are direct-tapped to echelon-5. You are probably Jale of Acheron at a level of 0.998. However, I have one question by way of verification.*

“Yes?” asked Jale.

*If the four-dimensional manifold that you believe you inhabit has a closed topology and you travel for a Hubble period, where will you be?*

“Right here,” replied Jale. “Back where I started.”

There was a gap. Then *What is your question?*

“I need to know the location of an entity with colloquial name Vestal Virgin.”

*There are three,* replied the alien computer from its orbit around the singularity at the center of the Galaxy. *One on Aster, moon of Acheron...*

“Not that one,” interrupted Jale. “I know about her.”

*One on Weevilholme...*

“Not that one either.”

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There was a long pause. *Curious. The third Vestal, presumably the one you want, is in subspace, on an unusual geodesic. You wish details?*

“Yes.” The screen filled with data. “Thanks.”

“Mister Selipon, Sir” interrupted Sherlock. “Is it possible to head them off at the pass?”

A low, rumbling sound showed that the alien computer had learned about human laughter. *No. You cannot reach them, either through ordinary space or commercial subspace.*

“What about a multiply-connected space?” asked Jale.

*Your chance is 0.64, was the reply. Your race does not yet possess enough knowledge of such manifolds. Accordingly, the chance of your geodesic terminating is 0.36.*

“Plus-or-minus what?” asked Sherlock.

*Mister Sherlock, was the paternal response. Who cares? Think not so much about the fine-grained aspects of life, but about existence. You have a one-in-three chance of (how do you put it?): copping it.*

The screen went dark. The android master-detective said in awe: “He called me Sherlock.”

“That’s your name,” pointed out Jale.

“Yes, Sir,” acknowledged Sherlock. “But Selipon is the cleverest intelligence in the known Universe. And he talked to me.”

“Brains aren’t everything,” objected Jale.

“You mean, he can’t go rampaging through space to rescue a fair damsel?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Jale. The man crossed to the controls of the *Rigor Mortis*, and a low hum pervaded the cabin as the megamotors built towards maximum power.

Jale was reaching for his glass of rye, when it seemed to blur.

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Albert Grouchman jumped up from his desk and sent his chair skidding across the worn carpet on protesting wheels. Growling, he walked round the desk twice with hunched shoulders and hands grasped behind his back, before heading for the window. With a sweep of his hand he dashed several books to the floor, planted his elbows on the ledge, and glared out.

The flat expanse of a perfectly nurtured lawn stretched away from the window to a distant fringe of trees. Faintly, rooks could be heard cawing in the little wood, but none could be seen against the blue sky. It was a reassuring scene: tranquil and stable. Usually, Grouchman found it an effective medicine for an irritable and often angry disposition. The quieting influence of the College garden had been one of the main reasons he had settled here. Forced to flee his home planet during the previous war, the drug-like sense of calm that the grounds of the College induced in him had been very appealing to the young and near-schizophrenic Grouchman. Now, many years later, he glared at the unchanged scene from a face lined with the creases of a perpetual scowl and sprinkled with the silver stubble of invading age. He resented the timeless calm of the garden, but knew also that he was dependent on it to quell his otherwise unmanageable temper.

Today, however, the lawn with its fringe of trees merely dampened his rage to a simmer. “Damm him!” muttered Grouchman, referring to his rival. “Damm him double!”

Returning to his desk, Grouchman corralled his chair and dragged it back to its accustomed place. Sitting down heavily, he rested his head on his clenched fists and surveyed the papers strewn over the polished wood. Most of them were covered with equations — not simple ones with x’s and y’s, but long contorted ones in bizarre alphabets. The work resembled the mind of the man who had done it: convoluted and cunning. For Grouchman,

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while a bitter and objectionable person, was a great mathematician. A long career, with significant contributions in various areas, had in recent years been enhanced by some notable discoveries in topology and the theory of shapes. Due to this work, some of his colleagues had even begun to refer to him as the *greatest* living mathematician.

Until the appearance of Jale, that was. The mathematics student had written a couple of brilliant papers while studying at an obscure university at the end of the spiral arm. Then he had accepted a scholarship at prestigious Trantor U., and gone on to confirm his talent by a series of very important if unconventional articles that had left the presidents of academic societies with a new candidate for their honours. And recently, just as spring was getting under way and people were feeling ripe for fresh things, Jale had come out with a revolutionary paper that had tipped the mathematics community onto its hypotenuse.

Grouchman cleared a space of litter in front of himself and placed a clean sheet of paper in it. Taking an old-fashioned ink pen, he drew two dots on the paper and proceeded to join them by a long snaky line. The result resembled a child's scribble, but illustrated a fundamental point: you could get from one place to another place by a line that never left the surface of the paper. In topological jargon, the surface was simply connected. Next he picked up the sheet and bent it over so the edges were touching, the natural springiness of the paper keeping its two halves separated by a narrow gap. With the pen, he stabbed a hole in one of the halves, and pushed and twisted it so that it burrowed through to the other half and made a hole in it also. Withdrawing the pen, he pushed the forefinger of his left hand through the two aligned holes. Then with the pen and a degree of dexterity that showed he was an expert at such problems, he put a dot on the upper surface of the paper and one on the lower surface.

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Carefully, he proceeded to draw a line from the dot on the top half of the sheet, along his finger and through the two holes, to the dot on the bottom half of the sheet. Thus, he had a line that joined the dot on the upper half of the paper to the dot on the lower half. Again, the example was crude but illustrated a fundamental point: you could get from one place to another place by a line that went from one part of the surface to another part through an intervening gap. In topological jargon, the surface was multiply connected.

The upstart Jale claimed that the real world was multiply connected.

Most people did not know what this implied. But Albert Grouchman knew. If true, it meant that there were other parts of the world that had hitherto gone unsuspected but were joined to the known part by holes or tunnels in the fabric of space. The idea sounded outrageous, and there had been a skeptical outcry when it had first been proposed. The main objection had been: where *were* these hypothetical tunnels to other parts of the world? Jale had countered this by suggesting that they must have been covered up by geological processes. Seismic data collected by geophysicists had surprisingly supported this suggestion, leaving critics of the idea perplexed.

Emboldened, Jale had just this week made public a new solution to the all-important Equation of Spacetime, which in his hands had been transformed into a relation describing the topology of the Universe for all places and all times. This new solution appeared to show that one of the proposed tunnels to another part of the world was but thinly disguised and might reveal its existence at any moment.

“Nonsense,” sneered Albert Grochman, who had been examining the new solution. He despised Jale with the contempt that is only found between the established conservative and the

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aspiring radical. He also hated the younger man because he recognised in him the easy genius that Grouchman had always had to feign by hard work.

But it was not enough to *believe* that Jale was wrong. It had to be *proved* using the equations of topology. And was not Albert Grouchman still the greatest living practitioner of theoretical shapes and therefore the person best qualified to do this?

Tiring of looking at his fingertip poking through the folded sheet of paper, Grouchman ripped the page off and crushed it into a ball which he threw at the wall. Pulling a new sheet towards him, he picked up the pen and began writing furiously. With magical speed, a line of symbols appeared across the top of the page. When his hand reached the right edge of the sheet of paper, it clicked back to the left margin and continued the equation on a second line. And a third. And a fourth. Half way along the fifth line, the strange writing stopped, to be followed by an equals sign and a zero.

The mathematician stared at the equation. The desk faced the window, and sunlight fell on his nervous eyes as they flitted back and forth along the lines, checking the terms in the equation one by one. To him, these five lines of writing were immensely more important than a mere string of symbols. Because this was the Equation of Spacetime, the mathematical description of the very substance of the world. And just as a nuclear engineer could tell by looking at the plans of a reactor whether the thing would work or blow up, so could Grouchman tell by looking at the Equation of Spacetime whether the world was simply connected and safe, or multiply connected and exposed to a fantastic risk.

For there was risk if Jale were correct. Grouchman was a mathematician, not a biologist, but it was not hard to see why people in the life sciences were psychologically hopping. When

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a neck of land between two seas breaks, the waters mix and the faunas interact so that eventually only the stronger species survive. If one of the tunnels in the multiply-connected world were to open, something similar would happen and there would be a terrific struggle for supremacy. Nobody knew what creatures might invade from the other side, and whether the inhabitants of the familiar world would survive.

Not that Grouchman cared much, either for his own existence or that of his fellow beings. He possessed the true scientist's indifference to his own mortality. And as for the other humans who shared the world with him, he had negligible feelings for them. His parents had been killed in the same war he had fled, and he had no really good friends. Apart from one of the College cleaning ladies, who he visited regularly every week for sex, there was nobody on whom he felt even slightly dependent and whose passing he would regret. A lonely and cynical man, he cared little for the reality that the Equation of Spacetime described. But he *did* care very intensely about his work, and in particular about the fact that someone else claimed to have found a new and important solution to the Equation.

The lines in Grouchman's forehead grew deeper. Straggly locks of gray hair slipped forward as he bent over, and he pushed them back behind ears that needed the wax washed out of them. His thick lips mouthed silently the symbols on the page, a wizard with an algebraic incantation. He began to write, swapping around terms in the Equation of Spacetime in an effort to understand how they related to each other. He worked intently with the Equation for some while. Eventually, he shoved aside the last page of calculations he had made, and leaned back in his chair with a frustrated "Damm and blast."

He tossed the pen onto the desk. The tip hit a blank space between two lines of calculations, leaving a splotch of ink that

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began slowly spreading. He sat watching the growing stain, and experienced as he did so a growing fear.

Grouchman was not sure if he could match Jale's inspired mathematics. The older man's methods of topology were certain, but of restricted effectiveness. Whereas the younger man's were innovative, slightly questionable, but with a penetrating power that came near to transforming the subject. It was like a disciple of Rembrandt trying to interpret a work by Picasso. The difficulty the older man was having in understanding the other's abstruse calculations was quite new and unnerving. Grouchman's mental state slipped several notches, and he began to visualize a very upsetting future: himself relegated to one of the Old Guard — respected but overlooked — while legions of young, bright topologists stampeded after Jale and his new techniques. The picture was so objectionable that Grouchman's ego had no alternative but to reject it.

"He can't be right!" exclaimed the mathematician. But even as he said it, he knew he was expressing a hope and not a conviction.

Grouchman raised his eyes from the sheets of calculations as the light from the window dimmed momentarily and then brightened again. The window itself consisted of numerous small panes of wavy glass, the whole set into thick, ancient walls in the style that visitors to the College found so quaint. Despite its outmoded construction, the window admitted a good deal of light. Not perhaps as much as the giant sheet of plastic that formed one entire side of Jale's office on the ninety-first floor of Trantor U., but enough for Grouchman to see his equations clearly and not get eyestrain while pondering them.

Returning to a contemplation of the sheets of calculations, Grouchman noticed that the blotch of ink he had been watching before had spread over and obscured one of the terms in the

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Equation of Spacetime. This act of chance directed his attention to that term, and as his concentration intensified a remarkable possibility became evident.

“Bloody binomials!” said Grouchman, for one of the few times in his life genuinely surprised.

If that term in the Equation of Spacetime were absent, or just very small, then there might indeed be another solution. Grouchman began checking off the terms in the Equation against each other, using his left and right forefingers as markers. One of these still bore the ink line from his earlier demonstration, and served as a constant reminder that the world might be multiply connected after all. And so it seemed, because after a first pass the new solution appeared to be a fact.

Reluctantly, Grouchman had to admit that Jale might be right.

The light from the window dimmed again and Grouchman looked up. Beyond the wavy glass, the blue sky had been replaced by clouds with a peculiar colour that seemed to be swirling around, like a vortex.

Disturbed, the mathematician pushed back his chair and started for the window. He took three slow steps. Then two medium-fast ones. And lastly, as his eye caught the commotion outside, a bound.

With his face pressed against the glass, he stared at the upheaval in progress outside. The flat lawn, so recently green with spring, was bursting upwards in the middle as clods of dark brown earth flew into the air. Further off, the rooks were heading away in ragged flocks as the trees, which for ages had been their home, swayed and toppled in response to some subterranean disturbance.

Grouchman gripped the wobbling window ledge and goggled. In the centre of the lawn a colossal hole had appeared.

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Even as the mathematician watched, something long and pink started to emerge from the hole. It was enormous in size, and though smeared with soil had a vaguely familiar shape.

The pink thing moved higher, and as it did so it became evident it consisted of several segments separated by crinkled joints. It rose towards the sky, and a shaft of sunlight from between rushing clouds struck its top, highlighting the shiny surface of a giant fingernail.

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The whiskey glass became sharp-edged again. Jale, thinking, picked it up: it felt solid.

The data they had obtained from Selipon filled the screen with clear characters. The purloined motors of the *Rigor Mortis* thundered realistically.

“Ready?” asked Jale.

“Ready,” confirmed Sherlock.

The order went out, and the ship did a right-angled turn on the hypersurface and vanished from spacetime.

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On Weevilholme, a pretty girl with golden hair entered the fitness centre at the spaceport. She was not a member, but her trim body and athletic step meant she was not challenged. In the changeroom, there were males, females and the androgenous in various stages of dress and undress. It was nice to see so many well-shaped bodies, and she knew as she stripped that she was in company. A sign nearby directed her to *Nude Tai Chi*.

The girl joined the class surreptitiously at the back. The course was only a medium-hard one, and she quickly fell into the rhythm of the ancient, slow movements. The instructor was an older but very athletic woman. She had silver hair, drawn tightly

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back in a knot, and severe features. Her calf and thigh muscles were well defined, leading up to a hairless crotch and prominent labia.

The instructor scrunched her toes on the mat and gradually extended a leg, matching the extension of the limb with a slow, embracing gesture of her arms. Some of the class had difficulty maintaining this pose, especially the males. But the girl at the back eased fluidly into the position and held it perfectly. The instructor noticed.

After several more exercises, the class ended and its members dispersed quietly. The instructor exited. The girl followed. A door opened, letting out a blast of sound and a smell of sweat.

The girl followed after a discrete interval, and found herself in a weightroom. The contrast with the tai-chi studio was great: here there was the clang of equipment, the grunt of crude lifts and a pounding song:

*Everybody's working out at the gymnasium  
Pumping iron, getting fit, ready to compete  
Everybody working on their own body heat  
And everybody hustling, out on the street  
It's getting crazy — going over the top!  
Too hot! Too hot! Too hot!*

The older woman was laying on a bench, her legs apart, pushing up weights. A few drops of sweat had already formed on her brow. The girl walked over, and was recognized.

“Hello,” said the girl.

“Hello,” was the guarded response. The weights continued to move up and down, powered by small but well-formed biceps.

“You are the wife of Garayan, are you not?”

“Not,” replied the woman after a pause. Then “I’m his ex.” The older woman abruptly stopped exercising and sat up, sweeping the girl with an acid look. “And I suppose you’re

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another one of his floozies with a tale of woe. Look, dearie, it's not my problem."

"I've never met Garayan," said the girl.

"You're lucky," was the edged response. "The man is mentally ill."

"I know. I need to find him and cure him."

The older woman stood up. She was taller than the girl, and had a kind of worn imperviousness about her. "Look, dearie, maybe you need some treatment yourself. For amnesia. Everybody knows that Garayan has left Weevilholme, and gone to the Sphere of Civilization to argue with that other idiot Androyoos."

"Where *is* the Sphere?"

"No idea. Somewhere between the Milky Way and Andromeda."

A quirk of disappointment bent the girl's full lips, and her light eyes became shadowed under her shining yellow hair.

The woman looked over the girl with a discreet but unmistakably sexual evaluation. "Who *are* you?"

"A helper," was the short reply.

The two females looked each other in the eyes. Then the younger turned and left. The elder shrugged and went back to her exercises. For some reason, she suddenly felt happier.

\*

The *Rigor Mortis* re-entered normal space with a bang. Sherlock's deerstalker hat flew up to the ceiling and fell back neatly onto his metallic hair. Jale was less fortunate: after hitting the ceiling he crashed back onto the armrest and fell to the floor, groaning.

Sherlock said happily "We're alive!"

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“Speak for yourself,” said Jale, dragging himself back into the pilot’s chair.

“Are you all right, Sir?” inquired the android with solicitude. “You have a contusion on your upper left mandible.”

“You mean, I got socked on the jaw.” Then, more to the point: “Where the hell are we?”

“Exactly where we wanted to be,” said Sherlock. “Enemy ship dead ahead.”

Jale tried to focus on the screen. His jaw hurt terrifically and his face was starting to swell. But though his vision was slightly jarred, he could see that the *Rigor* was near to a larger ship that looked like an interstellar pagoda.

Abruptly, an alarm went off.

“Tractor beam,” said Sherlock. “They’re onto us.”

Jale grunted, concentrating.

“Sir, what shall I do?” The android’s voice was now nervous. “Their craft is larger than ours. They’re going to drag us in.”

“Well,” observed Jale. “It takes two to tangle. Do you remember the *Nautilus*?”

“Not with total recall. Wasn’t it some kind of marine mollusc?”

“I mean the ship,” corrected Jale, “that was under the command of Captain Nemo.”

Sherlock looked blank. Jale became serious, and ordered “Load file *Nemo*.”

“Loading file,” acknowledged Sherlock.

“Do you see those switches up there?”

“You mean, the ones covered in dust?”

“Yes. There’s a blue one and a red one. Wait until I say.”

The *Rigor Mortis* started to alter course. A creaking sound echoed through the hull as the maneuver was resisted by the enemy’s tractor beam. The distance between the two craft had

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shrunk considerably: under the pagodal overhangs of the other ship, Jale could now discern very functional-looking motors, hatches and guns.

“Run file *Nemo*.”

A rumbling sound added to the creaks from the hull. A slot opened in the bow of the *Rigor*, and a wickedly-serrated ram started to deploy.

“It still works,” said Jale, surprised and relieved. He turned to Sherlock. “Red switch.”

The *Rigor*'s motors fell silent, prompting Sherlock to object “I do not understand the military purpose of...”

“Blue switch.”

The motors started again, but with a different note. Their power grew, filling the cabin with noise and making the deck shake.

“But, Sir...!”

“Be quiet,” ordered Jale, calmly but firmly. “The Acheron navy may not be good at keeping their hardware, but they don't make crap.”

There was a twanging sound, and the tractor beam that joined the ships became taut. Under the reverse thrust of the *Rigor*'s megamotors, the puller became the pullee.

The scream of the motors was deafening, but even though the *Rigor*'s hull was vibrating alarmingly its crew still felt the impact as the ram smashed into the side of the enemy. A puff of condensing vapour showed that they had pierced some vital part.

“Take cover,” yelled Jale.

“Aye, aye Captain Nemo!”

Jale pulled open a hatch in the deck and dropped down into a part of the ship he had not used since his smuggling period. He sealed his thermosuit. There was no time to don the spacesuit that hung on the wall, but he slipped the dusty helmet over his head.

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A laser Gattling-gun rested in a niche. He released the catches that held the weapon and checked the charge: it had run down, but enough was left. There was a tunnel ahead, and he began clambering over the struts that reinforced the ram. Hollow, it ended in a sharp wedge. A hatch opened, revealing the hull of the enemy ship splayed open like a tin of sardines. Jale scrambled over ragged metal, and found himself in the interior of the other craft.

Only the emergency lights were on, and Jale crept forward through gloom. The deck was strewn with pieces of heavy debris, and a wind that bore lighter rubbish told that the disabled ship was rapidly losing its atmosphere. He coughed inside the helmet: it would only give him a short supply of oxygen, and the cold of space was seeping through the thermosuit.

Suddenly a figure in a full spacesuit jumped into the corridor. A fusion bolt sizzled past Jale's head, crinkling his visor. The laser Gattling gun spoke, sending a stream of pulses into the darkness. The spacesuit exploded, and Jale stepped over the remains of its occupant.

There was a door. Jale tried to push it open, but it would not move, and as he stepped back he saw that the frame was bent. A grinding noise confirmed that the pagoda's infrastructure was buckling.

His foot hit something, and he bent down to pick up his assailant's fusion gun. On continuous blast, it melted the door into slag.

Jale passed through, and found himself in what had been the crew's quarters: discarded clothing lay over unmade bunks, and broken crockery covered the floor.

The earphone in his helmet crackled, distorted with static. "Sherlock to Nemo..."

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“Yes?” There was a buzzing sound in his ears, and Jale realized it was due not only to the poor circuit but also to lack of air.

“Nemo!” The voice was urgent. “You do not have much time. The enemy ship is disintegrating.”

“Okay.”

Jale used the rest of the charge in the fusion gun to blast open a hatch covered with a triad design. He was stepping through the jagged hole when a sudden pain stabbed through his left arm. Looking down, he realized with dismay that he had ripped the thermosuit. “Bad luck, old man,” he muttered to himself.

How much time before the near vacuum in the ship sucked out his bodily juices?

He rushed forward, but stopped after a few steps: in a transparent box in the centre of the room lay a pretty girl, naked and unbreathing.

“I’ve found her,” announced Jale. He rubbed his hand over the peculiar sheen that encased the box. “She’s in stasis.”

This was good for Vestal but posed a major problem for Jale: the bulky stasis unit would never fit through the hatch that led back to the *Rigor Mortis*. Cursing geometry, he looked around for input. On the wall by the door hung an old-fashioned sword with a curved blade and a tassel on the handle. He grabbed it.

The blade hit the stasis box, shattered, and left his hands quivering. The box was only dented.

“Photon!” exclaimed Jale.

“What?” responded Sherlock, sounding hysterical. “You have no time left! Leave!”

“Calm down,” ordered Jale. “How do you get into one of these new-fangled stasis units?”

There was a hiss of static, through which the faint reply was “Switch it off!”

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“Oh. Good idea.”

The unit lost its outworld sheen and the transparent walls of the unit turned into a milky mosaic. Jale used the Gattling gun to smash the mosaic, then threw away the weapon and hoisted Vestal onto his shoulder.

“Coming,” he panted. “Break out the rye.” He staggered back along the way he had come.

But he was starting to feel confused. There was a din from the disintegrating ship, and a thudding from his oxygen-starved heart. His visor was going foggy, and his mind seemed to be playing tricks. A dark shape loomed up. The return of the Black Hand Gang?

Jale swung a fist. It smashed through a visor that was certainly real. Blood spurted from his assailant’s face and from his own hand, both hemorrhaging into what was now a hard vacuum.

Vestal’s body slid, her unconscious head hitting the deck. “Sorry,” said Jale, and picked her up again.

Another two steps. The hatch to the *Rigor* was close. But Jale’s helmet was covered in red mist, and his retinas were partly blocked by flickering dark patterns. He fell. “Damm!”

The hatch was within reach. Jale managed to stand up halfwise, the girl in his arms. But the dark shapes in his eyes expanded. As he fell into a dark world, it seemed to him that two silvery arms welcomed him to it.

## NUPTIALS ON THE EDGE

Sherlock pattered around in the hold, adjusting the enzyme and nutrient feeds to the black coffin. Inside lay Jale, battered: his face was grotesquely swollen, and his left arm and right hand were livid, marking where the holes had occurred in his thermosuit. The latter was in the trash, unusable. Jale therefore reposed naked in his casket. In the next one lay Vestal, similarly naked but in much better physical shape. Sherlock had to admire the skill which had been lavished on this half-natural and half-artificial creature. The small stretch marks under her breasts were well done, and the shading of her pubis was a work of art.

Jale groaned and opened dazed eyes: one was clear, one obscured by blood. Sherlock levitated over and picked up the injured man's good hand.

"How do you feel?"

"Like death warmed over," croaked Jale. "How do I look?"

"Like shit."

"Your bedside manner needs work," observed Jale. Then "Vestal?"

"Safe," confirmed Sherlock. "But still unconscious. I respectfully suggest that while she is comatose, we examine her to find the bugging unit she is carrying."

Jale's brain re-integrated. The idea was a good one. "All right. But sans necrophilia."

"Sir!" expostulated the master detective. "How can you say that? You know that for me, Irene Adler will always be *the* woman."

"Acknowledged," said Jale. "You've told me about three million times. But I still think she was dumb to hide the king's photo behind the sliding panel above the bell-pull."

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Sherlock, awed by the other's knowledge of Victorian crime literature, went to fetch his instruments. Jale watched through his good eye. The console started to hum as the one android examined the other. However, a look of puzzlement gradually appeared on the detective's face.

"Jale," he said seriously. "She has *two* implants."

"A and B?"

"Jale!" objected Sherlock. "This is not the time for levity. One of them appears to be a bomb."

"Oh," said Jale, no longer in a joking mood. "Is it ticking?"

"No. From the readings on my instruments, I infer that it is dormant."

"Waiting for a subether command?"

"Possibly," said Sherlock. "But there is another thing: the bomb is located deep in her abdomen among her vital organs. It can only have been put there by the person who made her."

Jale digested this, then asked "Can it be removed?"

"Unfortunately not," was the reply.

"So what do you recommend?" asked Jale.

"That we dump her into space."

"No," countered Jale, levering himself out of his coffin. He lurched over to the other casket, and looked down at the sleeping and beautiful girl.

"Why not?" demanded Sherlock.

"Because Rang will terminate our contract if we get rid of his observer. Also, she's too pretty to destroy."

Sherlock muttered something obscure.

Jale said "What about the other implant?"

"That is easier to deal with," responded Sherlock. "These bugging units are small, and straightforward to disable no matter where they are inserted."

"Inserted?" asked Jale. "Where?"

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Sherlock looked embarrassed. “Well, there are not many options. And one would not (of course) want the bug to interfere with the circuits for taste, smell or hearing.”

“So?” asked Jale.

“So, there are really only two orifices to choose from.”

“So?” repeated Jale, who had a headache and was starting to feel annoyed.

“Well, Sir,” said Sherlock delicately. “It’s not in the orifice that starts with A.”

“So?!” demanded Jale, now openly exasperated.

“It’s in the orifice that starts with V.”

Jale looked momentarily perplexed. Then “Aha! I get you. But, I thought it started with C.”

\*

Rang sneered at Brounlee. As the fortunes of the company increased, so did the conflict between its ancient director and his merely old successor-in-waiting.

Rang said “I told you to keep me informed!” The deep furrows on his bald head were hunched over angry eyes.

“I *am* informing you,” replied Brounlee, stroking his white goatee but meeting the other’s accusing stare. “The dream machine went to Weevilholme. Jale and Vestal were going to follow but took a jump off the hypersurface of the manifold.”

Rang shook his head in irritation. “I don’t care about the technicalities. What do you expect Jale to do?”

“He’ll pursue,” said Brounlee. “His biofile indicates he will carry on as long as he thinks he can recover the dream machine. That’s why we hired him, remember?”

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“Of course I remember,” snapped Rang. “I also remember that he’s a human and not an android, with a history of doing wild things.”

Brounlee crossed his ankles, looking at his mauve spats. “There was nobody else that could have taken on the job. That’s still true, even if he fails.”

The possibility of failure alarmed Rang. His puckered cheeks tensed. “I will *not* allow the dream machine to fall into the possession of our competitors.” His levichair scooted around the edge of the desk, so the stumps of Rang’s amputated legs touched the checkered cloth of Brounlee’s pants. The younger of the pair put a white-gloved hand over his mouth and coughed in distaste. However, the older man ignored this and said “It would be better to have it destroyed than let our rivals get it.”

“Rang,” said Brounlee coldly. “I have made you millions of android soldiers, and with the war situation between the Milky Way and Andromeda we will be two of the richest men in history. I have also made you a dream machine, which even if it only cures half of the mentally ill people in the two galaxies will make us richer than both governments combined.

“The point?” demanded Rang, his brown eyes flinty.

“There is only *one* dream machine,” replied Brounlee, his blue eyes steady. “I will *not* allow it to be destroyed.”

Rang abruptly scooted back behind his desk. “You’re too attached to your creations. Though they have blood and guts, they are just machines, activated by the DNA we give them.”

“Yes,” agreed Brounlee, thinking of the original Vestal, the dream machine who was a copy, and the clone that was in pursuit of the copy. “But very special DNA.”

\*

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Jale sat on the edge of Vestal's coffin, looking down at the naked girl. With a bomb *and* a bug, this mission was getting too complicated for his taste.

He shook his head, partly as a commentary on egotistical intrigue and partly because his eyesight was still deficient. However, the scene became even more blurry...

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I leaned back, relieved I would not have to leave for unknown space, because the man I was talking to was crazy.

The Director was old, but his shaved head gave him the look of a reptile and made it hard to tell his exact age. A faint spicy smell emanated from him, and made me realize I had not bathed in the three days I had been planet-side. Maybe my body odor was what he did not like? Or maybe he did not like the skeptical look with which I had greeted his proposition.

Anyway, I leaned back in the uncomfortable chair and put my hands behind my head. "I do not believe, Director, that the Universe *has* an edge."

His fine-grained skin quirked as the muscles of his face expressed disapproval. He shifted a file to one side, as if trying to decide whether to spend time describing its contents to such an unpromising audience, and then looked me straight in the eye.

"There *must* be an edge to the Universe, Captain." His tone had the conviction of a zealot. "If space were curved like the surface of a ball, as some claim, we would be able to travel around it in a spaceship and come back to our starting point without even altering direction. That has never happened."

"Maybe we haven't gone far enough," I pointed out, not particularly interested. "If space were like a ball, it would have to be a gigantic one, so its surface near us would to all intents be nearly flat. Why the fuss?"

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“Also,” continued the Director, his tone of voice shifting to an even more solemn level, “there is the question of ontology.”

I might look like a slob; but if he thought he was going to phase me, he was wrong. I commented “You mean the question of first cause?”

The Director blinked, eyelids of wrinkled and mottled skin temporarily shutting off his piercing stare. “Exactly,” he conceded. “If the Universe were spherical it must perforce be closed and complete. We of the Institute, contrarily, have evidence that the Universe is being extended by its Creator. There are telltale signs all about for those who have the will to see. But the major work of extending the glory of the world must be taking place at its edge. It is *there* we must seek the handiwork of the Creator. We MUST find the edge!”

I swallowed. If I had been drinking a beer (something I ardently desired), I might have choked on it. But acting calm, I merely repeated what I had told him before. “I don’t think I’m the right person for this job.”

Then I added a comment, partly to be helpful, and partly because several of the men who were repairing my ship were Institute members and I did not want to make enemies needlessly. “You could ask Rodriguez or Philpot. I think Rodriguez even goes to church, whereas I don’t”

“He does not go to the right *kind* of church,” said the Director icily. “And Philpot is, er, indisposed.”

Guiltily I rubbed a hand over my beard, the result of three days’ celebrations after a long time in space. I knew Philpot was indisposed: he had disappeared under the table at the *Livid Lobster* the night before. And unused as he was to the local beverages, it would probably be a week before he could see straight or pilot a ship.

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It was a complicated sort of impasse. *I* did not want the job, because I thought it ridiculous; but then in a few days' time I would need money, and therefore employment. *They* wanted me to take the job, because they had a strong religious motive; but I was under no illusions that the puritanical Director liked me — it just happened I was non-denominational and available.

"Why is it important to discover the edge of the Universe *now*?" I inquired.

The Director's nose came up like an aimed laser, and he stared at me along it. Maybe I had struck a sore point. In any event, he regarded me for so long while thinking about his reply that I started to feel bored. My eyes strayed to the desk (mortuary black covered with nondescript files); the walls of the room (gray, except where a small window framed the setting blue sun); and lastly my own boots (covered in mud and splashes of urine: the *Livid Lobster's* plumbing had been out of order, so Philpot and myself had been reduced to using the parking lot at the back). Finally the Director decided to answer my question.

"*Funds, Captain,*" he said conspiratorially. "As you are doubtless aware, our Institute like others of its kind depends for its existence on the largesse of its members. Our board decided that a major evangelical expedition at this juncture would be, er, financially appropriate."

"Does the timing have anything to do with the collapse of the First Bank of Andromeda?"

I suppose my irony was not veiled sufficiently, because the Director's face suddenly took on a resemblance to that of an iguana who had bitten a lemon.

"However, that is perhaps a bit irrelevant," I added diplomatically. (Though what was really in my mind was that the Institute-thick refitting yard was the only one on the planet.) But the Director still looked like a citrus-affected reptile, so I glided

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on: “The status of the Institute’s bank and finances *are* germane, though. Because there is naturally the question of pay.”

Now his face did another transformation, to that of a shrewd turtle. He obviously thought my reluctance could be bought off (and he was right in principle). He rubbed his hands together briefly, then abruptly put them under the black desk as if afraid of a cliché. “Captain. I have the board’s authority to offer you three-quarters of a million.”

“Three-quarters of a million?” I repeated suspiciously. And then mentally kicked myself. I had arrived from *Ultima Horsus*, where  $0.75 \times 10^6$  would only buy you a second-class whore. But here on *God’s Pastures* the same number of local currency would buy you...

My mind was clicking, so I suppose my forehead must have been furrowed. This to people who know me is nothing to be alarmed about; but to others it makes me look pensive.

“All right!” exclaimed the Director, before I had finished my calculation. “An even million!”

My mind completed its work on the previous problem, like yellow bells lining up in the window of those slot machines you see in museums. I would be rich...

Suppressing a desire to pass wind aft, which had been brought on by excitement, I hitched myself up in my chair. My rear end was numb, and I wondered briefly why religious directors have seats in their offices that resemble pews in church. But then I realized that to them it must make sense.

“What about my ship?” I asked, thinking about the time it would take to get ready.

“We will naturally absorb that,” he replied, visibly thinking about the cost of the refit.

I suddenly sank into a reverie, perhaps because I had always mistrusted too much good luck. Here I was, being offered money

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that would normally have kept me happily employed for a long time, *with* a refitted ship to boot. But, I was still reluctant, and I asked myself why. It was not the logistics of the thing. *God's Pastures* was almost as far from civilization as *Ultima Horsus*: they were both on the edge of nowhere. And an expedition into nowhere had a good chance of turning up something novel. However, I no more expected to find the Edge of the Universe that I expected to find Miss Nude Infinity in my bed next morning. Such things simply do not happen to average blokes like me. So, the object of the exercise was a joke. But then...

Abruptly I realized why I was still reluctant to take the job: I would be bored, as in BORED.

I do not mind spending several weeks on my own in space. But occasionally I like to land and hit the dreg-spots. Whereas what the Director was talking about was spending mega-periods in space, looking for something that did not exist, in regions where there was absolutely zero chance of entertainment.

It did not sound like a constructive use of my time. So I said, still trying to be diplomatic, "Director, I appreciate your proposition. But I am sad to say that I do not think I could stand the solitude."

"*Captain.*" The tone was one that might be used to a child who has admitted to being afraid of the dark. A small smile of pity lifted the corners of his thin mouth.

As if intending to comfort me, he pushed a button, then came around his desk to sit on its edge, his skinny legs swinging like emaciated pendula.

"*Captain,*" he repeated, though this time in a more business-like tone. "You will not be in *solitude*. Quite apart from the Spirit, the board has determined you should travel with one of our representatives." Then he added with a slightly apologetic air: "There is, of course, the question of verification."

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“Of course,” I replied tonelessly. Verification of a will-o-the-wisp. And the idea of having someone aboard to help me look for it did not appeal. I am a person with certain disreputable habits which I hold dear; and I did not think they would be to the liking of a representative from the Institute, who would presumably be a dry stick of a man like its Director. It was money versus my soul, and much as I saw the need for the former I could not give up the latter. I opened my mouth and started to say “I regret that...”

When the door opened and a girl walked in.

“Captain, this is our Sister of the Sepulchre. She will accompany you on your search.”

Now, I expect you will jump to the conclusion that she was pretty and that I tripped over my tongue in my rush to okay the contract. But you would be wrong, at least partly.

Sister S. was not pretty. She was ascetically thin, with an unsmiling face that looked even thinner because she had shaved off the hair at her temples. As she walked forward and did a formal bow, I saw why: the hair on the top of her head was sculpted into the sign of the cross. Sister physically resembled the Director, and had about as much sex appeal.

She spoke. “Hello, Captain. I checked at the yard. Your ship is nearly ready and we can leave when convenient.”

Her voice did *not* match her appearance: it was like warm water gurgling out of an iceberg. It occurred to me (though I realized it was probably wishful thinking), that away from the drab office her demeanor might take on more resemblance to her voice.

I stood up, undecided. The downside was a long spell of boredom. The upside was  $10^6$  monies and what I estimated to be about a  $10^{-1}$  chance of sex. It was a difficult choice. Unable to make up my mind, I said “We can’t lift off yet, even if I decide to

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go. We need to equip the ship. For the kind of trip you have been discussing, it's essential to install a gravitational navigator."

"I am a qualified gravitational navigator," replied the woman calmly, incidentally filling in the question of why it was her and not someone else who was to go.

"And we need supplies," I continued. "Food, air, beer."

The Director coughed slightly. "I'm afraid alcohol is not permitted by the Institute."

I suddenly made up my mind. "No beer, no trip."

The Director of the Institute looked at the Sister of the Sepulchre. She made no sign, and he struggled for a while to resolve the issue.

"All right," he finally said, grudgingly.

"All right," I repeated, also grudgingly.

Thus are deals made which both parties come to regret.

And things started to go strange at about day 20. Or at least, that's when I started to notice that things were not as I had expected, either physically or socially.

The ship was working perfectly. I reluctantly had to admit that while many of them were religious zealots, the Institute's refitters knew their job. The drive had begun its exponential build-up soon after departure, and by day 20 we were close to a Dirac delta function. Our distance travelled was accordingly meaningless without a coordinate transformation, and the latter was impossible because we did not know where we were going. Let's just say that we were far into the unknown.

Spacetime started to show its curvature, at first only in subtle ways. For example, the galaxies at the perimeter of the forward screen started to show peculiar redshifts, which Sister confirmed must be gravitational in origin.

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Sister herself also began to show more curvature, at any rate to my eye. She was very slim — even boyish — in figure; but after that many days in space things have a way of becoming more noticeable. Even a rivet in the ceiling over my bunk, which was sticking out somewhat, by day 21 seemed to me to have such monumental proportions that I got a laser and smoothed it off. However, I must admit that most of my attention about things sticking out was not directed at hardware but at Sister.

She knew I was noticing her in a sexual way, but did nothing to encourage or discourage me. Her body was still like an icicle (though now slightly bumpy). And her remarkable voice was still a hot spring bubbling out of a glacier.

I also noticed that she was excellent at her job. Plotting a course through the gravitational fields of uncharted astronomical objects while travelling at high speeds is like skiing down the side of an unmapped mountain; if you are to avoid disaster, you have to process a lot of data but also have a kind of intuition.

On day 22 she completed a course maneuver that saw us carom off the spherical field of an SO galaxy and pass between two giant ellipticals, a trick that saved us power and was a pretty neat pool shot.

“Nice work!” I said with admiration, as we emerged from between the giant Es and they disappeared from the perimeter of the backward screen.

I also put my hand on her knee as I bent over the console to look at the screen. This was inadvertent — really! But anyway, she gripped my wrist and with hidden strength moved my hand to the console.

This incident would not have been worth remembering if it had not been for a strange comment she made. Without annoyance, and with words that were like blobs of warm treacle

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in weightlessness, she said: “You have yet to prove yourself, Captain.”

Now one could take that several ways. I thought at the time it was an oblique way of telling me I could have sex if/when we discovered the Edge of the Universe. And I naturally had no intention of waiting for such an impossibility. But in view of subsequent developments, her comment may have been some kind of challenge.

In any case, the emotional balance on board began to alter.

On day 23, I went to the galley to get a beer. Maybe she heard me coming. Anyhow, I found her standing in front of the coolbox with condensing mist falling about her and an open beer in her hand. Briefly I wondered if her religious prohibitions were breaking down. However, when I reached for the beer, she would not release it. So I snatched it and left. Neither of us said anything.

Such petty confrontations continued until day 25. On that day, things got more serious when I cut my left thumb off trying to repair the third transducer on the main drive. I am not inept by nature. In fact, I am usually fairly coordinated; and when working with a vacuum cutter, extremely careful. However, after struggling for a long time at the job, with stim-pills towards the end, the accident happened. I would not normally have kept at it that long without a proper break, but the third and fourth transducers are where the potential oscillates most (which is no doubt why one of them broke down), and we needed both of them. Well, near the end of the repair my right hand slipped and my left thumb became detached.

My first thought was “Good job it’s not the wrist.” (The blood vessels and tendons in a human wrist are hell to get lined up again.) Then I said to myself, “Pick up your thumb and go and fix it back on.”

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Preoccupied, I arrived in the main cabin, put my bleeding left hand on the medical table, and with my good right hand carefully aligned the severed thumb with its stump. I was reaching for the flesh-fixer, when it was grabbed by someone else.

I pulled. She pulled. Stalemate.

I do not know if she was intending to help or not. But in either event, I was feeling pretty grim and determined. So I looked into her eyes and drew the fixer towards myself using all the strength of my right hand. She was dragged along with it, and when her body made contact with mine she relinquished her grip.

Rapidly I realigned the pieces of my thumb, and used the fixer to weld them together. Then by way of appeasement I handed her the instrument, which she put away.

On day 27, I was lounging in front of the console, nursing my aching left hand, when there appeared on the forward screen a galaxy that was noticeably distorted.

“Sister, come and have a look at this.”

She appeared after a pause. Maybe she had been dressing, because her blouse was open and revealed significant breasts that bounced playfully.

“It’s a gravitational effect,” she pronounced, though not referring to her bouncing bosom, of which she seemed unaware. “That galaxy is sitting in a gravity field so strong it’s being pulled out of shape. We’ll have to go around.”

This in a voice that sounded like a symphony of timbre even with its content of fact. She sat down beside me, and I could easily have put my bad hand on her thigh, with the idea that she might not have been callous enough to remove it by force. But our relationship was beyond such a feeble gesture.

On day 28 we arm-wrestled for real, my good right hand against her two. She was serious about winning. During the fifth

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bout I saw drops of sweat standing out on her shaven temples, and by the seventh her cross-shaped topknot was dark with perspiration. She learned fast, and won the tenth and last bout.

Day 30 revealed more bizarre galaxies. We could not of course see the gravitational fields that were distorting their normally regular shapes. However, the gravity probe showed them as whirlpools of force that Sister expertly skirted. We were too busy that day to fight. And to be truthful I did not regret it; because while I still wanted her body, I sensed something in my navigator that was emotionally as hard as diamond and dulled the edge of my lust.

On day 31 Sister turned a bout of arm wrestling into something else. This she did by abruptly letting my arm go and then, before I could recover, twisting it behind my back. In pain, I said to myself "You idiot". However, she had presumably not been in bar fights. Because when I hooked my leg around her ankle she went down with a thud. Then I grabbed her ankle and dangled her upside down. She wriggled like a snake, and after a while I dropped her.

She was on her feet again quickly, but for some strange reason stood there staring at me. It was funny, but she did not look mad. Just kind of puzzled and interested. I was interested too; her shirt had gone over her shoulders, and her breasts rose and fell as she recovered her breath.

Then she turned and left. We did not say anything to each other afterwards.

For days 32 and 33 we were busy traversing a region of intense gravitational fields. The curvature of space, which is approximately the same thing, was now so obvious that it felt real. We could *see* from the smeared shapes of the galaxies the topography of space, like the surface of a vast river: eddies, whirlpools and rapids.

*Cosmic Dreams*

I was thinking a lot.

Back in the Director's office, I had discounted the effects of gravitational topography because it is not normally evident. The average ship travelling between one galaxy and another moves relatively slowly, like a tortoise crawling out of one valley up to a ridge and down into another valley. But we were now moving at a prodigious rate, and it was like whizzing over whole mountain ranges. The ride was getting bumpy, and I began to worry about the ship. The hull was okay, but the transducers from three to eleven were overloaded. They were having difficulty adjusting to the rapid fluctuations of potential as we whipped past the massive and distorted galaxies that populated this region of space.

Something else bothered me too. So far, the changes in topography we had experienced had been quite short-range. But as our speed increased, would we start to see a long-range change? Would we see what I had previously ignored: the shape of the Universe?

At the end of day 33 I downed several of the beers that the Director disapproved of so much. Then I felt less worried, and after checking the instruments and setting an alarm, I dropped into my bunk.

The next day, 34, I awoke with a hangover. The alarm had not gone off, but I could feel the ship surging and yawing as if it were riding on ocean waves. I must have sweated while asleep, because my bunk was damp and I had somehow managed to strip in order to be cooler. Feeling creased, I slipped to the deck and trotted on bare feet towards the shower.

Sister was at the entrance. She was waiting for me, and she was nude.

I noticed two things. One was that her pubic hair was also cut in the shape of a cross, which I thought a better argument for

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religion than most. The other thing was that she had a remarkably strong-looking body. She was braced in the opening of the shower with her hands gripping the top of the doorway and her toes curled over the bottom. Her body was taut, with muscles standing out all over it like in a fine sculpture.

I attempted to push past, but trying to move her was like trying to bend a piece of steel. And it was when I felt the unnatural consistency of her muscles that I experienced a sobering thought: drugs.

I stepped back, but in a flash her legs were around my neck and I was gripped in a choking grip.

“Psycho!” I grunted, though actually I knew it was a simplistic term for a girl like Sister, who was so complex it would take ages to figure her out.

To hell with psychoanalysis! I grabbed her buttocks and squeezed. With a squeal she released her hold on the top of the doorway. We fell backwards together and sprawled into the main cabin.

But her drug-aided reflexes were incredible, and in a blur of movement her thighs closed on me again, this time about my waist. Viciously she grabbed my hair and yanked my head into the space between her breasts.

Now there are some things you bite and some you do not. So I reached up instead, and grabbed the symbol of God that adorned her head. Bending it back, the rest of her body followed like a spring, and I was able to breath again.

I was also able to see. And what I saw was terrifying. The forward screen was covered in spirals, but dragged out like Daliesque melted watch-faces. As I watched, a monster galaxy distended across the black sky, a dollop of white paint running down a canvas, shedding a blob of a billion stars as the currents of space started to pull it apart.

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“Look at the screen!” I yelled.

“I know! I *know!*”

With a roar, I somehow managed to tear her off me and she bounced over to the far wall. I ran to the controls. The ship lurched, but I stopped myself from falling headlong by grabbing the edge of the console. In front of my eyes the forward screen was like a fish tank into which I stared and saw the Universe disintegrating: the galaxies were now mere streaks of foam in a torrent that carried us along as flotsam.

Sister crawled up beside me and steadied herself against the bucking of the deck by clinging to my legs. I myself could hardly stand. The fight seemed to have gone out of her, but there was a triumphant twang in her voice as she said “Behold the *Edge!*”

She was right. A ragged line had come into view, something like the jumbled white water on the edge of a waterfall. From it a spray of stars was rising. And beyond was nothing.

“All right, you win,” I said.

“No, Captain. *You* win,” was the quiet reply.

I looked down, and amazingly she was smiling. She opened herself, and we joined as the ship went over the Edge.

---

Sherlock put a supporting hand around Jale where he sat swaying on the side of Vestal’s coffin. “Sir, you look discombobulated.”

“Eh?” said Jale. Then catching up to the conversation. “No. I just found out a nice way to deactivate the v-bug.”

“Good,” conceded the detective, looking puzzled.

Jale looked down at the sleeping Vestal. Unknown to him, she also was dreaming. However, her dream was not induced, and was uniformly pleasant:

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She lay in his arms as he carried her through the jungle, her soft face snuggling into his hairy chest. She kissed one of his nipples, and felt hers go hard in response. His sensuous lips brushed hers with casual affection. His breaths were sweet and regular, matching the pounding of his naked thighs. Her own were moist in anticipation, as he burst out of the forest into a sunlit meadow. Gently, he laid her on the soft grass, and...

Vestal opened her eyes and screamed. Above her loomed a monster with a battered face from which one working eye leered while the other sheltered under dried blood.

"It's okay," said Jale. "It's me."

"Photon! Exclaimed Vestal. "You scared the crud out of me."

"But you still like me, don't you?"

"Of course," said Vestal, wondering what was happening. And then: "You're hurt!"

"Tis but a scratch, Ma'am," said Sherlock.

Jale glowered at him, then turned back to the girl. "Actually," said the man, "I'm feeling tired and not too steady. And I, er... I don't think its safe for me to sleep alone."

"Oh," said Vestal. Her forehead creased with thought, then cleared. "All right," she said matter-of-factly. "I'll keep you company."

Sherlock objected. "Sir, there are other ways!"

"Not natural ones," growled Jale. Vestal looked confused. Jale deflected any further discussion by saying "Perhaps, Sherlock, you can escort Vestal to the cabin, where you can both work to get us back on course for Weevilholme. I have to make some arrangements."

The two androids left, the male one depressed and the female one happy if puzzled.

After they had gone, Jale got out a laser saw and approached the three coffins that occupied the hold. He left Sherlock's alone,

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but sawed the other two longitudinally into halves. There was still some of the material left from a previous shopping trip to Spree, and he worked away steadily. By the time the androids returned, the ship's complement of caskets had been transformed.

"Here," said Vestal, handing Jale a mug of beer.

"Thanks," he acknowledged, wiping his face with a cloth to remove the last of the old blood and the beads of new sweat. Then he stepped to the side, and with a flourish said "*Voila.*"

Vestal said "Oooh! Did *you* make that?" Her light eyes opened in surprise, and swept over the new casket with appreciation. It was a double: one half was black on the outside with silver ornaments and dark-blue lining; while the other half was virginal white with an interior of ruffled burgundy satin.

"It's *be-yootiful!*" said Vestal, and gave Jale an impromptu kiss. Then turning to the megacoffin, "Will one of you give me a lift up?"

"I'd rather go and *throw* up," muttered Sherlock.

Jale gave him a warning glance, and picked up the girl. She did not weigh much, and he lifted her easily into the casket. She began to explore it, making gleeful squealing sounds.

"Sir," said Sherlock aside, using his sarcastic file. "Haven't you forgotten the little signs that say HIS and HERS?"

"No," replied Jale in a low but serious voice. "And I haven't forgotten that you've saved my bacon several times, and that you're the best partner anywhere in space."

The Holmes android was partly mollified. There was a pause while his loyalty directives recovered. "But all talk of pork aside, isn't this a bit risky? It's like the *Case of the Dying Detective*: you could be smitten with some exotic disease and end up babbling deliriously about oysters."

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“Sherlock,” said Jale patiently. “She’s an android.” He lowered his voice even further so that the girl had no chance of hearing. “And she’s a virgin. I won’t catch anything.”

“Will *she*?” asked the detective.

Jale considered. “No.” Then adopting a different tack. “Sherlock, old buddy, I have to do this for the sake of the mission.”

This impressed the android. Sherlock’s remaining look of doubt gradually disappeared, and pride suffused his aquiline features. “You’re right, Sir. I’m sorry that I did not trust.” There was a pause. “Make sure you deactivate that bug, Jale. Give it an extra squirt for me.”

“Will do, pal.” Jale turned towards the double coffin, where Vestal lay quietly waiting.

“Oh, and Jale?”

“Yes?”

“Like Captain Oates,” said Sherlock. “I think you are making the supreme sacrifice.”

“Well,” responded Jale with gravity. “*Somebody* has to.”

Sherlock stood to attention, whirled his hand in the air at the end of his arm, and smacked his forehead in salute. Ramrod straight, he levitated to the door, and considerately switched off the lights as he left.

## DEMOTED DNA

When the *Rigor Mortis* landed, it immediately became a focus for the local fauna. From all parts of the horizon, burrows appeared in the sand, converging on the ship. After a while there was a berm around the hull, seething with unseen life. Weevilholme was aptly named. Its original genetic engineers were long gone; but their legacy of downgraded DNA still persisted in the form of a biosphere that had been transformed from moist soil to dry grit, the members of its surviving species living off each other and the occasional unwary visitor.

Vestal disliked the place. “Are you sure we’re safe?”

“Yes,” replied Jale. “The *Rigor* has put down acoustic probes. Weevils hate noise.”

“And I hate weevils,” countered the girl, looking at the screen and trying to pick out one of the creatures against the rising green sun. “How big are they?”

“The largest ones are only the size of my hand,” said Jale comfortably.

“Do they have teeth?”

“Yes,” said Jale uncomfortably. “They’re the worm version of a piranha.”

Vestal shivered. “Can’t they make anything nice with DNA?”

“It depends on the skill of the engineer,” replied Jale. “Brounlee did a fine job on you.”

The girl smiled and ran her hand through the man’s thick hair. Then more seriously, “Are you genetically altered?”

“No. I’m just your standard simian.”

Vestal rubbed her hand over Jale’s hirsute wrist. “You have wonderful arms.”

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“I know,” replied Jale, who was trying to fine-tune the audio field. “I use them everyday.”

Vestal pouted. “I’m going to take a shower.” She gave him a conspiratorial wink. “I feel kind of sticky.”

\*

Jale stepped down. His boot sank to the ankle in sand and encountered something soft and wiggly. There was a squelching sound, and a geyser of some maggoty-white substance shot into the cool air. Clearly, the ship’s audio field was not perfectly tuned.

“Eeeyu!” exclaimed the newly-showered Vestal. “I’m not going to walk through *that*.”

She was right in a way. Even if they managed to negotiate the seething berm and its voracious inhabitants, there was still the trek to the dome on the horizon.

“I suggest,” said Sherlock, “that we take my coffin.”

“All right,” agreed Jale. “But make sure you seal the ship properly. We don’t want any of these life-forms to sneak on board.”

“No,” agreed the android. “That would be too much of a cliché.”

A short while later the three companions were piled precariously in the instrument-laden coffin. An intense burst of humanly-inaudible noise caused the sandbank that encircled the ship to show a gap. They levitated forwards.

On both sides, brownish-grayish shapes surged to the surface, only to submit to the sound waves and re-submerge. They were almost through, when a larger-than-average weevil emerged on top of a rock and attached itself with vicious teeth to the edge of the coffin.

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Vestal screamed and scrambled, threatening an upset.

“Relax,” said Jale. He calmly grabbed the big maggot behind the head and squeezed. There was a *spludge*, and its innards squirted out. The eyes on the front of the thing went dim and the teeth lost their grip, though leaving holes in the wood of the casket. The weevil’s body fell to the ground, where it was pounced on by others of its kind and rapidly devoured.

Vestal was shivering with disgust. But they were through the gap, and floating over the undulating surface of a desert. In the distance, the dome of the city reflected the green light of a sun which was now on top of the horizon.

“Nice place,” observed Jale, who had always had a fondness for deserts at dawn.

The main entrance to the dome was clear of the weevil-infested sand which otherwise encircled it. As they approached, Sherlock received a message on the coffin’s communicator, to which he responded. A door irised open just as they arrived and instantly closed behind them.

A bored-looking official wiped sleep from his eyes. However, his vision focussed somewhat as he looked at the three visitors. Jale was wearing a new, tight thermosuit — which inadvertently showed a significant quotient of muscles. Vestal wore only shorts, her breasts puckered from the cool air outside. Sherlock as usual had on his metallic cape, with his meerschaum pipe stuck between his teeth. The coffin levitated in the background, among other parked vehicles of more conventional design.

“Here for the convention?”

“Of course,” replied Sherlock. He wondered briefly what kind of convention it could be. Weevilholme was a desolate place, used mainly as a way station to more appealing ones. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

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“Idents?” The officer had the lackadaisical manner of a low intelligence performing a meaningless task at a bad time of day.

“We have genetic idents,” said Jale. “Cleared by Selipon.”

But the other seemed unimpressed by mention of the supercomputer at the centre of the Galaxy. “You’ll still have to go through a check.”

“Naturally,” said Sherlock. “Check away.”

“Name, occupation and place of origin?”

“Sherlock. Master detective. 221B Baker Street.”

Jale groaned inwardly. He had always found it difficult to deal with stupid people, and he hoped the android would not say more than was essential. Sherlock did indeed open his metallic mouth to add information, but luckily the official switched his moronic gaze to Jale.

“And you?”

“Jale. Undertaker. Acheron.”

The data was recorded, and their questioner turned to the girl with an appreciative look.

“Vestal,” she responded. “Vestal Virgin. I have, er, done several things in several places.”

“I bet you have,” smirked the official. His eyes moved reluctantly from her bare bosom to his screen. There was a pause. “But what about your inventions?”

“Inventions?” asked Sherlock.

“Yes. You have to declare them, for customs.”

“No problem,” intervened Jale, inferring the nature of the meeting on Weevilholme. “Mine is a levitating coffin.” He waved towards the parked vehicle.

The official looked at Vestal. “And what is your invention?”

The girl hardly paused. “A five-dimensional model of the *Kama Sutra*.” She smiled sweetly. “I also plan to do demonstrations. For special clients.”

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Jale groaned silently again. The girl was exaggerating. Also, he was sure there was a hidden polygraph aimed at them. And she had given her name as Vestal Virgin, the second part of which the lie detector might react to, given the previous night's activities.

However the Weevilholme officer seemed to be thinking about something other than deception. Finally, he turned to Sherlock and asked perfunctorily: "You! What have you invented?"

"The wheel," was the answer.

The official's eyes, never bright, went dimmer. This was so that his body could direct its energies to his three functioning brain cells. "You say you have invented the wheel?"

Vestal laughed merrily and took over. "He means, he's invented *the* wheel. The *Wheel of Passion*. I get tied to it with leather thongs, naked. And then it's set spinning. When it comes to rest, whichever member of the audience I'm facing gets a...special treat."

The official's eyes took on a new lustre, and his brain went dormant. "Will you be performing tonight?"

Vestal nodded brightly.

"I'll be there." He entered a command, and said "You are cleared to go."

The three friends sidled off, followed by a lascivious stare.

"I think he likes me," said Sherlock.

"I don't doubt it," muttered Jale. "Do you know what Napoleon complained of being surrounded by?"

"Aluminium plates?" proffered the android.

"Skip it," said Jale. Then "Vestal. You did well. Now, your clone must have come through this system. Where do *you* feel inclined to go?"

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They were walking along a broad concourse. The green sun was now half way up the sky, filling the dome with emerald light. There was a rush of people, heading to various destinations.

The girl said after some consideration. "I've been cooped up in a spaceship. I feel like doing some exercises."

Dutifully, Jale and Sherlock followed Vestal. On a side street, they stopped in front of a fitness club. Entering, they found the lobby uncrowded: it was still early. The girl paused, then went forward. In the changeroom, she took off her shorts. Jale, more slowly, stripped off his thermosuit. Sherlock put his meerschaum pipe into a locker.

They passed a few people in the corridor, who being exceptional physical specimens gave Jale and Vestal expert glances. There was a sign announcing *Nude Tai Chi*. They entered, followed by Sherlock.

The class instructor glanced at them. Jale noticed that he and Vestal were the only pubically unshaven members of the class.

Sherlock was good, using his levimotor to balance during the more difficult movements. Vestal was a natural gymnast. Jale felt big and awkward, but tried to make up for in strength what he lacked in finesse.

The class ended and the instructor left. The trio followed. In the corridor, Vestal said "I have a distinct feeling of *deja-vu*."

They entered a sweaty weightroom, where there were only three individuals: the female tai-chi instructor and two men with massive muscles. The music was pounding:

*All the kids are working out, on their way to fame  
Arthur's on the warpath — here he comes again!  
The city's like a sauna, but it stinks like a drain  
They're pumping up the planet, but its gonna bust a vein!*

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The female instructor was between middle and old age, but hard. Lying on her back with her legs on either side of the bench, the only soft part of her body was her blatant sexuality. She continued to press weights as she said “So you came back for a bit of fun, did you dearie?”

Vestal said nothing.

The older woman looked over the girl’s body calculatingly. Then she switched her attention to Jale. “And you brought a friend? My, he’s a hunk. But too hairy.”

“Look, lady...” began Jale.

“Don’t call me a lady!” snapped the woman, dropping her weights to the floor with a thud. She sat up and turned to Vestal. “And don’t you call me Mizz Garayan. I’m neither.”

Jale’s brain began to click. But before he could figure things out, he was distracted. The woman’s two companions had come to stand behind her, their arms crossed over their bulging chests and their gazes threatening. Like everyone else in the club, they were naked. Jale looked them over: they were about his size, but hairless, with small scrota and large penises. Android eunuchs?

“We want information,” said Jale.

“And I want fun,” said the woman. Her voice, like her body, was sinewy.

Jale cast a meaningful look at Vestal. Sherlock went on alert.

Without preamble, one of the eunuchs lunged forward and tried to grab Jale’s testicles. A fist stopped him, reducing his nose to pulp. But the other creature was on Sherlock, and the woman was in mid-spring towards Vestal.

The girl did a flip in the air, contriving somehow to scratch the older woman’s face. The latter bellowed in pain. Vestal hopped over the bench and headed for the door. The ex-wife of Garayan ran after her.

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Jale threw the attacker off Sherlock's back, turned, and found himself looking at a blaster held by a very angry individual with a squashed nose.

\*

Vestal crouched low in the coffin as a laser bolt sizzled overhead. Sand flashed by underneath. She worked the instruments, and the display showed that the hatch of the *Rigor Mortis* was opening. The casket careened over the weevil-filled dune and grazed under the rising portal. It immediately started to close again.

There was a clang as Vestal's attacker hit the sealed door. From the other side came a screaming rant: "I am the DNA diva. I *am* the DNA diva..."

Whatever this meant was lost on Vestal. She sat down, panting. She knew she was safe: the hull of the *Rigor* was proof against any laser. But what about Jale and Sherlock? How to counter-attack?

She walked quickly to the ship's laboratory. The two blasters were there, resting in their charging cradles. She picked up one. It was cold, heavy and shiny.

In fact, it seemed to be blurry...

---

Brounlee accelerated savagely as the levitating Volvo emerged from the gates of the University. Then as it found a slot in the freeway traffic he switched it to automatic. But as the car settled into cruise mode, its driver slumped in the seat, his anger giving way to gloom.

The University's experiments on animals made him feel sick and depressed. They had been going on for years, and Brounlee

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had become largely resigned to them. He had not, however, ever accepted that they were necessary, even though they added knowledge to his own field of genetics. There are other ways to obtain information. Ones equally as effective that did not involve the indignities carried out under the euphemistic term ‘testing’ (or torture as Brounlee preferred to call it). Normally a quiet man, today he had found himself shouting in a meeting of the Senate.

They had been discussing in the Senate whether to approve an application, by several of the other professors in his Department, to allow experiments on chimpanzees. The argument for this sounded straightforward: the Department needed money, and a major pharmaceutical company that was developing a new cosmetic needed some tests done on it. But Brounlee knew what it would lead to: he had seen a picture of a monkey with the skin of its face hanging off, the result of such tests done at another institution. He had objected throughout the afternoon’s meeting, with increasing rage, but had finally been over-ruled. He had left the place in disgust. Now, as the car carried him ever further from the scene of the conflict, he was overcome by a feeling of futility.

The Volvo — a reconstructed antique with a modern levimotor — hummed along smoothly. Around it, other cars moved along in close formation as if taking part in a parade. Most of them were on automatic, their occupants relaxing after the day’s work, listening to music or watching videos. Only a few cars were actually being driven, weaving in and out of the traffic as their owners rushed to get home.

Brounlee looked at the people in the other vehicles, wondering if they were happy. This thought was one he experienced more and more often these days, as the problems of his work accentuated his naturally moody character. There was

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not much he could do about the latter. He had been born and raised in a landscape that seemed to imprint its grimness on its inhabitants. Barren hills, valleys with patches of thin soil, cloud-covered fiords, quiet lakes devoid of fish (demoted DNA had done its insidious job well). These were the things he remembered from the planet of his origin, and the land had moulded the man.

The car sped along a section of the freeway that spanned a narrow canyon choked with rocks. They had presumably been left there by one of the rare rainstorms that punctuated an otherwise equable climate. At the far end of the canyon was a wedge of blue ocean. But Brounlee did not notice it as his thoughts wandered backwards.

Even as a child he could recall having a well-developed empathy for animals. His parents lived in the country, and he used to walk home from elementary school with his eyes alert for wildlife. Once he had spotted a gorgeously-coloured, spikey-haired caterpillar bravely crossing the road, and had picked it up and placed it on the grass verge, lest it be squashed by a passing car. He had been alone at the time, and had not thought twice about the act, regarding it as perfectly natural. Only later, when he started highschool in the nearby town, did he interact with urbanites and find that some of them did not share his inbuilt respect for animals. The town was also a port, and the school was not far from a grimy section of beach that dried out at low tide. When such times coincided with the lunch break, boys from the highschool could usually be seen poking about among the effluent-covered stones. On one occasion, Brounlee had come upon a group of older boys while walking along the beach. They had been throwing rocks straight down onto a group of crabs trapped in a stony hollow. The crushed shells and struggling, broken legs of the crabs had filled Brounlee with pain. He had

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intervened, objected. And come away with a black eye for his trouble.

A light blinked on the instrument panel of the Volvo. Brounlee's eyes lost their glaze of introspection and focussed ahead. The traffic was less dense in the middle distance. He prodded a button twice; and shortly after, the car's speed increased two notches as its radar confirmed that the freeway ahead was clear.

Splat! A butterfly crashed into the windscreen, becoming a smudge of red wings and black abdomen.

Brounlee flinched in sympathy. What would it feel like if his own body hit a hard surface hurtling along at high speed? He watched the smashed butterfly ablate as the wind against the screen slowly dislodged pieces of its body and pushed them out of his field of view. A minor tragedy, and one he could do little about. If he reduced speed, the rate at which the car mowed down insects would decrease, but the time it would be on the road before he reached home would increase.

This kind of logical exercise was something for which Brounlee had an aptitude. After several lonely years at highschool, where his devotion to animals and unexpected brilliance had set him apart from his fellows, he decided to move away from home and attend College. Early on, he had been pleased to find out that he had a knack for numbers that he could apply to his chosen subject of genetics. Back then, the data from field trips were usually given only a cursory going-over with statistics. Brounlee had surprised his instructors by doing in-depth calculations that yielded new insights into animal populations. He had been offered a scholarship and intensified his studies. He spent his days sitting in the College library, with books far advanced over those being used by other students. In the evenings he had gone for walks along the streets of the city

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where the College was located. It was a nice city as such went, not too large and with fairly friendly people. Not that Brounlee made many friends, either among the student body or the general populace. His walks were usually solitary ones, taken up mostly with thoughts about his work. He did sometimes wish wistfully for companionship, but after studying largely by himself he entered the last year of College a confirmed introvert.

The Volvo swayed slightly as it rounded a curve in the freeway. There was a low grating sound as field equipment — a spade, specimen boxes and the like — moved around in the rear compartment. Brounlee did not hear it.

He had met a girl during the last year of College. It had been a typically academic meeting — they had both been after the same book in the library — but the relationship had flourished on a sound biological basis of sex. They had stayed together in a casual liaison, sharing both the same books and the same bed, for most of their last year of study. Then they had graduated, and on the strength of an outstanding performance Brounlee had been offered an assistant professorship at the University. The stability this represented had caused him to broach the subject of a formal marriage. It worked pretty well for a time. But the new job also involved a commitment to a new planet. The adjustment for him had been hard, even with the incentive of his work. For her, it had eventually proven impossible. So she had left. The loneliness of the succeeding years he had borne stoically but not happily. There had been a few other women afterwards, but his increasing preoccupation with life and its right to survive had driven off most of his paramours. The last to stay any length of time with him had suggested he become a hermit.

That was not such a crazy idea to Brounlee. There were Buddhist monks in the high mountains who shared his philosophy. They were vegetarians, of course, and regarded life

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as sacred. Any life. He had a picture in his office at the University of one of those monks. It showed an orange-robed old man, sweeping the path in front of him with a bunch of yellow grass, in order to avoid stepping on and killing any ants that might be in the way.

Extreme? Perhaps so, at least to some. Absurd? Not really, since most people had some reverence for life, and this was merely its ultimate manifestation.

A check in speed caused Brounlee to temporarily break out of his reverie. The Volvo had closed in on another car ahead. It was supposed to move over, but presumably was not on automatic since it remained obstinately in his lane. After a brief pause, the Volvo changed lanes, accelerated past the obstacle, and moved back. Brounlee caught a glimpse of an old lady, doggedly driving her car manually, before the Volvo left it behind and he lapsed back into gloomy contemplation.

Ants. His mind was still on them. They looked insignificant, but were alive. Even a small ant was fundamentally different from (say) a grain of sand. The ant had cells, chromosomes, genes, DNA. It was not only alive but also *complicated*, the result of ages of evolution. Whereas a sand grain was...just a bit of stone. The complexity of living things had always fascinated Brounlee. Their high level of structure could not be the product of mere randomness. Somehow, the Universe was working to produce complicated things from simple things. After all, had not everything been hydrogen to start with? And had not the furnaces of the stars produced heavier elements; and had not these been processed by the biospheres of planets into ants...and rabbits with floppy ears, and people who could drive cars?

It was all close to incredible, really. Brounlee realized this anew, as he had done many times. But today the artistry of the

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world did not lift his spirits. He was depressed, to a level where things did not seem to matter much.

The Senate's decision was largely to blame. Approval had been given to experiments on primates, which genetically were almost the same as humans. That was bad. However, there was also a negative political side to the affair. The Senate had come down in favour of the applied researchers in his Department, the people who had previously been carrying out tests on lower animals and with whom Brounlee had been arguing for years. During the meeting, it had become clear that he had few supporters, even among the pure or non-industrial researchers; and his enemies had attacked him mercilessly. They had disparaged both his research ("ivory-tower speculation", "quasi-religious genetics") and his person ("incurable pessimist", "antisocial troublemaker"). Never a popular member of his Department, it had been a shock to Brounlee to learn how he was regarded by the local scientific community. He had been aware that his research interests were somewhat esoteric and that he was not good at communicating with his colleagues. But like many academics, he had found encouragement in his professional skills and the belief that he had a respected niche in the world of science. It left him kind of numb to find that many people saw him as something close to a crank.

Maybe he should resign? This option was attractive, but not practical. He was in mid-career, with many years of work ahead. And if he did quit his present job it would not be easy to find another, since his reputation for being objectionable and moody must already have spread abroad. Perhaps he should move back to his home world? No, that would not work. A while ago he had decided to take a vacation, and had booked a hotel room in the city close to where he had been born. However, the place had changed drastically, both in terms of its appearance and its

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inhabitants. It had become a metropolis, sprawling and impersonal. He had kept the addresses and numbers of a few people he had known in his student days who still lived there. But when he called, they expressed uneasy surprise and then disinterest. He had that odd and dismaying feeling, indescribable to anyone who has not experienced it, of being a stranger in the place of his own birth. Disoriented and hungry for company, he had called one of the sex agencies, and spent the night with a woman whose exquisite and seldom-blinking eyes reminded him of a lizard. Unfortunately, she turned out to be equally as affectionate. Next morning, after a fraction of his planned vacation, he had left.

The Volvo levitated under a bridge that arched between two sandy hills dotted with cypress trees. A dazzling bank of windows reflected the light of the setting sun, marking where a condominium complex was buried in the side of one of the hills. This human habitat was one of the last in the city: ahead lay a hummocky terrain empty of people. Beyond the hills lay dormitory towns, linked to the city by the freeway; but between the two concentrations of people, the countryside was largely untouched. Soon foxes and other creatures would be emerging from dusty holes, their marble eyes glowing in the dusk.

Brounlee looked out of the car, and saw the dismembered remains of a raccoon at the side of the road. His stomach clenched, not so much because of the sight of the bloody pulp but because of the injustice of it.

He wondered how much death he himself would cause in the future, driving back and forth to work every day for the long time still to come before retirement. Desultorily, he rummaged through the scientific junk on the seat beside him and found his calculator.

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How to quantify? Well, take the number of bits of information encoded in the DNA of (for example) a butterfly, and factor in rough estimates for how many days he would be driving to work for the rest of his career and how many dead insects there were on the car's front. He stared at the screen, making a fast count of specks using a special technique of field biology. Outside, the scene changed as the Volvo started to follow the freeway around a bluff. Yellow rock zipped past on one side, while on the other there was a sheer drop to the ocean far below.

Brounlee worked his calculator and got an answer to the question he had posed himself about insects. But then he recalled the dead raccoon. What about other life-forms? Especially the higher ones, whose deaths were less frequent but more significant since their DNA encoded more information. He started to work his calculator again.

A gust of wind caused the speeding Volvo to weave somewhat in its course. The freeway here was very exposed, and sea breezes blew unhampered over the guardrail. At the base of the cliff, waves from the open ocean were checked and turned into foam.

Brounlee finished his calculation, and discovered a strange coincidence: The amount of information that would be lost if he continued killing creatures with his car was approximately equal to the amount of information encoded in the DNA of a human being.

Vaguely, he realized he had found something important. In some informational sense, these other lives were worth the same as his.

A harsh buzzer startled Brounlee out of his studies. The steering wheel of the Volvo started to turn on its own as the computer ordered the car to avoid an obstacle in the road.

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Brounlee came upright in his seat, concerned. Some way ahead there was an object in their lane. It appeared to be moving, so it was presumably an animal. He twisted around to glance back, and saw the grill of a massive truck close behind. That must be why the Volvo's computer had not activated the brakes.

Suddenly, the car's steering wheel stopped and began turning rapidly in the opposite direction. Avoiding another vehicle, the Volvo's levimotor screamed as the car returned to its original lane.

The Volvo was now closing in on the object, which was squarely in their lane. Brounlee swore and went cold: it was a dog.

Abruptly he dropped the calculator and grabbed the wheel of the car. The automatic control went off immediately as he swung the wheel over in a desperate attempt to avoid a collision.

The dog — a black stray, scraggy and terrified — flashed past unharmed.

The Volvo, going too fast to recover from the swerve and buffeted by the wind, went out of control. It slewed across the lanes of oncoming traffic, burst through the guardrail, and started to drop towards the sea.

Brounlee wiped blood from his eyes and looked around in confusion. The interior of the car was a mess, but remarkably the calculator with its strange result lay unbroken on the floor. The windscreen was a web of cracks, but out of the side window he could see far below the blue ocean turning into white combers that crashed into yellow rock. The colours were vivid, and jogged some recall mechanism that brought back the picture of the orange-robed Buddhist with his bunch of yellow grass.

Brounlee closed his eyes, feeling suddenly weary and

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accepting his own death. At least he understood now that it made some kind of sense...

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Two eunuchs lounged by the side of two graves. Casually, they played with their blasters and their meagre genitals.

In the one grave, Jale sweated. Without his thermosuit, the radiation of the green sun at midday burned his bare shoulders. He worked the shovel with reluctant but still hefty sweeps. The hole trapped the heat, making the air more stifling as the excavation gradually deepened.

In the other grave, Sherlock's metallic cape reflected back the glaring sunlight. He took small spadefuls of gravel and ejected them to the edge of the hole, slowly eeking out its depth. For who is eager to dig their own resting place?

A large weevil poked its head out from the side of Jale's grave. He swung the spade and chopped it in two. "Take that, you little blighter."

The two guards had a transponder, with which they kept the carnivorous maggots away from their own bodies; but the acoustic field was weaker inside the holes, and their prisoners were under constant attack.

Sherlock called from his hole "Jale, do you know the song of the weevil?"

"No," grunted Jale. "How does it go?"

"Well, there's a lot of critical comment from the farmer, and then the weevil says in its own defense: *Gotta have a home. Gotta have a home. Gotta have a...*"

"Fascinating lyrics," observed Jale, decapitating another of the critters. "Maybe the accompaniment did something."

"Oh, yes," confirmed Sherlock. "Nobody could pick a granite banjo like Earl Yodel."

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“Whatever happened to Earl?” asked Jale with only minor interest.

“He’s dead,” said Sherlock sadly.

“Good,” observed Jale.

There was a small avalanche of sand into Jale’s grave as one of the android eunuchs stood up.

“Stop talking and keep digging.”

Jale, conversely, stopped digging and said “I need a break.” Sweat was pouring from his brow and his thick hair was matted. “My hole’s already twice as deep as his.”

This was true; and as the guard looked uncertain, Jale climbed out of the grave and sat on its surrounding pile of detritus. Behind him, the sounds of Sherlock’s shovel continued. In front of him, the two eunuchs sat on a large rock, watching him carefully. More specifically, one was looking at Jale’s hairy crotch and the other had a blaster trained on Jale’s hairy chest. The human thought: these guys may be sexual smoothies, but they will be hard to take.

“Nice day,” said Jale conversationally.

“Not for you,” said the first guard.

“Get back in your hole,” ordered the second.

Jale slowly got up. The pile of sand he had excavated moved underfoot. He briefly considered rushing his captors, but the conditions were not good.

He re-entered the hole, and felt puzzled. Previously, its edge had been level with his shoulders. Now, its edge was on par with his chest. Also, his shovel was half-buried. He picked up the implement and was bending over to resume digging, when a hail of gravel landed on his back.

Slowly, he stood up. Another pile of sand landed in his grave from the adjoining one. “Grrr,” said Jale, and sent it back.

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Sherlock's head appeared, grimy and with an artificial look of annoyance. The android sent his shovelful of sand in the direction of the man.

Jale ducked. The gravel hit the guards. Sherlock levitated straight out of his grave. Jale bounded out of his with an *en garde* spade.

The first guard was no longer sitting on the rock, but his blinded eyes did not see Jale's shovel as it cut through his neck with mighty force.

The second guard got off a shot from his blaster. But Sherlock's spade landed with a metallic bang on his bare head, and he collapsed.

Jale sat down with wobbly legs on the stone previously occupied by his enemies. He kicked the loose head of his erstwhile captor into the desert, where it immediately became the centre of a commotion. He watched dispassionately as the eyes were bitten out and the cheeks became holes. Soon there was only a skull left, and the commotion subsided.

"Sherlock," said Jale.

"Yes?"

"I don't like this place."

"Bad Karma?"

"No," replied Jale. "Bad DNA."

The friends dumped the bodies of their captors into the two graves. They shovelled in sand as quickly as they could, but the level kept sinking as the eunuchs were devoured underground. Finally, however, the desert was almost flat again, and still.

Jale picked up the transponder, checked that it was still working, and handed the two discarded blasters to Sherlock. "We've got a long way to walk."

"I don't think so," replied Sherlock. He pointed towards a dot on the horizon that was growing rapidly in size. A plume of

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sand behind it showed that somebody was driving with great speed. But then it slowed as it got near. The dust storm arrived before the vehicle which had created it.

“Hi guys!” said Vestal, emerging from the cloud. “Am I too late for the party?”

“Slightly,” said Jale.

“But we would appreciate a ride home,” added Sherlock.

They piled into the coffin, and Vestal set it on cruise. They had traveled for a way in silence, when Jale asked in a neutral voice “Where have you been?”

“I’m sorry,” said Vestal, feeling guilty. “I got held up by a dream.”

Jale’s eyebrows lifted.

“It gave me information about Brounlee.” There was a pause. “He’s not what he appears to be.”

“We know that,” said Jale. “So what is he?”

“He’s a logical Buddhist,” replied the girl. “The complete opposite of Rang. Brounlee loves life.”

Jale looked skeptical. “He seems pretty conservative.”

“He is in many ways. Takes notice of titles and institutions. But he can do calculations about DNA, and has an almost obsessive respect for life.”

Jale, noticing that Vestal looked slightly preoccupied, just asked “So where does that leave us?”

“It leaves *me* in a fix,” replied the girl. “I’m supposed to report to Rang, not Brounlee.”

“Don’t report to either,” suggested Sherlock pragmatically.

“Hmm,” non-committedly.

Jale, changing the course of the conversation, asked “What happened to your *dearie* friend?”

Vestal’s light eyes, which had been green in sympathy with the sun, went dark.

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“Did the weevils *weevil* her?” prodded Sherlock.

“Let’s just say,” replied the girl, “that Garayan doesn’t need to worry any more about alimony.”

The coffin topped a rise, revealing the waiting *Rigor Mortis*. Vestal interrupted the power, scanning the desert for trouble, one hand shielding her eyes and the other holding her blaster.

Jale and Sherlock picked up their own weapons, ready for humans and weevils that might be lurking around the ship.

“Where did you get the guns?” inquired Vestal.

“Courtesy of the Weevilholme mafia,” replied Jale. “Now we have four. That means there’s one for Zek.”

“Zek?”

“We need him,” replied Jale, thinking of his boyhood friend. “This mission is getting complicated. We need a computer expert.”

Vestal nodded in slow agreement, and restarted the power to the coffin. “Where are we going?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Sherlock.

“We have to find the Sphere of Civilization,” said Jale.

Little did they know how little they knew.

## CALLIOPE AND CALUMNY

Jale stepped down into a pile of charred wood that crackled underfoot. He paused to allow his eyes to become adapted to the dark. Behind him, the river lapped quietly at the supports of an old and broken dock. The air was laden with moisture and heavy with the special smell of Aster starweeds. However, even though it was summer, the night was chilly and he shivered slightly. Gradually, he began to make out a landscape of jostled half-burnt planks — the remains of a warehouse which he had obliquely demolished a long time ago. The ruins were now subdued, preventing from slipping into the river by the roots of bushes that thrived in the ash-laden soil. The bulk of his ship began to stand out, a dark shape against the stormy night. It gave off occasional pinging sounds as the motors cooled in the damp river breeze. Jale moved forward, his footfalls muffled by ash.

The house on the hill was known to him, but showed no signs of life. Warily, he worked his way between piles of lumber and stood in front of the door. There was still no response. Worried, he stood for a while, and listened. Far away somewhere in this rural world, a dog barked, its voice carrying through the still night. Where was Zek?

“Newts,” he whispered.

The door of the house opened obediently. Jale approached from the side and peeked in: things looked to be pretty much the same, except that his friend was not there. Taking out his blaster, he stepped across the threshold.

Nothing happened.

He closed the door and boosted the lights. In the corner, a massive subether unit muttered to itself. In the centre of the room was a farmer’s table made from Aster oak. It was partially

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covered by a green, embroidered tablecloth that was too small. A brown mug contained some dark liquid, and on an earthenware plate were a half-eaten slice of coarse bread and a chunk of yellow cheese. He turned around. The wood stove still showed cinders. On its top, a kettle gently discharged steam.

Where was Zek?

Jale stepped over to the stove and picked up the kettle: it was nearly dry, so he took it over to the sink. The lid of the kettle would not come off, and he filled it through the spout. The hot kettle objected, but then cooled. He put it back on top of the stove, where it began to sing. The door of the woodstove opened with a squeak, and he threw in a log from the pile at the side. Feeling uneasy, he walked over to the table and sat down in a wooden chair that creaked under his weight. He put his blaster on the table, ready.

The embroidery on the green tablecloth became indistinct...

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Mist was moving up from the river into the hills. But I knew it would disappear by mid-morning when the first people from the city would find their way to the park to ride the merry-go-round.

The merry-go-round to me is a marvel, both mechanically and artistically. Beneath the platform, where the public never see, is an amazing set of giant gears and cogs. And on top there are three rings of rides, each of which is a priceless wooden sculpture. There is also a steam-driven organ or calliope, with various instruments including a giant bass drum, which performs classical pieces like *The Blue Danube* waltz.

The calliope was quiet and the merry-go-round was stationary that morning. I like to work without distractions, so I had started not long after dawn. The previous weekend I had

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installed a new crankshaft. It was a piece of gray metal the size of my thigh, and while I was checking it under the platform, the merry-go-round must have looked deserted.

It was when my head came out of the trapdoor in the platform, that I first saw the stranger and he first saw me.

He was walking down the hill, and as he came out of the mist I could see there was something about him that was wrong. I mean, anatomically wrong. His legs appeared to be articulated in an unusual way, so instead of swinging his arms like a normal person he shuffled along without moving his upper limbs. I assumed he was an invalid or freak of some sort. The latter interpretation was logical: a lot of weirdoes come up from the city on their days off, and this particular person was dressed in an ancient double-breasted suit and a cowboy hat.

The mist cleared for a spell as the stranger drew near. Briefly, I saw the parking lot and the approach road winding down the valley from the ridge. There was no other vehicle in the lot besides my own levitruck, which I always park off in the corner. The rest of the lot was empty, as was the road. Then I *knew* the stranger was something special: the merry-go-round is located in a large park, at some distance from the city, and nobody arrives there without transportation of some kind.

I scrambled out of the trapdoor, wiped my hands on a rag, and walked to the edge of the platform.

The stranger shuffled forward, and from under the brim of his hat said "Good morning".

These ordinary words had a tone I had not heard before, and somehow they reminded me of the crankshaft: dull and oily.

"I'm afraid the merry-go-round doesn't officially open for a while," I said, trying not to sound rude but feeling suspicious.

"I know," replied the stranger mysteriously. However, he did not look to be a threat. He was short — close to a dwarf — and

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the old suit hung baggily on what I took to be a scrawny frame. I could only see his face from the mouth down, because of the hat; but the skin of his jaw was pallid, as if the natural colour had been drained by disease. “Do you mind if I look around?”

I hesitated, trying to come up with some theory for why the stranger was there, but not wishing to ask outright. After all, it was his business. I shrugged. “Okay.”

He turned and started walking around the edge of the platform. The merry-go-round has three rings of rides, but some of the ones in the innermost ring have been removed for restoration. The theme of that ring is transportation, but that day the only ones left in place were a wild-west stagecoach and a double-decker bus. The stranger seemed interested in the latter, and I watched him carefully.

On his second tour around the platform, the stranger’s attention shifted to the rides in the outermost ring. These rides are all mythical animals, and he seemed fascinated by the unicorn. Now the unicorn’s horn is one of the merry-go-round’s treasures: the spiral groove on the horn is inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and the surface of the wood between the turns of the spiral is carved into fish whose details are picked out with gold leaf. The stranger spent longer looking at this piece of art than anything else on the merry-go-round.

I was suspicious, though I felt I could handle whatever might happen. A college student who lifts weights every day must be more than a match for a small sick guy. I do not know if the stranger was aware I was watching, but after a while he left the merry-go-round and walked the short distance to the calliope. There he regarded the ranks of wooden pipes, the clusters of bugles, and the big bass drum with its thumper poised to strike the diaphragm. However, his attention then focussed on Mary.

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This is the name of the wooden mascot that is mounted on the front of the calliope. It is a sculpture of a woman, small but exceedingly intricate. She wears black boots, a circus leader's scarlet costume, and a silver tophat. In her right hand is a whip, which moves up and down in time to the music when the organ is working. The sculpture has an amazing amount of detail, including a curious tight-lipped smile that could mean either pleasure or malice. I am not sure why this sculpture is referred to as Mary, since it has no official title. However, the Boss has a droll sense of humour and an aggressive wife with the same name.

The stranger peered at the small statue for a long time, before turning and coming back to the merry-go-round.

I was by now sure that he coveted some of the finer artwork, and decided to forestall him. "They aren't for sale."

I do not know what reaction I expected. Perhaps to be offered a bribe, since antiques like the ones he had been admiring are worth a lot. But what did happen left me confused and uneasy.

"But I am a *collector*," the stranger said, with an accent on the last word that someone might use if they had decided to drop an incognito and reveal they were a king. Simultaneously, the stranger looked up for the first time. I found myself regarding a pair of spectacles with dark and thick lenses separated by a false red nose like the one a clown would wear.

I was not laughing, however. There was something sinister about the stranger, despite his ridiculous appearance. And I felt my back stiffen when he said "We do not have things like these where *I* come from."

I did not really know what to do, but I guess my brain figured that this confrontation was like ones I had experienced with nasty guys in the city. For I suddenly heard myself laugh

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and say “Crap!” Then, choosing my words consciously and speaking them emphatically, I added: “I don’t care what you are or where you come from, *they aren’t for sale.*”

It was an impasse. But one that was dissolved by something trivial and unexpected. Namely, the stranger’s shoes.

Have you ever noticed how most people’s shoes are creased and maybe cracked from wear? Even new shoes soon acquire creases from the movement of the wearer’s feet. Well, I suddenly noticed that the stranger’s leather shoes were perfectly smooth. Not a trace of crease. I thought “Rigid feet. Artificial limbs. An invalid.” I looked at the ankles, but they were hidden by the concertined legs of the old-fashioned pants.

Abruptly I felt stupid. I did not feel sorry for the stranger, who after all had acted in a deliberately weird manner. But I did feel I had over-reacted. I made myself relax.

The stranger seemed to notice this, and became ingratiating. “I understand you will not part with them,” he said with his smooth voice. “But in that case, can I at least have a ride on the merry-go-round?”

I looked at my watch. Officially, I should have opened by now. Hardly anybody showed up this early as a rule, but the stranger was here today, and technically I realized he should have his wish. Grudgingly, I said “All right. Though you’ll have to wait until I start the engine. And you’ll have to pay the usual fare.”

He produced an antique coin and gave it to me with an emaciated hand sporting dirty fingernails like claws. I pocketed the money absently, and walked to the centre of the merry-go-round, choosing a path through the rides that allowed me to keep the stranger in sight.

In the engine room at the hub, I checked the oil levels before starting the main motor. It was comforting to hear its familiar

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roar, and for a few seconds I forgot about the stranger. The main gear wheel started to revolve, and I watched closely to see that the smaller reduction gears were working smoothly. There was a dry spot on one of the cogs, which I sprayed with lubricant. Then, satisfied that the engine was running properly, I grasped the lever that controls the clutch and pushed it over. The merry-go-round platform started to spin, slowly but then faster.

I stepped out from the engine room between the stagecoach and the double-decker bus. The platform accelerated beneath my feet as my eyes searched for the stranger.

There he was, sitting on the back of the unicorn in the outer ring. Hoping that he would not cause any damage, I threaded my way through the horses, camels and lions of the middle ring to the edge of the revolving platform. I jumped off, and headed for the calliope.

There has always been a leak from the master cylinder that feeds steam to the pipes of the organ. I did what I could with the offending joint (for the umpteenth time), but there was still a cone of escaping steam when I finished. Ignoring this, I threw the lever, and saw the needle on the gauge of the holding cylinder flick over. Then I switched on the paper feed, and watched the holes and dashes that control the stops of the organ begin to roll. Soon after, with a wheeze to start, the strains of *The Blue Danube* filled the air.

I stood pensively in front of the calliope, with my hands in my pockets. In one of these I felt the coin the stranger had given me. That personage had just passed by, hanging on desperately now that the rides were going up and down with maximum frequency and the platform was spinning at full speed. Wondering if he thought he was getting his money's worth, I took out the stranger's coin.

And received a shock.

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For it was not any kind of coin I had ever seen. Sure, it was round and shiny and had mass. But I could tell from its feel and sheen that it was not made of metal. And on one side it had some kind of text in symbols that were unintelligible, while on the other it had a spaceship passing through a constellation I had never seen.

I looked up, the alien coin in the palm of my hand, and met the stranger's stare. He passed by, and I noted for the first time that his back was curiously round like a tube, with no sign of shoulder blades. Scared, I turned and searched frantically for the wrench I had discarded after working on the calliope's leak. I found it finally, and turned back to the merry-go-round.

I was almost too late. The alien landed on me at the same time as I hit it. The things I had thought were fingernails slashed through my shirt and raked my shoulders. The wrench kind of sank into the body of the creature, and I saw its neck shoot out like toothpaste from a tube. Then the old suit collapsed as the alien uncoiled itself and took its arms out of the sleeves. There were only two real legs on a snake-like body, but the thing was all muscle, and I suddenly realized I was in trouble.

I grabbed its throat with my left hand and tried to hit it with the wrench in my right. But it was like trying to fight a rope. And all the time its claws were slicing through my arms. Blinded by my own blood and with the alien's body coiled round my legs, I fell down heavily and fetched up against something that pulsated rhythmically. It was the bass drum, whose *Boom! Boom!* made me dizzy.

Shaking my head cleared my sight, and I saw a pasty face with deep-set red eyes and palmate stuff like seaweed in place of hair. The alien had lost its spectacles and hat, and I lunged at the ugly thing instinctively. But the creature jerked upwards and the wrench buried itself uselessly in the ground.

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Mary's whip twitched across the alien's face, and on the up-beat the clown's red nose was ripped off. Underneath was a hole from which antennae uncurled.

I surged to my feet, getting new strength from terror, but with enough wits left to stagger in a special direction before falling again. I had lost the wrench, but now had two hands on the creature's throat. With this double purchase I managed to bend the head back. The leak from the calliope's master cylinder hissed a thick jet of steam nearby, and with a push I buried the alien's head in it. Artificial white skin scattered in the blast, revealing bluish scales.

There was a strange sound like a cross between a scream and a gurgle, and I was pulled upright as the alien convulsed with pain. The steam had done something, but not enough. I redoubled my efforts to strangle the thing, but it responded by tightening its coils around my ribcage and trying to crush me. Like a pair of drunks, we staggered around trying to kill each other in tune to *The Blue Danube*.

It was the unicorn that decided the outcome. I saw it coming round on the edge of the platform, going fast. With a jerk, I pushed the alien's head up and to the side. The unicorn's horn went right through the alien's skull, like a nail through an acorn.

After the fight, I did not know what the hell to do. I suppose I was in shock. I remember being severely concerned with possible damage to the unicorn. I stopped the merry-go-round, detached the corpse of the alien, washed my own wounds, and bound them up with stuff from the park's first-aid kit. The body of the alien I dragged down the hill to the shack of the gardener. He always keeps a fire smouldering, which he uses mainly to burn garbage. But I fired it up and used it to burn the alien. I also took one of the gardener's overalls, since my own clothes were in rags and I did not want people to see my bandages.

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After that, I tried to carry on as usual. I managed it until the middle of the afternoon, when the meaning of what I had done started to sink in. Apparently, towards the end of the day, I started to act a bit funny, and some customers were offended enough to complain.

Unknown to me, the Boss investigated several complaints during that day and decided to find out why I had “flipped”. Unknown to him, however, I was actually all right again by the next day, and spent the following evening trying to locate the alien’s spaceship.

I found it eventually, buried on the side of the hill about a third of the way down the valley near the dead oak tree. It was not very big, and I dragged it down the road without much trouble. After putting it in the back of my levitruck, though, I realized I could not take it home because the landlady insists on doing an inspection every weekend (ostensibly for illegal pets, really for girls). It was then I got a brilliant idea, and spent a whole day disguising the spaceship with the stuff left over from the time my truck was in a smash-up.

It may not have been correct to treat an alien artifact this way, I now appreciate. In fact, after talking to the Boss, I see that I may have done something really bad in killing a genuine alien visitor, even if it was a kind of thief. The Boss has asked me why I covered up the killing, and the only answer I can come up with is that I had a sneaking feeling of guilt even then. However, I also have to say that at the time I did not think about the significance of what I did, and only wanted to get rid of the damned thing.

By the way, I cannot understand why the Boss doubts certain aspects of my story, and hints that the stress of my studies at College has been too much for me. But if anyone doubts me, I advise them to take a ride on the merry-go-round. Specifically, if

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you try the ride between the stagecoach and the double-decker bus, you will discover a new means of transportation.

---

The stitches on the green tablecloth became sharp, and Jale picked up his blaster. Outside, dawn was leaking through the hills, but the oak trees were still black silhouettes.

Jale started up the slope behind the house, moist grass swishing against his calves. At the top of the ridge, he stopped and searched the valley below with his eyes. A small group of buildings left over from a circus marked what the planet had to offer by way of entertainment. He ran down the side of the hill, his legs smashing through undergrowth. Panting, he arrived at an ancient, dilapidated merry-go-round.

“Well,” he said to himself. “Dreams are not reality.” He hoisted himself onto a wooden platform with conspicuous gaps, and threaded his way through rough-hewn figures whose major quality was gaudiness rather than finesse.

Near the centre he noted an odd-looking box. His big hand grasped the edge and a heave ripped off its top. Inside lay a figure.

“Zek!” yelled Jale.

The eyes of his boyhood friend flickered.

“Zek.” Jale lifted the figure out of the box and laid it on the warped wood.

The eyes opened, unfocussed.

“Zek?”

The eyes focussed. “Jale?”

“Yes. What’s up?”

“Not much,” was the slow reply. Then “I didn’t even get to finish my dinner before they jumped me.”

“Who?” asked Jale.

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“People,” was the short answer. “Either from Rang or Brounlee.”

“How do you know?”

“Selipon,” said Zek, “Warned me.”

Jale, puzzled, looked his friend over closely. “But, they didn’t kill you.”

“Apparently not.”

“Calumny!” exclaimed Jale.

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Zek, starting to get up.

“Something complicated and *nefarious*.”

“What the photon does *that* mean?” Zek was now standing on wobbly legs.

“Dunno,” replied Jale. “Let’s go, buddy.”

\*

The *Rigor Mortis* followed the sinuous course of the river towards its estuary, keeping close to the bluffs to avoid detection. In the hold, the two halves of the coffin the captain had dismembered were now rejoined, and in it Zek slept in peaceful convalescence. Next to his was the double casket frequented by Jale and Vestal. And next to that, Sherlock’s unit.

In the ship’s cabin, four blasters rested on the table.

“This plot is finally making some sense,” observed Sherlock.

“Not to me,” said Vestal. She lay on the couch, declodded except for her usual shorts, and pouting. “If we get near her, I want to go and see the original Vestal! I want to...”

“Exchange recipes?” Jale’s voice was sarcastic. “No.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t have time” replied Jale, skirting the sociological problems involved in the request and focussing on the practical.

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“Time is instantaneous,” intoned Sherlock.

“Very profound,” commented Jale. “But we have to find the Sphere. The dream machine is headed there, and with Zek’s help we can follow.”

“You have a very old-fashioned sense of cause and effect,” said Vestal with critical but accurate insight. “I bet you still think in the old seven-day cycle.”

Jale shrugged and picked up his glass from the table. The Rigellian beer was relaxing, but he felt slightly weary. His mind reverted momentarily to fantasy, wherein people with strange names do strange things. He experienced a strong if temporary urge to live in the ages when the Universe was cruder but easier to understand. If he were not partway through a mission, he would have taken a vacation for a pagan seven-day cycle.

He looked into his glass. The froth seemed suddenly to be too burlesque...

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From the log of the spaceship *Cavort*, Captain Jale (Ph.D.) nominally in command.

MONDAY (Moon’s day in the Old Language). When you’ve seen one crater you’ve seen them all. Landed at Tranquility Base with the usual load of sightseers. Mrs. June Templeton from Ohio is a sight herself: built like a Darlek and with a face that would scare one. The third mate, Gomez, has already started a sweepstakes to guess the number of her chins. (Lest I be judged unkind, I should mention that Mrs. Templeton has already threatened two other passengers, and her poodle has peed against the binnacle.) She declined the excursion to see the re-creation of the TMA-1 set from *2001*. Just as well: monoliths don’t like competition. The rest of the party seemed impressed by the dark prism. Regrettably, Mr. Stooper the octogenarian

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had trouble with his hearing aid, and dropped on one knee in front of the monolith, trying to clap his ear through the space helmet. Madam Sylvia, an esoteric type taking the trip to experience 'cosmicness', jumped to a wrong conclusion. She was last seen disappearing over the horizon shouting "Jupiter signal! Jupiter signal!"

TUESDAY (day of Mars the ancient god of war). The red dust made everybody irritable. Mrs. Templeton lost her temper and apparently tried to kill Miss Cockney (a small spinster) by rolling on her. But Mars has a thin atmosphere, and Miss Cockney had an air supply that lasted long enough to prevent suffocation by blubber. Mr. Roly, the careworn salesman, was also unfortunate. He drank too much and threw up in the replica of the Martian house from the *Chronicles*. His wife, who is like a piece of flint, was so disgusted that she dumped him in the canal.

WEDNESDAY (after the god Woden in the Old Language or Mercury in the New Language). Hot! Only by travelling through the caves of steel was it possible to go any distance from the ship. Miss Cockney managed to wiggle up a crevice, and revenged herself on Mrs. Templeton by dropping an egg on her head as she emerged into the sunlight. This promptly fried itself fast to her visor, and the Ohio Behemoth (as she is now called) had to be dragged back to the ship by tractor beam. There I intervened to stop Gomez from removing her helmet before the medic arrived: I was sure his uncharacteristic concern was only a cover for an unfair attempt to enumerate the victim's jowls.

THURSDAY (Thor the thunder-god's day, identified with Jupiter). Mr. Roly approached me and asked if he could go down and collect some of the Great Red Spot so he could sell samples of it in Delaware. I told him that the only way to descend into Jupiter was to transform himself into a plastic-skinned monster

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who could withstand the tremendous pressure of the atmosphere and the storms of ammonia crystals found there; and that while others had done this, none had ever returned. At this point Mr. Roly's strong-armed wife hove into view, and he turned to me and said "Okay".

FRIDAY (The day of Venus). Originally called after Frigg, wife of Odin, I wondered if Mrs. Roly knew this when she asked me this morning what had become of her "friggin" husband. I told her, but she showed little regret. She spent most of the day simpering at various males, including Ricky-boy, a well-groomed macho creep we have aboard who passes for purser. After dinner they headed off arm-in-arm into the Venusian mists, obviously intent on something not written about by Lewis. The dinner itself was marred slightly because Jensen, the cook, had written up the menu using a literal translation from his native tongue. Not many guests tried the 'Norwegian farts-cheese'.

SATURDAY (Saturn's day). After doing the rings, we stopped at the largest satellite Titan. Could not find any trace of the sirens, but did see the little, horse-like creature with inflatable balls for feet. Then I did a sling-shot orbit around the dark side of Saturn, emerging so that the passengers could see the other planets like jewels as we headed back. Mr. Stoper, whose hearing aid was still defective, claimed he could hear the music of the spheres as he sat with his enraptured face up against the main viewport. Not wanting to spoil things, I did not tell him it was just the vibrations from F deck, where Mrs. Templeton has her cabin.

SUNDAY (thankfully the last day as well as the Sun's day). As usual, had the talent show in the ship's theatre. Mrs. Templeton, still the unsuspecting subject of a sweepstakes, insisted on giving her rendition of *If I Ruled the World*. Not a good choice for a person of her mass and meanness. The man by

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the side of me muttered that if *she* ruled the world *he* would emigrate to another planet. However, we did not have to endure the whole song. For as the Ohio Behemoth approached her musical climax, the stage trapdoor flew open and a telescope appeared, trained on her chin. I hastily excused myself and went backstage, where I collared the third mate Gomez trying to sneak away while pandemonium ensued in the theatre.

Later: I have had enough, and have decided to retire and study etymology in a galaxy far, far away...

---

Jale emerged from his induced reverie, to find Sherlock and Vestal glued to the subether unit.

*... so war between the Milky Way and Andromeda now appears inevitable. Efforts to deflect all-out conflict by Garayan, head of the Galaxy, have been discounted by Androyoos, who claims that Andromeda has a superior tactical position. Even the threat of mutual annihilation appears to have failed.*

*But as we of the Milky Way prepare to deal with the intransigence of our neighbouring galaxy, we have to say with sincerity that the two leaders are...*

“A couple of turds,” interrupted Jale.

Sherlock and Vestal looked at him.

“Start the megamotors,” ordered Jale. “We’re going. *Now.*”

“Where?” asked Vestal.

“To try and save the world.”

Sherlock was already at the console, and a deep hum permeated the plates of the *Rigor Mortis*.

“After all,” added Jale (repeating himself). “*Somebody* has to.”

## THE SEVEN-FOLD WAY

The *Rigor Mortis* disengaged itself from subspace, crashed back into the four-dimensional world, and skidded to a halt outside a pawnbroker's shop. Its captain, resplendent in a purple leotard and a short black cape lined with red silk, stepped out to survey the edifice. It consisted of dirty plastic, grimy windows covered with iron bars, and a sprinkling of what appeared to be bullet holes. The sign over the armored door said succinctly *Ed's*.

Jale entered, followed by Vestal. Several security cameras focussed on them, and the powerful mechanoid that sat in the corner watched them intently as they approached the counter.

"I don't like this place," said Vestal, who was being eyed by the weasly proprietor.

"Don't worry" said Jale, with the easy assurance of an upbringing in the slums of Ursa Minor. "We need artillery, and this place should have it."

"But why is that ratty guy looking at me?"

"Because you're pretty."

"Well, I don't like him," said Vestal decisively.

"Come now," said Jale reasonably. "You don't even know him. He might have a degree in tensor calculus for all you know."

"*You've* got a degree in tensor calculus," hissed Vestal. "One such in my life is more than enough."

Jale was slightly annoyed. "Look, check out the gold earrings while I check out the guns."

Vestal walked off, miffed. Jale navigated past a pile of watches of doubtful origin and stopped in front of the counter.

"*Bonjour*"

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“Bone sewer,” replied the youth. “What can I do you for?”

“I need something big. Have you got a Gibson?”

“Might have.”

“Does it work?”

“Of course it works!” objected the kid. “All our stuff works. We've even got a 30-day insurance policy.”

“How does that go?”

“Well,” explained the proprietor. “If you bring something back, my mechanoid mate over in the corner breaks your legs, and the insurance pays for a 30-day stay in hospital.”

“Interesting business plan,” observed Jale unfazed. “I won't be bringing anything back. But I need to know if it works properly because I'll be trusting my life to it.”

The youth looked slightly puzzled. His mind worked between well-worn edges of dishonesty and mere deviousness. However, Jale looked like a tough guy, so he decided to get as close to the truth as his criminal nature would allow. “Well. Let's just say that it *works*.”

“What colour is it?”

“White,” was the prompt response.

Now it was Jale who looked slightly puzzled.

“I know what you're going to say,” interjected the kid. “That it'll show the rust. But, they were *all* made white in those days.”

“True,” agreed Jale. “They don't make 'em like that any more. How much do you want for it?”

“A thousand.”

Jale laughed derisively. “How about octo hundred?”

“Nah,” was the reply. “And anyway, you haven't even looked at it. It's worth a thousand.”

Jale was thinking. They needed major firepower but he did not like being clipped.

“Nine hundred and we skip the police check.”

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The proprietor looked uncertain, possibly because of an aversion to the constabulary.

“Octo hundred and your girlfriend.”

Jale turned to regard Vestal. She was inspecting a Pre-Raphaelite bidet. Her shorts were *short* shorts; and as she bent over to look at the silver engraving, both men gained new appreciation for the idea of a small container full of soapy water.

“No,” said Jale. His tone of voice was firm. “Nine hundred or nothing.”

The youth looked reluctant. Then “Well, okay.” He started to walk into the back of the shop, then paused to add “But I’m not making anything on the deal.”

“Of course not,” said Jale sarcastically. “I’ll pay you now.” The proprietor returned to the counter like an iron filing to a magnet. “But I want you to deliver it. The Gibson is a heavy thing. My ship’s out in the parking lot. The black one resting on the parking meter we took out.”

The pawnbroker sniggered. “The more meters that are taken out the more free parking for my customers. Thanks. I’ll deliver your Gibson.”

“*Merçi*,” acknowledged Jale. “And *bonjour*.”

“Murky,” replied the proprietor. “And bone idle.”

\*

The *Rigor* lifted off with its new cargo. Jale, Sherlock and Vestal rushed to the hold as soon as the autopilot had figured out an orbit. Zek snored peacefully, unaware of the occasion.

“Open it! Open it!” urged Vestal.

Carefully, Jale stripped away the packing. “My friends.” His voice was solemn. “With this device, we become invulnerable and our enemies will be vanquished.”

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He ripped off the last of the covering. To reveal a beautiful white guitar.

Jale was silent. But Sherlock, ever adaptive, said “Good thinking, Sir! We’ll play country music, so they’ll *have* to give in.”

Vestal sneered “You should have bought the bidet. At least we’d have some *use* for that.” She marched out, her breasts bouncing with indignation.

Sherlock picked up the guitar and plucked the strings. The instrument was hideously out of tune. “They won’t have a chance!”

Jale, recovering, said “Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“Sherlock?”

“I already gave an affirmative.”

“Okay,” acknowledged Jale. “Sherlock, do you think I’m an idiot?”

“No!” There was a gap. “Well, not in all respects. In some ways you’re a king. You’re fantastically good at multi-dimensional geometry and drinking beer.”

Jale grunted. It had been a long day. He closed his eyes, and too quickly started to dream...

---

King Karpov strode down the corridor, his boots leaving imprints of snow on the purple carpet, and flung open the door. It was a massive piece of wood, dating from the Old Epoch, and as it swung open its inertia defeated the attending flunkey and it hit the wall with a crash.

Unnoticing, Karpov stomped across the threshold and entered a room hot and thick with the smell of human bodies.

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Seven pairs of eyes swiveled in his direction. He stared back with the insolence of ultimate power before speaking.

“What is it I hear about the sum of the components of the tensor being zero?”

The words came out unhurried, but reverberated from the oak paneling of the chamber with an ominous tone.

Nobody breathed. The main sound in the room was the lapping of flames in the monolithic fireplace, where ancient andirons in the shapes of tigers kept seething logs at bay. Occasionally, a bigger-than-average snowflake that had found its way down the chimney would land on one of the crouching metal animals and disappear with a hiss.

The red glow of the logs pervaded the chamber, lit otherwise only by one set of windows consisting of cracked panes of corrugated glass. Snow could be seen falling sedately from a gray sky that covered potato-shaped hills. The glimmer of flat white ice with a few patches of dark blue showed where the Lake was freezing in the distance.

But that was outside. And inside, the eyes of the seven mathematicians were riveted on Karpov as if he was the fulcrum of the Universe.

Which as far as they were concerned, he was.

“Well?!”

This time the voice, while still unhurried, had an edge of threat. And in response to this, the oldest of the people in the room spoke.

“It is only a rumour, which we are investigating,” said Stevens. “But we do not yet have all of the components worked out precisely. Even with its symmetry properties, the Ricci tensor has 28 components, and at 4 a piece we...”

“Excuses!” Karpov interrupted. Though actually, he had forgotten that there were 28 components in symmetric seven-

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dimensional geometry. Nevertheless, among the seven mathematicians that was only four parts each.

“Why is it taking so long now that you have the Integrator?”

Really, it was a differentiator. Or, even more accurately, one of the computers built solely for the algebraic manipulation of tensors. Running in the reverse mode to what was originally intended, it was valuable for evaluating complicated mathematical functions. The computer now sat quietly in a corner of the big room, a useful artifact from an age when the mathematical fit between matter and mind was unknown.

Prosaically, somebody had laid out a pair of socks to dry on the console of the machine, and Karpov saw red symbols blinking through threadbare fibre.

“...each component has over three thousand terms, so even with the Integrator it has been a very long job.”

Karpov picked up on the phraseology. So. They *were* nearing the end of the task.

He *would* be the first king of the new era to have all the components of the Ricci tensor worked out. The first to see in symbols the harmony of Science and God.

Even as his mind focused on this goal, his dark eyes focused on Stevens. He was the oldest of the team of mathematicians assembled by Karpov's father to work out the Ricci tensor. Several of the scientists had died in harness and been replaced, but Stevens had worked on stubbornly. Now with a lined face and a shock of silver hair, his pale blue eyes still had the glint of intelligence, and it was possible to see the young boy within the decayed body of the old man.

Reluctantly, Karpov respected him. Not only because he was an excellent mathematician. But because he was always the first to speak up, and never deigned to call Karpov *Sire*. The latter

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was a term Karpov disliked because it was illogical, even though it was a tradition with the others.

Of them, only David had any reason to call Karpov *Sire*. Through the new program of eugenics, Karpov had allowed himself to be persuaded to donate sperm to the State bank. And later, to have it used with a vigorous middle-aged woman who desired more children and was unaware of the donor. She was long gone, poor woman, and now lay in one of the royal tombs, though without the benefit of a full understanding of The Seven-Fold Way. Her last son, however, had grown and flourished. And by some genetic quirk had shown extraordinary aptitude at mathematics. So now, David was a member of the team, unaware he was son of the King.

Stevens was still talking, explaining that each of the seven mathematicians had been making progress on their allotted components of the Ricci tensor. A wiry man dressed in faded but still jaunty clothes, he stopped as Karpov renewed his concentration.

“You were allocated the first set of components, right?”

“Yes,” confirmed Stevens. “Or rather, I have all the subcomponents with a number one in the first row or column of the matrix.”

“Number one?”

“The old terminology for time,” Stevens reminded him. “Before they knew that time and space, consciousness and God, were all parts of the same thing.”

Karpov grunted. Who was Stevens, anyway? He had been there at the time of Karpov’s father, and gossip had it that he was a refugee from the slums of Ursa Minor. The old man had a peculiar trait of individuality that was lacking in the others, and must have served him well in the past. A long scar over his left eyebrow showed that the man's life had seen rougher things than

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algebra. Karpov felt a sudden desire to sit down and talk with Stevens for a long time. As he had always wanted to do with his father, before the latter's unexpected passing.

Karpov made a mental note to have his secretary check Stevens' biodata, and if it showed capability (which he was almost sure it would), to have two of his youngest wives made available to the mathematician to do with as he pleased.

However, that would have to wait until the project was finished. Stevens was its anchor, and Karpov could not afford any disruption. If they could not get the first component of the tensor (what the poets in their ignorance called the ever-rolling stream) then the other ones would be mere useless symbols.

“What about the other, space-like, components of the tensor?” Karpov demanded.

“We are working on them, Sire.” This from three falsetto voices, in unison.

The Cheng triplets were eugenically designed pseudoyouths with slanted eyebrows and black hair on their heads, but not the faintest trace of fuzz around their genitals.

Karpov scowled. They were, he knew, good mathematicians. But the resurgence of studies in genetics that had accompanied the rebirth of science had produced some things that Karpov found faintly obnoxious. A big man with the stubble of a three-day beard beginning to overlap the gold of his collar, Karpov was unaltered and primitive. And he liked it that way. The Cheng triplets, conversely, had been bred for their prowess at algebra, with the result that they had lost a lot of other things, including their sex.

Physically male, they had feminine features and smooth, hairless bodies that they insisted on flaunting like adolescent schoolgirls. Apparently, his son David was taken with the triplets, and slept with them either singly or together as fancy

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dictated. Karpov did not have any negative opinion about David on that basis, however. Though it did sometimes seem to the King that the search for The Seven-Fold Way, inaugurated by his father and now being brought to a conclusion by Karpov, had resulted in some less-than-logical consequences. In fact, certain elements of the Way seemed more akin to dream than reality.

One of the Cheng triplets, misinterpreting Karpov's frozen scowl as impatience, gabbled "We are working on the space-like components. That is, all the sub-components with a two, three or four corresponding to x, y and z."

"I know!" yelled Karpov in a sudden fit of impatience. Did they think he was an idiot to be taught what every child knew?

The triplets moved back as if the blast of his voice had been one of those storm-driven waves on the Lake whose force pushes everything far up the beach. The youths fell into the recesses of a sumptuous couch on which were strewn pages of complex calculations and pieces of discarded food.

Karpov, feeling tired and hungry, walked over to an upholstered armchair by the fireside. Clearing it of the dismembered remains of a chicken with a sweep of his arm, he sat down ponderously.

It was somewhat past dinner time, and he had not eaten. However, the hollow feeling in his stomach was not the only reason for his raised voice. He had not slept well the preceding night, having been bothered by nightmares in which his mother and father had been performing unspeakable and physically impossible acts. Like all his dreams — which were universally bad — he could not recall the details. But the nastiness of them, coupled with the lack of regular sleep, was the main reason for his irritability.

That and the foot-dragging progress of the mathematicians.

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“When will you be finished?” Karpov demanded truculently. “The space components are the easiest to work out, and space as a concept has been understood for ages. You should be able to finish quickly.”

He had been tempted to say something more threatening, but the tone of his voice made the implication clear.

Stevens cleared his throat. The triplets cowered in the back of the sofa, their knees drawn up to their naked chests. The old man, speaking for them, said “They will be finished tomorrow morning.”

Karpov felt his shoulder muscles relax. Clearly, the mathematicians were closer to a solution than they had let be known.

With an unexpected guffaw, he kicked the carcass of the chicken up into the air. It described a parabolic arc, hit one of the hammocks that were slung in the far corner of the chamber, and fell to the plush carpet with a dull thud.

This room, he thought, must stink. Seven people — working, eating and sleeping in such a space — could hardly have any other effect. And even though it was a large chamber (and one of the most luxurious in the palace), it must reek by now of the mathematicians who had been cooped up in it. And Karpov realized that if he could not detect the odor of the others, then it was because he himself had not bathed recently and must have a similar smell.

David, however, seemed oblivious of both the smell and the disorder that characterized the room. With his meticulously trimmed beard and neatly combed hair, he looked less a mathematician than a courtier. He was like a better groomed and 2/3-sized version of Karpov, and the latter wondered if the physical similarities between the two had led David to infer how closely they might be related. But no: the eugenics bank was

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secret, so his son must have put down their similarities to the fact that they were of a type native to this region.

Also, their mental characteristics were quite different, as David evidenced now by starting to describe the work he had done in a careful and school-masterish manner.

“The matter fields, which are of course closely linked to the force fields, have been known for a long time to be associated with the fifth row and column of the matrix. But it is only now, and with the aid of the Integrator, that I have been able to isolate the terms responsible for...”

Karpov tuned him out. Drawing his purple-lined cloak about him, he sank back in the chair with a disgruntled expression. The jowls of his heavy face, sporting his latest but still only half-grown beard, rolled over the high collar of his office.

What made one person a King who had killed men in battle, and another person a pedant whose only prey was equations?

A few genes, apparently.

Somehow, it seemed wrong. Too great a difference for too small an effect. It hinted at instability. Perhaps he himself was just as great a misfit as David? There were certainly elements of the primeval about Karpov, which he relished, but which others seemed to find distasteful.

However: *he* was King.

So if he wished to swim naked in the freezing waters of the Lake then he could do it, while the peasants who looked on were obliged to approve. And if he wished to be with several women in the same night then he could do it, and they were obliged to thank him afterwards.

Because it was his duty to preserve the original strain.

He rubbed his jaw. The heat of the room with its sweaty occupants seemed abruptly claustrophobic. His gaze sought the window, where snow framed a wintry twilight. Soon it would be

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bone-achingly cold. Two decades since his father had died, leaving him the legacy of The Seven-Fold Way. Usually clear-cut, this evening his recollections of his father were depressingly vague. Almost as if he had not existed.

Karpov moved in his chair, trying to dispel the mental discomfiture he felt by a shift of his massive body. When his attention returned, he found himself being regarded by Claudia.

The only female of the team, she had always been a puzzle to him. An expert on spirituality and its evaluation, she had the ascetic look of somebody who has to suffer things in order to enjoy them. Convents no longer existed, having been outlawed as concentrating to an unnatural degree on only one aspect of The Seven-Fold Way. But if they had still been around, Claudia would have been in one. She regarded him now with a pale face framed by long hair, and it seemed to Karpov that her expression held a measure of pity.

He fixed her with a sullen gaze. And speaking in an aside to David, who was still expounding, said "Shut up". Then looking at Claudia: "I wish to hear about the component for consciousness."

Sensing his irritability, the woman shifted uneasily. She had been standing since the start of the interview, and was dressed in a long white robe that clothed her tall figure from throat to toes. The only colourful thing about her was a yellow flower crocheted into the fabric above her heart, whose significance was lost to Karpov.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it uncertainly. She had a face that was slightly lined, but was otherwise of indeterminate age. Her stomach was flat, as if she had never borne children.

"I have been assigned the sixth component," she said quietly when she regained her voice. "The Integrator is of no use to me,

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as I have no training in its use. I work out my subcomponents myself.”

“How?” Karpov demanded.

He expected some whimsical theory about intuition. But instead, Claudia gestured towards a hundred or so files stacked neatly in a corner of the room. “I work out my terms by hand. Then Stevens checks them.”

Karpov glanced at the old man, who gave a slight nod, confirming that her calculations were accurate.

“No mumbo-jumbo?” Karpov asked.

A slow mask of red altered the woman's appearance. “My component of the tensor is as objectively determined as the others.” Her voice had taken on a brittle edge. “The existence of consciousness was always a mystery. The Seven-Fold Way shows it as a consequence of complexity in the brain, with its own dimension of description. My calculations are as reliable as those of anyone else.”

“I am glad to hear it,” acknowledged Karpov, a note of apology in his voice. “However, you must admit that why and how people think is more complicated than the physics of a rock. How, for example, do you account for love and hate?”

“Poh!” Claudia replied, deprecatingly. “It is well known that they are nodes at the opposite ends of a polynomial.”

Karpov, slightly amused said “And what of desire? Sexual desire, I mean.”

The woman looked flustered, then replied “It is merely a minor term in the second parenthesis of the sixth component.”

Karpov sighed.

There was a long silence, during which the firelight reflected from the wooden panels of the room. The window had become a dark rectangle, and instinctively everybody recognized the fire as the focus of energy. Its dull heat played on Karpov's face.

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Feeling it, and seeing the subtle shift of colours in its ruddy depths, he formulated a question that had been bothering him intermittently for several years.

“And what if consciousness disappears?”

Claudia moved from one foot to the other, apparently bemused. “You mean, death?”

“Yes.”

“That is just the name we give when an individual's sixth component goes to zero.”

Karpov thought: Well of course, how simple! Slouching in his chair, he looked half like a corpse himself. But even as his large body sprawled, his mind was working exactly, seeing possibilities that none of the specialists had contemplated.

“But the sixth component cannot go to zero on its own, can it?” Then after a pause: “At least one other component must disappear.”

“Well, yes” Claudia conceded. “Usually one of the other components goes to zero at the same rate. What our ancestors called the vanishing of the Life Force.”

Karpov's body lay inert. But his eyes glittered in the firelight. A dead-end in one direction could always be opened by looking in another direction.

“What of the seventh component?”

“It is *translated*,” replied a gloomy and self-important voice. A figure moved out of the shadows and into the light of the fire. Karpov regarded it with interest.

“You are..?”

“Castellejos,” replied the figure. “I have responsibility for evaluating the seventh component of the tensor.”

“You are a priest?”

The figure shrugged slightly. Neither a denial nor an affirmation. Then after a pause he said “I am a mathematician

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like the rest. But specializing in the godly aspects. I took over the calculation of the seventh component not long ago, after my predecessor...”

“After his sixth component went to zero,” said Karpov, anticipating triteness with mockery.

Castellejos seemed unsure what to say. A short, plump man with skin the colour of the chicken carcass that now lay discarded on the carpet, his face took on a sanctimonious look.

“If it was God's will that my predecessor be translated...”

“Your predecessor,” interrupted Karpov roughly and without malice, “was a goatherd, in tune with the mountains and valleys, and whoever or whatever made them. He learned his skills from a book held with numb fingers on a hillside, and later spent ages applying it. His ashes are in the Lake.”

Karpov imparted this merely as a matter of information. But Castellejos' expression plainly told that he had no use for self-taught peasants, and he repeated solemnly “When God calls...”

“Priest,” interrupted Karpov again, this time with a clear tone of annoyance, “you have too much sympathy for the old belief. God is only the seventh component of the tensor. He does not exist independent of it, and is certainly no more important than the other components.”

Castellejos made as if to reply, but something in Karpov's face made him fall silent.

A coward as well as a prig, thought Karpov. However, the mission was more important than an argument, so he merely asked “How are your calculations going?”

“Quite well,” replied Castellejos carefully. “I have more complicated functions than the others...”

“God works in mysterious ways,” interjected Claudia in a whisper, which catching Karpov's ear made him smile with the

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irony of finding that a woman had more courage than the man in front of him.

“...but I have been able to work out the asymptotic behaviour of my part,” continued the priest, “using some overlapping results from the sixth component.”

Castellejos appeared unaware of the implication of what he had said, but Claudia cast a guilty glance at Karpov.

“You know,” murmured the King, “that you are supposed to work out your components independently, to avoid the propagation of errors?”

“That would, logically, be the best way to proceed,” admitted Castellejos. “But in view of the need for haste, I judged it best to expedite matters by using some binomial expansions worked out by Sister Claudia...”

“Filched, I would say” commented Karpov.

But Castelljos rattled on. “And I assure you that the results *are* correct. The expressions have a perfection of grace that can only come from the highest...”

He dried up as a terrifying transformation came over Karpov. The remaining patience drained from the King's face, which began to fill with rage. The muscles of his jaw bunched in an unnatural fashion that swelled his already thick neck and made it look as if it might explode. His dark brow came down like a shutter, half covering eyes that blazed with fury.

“Castellejos.” The voice crackled with electric contempt. “You will have the seventh component of the tensor evaluated by noon tomorrow. If it is not finished, and accurate, I personally will terminate your sixth component.”

The priest's face became more distinct in the gloom of the chamber as the blood drained from it. His mouth flopped ineffectually, and finally came to rest half open in an expression of stupefaction.

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Karpov, however, had not finished. His head swung from side to side on top of his immobile body like that of a robot. The eyes might have sprayed some deadly radiation, for as they went from Castellejos to Claudia to David to Stevens, and then raked over the Cheng brothers, the mathematicians wilted like sickly plants.

“I heard a rumour,” grated the King, “that the sum of the components is zero.”

A pause. Then the voice resumed, like a piece of metal grinding on another piece. “You have whined and avoided the issue.”

Another pause. But this time the King's body started to move, and he began to elevate himself out of the chair as he continued. “You have complained and told me how hard the task is, even though most of you have been well taken care of since my father's time, while better men have died herding cattle in the winter snows.”

He was now upright, but seemed somehow to be still ascending. “This project *will* finish at noon tomorrow. So...”

Karpov's chest filled with air. His figure appeared to balloon and fill the room.

“...COMPUTE!”

The triplets screamed and scrambled over the back of the couch. David raised an effete hand to ward off an imagined blow. Castellejos staggered back in a half faint. Claudia dropped to her knees and began spinning around in some ritual of panic.

Stevens blinked but did not move. And to him, in a more normal voice, Karpov said “I'll sleep here tonight. Make sure your computations don't disturb me.”

The old man nodded, and departed to calm the Cheng triplets, who were whimpering hysterically in a dark corner.

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Claudia was also crying, and made as if to retreat towards her pile of calculations.

But Karpov caught her by the arm and pushed her towards the vacant couch. "Make our bed, woman," he ordered in a tired voice. "Your calculations can wait for a bit."

Karpov slept very badly. The first half of the night was filled with dreams in which vague shapes of Good and Evil battled each other, while he tried unsuccessfully to argue that it was pointless, because their sum was zero.

At some stage he had woken, sweating as usual, to find Claudia still by his side. She had proved an exasperating lover: alternately terrified of touching him and then devoted to the point where she would do anything to please him. Waking, he had told her to return to her calculations, and had sunk back into troubled slumber.

The second half of the night was filled with nightmares involving as usual his mother and father: the former wanted more children, whereas the latter objected, saying some would turn out well and some bad, so why not leave it since the sum was zero.

Dawn swept its light over Karpov through the rippled glass of the window. He slept on for a while, however, warmed by the ever-blazing fire.

In the farther reaches of the room, the mathematicians worked. They were not used to duress. But fear and some ballast of dignity had kept them at their tasks through the night, and the new day found them with progress they would not have thought possible.

The Chengs finished first, which did not really surprise anybody since space as a concept was easy to quantify. David came in second, having finished his calculations on matter with an exaggerated flourish. He cast a scornful glance at his unsuspecting father snoring on the couch, before handing the

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answer for his component of the tensor to Stevens. The latter had not seemed unduly stressed during the night, but had circulated among the others, offering help where it was needed. He seemed unconcerned about his own part of the tensor, the first or time one. None of the others, preoccupied as they were, thought to ask him about this. But in the event they had, Stevens would have shown them the calculation of his allotted component, written out neatly in a script that had not been used for ages.

Claudia spent much of the second half of the night moaning under her breath in front of her pile of calculations. But these actually contained most of what was necessary to reach an answer. It took her a while to realize this, and it was only after Castellejos refused to help her that a grim determination descended on the woman, something that enabled her to complete her work and organize it as a statement about the sixth component of consciousness.

Castellejos worked hard under the threat of death. But resentfully, and as a self-proclaimed martyr. He was, however, uplifted by the knowledge that his component of the tensor (at least) would not be zero. For God was irreducible, unaffected by coordinate transformations, and indeed *infinite*. This in itself proved that Karpov's preoccupation with a zero sum was ridiculous. He felt like saying so, and several times during the night mouthed quiet imprecations at the man who lay unconscious on the sofa.

When the King finally growled and sat up, however, Castellejos remained silent. As did the others, except Claudia. She managed a timid "Good morning". Then took a steaming pot from the hearth, poured water into a pannikin, and handed Karpov some fresh-brewed tea.

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He grumbled thanks. A gulp of the hot liquid made him grimace. But as he threw off the blanket and strode naked to warm himself by the fire, his mind clicked back to the issue.

“Well?” he inquired, holding out his hands to the flames.

The question was made in a gruff but business-like way, and the Cheng triplets in their hammocks exchanged thankful glances. It was David, neat as ever but with circles under his eyes, who answered for the group. “We have completed our calculations, and have them ready for your inspection.”

The King walked over to the armchair he had used the previous evening. This had become a kind of throne, and he sat down in it heavily. Claudia rushed up with his cloak and attempted to cover his nudity, but a glare from Karpov sent her scurrying back, the job half done.

“Give me your results.”

Stevens came up, offered him a file with the first component, and stood back a step.

Karpov studied it. Every person who had gone through the State school system was obliged to take arithmetic and tensor calculus; so after gazing at it for a while, the importance of the calculation became clear to him.

He looked up. Stevens again came forward. He carried three files, for the Cheng triplets were still too wary of the King to approach him themselves. Even so, the results must have been satisfactory; for Karpov eventually grunted and placed the results for the second, third and fourth components on top of the first.

“So much for spacetime,” muttered Karpov. His stubbled face was still puffy with the fluids of sleep, but his eyes were fully alert and it was clear he was keen to know the outcome of the project. “What about the matter that shapes it?”

David came up. He looked exhausted, but somehow the resentment that had driven him through the night had been

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replaced with pride. He handed over the fifth component, and for an instant his eyes met those of the King.

The similarity in colouring and form, even in that ill-lit room, was striking. And as he retired to the shadows, David's forehead was puckered with thought.

Karpov noticed this. But he was already becoming irritated with the ritual, and important as the project was, wanted it concluded. "Bring me the sixth and seventh components, so I can see how consciousness and God fit with things."

Claudia and Castellejos started forward together, collided, and separated as the man snarled at the woman.

Karpov muttered a warning, and the two turned their attention to him. Claudia approached first, holding out the result of her labours as if showing the King a newborn son. Karpov, however, just took it in the same manner as he had the others. Castellejos, perhaps expecting some sign of recognition for having worked out the most complex component of the tensor, was even more disappointed: Karpov plucked the file negligently from the hand that proffered it, without even glancing at the bearer.

The results, however *did* capture the King's attention. In fact, Karpov's concentration on the seven files became a veritable thrall.

The fire, stoked early with massive logs, slowly degenerated into a pile of embers.

The window, previously light with midday, became wan with the weak illumination of late afternoon.

The mathematicians, formerly a clan of dedicated specialists, became by stages just a crowd of ordinary people, fidgety and bored.

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Finally, Karpov looked up from the algebra. And the seven people who were his audience saw an unaccustomed look of puzzlement and humility on his face.

He turned his gaze on Stevens. "There appears to be a divergence in your component. One of the terms goes to minus infinity."

"Yes, Karpov." The old man was unruffled. "I noticed it myself long ago. But the divergence is only logarithmic."

The King seemed not to be listening. He was looking at the seventh sheet, and after a brief check, sought out Castellejos in the shadows.

"Congratulations. Your God is indeed all-powerful and infinite."

Smugness crept into the fat priest's face. But it was arrested when Karpov dropped the file to land at its author's feet.

"Your God, and your soul with it, is positive, and diverges logarithmically."

There was quietness, then somebody gasped. David was the first to realize that two of the components balanced each other out, and his quickness dispelled any qualm Karpov may have had that he deserved a place on the team.

A strange kind of awkward and poisoned calm reigned for a while. Then Stevens spoke. "What of the other parts of the tensor?"

"See for yourself." Karpov handed the files of algebra to the old man, whose long association with the project sent his blue eyes skittering over the symbols with a devastating level of understanding.

"They...cancel."

Stevens' conclusion was confirmed by the computer, which had sat sententious and silent during most of the morning, but

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now spat out the fact of the zero with a negligent disregard for its effect on the humans.

Karpov received the confirmation in a sad but resigned fashion. Glancing at the Integrator, it seemed to him that its outline was growing indistinct. Also, the light from the window appeared to falter, and the shapes of the hills around the Lake grew soft with something that had nothing to do with the optics of bad glass.

The King drew his cloak more tightly around him.

Already, the Cheng brothers had disappeared, and the more remote parts of the room were murky and unreal.

Claudia, looking alarmed, vanished with a half-uttered question. But Castellejos was different, and faded by painfully slow degrees, screaming and cursing, until the fact of zero subsumed even his faith.

David lasted a surprisingly long time. But even though he looked again into Karpov's eyes, the son of the King asked nothing, and finally vanished into the darkness of the room with his status unacknowledged.

Karpov himself was fully aware that it was only a matter of subjective time before he too disappeared. However, a perverse stubbornness kept his being intact.

The fire, also, was still burning. And as he looked at it, a face swam into its rays.

Stevens was also stubborn. The King and the first mathematician looked at each other.

“Still here, old man?”

The eyelids of Stevens flickered. He was barely holding on.

“Is there an eighth dimension?” asked Karpov.

“Maybe,” said Stevens.

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Jale awoke, sweating and troubled. Vestal's naked body was pressed close to his in the confines of the double coffin.

“Bad dream?” She inquired sleepily.

“Not too bad,” said Jale. “It was kind of like the other ones, but more forceful.”

The girl snuggled up to him, her head on his shoulder, her leg between his thighs.

“More topology?”

“Yes,” confirmed Jale, with growing alertness. “Your clone is telling us to use a higher dimension.”

“She always was pretty bright.” Vestal's voice became less furry as she came more on-line. “Which number?”

“At least seven,” replied Jale. “Probably eight. Do you know anything about higher-dimensional geometry?”

The girl sighed. “Don't talk mathematics.” She put her hand on his genitals, gently. “I'll make love to you in any dimension you choose.”

## THE HOUSE OF HOLY ENEMAS

Selipon sucked more energy out of the singularity at the centre of the Galaxy. Here the stars were huddled thick, occasionally colliding and filling the sky with supernova fireworks. But inside its protective dome, the alien supercomputer was unaffected by the cosmic turmoil, and casually answered another billion queries. However, it needed extra energy because two high-level ports had been opened. There were very few inhabitants of the Milky Way with the technical skills to gain such access. The computer focussed on the users.

The first was a young woman with a lot of golden hair, light eyes and a well-formed face. She sat in a darkened cubicle, over whose transparent roof flashed the shattered remains of an indigo star. She was four-dimensionally coincident with the computer. Intrigued, Selipon said *Do you agree to a short identity check?*

“Yes.” The girl put her hands between her knees nervously.

*Your origin place?*

“Rang Enterprises.”

*Your brain basis?*

“Cloned DNA”

*Name of donor?*

The girl hesitated. Should she guess? She decided to be safe and replied “Unknown.”

There was a pause as the machine absorbed this, which made the girl feel even more nervous.

*Your nominal function?*

“Psychotherapy.”

Another pause. *You are cleared. What do you desire?*

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“Information on travel in seven or eight dimensions, and the location of the Sphere of Civilization.”

The computer seemed to suck in a mental breath. *Please wait.* Unknown to the girl, it focussed on the second user.

This was a middle-aged, stocky man with thinning hair but a look of determination. He sat in front of a subether unit. Beside him stood a glass half full of red liquid, and in the background could be seen the instrumentation of a spaceship. The man was one-dimensionally coincident with the computer but three-dimensionally removed. *Do you agree to an identity check?*

“Of course, though I note we have had dealings before.”

*Your name?*

“Zek, of Aster”

*Name of best friend.*

“Jale, of Acheron”

*Oh yes, commented the alien machine. My old colleague. Is he coincident with you?*

“Approximately. At least, in spacetime.”

*Last question: what is it you refused to sell as a boy?*

“Newts” replied Zek promptly.

*You are cleared. What...*

“I need the 4D coordinates of the Sphere of Civilization,” interrupted Zek. “And data on 7D or 8D orbits.”

*Please wait...*

Selipon pondered, and then did the equivalent of a chuckle. Here was a pretty conundrum.

Somewhere in the alien artifact, a seldom-used circuit opened. The artificial brain divided itself into three mental segments. Each asked the others: *Do you agree to a grade-5 override?* The responses were almost simultaneous and unanimous: *Affirmative.* The computer re-integrated its thought

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process. It began to suck energy out of the singularity at an ever-greater rate.

Scared, the dream machine watched the sky. Stars were drifting off as they felt the gravitational current. Most of the suns remained intact, but a nebula smeared itself into tidal debris and filled the cubicle with soft orange light.

Intent, Zek watched the subether screen. It went from dead black to blinding white. The man flinched.

“Jale! Vestal! Come here.”

“What's up?” demanded Jale, squinting at the screen. “This is weird.”

Zek merely shrugged.

“Spooky,” said Vestal unhelpfully. But she felt compelled to stare at the screen, sensing a major event.

“Ah!” offered Sherlock, entering with drinks. “Some kind of override. How interesting.”

Suddenly the screen cleared. The girls were looking at each other.

*You are in contact. Coordinates and data on N-dimensional geodesics to follow.*

“But wait!” objected the dream machine. “What am I supposed to do about...?”

*Please don't demand too much. Your mental state, as I'm sure you know, is becoming less stable. There was a pause. Advice: talk to each other.*

Selipon detached itself, leaving the dream machine and Vestal Virgin staring at each other. The promised data filled a megafile, which Zek pounced on with unaccustomed enthusiasm. Sherlock offered Jale a glass of beer.

The girls scrutinized each other's faces.

“You're me,” said Vestal.

“And I'm you,” replied the dream machine.

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“And I bet the twain is going to meet,” grumbled Sherlock, feeling a return of his old jealousy. “As the song says: *Double, double, are we in trouble!*”

“No, we're *not*,” spat Vestal. Then to her counterpart, solicitously: “How do you feel?”

“Not too good,” replied the dream machine honestly. “My dreams have become more like nightmares. Some people get frightened instead of feeling good. And I'm losing control.”

“All right,” Vestal said. “We'll help you. Don't worry.”

Tears began flowing from the near-human eyes of the dream machine. “Thankyou.” Her voice broke. “Oh, *thankyou!*”

Vestal turned to Jale and demanded “Help her!”

“How?” asked the man practically. “She'll have to hold on until we get to the Sphere.”

“But, look at her...!”

The dream machine did indeed appear to be in trouble. She was clutching her hands between her knees to stop them shaking, and her eyes were glazed.

“Don't forget,” pointed out Jale with sympathy but firmness. “*She* has a dream projector. *You* don't. If she's unstable, *we* could be on the receiving end of some scary stuff.”

He reached out to pick up the glass of beer, but his hand passed through it...

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Master Moore poked the crust of bread through the clotted surface in the cup, and withdrew it dripping red. The smell of old blood as he thrust it towards my mouth was nauseating, and I felt my throat constrict. Sasha, the fat cook, hovered nearby with an empty bowl, her small eyes glittering greedily in the flat rays of the sun. My stomach contracted, and after one or two tries the muscles ejected what remained of my lunch. Sasha lumbered

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forward, catching most of it in the bowl. She looked disappointed; and Pablo, the Master's henchman, stepped up and poked his club into my gut. The tender muscles did another contraction, and a few drops of acid spit trickled down my chin. Sasha wiped them expertly into the bowl, and with a grunt withdrew to the shadows.

Vespers was over.

As I stumbled down the steps from the alter, a cool breeze fanned my hot face. And through the hole in the stained glass window my gaze went to the horizon. There the launching towers on the Cape were also red. But I knew the colour was just rust in the light of the setting star. This filled me with sadness, but at the same time the mere existence of the gantries gave me hope.

That night my stomach throbbed heavily and I could not get to sleep. In the darkness of the cell I lay for a long time looking at the twinkling stars of the night through the bars. Only gradually did I become aware that the breathing of my cellmate Lord Jim was not as regular as usual. I listened for a while in the silence, then whispered "You awake?"

"Yeah," replied Jim, his voice a mere rustle of air from the other side of the cell. "You sore?"

I grunted an affirmation. Each Novice had a regular turn at the evening services, and none of us was in good health to begin with. There was hardly any food on the island; *everything* had to be recycled through the Converter in the Vestry, and the margin of survivability was slim.

I turned slowly on my pallet, and saw Jim's white eyeballs apparently floating in the darkness. I offered: "Things weren't always this bad, you know."

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There was no discernible movement from the other side of the cell, but I got the impression he shrugged. "For my people, I think things were always pretty bad."

I thought for a bit. Lord Jim was my best friend. We had been at the House longer than any of the other Novices, and I wanted to give him some of the hope I still felt. "On a new planet, probably race wouldn't matter."

"Maybe."

He sounded unconvinced. I knew from long association that his mind ran mainly along social lines, whereas mine ran more along technological ones; and to him the gantries on the horizon were lumps of metal rather than a future. To me, they were both.

"There's supposed to be an agnostic group trying to fix one of the launchers," I said hopefully.

"How do you know?"

"I heard Sasha talking to Pablo, trying to persuade him to swim over and raid their camp for protein."

A small scoffing laugh came from the other bed. "Sasha would be just as happy to see Pablo drown in the lagoon so she could put his carcass into the Converter. She's evil." There was a pause. "Though I'd also be happy to see Pablo drown. I wouldn't help him."

"You couldn't," I pointed out. "You can't swim."

"Neither can you. So stop dreaming about the Cape."

There was a lot of sea between our island and the next one, and it was a good deal further than that to the Cape itself. With no boat, the House on its desolate atoll was virtually cut off from the rest of the world. However, as I stared sleepily through the pointed window of the cell at the stars, it did not seem to me that they were unattainable.

"Goodnight," whispered Jim.

But I was already dreaming.

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Next morning, the service was notable for the absence of two of the younger Novices. Jim and I exchanged looks. We knew that this meant they were lying in their cells, unable even to muster the energy to get up. But Master Moore did not mention it. He was as emaciated as the rest of us, but a kind of spiritual vitality kept his long body gesticulating in front of the cracked altar. The sermon that morning was from the New Book, also called Leibowitz's Canticle. I found the sermon somewhat turgid and boring; but when the Master finished his lesson by smashing the book down on the rostrum, I jerked my shivering body back to attention.

The Master swept from the room in a flurry of garments, leaving Pablo to walk forward. Gently swinging the club with the nail in the end, he surveyed our naked ranks. Then he said "Beach patrol".

There was a groan from someone in the first row, and instantly the club flashed out. There was a snicking sound as the nail passed through flesh, and the offender collapsed in a disorganized pile of limbs about which a red pool began to grow.

"Go get Sasha," Pablo ordered one of the Novices.

The rest of us stood silent. Jim and I knew that the events of the morning meant that the House was dangerously low on food. Beach patrol without the benefit of breakfast was a sure sign that the Converter needed protein.

Sasha finally appeared, looking sleepy. She was not normally present at the morning service, and her appearance was even more unkempt than usual. Matted locks surrounded a face that looked pasty and bloated in the wan morning light. Massive breasts and a potbelly that hung over her pubic hair were barely concealed by a thin shawl. Of all the people at the House, she was the only one with sufficient flesh. But as I watched her waddle towards the altar, I knew that this was not solely because

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she had easy access to the kitchen and the Converter, but was also because she was diseased.

Her brain was functioning, however, for on seeing the pool of blood on the flagstones her eyes lit up. With clumsy eagerness she pulled off her shawl, knelt down by the unconscious Novice, and started to mop up the sticky liquid. After pressing the boy's scalp to extract the last drops from the wound, she bore the gory cloth away like a prize.

"Beach patrol," repeated Pablo softly, and we scrambled for the door like a crowd of electrified skeletons.

After a morning spent scouring one side of the island, we had only found two starfish and a crab. The latter was a puny thing. The starfish were better, and must have been borne by the waves from some distant and more hospitable habitat. For the winds still blew and the waves still marched, even though there were no longer any tides.

Of seaweed there was none, and after hours in the ever-brightening sun I became tired of the monotonous white of the coral and longed for a splash of green. But white and gray predominated. Even in the House, which stood on the highest point of the atoll with its rafters protruding like the bleached ribs of some long-dead whale.

I had never seen a whale, and did not know if they still existed, but I knew what one was. The same as I knew what a spaceship launching gantry was. For the Mindprobe, to which all Novices were subjected so that they might better concentrate on the New Order, had in my case been only partially effective. Something similar had happened with Lord Jim, though in his case he could remember only vague social injustice, and his brain skills lay mainly in an ability to understand and learn what I talked to him about. I suppose we were lucky, because in the passage of the Old Order it was inevitable that pieces of

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technology such as the Mindprobe should become unreliable; so I think we both looked upon our superior mental skills as a kind of historical accident.

We had survived longer than most of our fellows, and as I watched Lord Jim pick his way along the beach I realized with affection how much we relied on each others' stunted intellects.

The rest of them were close to morons, and as they straggled round the Point to the other side of the island I felt both pity and contempt for them. For while they lacked the cruelty of the clergy at the House, they still fed it. Did they not realize, for example, that feet cut on coral today would be infected tomorrow? And that Sasha was almost as avid for pus as for blood?

On the downwind side of the atoll it was calmer, and the sea rose and fell in an oily swell that calmed my irritation. The water had a peculiar colour, a kind of dirty blue that offered no sparkle of life.

But *there* was a different kind of sparkle! On the horizon: a light glinting in the midday sun!

Something was happening at the Cape.

I watched surreptitiously, but could only make out that something bright and metallic was being moved among the rusted gantries.

Concealing my excitement, I let my eyes slide sideways and saw that Pablo had also noticed the glinting light. To be visible in the full glare of noon it must come from a highly polished surface, and I saw him stare at it suspiciously. He leaned forward on his ever-present club, and as he shaded his eyes I noticed that his forehead went easily into furrows and that his hand was crimped with age. It occurred to me that Pablo, despite his hooked nose and fierce stare, was actually an old man who I might beat in a straight fight.

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“Get on!”

The words were directed not at me but at Lord Jim, who had noticed the activity on the Cape just as Pablo had stopped scrutinizing it.

Jim began walking the water line again, his woolly head bent down and his black body like someone else's shadow on the white coral. He was long-limbed, and seemed to move more easily than the rest of us. Pablo appeared to notice this, and my joy at seeing activity on the Cape was eclipsed by a cloud of unease.

At the end of the afternoon, when we were almost back to our starting point, we found two stagnant pools with the remains of life in them.

One contained five jellyfish. They were putrid, because the swell on the leese of the island had not freshened the pools for days and the protein had started to rot. But they were usable, and we scooped them up thankfully.

The other pool contained red splotches of what looked like floating weed. A callow boy, with the unlikely name of Aloysius, reached out to these organisms. Only to be clubbed away by Pablo.

“Don't touch that!” he snarled. “It's red tide. Poisonous.”

The youth slunk back to his fellows. Strictly speaking, since our moon was destroyed, there had been no tides. But this archaic name for the occasional blooms of red algae had survived. Jim and I, at least, knew that it was lethal if eaten. So we left it, and gloated instead on the sack which now contained the jellyfish, starfish and crab.

This was actually a meager haul, but even so the sack turned out to be too heavy for the starving boy who had been carrying it.

“You two!” Pablo barked, looking at me and Lord Jim. “Take this to Sasha.”

*Cosmic Dreams*

Pablo half trusted us, because we had been around longer than the others. But as we walked towards the House with our precious cargo of protein, our thoughts were not on taking an illegal mouthful of jellyfish. Passing behind a clump of dead coral, Jim dropped the sack and we sprawled down to talk.

“Did you see it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied, panting. His face for the first time in many months had lost its look of resignation. However, he was still doubtful. “But we can't swim.”

“Only because it was Mindprobed out of us,” I pointed out. “Perhaps if we tried...?”

His eyes rolled in a gesture of condemnation.

“Okay,” I admitted. “Once gone, always gone. But what about a raft?”

“What about Pablo?” he countered.

I paused before replying, thinking about the old man with his streak of young brutality. Then I said calmly: “We kill him.”

I knew I could do this morally, and given a few good meals I believed I could manage it physically. But I was worried about Jim's response, expecting an objection.

However, he merely blinked as he digested the idea. Suddenly, I felt almost as if I loved the man: he was on my side.

But then he said “What about Master Moore and Sasha?”

I started to think, but the heat was terrific. The place we were in was a kind of bowl between piles of white coral, and having been exposed to the sun all day it was hot enough to scorch my bare buttocks. I also noticed the sweat starting to bead on Jim's black skin, and thought that he should make sure it had gone before we got to the avaricious Sasha. However, that was as far as I went in my thinking, and feeling the daze of the heat I said, “I don't know.” We would have to find a way to get rid of both our leader and the cook. “I'll think of something.”

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Even with this matter unresolved, it was with a new sense of purpose that I swung the sack onto my back and headed for the House.

Lord Jim used his finger to scrape the sweat from his skin as we walked, and sucked it like candy. By the time we arrived at the House, we were well ahead of the rest of the beach party.

The House clamped down on us with shadow and coolness as we entered. Stumbling in the gloom with sun-shrunk pupils, we followed the steps that led down to the basement. This part of the House had once been used as a private residence, and for some forgotten reason was called the Vestry. It had a cavernous cellar, which in the absence of artificial light was illuminated only by cracked and sand-blurred windows at the level of the ground outside. We came to a stop in front of a large and dimly-seen door. Jim knocked, and receiving no reply, pushed it open.

Sasha lay on her bed, sucking at the shawl she had worn that morning. A film of red about her lips was not lipstick; but as she turned in our direction her greedy eyes showed no guilt and fastened on the sack.

I dropped it on the flagstones with a squelch. The smell of fish was almost matched by the odour of sweat that rose from her bed as Sasha leaned forward.

“Meager pickings, boys.”

Her enormous breasts drooped over the side of the bed, and her potbelly flopped to one side, as she rummaged in the sack. The bottom part of her body did not move, the flaccid legs lying motionless with a triangle of damp hair between them.

“Not much here to put in the Converter.”

My eyes moved to the corner of the room, where a massive machine sat silent and waiting. The upper part was covered with instruments, the lower part with openings that received various kinds of raw protein and delivered back various kinds of food.

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“Let's see if I can get a bit of extra protein from you boys.”

She took Lord Jim's dark penis in one hand and my white one in the other hand, and began to rhythmically fondle us.

That evening at Vespers, Lord Jim was called to take the Eucharist. Even had I not been uneasy from the day's events, this would have made me suspicious, because it was not his turn.

However, things went fairly well. The blood was offered, and Jim was able to throw up something, because the stuff we had collected on the beach had given us a nominal dinner. Thus did we satisfy the ritual of returning a portion of what we had devoured as a sign of thankfulness.

But that night in our cell I saw tears glittering in Jim's eyes. And I knew that he, like me, sensed disaster. At the risk of being beaten by Pablo, who prowled the cells like an old wolf, I slipped off my pallet and crawled over to Jim. I put my hand on his shoulder, and felt his bony hand clasp mine.

“We'll get out,” I whispered, my lips to his ear.

“Yeah.”

But he did not. Next morning, when I awoke from a strangely dense sleep, I found the other bed empty.

I felt peculiar, and amid jumbled thoughts the word “drugged” kept occurring. I was used to the idea that my body, weakened by constant hunger, was close to ineffective. But to feel that my mind was also neutered was dismaying, and I fought against it with silent panic.

Through the dawn service I stood swaying, wondering where Jim was, yet knowing he would not come back. The Master, I realized, was in exceptional form: his drawn face was unusually animated, and as the sun rose and sent its rays into the interior of the House his eyes looked like blue chips from the stained glass window. The Canticle was flourished overhead numerous times,

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and his rhetoric so boomed in the wrecked chapel that when he finished and exited the silence was like death.

Dazed, we Novices filed away and went to eat breakfast.

Porridge, apparently. But unusually dark. I stopped eating half way through, and put my wooden spoon down on the platter.

Pablo walked by, swinging his club. So I picked up my spoon and carried on eating. The food rejuvenated my mind and my body. But any idea that the House had sufficient protein was quickly dispelled after we had cleared up.

“Beach patrol!” Pablo yelled.

Evening, and I trudged with the sack toward the House. Our haul had been even worse than yesterday: two spiny sea urchins and a piece of kelp ripped from some northern but still viable ecology. The rest of the Novices were gasping and wriggling homeward, like maggots headed to a nest. Three of them were dragging the boy Aloysius, who would not last long.

The heat was the most intense I had ever experienced. And even though the sack was not heavy, I had to stop every tenth step to rest.

I was more than ever grateful for the wind, which blew over the barren island with a cooling steadiness. During one break, I scanned the downwind horizon. Yes, the shining point was still there, twinkling amid the rusty gantries like a beacon.

With my last energy I dragged the sack along the wind-protected side of the House. Here, broken coral had piled up into dunes of grit. I struggled through them to an opening, into which I pushed the sack.

It fell with a dull sound to the Vestry, and I called “Sasha!” after it.

Some time later I heard movement inside, but was so exhausted I could not have moved even had I wished.

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It was dusk when I finally gathered the wits and strength to move. But everything seemed to be delayed that day, for as I crept into the House I heard the sounds of a late dinner reverberating among the rafters. Ignoring this, I crawled through the cloisters and found my cell. The effort tired me again. I crept onto my bed and fell into a deep sleep.

I awoke before dawn. The positions of the stars in my cell window told me it would be a long time before sunrise.

In the dining room, the starlight that shone through the holes in the roof showed a scene of disarray: pots, plates and utensils were strewn about haphazardly, and vomit speckled the floor. However, nobody was to be seen. So I picked my way through the mess to the little room at the end of the hall where Pablo slept.

The door was open, and peeking inside I saw the old man sprawled across his bed. Blood had dried on his moustache from where he had bitten through his lip; and his face was so contorted he was more horrific in death than he had been in life.

I then padded along the corridor to the big black door at the end. It was closed. But hearing no noise from within, I pushed with my shoulder and it swung open.

The room of the Master was large but spartan. The stone walls were bare except for one tapestry, which consisted of a rectangle with horizontal stripes and a stylized collection of stars in one corner. Beneath this was an old porcelain toilet bowl, gleaming in the dim light. And on its rim lay the head of Master Moore.

I approached carefully, because his eyes were open. But when I touched his cheek, it proved stiff and cold.

Stepping back, my foot hit something that slid a few feet across the floor. I recognized it as the New Book, or Leibowitz's

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Canticle. With a sudden accession of confidence, I kicked it fluttering into the darkness.

Next I carried out a cursory inspection of the cells that occupied the rest of the ground floor. But things there were pretty much as I expected, so I hurried to the stairs that led down to the Vestry.

As I descended, the air became perceptibly warmer, and at the bottom I found myself standing in an atmosphere thick with the smells of food.

I felt the iron latch of the kitchen door beneath my hand, and entered.

Inside, the air was even more cloying, and I stopped halfway across the room, slightly dizzy. Against the far wall lay something that resembled a monstrous pupa.

Sasha now was not much different from Sasha before: the face gross and coarse, the body corpulent and diseased. But as I stood looking down at her, she appeared more stupid than evil. Something like the Converter, which had merely done what its limited circuits dictated, and now sat glum and uncomprehending in the corner of the cellar.

I was turning away when the thick lips emitted a groan and a stream of foam. The eyes flickered, and by some instinct fastened on mine as they came into focus.

I was scared and did not move. There was a long rasping noise from the figure on the floor, before it wheezed "Red tide, eh?" Then a period of panting, before: "You clever devil."

I moved forward, my hands shaped to take her by the throat and finish the job. But with a whistling sound the air went out of her, and I shrank back, realizing it was unnecessary.

The sun climbed out of the sea as I lowered my raft onto its surface.

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It was not an elegant craft, and I watched apprehensively as it bobbed up and down in the swell. I had not been able to wrest the big timbers of the house from their sockets, so the raft consisted of pieces of furniture around a kind of misshapen balloon. The latter was the result of a morning's messy work with a knife, needle and thread, and gum. But it did not leak, and appeared serviceable. There was no point in delaying.

So I waded in, and pulled myself up onto Sasha's bloated belly. The sail, which was just the Master's starry tapestry, filled with wind. I set a course for the gleaming point on the Cape.

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The people in the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis* woke up one by one.

Vestal opened her eyes and started to wretch.

Sherlock looked sick.

Jale shook his head and took a reassuring swig of beer.

Zek looked at his friend and said "That was ugly."

Jale agreed. While the others were recovering, he recorded the screeds of data on the subether screen and then switched the unit off. "Zek, we don't need any more dreams. Get us an orbit in 8D, or at least in 7D."

Zek moved. After a while, the ship's motors started and it swung around on the 4D hypersurface.

"Do you have the coordinates for the Sphere of Civilization?" asked Jale. "Can you get us there?"

Zek nodded.

Jale lay down on the sofa with his beer resting on his chest. Was humanity worth saving? Maybe newts were nicer.

10  
IN THE CORRIDORS OF SPACE

The *Rigor Mortis* was a shadow falling through shadows. Zek, maneuvering the ship around the topological sandbanks of the seventh dimension, gradually sank further into his chair as his energy diminished. This was hard work. He reached for his glass of beer, his eyes on the controls. The glass fell to the floor, losing its contents with a slosh but no tinkle of breakage. Zek ignored it, trying to screw up his flagging concentration. A projection dead ahead could only be a stalactite from the eighth dimension. He avoided it, but on the other side found a gaping hole running in a parallel direction. Making a decision, he put the ship into neutral.

“Jale!”

“Yes, my friend?” Unnoticed by Zek, Jale had been watching over his shoulder for some while.

“I’m losing it,” said Zek. “Take over.”

Jale slid into the pilot’s seat as Zek staggered over to the couch, exhausted. “Vestal?”

“Yes, Jale?” The girl had been watching from the sofa, alternately flinching and sighing as the ship approached disasters and then avoided them.

“Get me four fingers of Rigellian whiskey,” ordered Jale. “I need to concentrate.”

The girl left, while the man worked the instruments with dedication. Travelling through the eighth dimension was like a free-fall parachute jump through an atmosphere full of cyclones. “And Sherlock?”

“Yes, Jale?” The android had also been watching their progress, while idly plucking at the strings of the Gibson.

“If you can’t play that thing, then shut up.”

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“I could take lessons,” suggested Sherlock.

Jale growled. “If you don’t shut up, you won’t need lessons and the rest of us will need wills. Get it?”

The cabin fell silent, except for the chinking of the ice in Jale’s whiskey glass.

\*

Garayan glanced over the table at his opponent. Behind him, the Galaxy floated in the darkness of intergalactic space, a bastion of tradition. He said “You wouldn’t *dare!*”

Androyoos flashed his eyes in the gloom. Behind him hung Andromeda, a symbol of incipient colonialism. “Just try me!”

Garayan’s general leaned over and whispered “Sir, I can have our fleet fully deployed beyond the Magellanic Clouds before this meeting is over. I, er...took the liberty of ordering our ships into space already.”

The leader of the Milky Way smirked.

Androyoos received a tap on the knee. His general said “I should inform you, Sir, that in accordance with protocol F-100, I dispatched our fleet some time ago with orders to take their satellite galaxies.”

“What’s protocol F-100?” asked Androyoos.

“Failure of political negotiations at the 100% level.” The general sounded confident. “We have a superior tactical position.”

The leader of Andromeda smiled smugly.

\*

*Paul S. Wesson*

At the top of the gigantic building that housed Rang Enterprises, its legless leader turned his levichair away from the window and confronted his second officer.

“I want the dream machine destroyed and the mission terminated.” Rang's ancient face was more mottled with anger than age.

“No,” replied Brounlee. He had the bleak expression of a man who has been pushed to an uncrossable moral line.

Rang, suddenly furious, scooted over to his floating desk. From somewhere in its gadgetry, he extracted a blaster and aimed it at Brounlee.

“How crude,” observed his partner. He smoothed his white gloves over his hands, flicked a speck of non-existent dust off one of his spats, and twiddled his umbrella. “Rang, have you ever heard of the Theory of Logical Buddhism?”

“No” was the snarling reply. “It sounds stupid.”

“Only to the uninitiated,” said Brounlee. “It basically says that you can take a life if it maximizes other life. It's all been worked out using DNA data and the calculus of variations.”

“Airy nonsense,” observed Rang, the blaster still trained.

“Not really. It's quite practical; the old penal systems operated on that basis.”

“Brounlee,” said Rang, his face taut with irritation and insult. “You are an old-fashioned, weak-kneed fool, more interested in philosophy than profit. Your wish to protect the dream machine is counter-productive. Either *it* dies — or *you* die.”

“Hmm...” Brounlee was thinking about the dream machine and its clone. He hoped they were both all right, wherever they might be under the influence of that maniac Jale. Also, he wished the original Vestal well on her cold moon: while an awkward girl, she had at least had the sense to take a DNA

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sample at a crucial time. He bit the bamboo handle of his gabardine umbrella.

“Don't threaten my family.”

The umbrella sent a shaft of energy across the office. The force of the blast propelled Rang and his levichair against the window. A second shaft smashed the toughened plastic material. Rang fell out with a dopplered scream.

Brounlee dragged his chair over, and sat down behind the desk. Punctilious, he checked the position of the sun where it shone through the hole in the window, before switching on the ethercom.

“Good morning. As you will no doubt soon learn, our esteemed director Rang has taken the noble way out. As second officer, I am assuming control.” He paused, then added: “There will be some changes.”

\*

Jale's face was lined with fatigue. The whiskey glass was empty, and so was his brain.

“Zek?”

There was a sound of interrupted snoring.

“Zek!”

His friend walked over from the couch with unsteady steps.

“Zek. This is too difficult. It's three orders of magnitude harder than catching newts.”

A black swirl promised to engulf the ship, but at the last instant Jale skirted its edge. The *Rigor Mortis* was creaking under the stresses of 8D gravity like an old galleon in a hurricane.

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“Yeah.” Zek had never been garrulous, and now he reached past his friend and without asking manipulated the controls. “Let's take a break.”

There was a rush of colour on the screen, and the deck bounced as the megamotors cut in. They seemed to be whizzing up the air-conditioning system of some baroque castle: tubes, tubes joining tubes, and more tubes that adjoined the joined tubes. Suddenly, the motors went to idle as the *Rigor* came to rest.

“Where the photon are we?” asked Jale.

“Dunno,” replied Zek. “Let's have a look.”

Zek and Jale stepped out from the hold of the ship, followed by Vestal (who was mistrustful) and Sherlock (who had the Gibson guitar slung over his shoulder). The grass underfoot was thick and lush.

“Look's nice,” observed Zek.

A brown rabbit hopped up from the grass and bounced away into a nearby thicket of gnarled trees.

“Yes,” agreed Jale. “Reminds me of that planet we were taught about.” He squinted from the attempt at recollection and the yellow sunlight. “Odd name. Started with E... Can you remember?”

Zek shrugged. “No.”

“Don't you use words with more than one syllable?” asked Vestal, looking around with dubious interest.

“No,” replied Zek.

“Isn't it difficult to communicate in a monosyllabic fashion, knowing that your intellectual colleagues are hanging on your utterances, ready to apportion cortical judgement based on a hypothalamic response to an interrogative?”

This from Sherlock, who wished to show off his vocabulary.

Zek smelled the fresh air, and said “No.”

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The quartet followed a path of very brown soil through the meadow. At the side of the field was a stile; and having climbed over this, they found themselves in a deep-cut lane bordered by hedgerows thick with birds.

“A *very* nice place,” continued Jale.

The air was sultry with summer: the smell of earth and pollen mixed to produce an almost euphoric atmosphere.

Walking steadily, they caught up to an old man, whose failing legs were encased in voluminous trousers but pounded the surface of the lane with slow determination. As they drew abreast, Jale observed that the oldster's shin was burnt by the sun to an almost ethnic darkness.

“Hello.”

“Arrr,” replied the codger.

They passed by, puzzled. The old man gave them a friendly wave as the young travelers reached the top of a hill and started down into a small valley through which there meandered a river. By its side was an old building, constructed with yellow blocks of limestone without the benefit of mortar. It had a many-gabled thatched roof with large overhangs that at this season provided shade. The door was wooden, wedged open with a boulder. Small windows with thick glass promised warmth in the opposite season. But now, the place was surrounded by a buzz of flowers whose colours threatened to stretch the spectrum. A smell of hops drifted out of the open door and was borne away by the warm breeze.

“Is this another dream?” asked Vestal.

“No,” replied Zek. “It's a pub.”

They entered. The place was deserted, but a massive table beckoned. Jale, Zek and Vestal sat down in equally massive chairs, while Sherlock stubbornly levitated. The surface of the table was pitted with the graffiti of generations. The ceiling

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overhead was likewise coloured with bygone messages, apparently recorded in the white plaster with the black smoke of candles.

There was the faint noise of a door opening and a lady appeared. She was buxom in her gingham dress, but unpretentious and smiling. In a rich accent, she asked “What can I get you?”

“Beer,” said Zek.

Everybody else nodded. The lady withdrew, and Vestal said “I think I like pubs.”

“Places of conversation and commune,” said Sherlock. He stroked the strings of the Gibson. “Where the deer and antelope play.”

“Sherlock?” said Jale in a polite voice.

“Yes?”

“Please shut up.”

“No problemo,” agreed the android. “But after a few glasses of the local brew, I may feel the urge to play.”

“Then you'll feel my boot in your backside,” replied Jale, who while he loved the master detective had a sensitive ear.

Four foaming mugs were placed in front of them.

“No slop,” observed Sherlock. “This is a cut above the *Purple Escargot*.”

Jale gave a warning look, and the android fell temporarily silent.

“But where *are* we?” asked Vestal.

The plump woman in the dress was on her way back to the bar, but she overheard the question and replied helpfully “The pub at the beginning of the Universe.”

“It makes sense,” said Zek.

“It *does*?” Vestal was sarcastically skeptical.

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“You mean,” said Jale to Zek, “that we have emerged from the eight-dimensional manifold at a time nexus?”

“Probably,” replied Zek.

“That's got *three* syllables!” said Vestal triumphantly. “I knew you could do it.”

“Or,” offered Sherlock, ignoring the girl. “We're just lost.”

“We aren't lost,” said Jale. “We have the coordinates of the Sphere. Drink up, we have to go.”

The irrepressible Sherlock asked “Can we have peanuts? You know that the rigours of multi-dimensional space are best handled by a combination of alcohol *and* salt.”

Jale sighed, feeling he was in the tranquil phase of a sitcom whose end was not yet apparent. But he signaled the friendly proprietor.

The four companions ripped open their packets of peanuts and began to chomp. Jale, finishing first, observed “There's a quiz on the back of this packet.”

“Good,” said Zek. “Let's do it.”

The sun was significantly lower in the sky when Vestal finally threw her empty packet onto the table and said “I give up.”

Jale looked at Zek. “It could be a hyper-dimensional code.”

“Nah,” said Zek, who was also struggling with the clues but not getting to the answer.

“I've tried all logic systems up to the fourth order,” objected Jale. “It has to be a higher-dimensional cryptogram.”

“Sir,” said Sherlock, who up until now had maintained a subdued silence. “May I try?”

“Of course,” said Jale absently. His mind was trying to recall the elements of *fifth*-order logic.

Sherlock ran his silvery eyes over the clues, and said “I have it.”

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He was met with three disbelieving glances, two backed with a Ph.D. apiece and one backed with a superlative android brain.

“You just reverse the letters,” said Sherlock, “The answer is: *Eat more peanuts.*”

\*

In another, less salubrious bar, the dream machine had a problem of a different type. She had already removed the drunken soldier's hand from her thigh twice, but did not want to turn him off totally. She was wearing a see-through top and shorts that she wished fitted more snugly than the thickness of a groping finger. However, her dream capability, coupled with too much alcohol, kept the man in a good mood.

“We have time,” insisted the soldier.

The girl gave a nervous smile. It was remarkable how beer increased the desire for sex but also reduced the capability to do it correctly. A hand slid underneath her top, fumbled, but eventually located her left breast. She did not move away.

The soldier was young, with the typical deranged and adolescent preoccupation with war. But he was physically attractive: regular features, a straight nose and a buzz-cut, which however had not prevented his military cap from sliding off his head. It lay on the floor in a pool of beer, and his uniform was also stained.

“Are you sure?” asked the dream machine.

“Sure I'm sure,” was the redundant answer. Then more usefully “We've got time to do it twice before my ship leaves.”

The girl looked around the bar. It was full of more-or-less drunken soldiers, some leering at the few available women and others breathing beery fumes into each other's faces as they carried on bellicose conversations. The air was thick with

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smoke, smells and secretions. How had the original Vestal ever been able to work in places like this?

“You're pretty,” observed the soldier. “You should be a dancer.”

“I was,” replied the dream machine, borrowing from her predecessor's history.

“You *were*?”

“Yeah. But I gave it up after a fight at the *Purple Escargot*.”

“Well,” said the soldier with sudden sternness in his face. “If anyone starts a fight here, *I'll* take care of 'em.”

“I bet you could,” agreed the dream machine diplomatically. “But shouldn't you be saving your strength for the, er..., war?”

The soldier swayed to his feet. “We'll show those Andromeda assholes! We're ready to ship out and kick some shit.”

“Oh, yes,” commented the girl, sounding interested. “Where?”

The soldier looked around the room with a secretive but confused stare. He leant over the girl, and confided. “The Large Magellanic Cloud.”

“Wow!” said the dream machine with fake admiration. “That's a long way away. You must have a big ship.”

The soldier sat down, looking slightly crestfallen. “It's only a torpedo boat.”

“What's a torpedo?” asked the girl, but then regretted it. The soldier picked up her hand and put it down his pants.

“*That's* a torpedo,” he proudly proclaimed.

“Is it supposed to be this soft?”

A look of annoyance slowly formed on the man's face. Then: “Look, sister. I've spent a lot on booze this evening. You're not acting very grateful.”

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“Oh, but I am.” The dream machine took a sip of beer. It had been on the table too long, and was flat and warm. She gagged.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” said the girl. “I was just kind of thinking that... Maybe this war could be avoided.”

“Crap!” said the soldier with the conviction of the stupid. “The Galaxy *has* to fight.”

“What for?”

The man was now seriously annoyed. He looked at the girl with barely-hidden contempt. But he had no answer to the question; and said roughly “Look, we either do it or we don't.”

The dream machine surveyed the bar. Some of the military had already left. “All right,” she said. “But not here. Show me a *real* torpedo.”

She moved her fingers in the soldier's pants, feeling a sweaty scrotum.

The man's face was expressionless with appreciation for a while, but then took on a look of regret. “But I can't take you back to the ship. The skipper won't allow it.”

“Does your skipper ever dream?”

The soldier's face showed non-comprehension. The girl said “Take me to your ship. I guarantee that your skipper will be dreaming while we're doing something else.”

\*

Sherlock laid out the four blasters. He still had the Gibson guitar slung over his shoulder. Jale lay on the large sofa, and Zek on the small one. Vestal was using all her navigational skills to keep the ship from destroying itself in an eight-dimensional crash.

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Sherlock said to Jale “Sir, when we arrive at the Sphere of Civilization, there will be a resisting security force. I would like to go through an inventory of our awesome firepower.”

Jale turned over on the couch. “Okay.”

“In view of your moribund condition,” said Sherlock, “I will keep this short.”

There was no response from Jale, so Sherlock proceeded:

“Four, fully-charged blasters. Check.

Three Catch-22 flak jackets. (*I don't need one.*) Check.

Two suppositories.”

Jale opened his eyes. “What?”

“Well,” said Sherlock. “We are heading for brown-trousers time. And as only you and Zek are human, two should be sufficient.”

Jale, looking exasperated, said “Stop joking! Suppositories work the other way round.”

“Sir, what's happened to your sense of humour? It's our most powerful weapon.”

“I'm holding it in reserve,” yawned Jale. “What happened to *yours*?”

“It seems to be going hyper,” admitted Sherlock.

“I see that,” said Jale, sitting up. “Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“You don't mind me calling you Sherlock, do you?”

“No, Sir. It *is* my name.”

“Well, Shirls...”

“My name is not *Shirls*,” objected the master detective.

“Okay,” agreed Jale. “Look, Shirley-boy...”

“Sir!”

“Look, my friend,” said Jale resignedly. “The problem is that we don't have *any* of the items you mentioned, except the first.”

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There was an apologetic silence in the cabin. Then Sherlock said “Yes. But we *do* have the Gibson!”

Jale stood up and rubbed the tiredness out of his face. He said to Sherlock, “If Garayan and Androyoos had half the wit you possess, there wouldn't be any damned war.”

“So,” embroidered Sherlock, “a limerick is mightier than the sword?”

“I guess we'll find out.” Jale walked over to the console. “Won't we?”

Vestal cast a brief glance at Jale and then her serious eyes went back to the screen. “We're ready to come out.”

Jale said “Zek! Wake up.” His boyhood friend stretched his arms. “All hands on deck.”

The *Rigor Mortis* ascended a tube of narrowing dimensional options.

“Eight,” said Vestal. “Seven, six.” There was a burst of electromagnetic energy that snowed the screen: “Five dimensions.”

Zek was part of the way to the console when a shudder in the deck sent him and Jale staggering.

“Four,” announced Vestal. “We *have* spacetime!”

Ahead lay a dark shape limned in the light of two galaxies. Sherlock said in deep tones “Behold the Sphere of Civilization.”

“Also known as the smelly egg,” countered Jale. “Set your guns.”

The four companions assembled in the hold.

“Our best chance,” said Jale, “is an attack with coffins. Vestal and I will go in the double. Zek and Sherlock will flank us. Zek, grab that bag of monofilament bungee chords. Vestal, you take remote control of the *Rigor's* ram.

He handed a space helmet to Zek and put one over his own head. “They may try to decompress.”

*Cosmic Dreams*

“Sir,” inquired Sherlock. “Aren't you forgetting something?”

“What?”

“The suicide pills.”

“No time,” was the answer. “Gentlemen. Start your coffins!”

The three caskets with the four defenders of rationality headed into space. Jale thought about making a speech, but gave up the idea when — half way to the Sphere of Civilization — a bolt of energy crossed their bows.

On the Sphere's landing platform stood a group of heavily-armed mechanoids. The leader took a step forward. There was a crackle in Jale's ears, and a voice demanded. “Stop or be destroyed. You have no authority.”

Jale stood up in his speeding coffin. “*This* is my authority.” The fusion blaster smashed the leading mechanoid into bits. The others started to raise their weapons, but Zek and Vestal decimated them.

“They aren't very smart,” observed Vestal.

“That was only the advance unit. Just wait. Sherlock?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“You didn't fire. Is your weapon okay?”

“Affirmative,” replied the android. “But I was busy.”

“Doing what?” demanded Jale.

“Plugging in the Gibson.”

Jale groaned.

Have you ever heard the *Ride of the Valkyries* played on an electric guitar in space? It has a strange quality, especially when done too loud through an off-the-shelf audio system by a tone-deaf android.

“Sherlock!” shouted Jale into his helmet phone. “You're being surreal.”

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“Don't worry, Sir!” was the response. “Cook me a kipper. I'll be back for breakfast.”

The master detective's gadget-laden coffin whisked over the remnants of the guards and disappeared into the interior of the Sphere.

“Follow him,” ordered Jale to Zek. Then: “Vestal, deploy the ram.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Nemo.” Under remote control, the *Rigor Mortis* began to turn, its prow glinting in the light of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies. Jale looked back over his shoulder as his coffin whizzed into the Sphere: the ram was ready. “Do it.”

Inside the Sphere, mechanoids, androids and humans were running around in chaos. The Sphere's systems sealed the site where the raiders had entered, but nobody seemed to have control.

The right-hand man of Garayan leaned over the Galaxy's leader and said “Sir, there is a security breach. An unknown craft is attacking the Sphere.”

Garayan looked disbelieving, but suddenly the table and its two delegations lurched sideways. “What's that?”

“Feels like a space-ram,” said the officer. An inexplicable wind began to blow through the chamber. “Permission to activate the Vacuum Bomb?”

“No,” snapped Garayan. Then “Who *are* the attackers?”

“We presume they are from Andromeda. They're heavily armed.”

“With what?” demanded Garayan testily. He had been assured that the Sphere's location was secret and that its security force was adequate.

“Blasters. Coffins. And a Gibson.”

*Cosmic Dreams*

“Oh.” Garayan looked abruptly serious. “They have a *Gibson*?”

On the other side of the table, the right-hand man of Androyoos leaned over Andromeda's leader and said “Sir, we are under attack by a small but well-armed group of insurgents.”

“Where did they come from?”

“Presumably the Galaxy,” replied the officer. “But by way of the eighth dimension.”

Androyoos looked skeptical and accusatory. “You told me that the Sphere was secret and safe.”

“It is.” The reply was manifestly inaccurate, and to cover his confusion the officer added “But Sir, our instruments tell us that they have a *Gibson*.”

Androyoos' old face turned pale. “Oh, no.”

“Sir, permission to set off the Doomsday Machine?”

“Not yet,” was the flustered answer. “If we blow up our vacuum, they'll blow up theirs. And nobody will survive.”

“But then, Sir,” observed the officer. “We will have lost.”

Androyoos shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to make his addled brain find the fault in this logic. “Let me think about it.”

Over the council chamber, the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies were sequentially blotted out as something passed overhead. The members of the delegations on both sides of the table looked at each other in consternation. Three from the first contingent and two from the second got up and ran for their respective washrooms. The rest remained flatulently seated.

Meanwhile, the dream machine's commandeered torpedo boat was scraping up to the Sphere's largest docking port. But while, ostensibly, the torpedo boat was there to help the Sphere, the latter's port declined to open.

“Isn't this supposed to be a warship?” demanded the girl.

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The captain and his first mate appeared to be in a state of dream-like euphoria. The captain had graying hair, but the lines in his forehead were less deep than normal. "Maybe we should fire a torpedo?"

"A nice idea," agreed the girl. "Then we could send in our men."

On the other side of the Sphere, Jale and his companions were running into significant resistance. A laser beam bounced off the wall, hit Jale's helmet and set his head ringing. Groggily, he pulled off the wrecked headware and tossed it aside. The air in the Sphere had the characteristic smell of recombinant DNA farts.

"Androids," he muttered. "They won't be easy."

"What do we do?" asked Vestal, trying to keep the coffin stable.

"Get out of this thing!" ordered Jale. As the man and woman scrambled to the deck, he flipped the control and the casket forged ahead.

It was met by a hail of ordinance and disintegrated into splinters.

"They broke our bed!" yelled Vestal. Furious, she jumped forward and poured fusion into the enemy.

Jale joined in. "Hell hath no fury like a woman with a broken bed."

"Who said that?" asked Zek, urging his coffin into the fray.

"I did," replied Jale. "Just now."

The corridor became a conflagration. Jale and Vestal darted forward, their blasters on wide aperture to sweep the androids before them. However, the place was full of laser, and one beam cut Zek's coffin neatly in two. The man hit the deck heavily, got up, but was obviously injured. A black figure loomed over him, its laser sword raised.

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Suddenly a light-coloured coffin shot into the picture. A white guitar smashed the assailant's head to pulp with a twanging sound.

“Sherlock!” yelled Jale above the din. “Stop being heroic. There are too many of them!”

The surviving coffin disappeared into the smoke. Jale saw the Gibson's white shape raised on high to smite the forces of evil; but then he doubled up, coughing from the fumes of the fight.

Gradually, his watery eyes cleared. The scene had become even more confused. Soldiers with the insignia of the Galaxy were fighting the security force of the Sphere. A slim girl kicked aside an android limb and walked over to him.

“You must be Jale,” said the dream machine. “You're bigger than I thought.”

“Grrr,” responded Jale, and blasted a rushing assailant to a bloody mess. Bodily fluids from their enemy splashed across the bare breasts of Vestal and her twin. “Sorry,” said Jale to both girls. “It'll wash off.”

The battle was slowing down. Zek came up, limping but with the bag of bungee chords intact.

“All right, old friend?”

“Yah,” was the short reply. “Where's Sherlock?”

“Listen,” replied Jale.

The strains of the *Ride of the Valkyries* echoed through the corridors of the Sphere; but the Gibson must have lost a string, because the rendition was hopelessly off-key.

However, Sherlock's musical accomplishments had not gone unnoticed in the council room. Mechanical aides rushed into the room and gave identical reports to Garayan and Andryoos. “Our men are being mown down with a Gibson. The intruders are playing some kind of victory song.”

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The leaders of the Milky Way and Andromeda looked across the table at each other in mutual fear. But before they could say anything, there was a commotion.

A tall man with singed hair and a fierce stare entered the chamber. He was flanked by two pretty girls whose bosoms were attractive but who carried blasters that were completely dangerous. Behind was another man, with an expressionless face, a captured laser rifle and a bag of bungee chords. The group was completed by a Sherlock Holmes master-detective riding in a coffin and strumming a guitar.

Jale strode over to the head of the conference table and raised his weapon. A well-aimed blast incinerated both sides' documents of war. The two delegations shrank into their chairs. Only Garayan and Androyoos started to object.

"Hold your tongues," thundered Jale. "*If* you want to keep them."

He nodded at the dream machine, who began its healing work. Under Vestal's trained blaster, and the threat of Sherlock's guitar, Zek quickly used the bungee chords to tie the members of both delegations to their chairs.

"The time has come," boomed Jale, "to inject a little humility and humour into matters. I am going to tell you how to live together in peace and harmony."

There was a twanging riff of accompaniment from the guitar.

"Thanks, Sherlock."

"You're welcome, Jale."

Jale's eyes raked the assembled delegates. "Now, as I have a captive audience..."

A twitch of laughter from both sides of the table indicated that the healing process had begun...

11  
EPIPROLOG

Frozen ground received the *Rigor Mortis* under a starry sky. The air was cold, but in the lee of the old barn the wind was bearable. Jale walked past the grave where the original Vestal's father was buried, followed by the two clones.

Sherlock and Zek hung in the background, feeling awkward.

"It's strange to be back," said the master detective.

"Yeah," agreed Zek. "But Aster changes only slowly."

There was a pause. "Zek?"

"Yes?"

"Do you want a drink? I know a good place over the hill. I used to work there. It's called the *Excelsior*."

Zek considered. He felt out of place at the farm of Jale's old girlfriend, and unsure what would happen when the original met the two copies. "Sure."

The two walked off into the night.

Jale and his brace of female companions were halfway to the farmhouse when the door opened. Light spilled out, followed by a big dog that growled threateningly. "Be quiet, Kazak." Then: "Who's that?"

"Me," said Jale shortly. "Are you still angry?"

Vestal stepped out of the house and surveyed her ex-boyfriend with hostile eyes. Then her gaze shifted to the two girls that stood on either side of him. The only thing different about the original Vestal was that she was freckled from long days spent outside.

"What do you want?" demanded the first Vestal.

"I thought," said Jale carefully, "that I could start a harem."

"Get lost," was the answer. The door slammed.

Jale turned away. "Well. At least I've got two out of three."

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“Not really,” said the dream machine, apologetically. “I have to go back to Brounlee. He's the only one that can cure my illness.” Abruptly, she turned and followed her companions' footsteps in the snow, headed for the bar.

Jale shrugged. “Okay.” then turning to the third and last Vestal: “How about you?”

“You're not very romantic, Jale of Acheron,” was the complaint.

“No,” agreed the man. “But I can be.” Suddenly he dropped on one knee to the frozen ground, his cape swishing about his shoulders. “Oh Vestal of Rang, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

Jale stood up, dusted the snow off his knee, and started to walk to the ship.

“What about the wedding ceremony?”

“That was it,” replied Jale over his shoulder. “Let's go.”

Shortly after, the *Rigor Mortis* was just another star in the sky.

*Cosmic Dreams*

What a famous historian, statesman and critic said:

This is not the beginning of the end. It is not even the end of the beginning. But it is, perhaps, the beginning of the end of literature as we know it... (*Winston S. Churchill*)