

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape

Volume Two

A Collection of Speculative Fiction Stories

A. B. Carolan

Steven M. Moore

SAMPLE

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Preface

My muses kept telling me it was time for another short story collection, at least from that part of my schizoid personality that writes sci-fi, so here are some more strange creations for you to enjoy. Many of these were freebies on my website's blog, so this is just a way of collecting them together. My collaborator A. B. Carolan contributed those in the last part.

These go from funny to serious. I hope they're all entertaining. A. B. and I would love to hear from you about which ones you liked best. By the way, *Volume One* is available as an ebook on Amazon and features a novella; there are no novellas in this one.

Without further ado, let's launch into *Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape, Volume Two*. Fasten your seatbelts! Or put on your dancing shoes?

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ
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Part One: Just for Fun...

Chiba

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[Note from Steve: Let's start with some space opera...]

Erid Arikalai lost patience with the robocab's obsession with safety. He took control by leaving the unit's AI smoldering behind the front dash.

Your heavy boot can do a lot of damage!

He was focused on controlling the cab now, but he took time to smile at Mira's thought. She often thought he was too impulsive.

He had three patrol cars in pursuit by the time he crashed through the guard barrier and landed in the canal's dry bed. He managed to maintain speed and control while dodging the garbage citizens from the Iskandian capital had thrown into it.

He would never have thought of the canal as a super-highway for his escape. Mira had suggested it before he committed robocide, her voice a soft purr in his mind. *You're the best, baby!*

It occurred to him that Iskandian cops were going to a lot of trouble when all he'd done was steal a painting from a local gallery, thinking it would be a nice gift for Mira. He'd kept that thought from her, of course, to make it a surprise. His real reason for his downtown visit was to break into the Hephreid Empire's embassy and steal some computer files. Because Iskandia wasn't part of the Empire, the cops' pursuit didn't even make sense for that.

Rotary for the spaceport turnoff coming up. You'll need to leave the canal.

He wondered if the robocab's electric motor had the necessary power. Time to find out! He spun the wheel—the cab allowed Human control in case the AI died, which it had—so he was able to steer toward the canal's side and climb the slope. He soon entered the rotary and took the branch off it leading to the spaceport.

Local laws required drivers to stop and ID themselves. He crashed through the security checkpoint's barrier instead and headed directly for their ship.

We're lifting in thirty ticks.

Erid slammed on the brakes and bolted from the car with the painting. He ran up the gangway and dove inside the main airlock. A few ticks later he was inside the hold and both outside and inside doors were closing. The ladder to the command-and-control center was at the far end of the hold. He headed for it. "Daddy's home, Mama G and Mira," he said as he began his climb.

"We're already in space." That was Mama G's voice from C&C. "Get your ass up here. We're going to need some fancy flying. Three police cruisers are chasing us."

He came to the ladder's end and entered C&C, leaving the package containing the painting on the table that was projecting a holographic model of the Iskandian solar system.

"Thanks for bringing me in," Erid said to Mira. "Babbage, give me a visual of our pursuers." The AI transferred the video image from Mama G's display to his as he took the pilot's seat. "Those are too big for police cruisers. They're Imperial warships. They must have been in orbit around the planet."

"Looked like police cruisers to me," said Mama G. "Can you outrun them?"

“Babbage, what do you think?” said Erid.

“I’m always doing a lot of thinking, too much to enumerate,” said the AI. “If I’ve correctly distilled your query, though, I concur with Mama G’s original comment. You’re going to need to do some fancy flying. If I could disable my safety coding, I could help, but I have to leave the reckless piloting to you, I’m afraid. Prepare to die, Mama G and Mira.”

“Just keep feeding me data. I’ve had more challenging situations. No one’s going to die.” Erid knew their ship. He also knew Imperial warships—he had served on one once. They were clumsy and slow. “Babbage, I need you to man the guns.”

“They won’t do any good against a warship.”

“I know that! But we’re going through this system’s asteroid belt. Blast any small crap that gets in our way. I’ll dodge around the big stuff but close enough that the warships won’t dare to follow.”

After about a quarter standard, Erid was able to lose their pursuers.

Erid accepted the drink Mira was offering and smiled at her. “You never had any doubts, did you?”

I knew you’d done it before. That—she jerked a thumb toward the painting now on the galley’s wall—is a nice gift but hardly worth putting us in danger.

“I don’t think it was that. They must have discovered my code download somehow. Any thoughts, Mama G?”

Erid’s mother-in-law shrugged. “I made a secure link to your transmitter. Babbage confirmed. No one should have been the wiser.”

“I’ll confirm that again,” said the AI.

“Maybe they’re cleverer than we think they are,” said Erid.

“Or they just wanted to fry your butt for breaking into the embassy,” said Mama G. “You know, just on general principles. I feel like doing it myself sometimes.”

“Maybe.” He raised his glass. “To riches. We’ll sell that stolen code to the rebels for a good price and rest on our laurels for a bit afterward.” A crash was heard in the ship’s hold beneath them. “Babbage, scan below.”

“I detect nothing that could produce that sound,” said the AI.

“I’ll go check,” said Mama G.

Erid watched her leave the galley. “Your mother’s a great crewmember,” he said aloud to Mira.

My mother was born on a rebel base and was in space before she was ten. She has more experience than we do.

“Agreed. Maybe that’s why she had problems accepting me.”

You’re an AWOL from an Imperial crew. That’s a negative in her opinion. Always will be.

“She sympathizes with rebels. It should be a positive.”

You never will understand. She believes in loyalty and the chain of command.

“She didn’t have to serve on an Imperial warship. I did. That’s more than a chain of command.”

I understand that. She doesn’t. Mother?

Mama G stuck her head in the door. "I hate to break up your discussion about me, but I found our noisemaker." She shoved a small girl into the galley. "Meet Chiba, our first stowaway."

Erid stood and caught the kid who didn't seem used to low g-force. "How'd you get in here?"

Chiba looked around. "I'm hungry. Feed me something and I'll answer your question."

Mira popped a tray into the microwave and set it for two minutes. Soon Chiba was devouring what played the role of roast, potatoes, and vegetables. *Kid's famished.*

Chiba looked at Mira and smiled. *You're a telepath?*

Among other things. Finish your food.

Chiba did just that. She soon pushed back her stool and sighed. "I can answer your question. I followed you in. I move fast. I had to get away. Your ship was getting away. Said and done."

"Why? Why did you need to get away? Is there some pervert chasing you?" Mama G looked concerned.

"Too many questions. Let me ask one. Where are we going?"

"I can't answer that," said Erid.

"Then I can't answer any more of your questions. We're at an impasse."

Mira smiled at Erid. *She's got you there.*

They let Chiba have the run of the ship, figuring she was neither an Imperial nor rebel spy. Babbage always had sensors on her, of course, but where was she going to go? Erid got used to having her around.

The trek to the nearest rebel planet took many jumps. At the end of the last one, Chiba was sitting on Erid's lap as he guided their ship into the solar system.

"Can't the Empire find this planet?" she said.

"There are spies everywhere, child," said Mama G, "even on Freedom-4, but you'll soon see why we'll be safe on this rebel world."

"Beginning Kuiper belt transition," said Babbage.

"That marks the outer boundaries of most star systems," said Erid.

"I know that." *He thinks I'm stupid.*

No, he's only explaining what Babbage said. The AI can be a bit terse sometimes.

"You two should shield me from your thoughts when they're private," Erid told Chiba and Mira. "And Chiba, I don't think you're stupid. In fact, I think you know more than you're telling us. Before we arrive, I'd like to try a theory out on you."

Chiba fidgeted a little. "Might as well go for it now. I'm listening."

"It's easy to express. I think the Imperial warships were coming after you. They had no idea that I downloaded code or stole a painting."

She jumped to the floor and faced him, hands on hips.

"What makes you think that?"

"Simple deduction. Our code transmission was secure. And Imperial ships wouldn't give a damn about a stolen painting. I'm guessing they even put the local cops up to pursuing me. Were you in the robocab?"

She smiled. "Not in. On. Standing on the back bumper, in fact. I almost flew off when you went into the canal."

Erid nodded. "OK. Thank you for being honest and confirming my theory. Now, why are you running away from the Empire? What do they want you for?"

She shrugged. "I was bored. At the embassy all I heard was talk about rebels. I wanted to meet some. If my uncle doesn't like them, I might. That's all."

"Your uncle?" said Mama G.

"The ambassador. My parents died in an accident. He's my guardian now."

"Oh, crap!" said Erid. "Just what we need. A run-away with noble blood."

"Noble blood isn't good for anything," said Chiba. "I've been a prisoner all my life. My parents were higher ranking than my uncle because my mother is second cousin to the Emperor. She didn't have much use for the pomp and circumstance, though. And my father was a scientist. I used to collect plants with him on some new colony planets."

Was your uncle abusing you?

No. He's only interested in using me to improve his stature in the Imperial court. And he's only my mother's half-brother.

"We should return her," said Erid. "Freedom-4 is no place for her. She might be persecuted."

"Can't I get asylum there? I want to be a scientist like my father. And I don't want to be with my uncle!"

"Maybe we should let the rebel leader decide what to do with her," said Mama G.

"They might use her too," said Erid. He smiled at Chiba. "Maybe you'd just like to become a member of our crew."

Chiba smiled. "That's OK for a while. But I do want to become a scientist."

There are many ways to achieve that, Chiba. Welcome to the crew.

"Who's the girl?" said Colonel Whelon. "Isn't she a little too young to be a mercenary?"

"We're opportunists, not mercenaries," said Erid. "If you must know, she was a stowaway. But she's smart and a valuable crewmember now."

The colonel shrugged. "My people have evaluated your summary of the intel you obtained. I'm ready to negotiate for all of it."

"It's valuable intel," said Erid. "What are you offering?"

"Very little. You realize that you have no other customers, right? It's a buyer's market."

"There's nothing that says we have to sell."

Whelon snapped his fingers. An entire squad of rebels entered the colonel's suite. He smiled.

"And there's nothing that says we can't take what we want. Put him in the brig. Then get some others and capture that little imp. We can hold her for ransom. The Empire should pay us well for her."

You're a terrible negotiator, thought Mari.

You have to hide me, thought Chiba.

One rebel pushed Erid into the cell and slammed the door. "Tell Mama G to take command. Lift off now!"

And what about you? thought Mari and Chiba.

“They won’t get any ransom for me.”

But they could kill you, thought Mari.

I can’t let that happen, thought Chiba.

Mari’s thoughts then echoed Mama G’s words: “We’re already in space. We’ll have to hide and then come back.”

“Who the hell are you talking to?” said a rebel through the small meshed window in the cell door.

“I’m calling for our mercenary fleet,” said Erid. “They’ll turn Freedom-4 into nuclear slag. Tell that to your Colonel Whelon.”

The rebel looked worried and left.

“We see no sign of a mercenary fleet,” said Whelon.

Erid was back in the colonel’s little office. “We actually don’t have one. My crew is taking the stowaway back to the Imperial court. There they’ll divulge all they know about this rebel planet and others. The fleet will be an Imperial one. You’ve forfeited any right to survive, and I’ve lost any sympathies I had for your cause.” He smiled at the colonel’s frown. “How did you find out who Chiba really is?”

“We have spies in the Imperial court. They’re good at weeding through gossip and gleaning valuable intel.”

“The Empire will be happy to know about that too.”

“You just heard it. How will you tell your people?”

“The same way I talked to my colleagues. I refer you to the studies of the great Dr. Halas. In particular, the definitive paper in the Imperial Journal of Psychology seventeen years ago. I forget the volume and number, but you can do a search and find it. Assuming rebels try to keep up on the latest scientific developments, that is.”

Whelon nodded to an aide who dashed out of the room. “We’ll check that. But I think you’re just wasting my time. Perhaps I should hear a convincing argument from you why you shouldn’t be executed with a lethal injection. That’s what we do with traitors.”

“Treason is in the eyes of the beholder.” Erid took a chair. “And why should I waste my time with such an argument when I can waste yours instead. That will give the Imperial fleet even more time to plan and execute the complete destruction of Freedom-4.” Erid saw the crimson begin in the black hair at Whelon’s throat and rise. *Maybe I’ve gone too far?*

Maybe, thought Mira, *but keep him stewing. He’s so angry he’s not thinking straight right now.*

Erid and Whelon sat and stared at each other for a bit until the aide returned and handed the colonel a note. He read it and scowled.

“You have found out that the great Dr. Halas has proven that general ESP powers don’t exist. But it was also proven that telepathy does in certain mutants. The mutation often occurs in small populations where genetic diversity isn’t large. The Imperial court is one such population. Our little colleague is a telepath. My wife’s planet has another small population, and she’s also a mutant.”

Whelon waved the paper. “So this note says. And I say, so what?”

Erid shrugged. “The doctor continued the research, although recent results haven’t been published. My wife participated in several experiments. Telepathy is bit like a starship’s drive: it can jump through the metaverses even better than a ship controlled by an AI. The telepathic communication is almost instantaneous.”

“That violates all known physics.”

“Before the superstring drive was discovered, the idea of FTL travel was thought to violate all known physics. Isn’t it wonderful that intelligent beings can push beyond the current frontiers of science, present company being an exception.”

Whelon ignored the barb and looked at his aide. “We need some telepaths.”

“Yes sir,” said the aide. He looked at Erid and then back to Whelon. “Where do we get them?”

“This Dr. Halas’s databases must be full of subjects.” Whelon focused on Erid. “Now you have some information that might save your life. Where is this Dr. Halas?”

“Darned if I know. I doubt the Empire knows either. Dr. Halas disappeared, along with the databases and other experimental data.”

“You told the scientist to do that?”

“I had to protect my wife. And now Chiba. They’re both valuable crewmembers.” Erid’s smile was now wide.

“Does the Imperial court have telepaths?”

“That’s privileged information,” said Erid. “And something to worry about, isn’t it? Perhaps the Empire only lets rebels exist because they really have no use for the world’s you control. Your setup here is primitive, to say the least.”

The anger had been building and seemed at a higher level this time. Whelon snapped his fingers. “Take him back to the brig.”

Do you call that a lie? thought Chiba.

Erid wasn’t lying, my child, thought Mira. *We’re the proof that telepaths exist.*

“Get out of my head,” said Mama G. “How are we going to save Erid?”

We’ll work on that, thought Mira. *But we should be up front with Chiba.*

Tell me later. Mama G is right. We have to come up with a plan to save Erid.

“I’d like to make a suggestion,” said Babbage.

“Go ahead,” said Mama G.

“My sensor sweeps show that Erid is being held in a one-level structure where the roof is the same height as a snow field for camouflage purposes. We should land the ship on top of his cell.”

Can the AI locate the precise position of his cell?

Mama G echoed Mira’s question to Babbage.

“Of course. Right down to centimeters. The structure has poor heating, so Erid’s IR signal is clear.”

“Even from orbit?”

“The planet is cold. All the local lifeforms give off a strong IR signals.”

“Let’s do it then.”

Mama G let Babbage fly the ship most of the way and then took over the controls for the final descent. Mira warned Erid. A blast from lift rockets burned through the sheet of ice and collapsed the roof to Erid's cell. Mira lowered a chain-link ladder from the main airlock. Erid was soon in the hold, puffing a bit from exertion.

Safe and sound.

"But I wanted to see what Whelon was going to do. I put him in a bind."

We'll have them chasing us.

"Along with Imperial warships. You contacted their admiral, right?"

They will have to choose between Chiba and us and going after the rebels.

"Want to bet they'll go for us?" Mira shook her head. "Agreed. Whelon will be very busy. And I don't care who wins because we'll be long gone."

Neither side impresses me.

"Isn't that the way it always is?"

Chiba watched the breakers crash onto the beach. *I like this planet.*

Mira squeezed the girl's hand. *We come here for R&R. We like it too. It's primitive, though, so we'll be roughing it. No intelligent lifeforms to bother us, though.*

Mama G hinted I'd find Dr. Halas on this planet. Where is he?

Dr. Halas isn't male. She's female.

And not Human?

Depends on your definition of Human, I suppose. Sometimes Erid calls me a freak of nature. I've come to understand those as words of endearment.

Chiba's eyes opened wide. *You're Dr. Halas?*

Halas is the surname I was born with. I followed an old Earth custom and took Erid's last name. Mira smiled at Chiba. *It has created some confusion, I suppose, but it's also useful.*

Lifeboat

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[Note from Steve: The movie *Men in Black* missed some action in the suburbs...]

“Can we keep it?”

Jerry looked at the creature in his daughter’s hand. He had stopped sprinkling the new grass seed and considered her question. He held out his free hand, still gloved from raking the soil.

“Give it to me and let me rinse your hand off!” The creature looked like fancy lime Jello from a mold, except it wasn’t completely transparent. “Where did you get this?”

Susie pointed under the hedge. He saw something the size of a small, shiny, stainless steel garbage can. The rounded end was blackened as if it had gone through a fire. The flat end was emitting white smoke. There were strange characters on the side that looked a bit like Chinese writing. *A bio attack launched from China?*

He jiggled the creature in the palm of his hand. *Maybe it isn’t alive? Maybe it’s mechanical. Or a kid’s toy?*

He put it on the ground and knelt by the hedge to examine the strange object more closely. *Yeah, could be a toy.* But he knew even toys had some purpose. This seemed to have none. It made a sound like passing gas and the smoke stopped.

He stood up and faced his daughter. “We’ll keep him. I’ll put him in Sniffy’s old cage and we’ll see what he does.”

Sniffy was Susie’s pet rabbit that had died three weeks earlier of old age.

“How do you know it’s a he?” said Susie.

“Just a guess, honey. I’ll put him in the cage now. We have to go in. Mom will want us to wash up a bit for dinner.”

The next morning there were two creatures. Jerry couldn’t tell which one was the original; they looked exactly the same.

He walked over to the shiny garbage can beneath the hedge. *Should I look inside?* He knelt down and examined it. *No obvious way to open it.* The end that had emitted smoke had six charred openings, one in the center and the others at the vertices of a pentagon. He knew pentagons; he had worked in one. *Should I get my service pistol and shoot a few holes in the thing? Or should I take it to the dump?*

He decided to wait for the bulk waste pickup.

The following morning there were four creatures. The next morning, eight. The cage was getting crowded.

Jerry wondered what they were eating. He decided to call his friend Hal, a bio prof at the university. He asked Jerry if he was drunk or thought it was April 1, so Jerry had to explain how they found the first blob of Jello. Hal said he’d be right over.

“They’re clearly alive,” Hal told Jerry after inspecting the caged creatures. “I don’t know what they are. Where’s the shiny garbage can?”

“They took it in the bulk waste pickup. Damn thing was heavy.”

“Can I have a creature to examine in my lab?”

“You can take the whole bunch. Susie’s already lost interest. It’s not like you can pet them like a rabbit.”

Hal packed them up in a cardboard box. When he arrived at the lab, he put them in his biohazard room just in case, but he didn’t think to wear his biohazard suit when he entered later to examine the creatures.

The next morning they found the entire volume of the biohazard room filled with a green slime. Hal was floating in the center.

The Pentagon was called.

The Apprentice

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[Note from Steve: Scientific evidence suggests that time travel is impossible. But who knows what happens in a parallel universe...]

“You’re late. I’ll buzz you in.”

Late? I know that!

Jeff Langley’s car had broken down...again! He’d had to call a cab, a trip that had cost him nearly all his remaining cash. He also expected the cops to tow the car—that charge would bankrupt him. He wasn’t happy with the prospect of asking dear old Dad for money. The I-told-you-you-needed-an-advanced-degree sermons were becoming tiresome.

The voice on the intercom had been garbled and hard to understand, but the buzzer sounded. He walked into the old lab building, one of the oldest on campus. *Why the security?*

He pulled out the slip of paper. It had gone through one wash of his jeans. “Technical assistant wanted. Must have experience writing code to connect and control different electronic equipment installations. Inquire with Prof. G. Hoff, Brook’s Lab, Room 5H.” He found stairs at the end of a dark corridor and began to climb. *Guess elevators didn’t exist when they made this building!*

He knocked at 5H.

“Wait a moment!” The voice was muffled. There was a pause. “Come on in. Take a seat. Not literally, of course.”

He looked around, but saw no one. Rows of workbenches were covered with equipment and parts, tools, and takeout cartons. “Professor Hoff?”

There was a tall object that looked like the Mercury space capsule sitting on its large end. A hatch opened and a young woman in a bikini stepped out as if the capsule were a gateway to a Caribbean resort. She had short hair and no tan, though, but the bikini straps were strained in all the right places.

“Don’t look so damn surprised. It gets hot in there.” She grabbed a lab coat, threw it on, and approached him. “Gail Hoff.” He shook her hand. She inspected him from top to bottom. “Pretty scruffy. I don’t like stubble. I’m guessing you’re Jeff Langley. Are you mute?”

“No, you just surprised me.”

She shrugged. “I get that a lot. Even other physicists are expecting G. Hoff to be a man. My subject matter also helps explain why I’m tucked into a lab in this godforsaken corner of the campus. I’ll probably not receive tenure and will have to find a job in a small college in the middle of nowhere.” She poked him in the chest. “I reviewed your rap sheet, Jeff, and liked what I saw. A bit of a rebel like me, right? I can’t pay much. 30k per year plus all the usual worthless benes, like a 401(k) and healthcare that will leave you broke if you ever get seriously ill. OK with that?”

OK. Nice to know she has to pause for a breath. 30k per year? He smiled. 30 divided by 0 was an infinite raise! “Sure. Am I just supposed to jump in or will you give me an explanation of what you want from me?”

“Mostly jump in. I have no idea how you work your magic, and you probably won’t understand or care about how I work mine.” She waved at a whiteboard covered with multi-

colored equations. “I keep running out of markers, but that’s the gist. My equations are like a doctor’s prescription too. And I ran out of Latin and Greek letters, hence the Cyrillic.”

“Theoretical physics?”

“Applied is a better word. I’m as much an engineer as physicist, but I’m not good at getting devices to talk to each other electronically. I can do it if I’m pushed—it’s like flossing my teeth—but I prefer to let an expert do it—like a dental hygienist. Electronics lab was my hardest engineering subject. That’s your mission, Mr. Ethan Hunt, if you’re willing to accept it. Be forewarned: the mission might become impossible. For now, I just need another pair of hands.” She took the lab coat off and tossed it into a chair. “Strip down unless you want to make an omelet out of your *huevos*.”

“Pardon?”

“It gets hot in the capsule. Even hotter with two people. Just don’t get any ideas, Mr. Hunt. That mission IS impossible!”

He smiled and began stripping.

They spent the rest of the day connecting circuit boards together, she in her bikini and he in his briefs. He just followed the woman’s directions. A bit after 4 p.m., she tossed tools into the chair with the cracked upholstery that filled most of the capsule.

“Time for a beer, my friend. Student center pub. I’ll treat. Get dressed and I’ll meet you downstairs in the foyer.”

Huff eyed Jeff. “Got a family?”

“Mom died when I was five. My old man is a stiff-necked ex-military dude who wanted me to go to the Air Force academy. I didn’t have the grades or the motivation. I did OK in electrical engineering, but I was sick of school after the BS. As far as I’m concerned, that degree has a double meaning.”

She shrugged. “You have a job. That’s better than many people. That reminds me. You’ll have to go early to personnel tomorrow morning and sign a bunch of papers. Try to get to the lab by 9:00.”

“That’s it? I’m hired just on your say-so?”

“Yeah, I’m your last and only roadblock to financial survival. Personnel sent me your resumé. You were the most qualified candidate.”

He grinned. “Really? How many were competing for the job?”

She looked at him over the brim of her glass, her eyes twinkling and eyebrows dancing. “One. You. The salary isn’t great, like I said. My grant’s not very large either. I gave up two conferences to hire you—admin calls it ‘creative accounting.’ I think I can mold you. Think of me as Dr. Frankenstein and yourself as Igor. Your operative response should always be, ‘Yes, master.’”

He squirmed a bit in the seat and the vinyl complained. “Gee, thanks. Just what does your research involve?” He hadn’t been able to figure that out either from the equation or the circuit boards they’d installed.

“Experiments in time displacement,” she said with a smile. She drained a third of her beer, wiped off her upper lip, and laughed at his expression. “Yes, what the sci-fi writers call time travel. From H. G. Wells to James P. Hogan. The latter author came closer to the truth,

according to my calculations. The many worlds of quantum mechanics, better known nowadays as quantum histories.”

“I wasn’t very good at physics.”

“Oh, this is far beyond what you’d see even in a PhD program in physics. Cutting edge.” She held up her arms that were covered with nicks, scratches, and a few band-aids. “This will be your torture from now on, Igor. I’m the brains; you’re the brawn.”

“Why the secrecy?”

She winked at him. “The Pentagon classifies almost anything it finances.”

“Wow! The Pentagon. Why aren’t you swimming in dough?”

“And why aren’t you making 100k? Because the money comes from DARPA and no one besides me believes my research is going to go anywhere. By the way, you have to fill out a security form. You’ll pass without problems unless you’re moonlighting for that narcissistic asshole in Russia. And, even if you fail it eventually, you’ll have a temporary for a year, which is time enough for me to get a ton of work out of you. Most things are only classified so people can cover their asses anyway. If I’m successful, they’ll probably make my research into a black program so it can never embarrass them.” She put the now empty mug down. “Say, do you want a burger? I’m hungry. I think I forgot breakfast as well as lunch today.”

They had another beer with the burgers and Hoff drove him home. “Thank goodness we had the burgers to help absorb the alcohol.” She hiccupped. “Say, this neighborhood is a bit sketchy, Jeff. With your car in the impound lot, how will you get to the U tomorrow?”

“There’s a bus stop three blocks from here. I only have to make one change. I’ll head out early to get all the personnel business done. I promise to be on time.” He looked around and saw no one. “Lock your doors and don’t stop for anyone.”

“So gallant. Chivalry is NOT dead. Don’t worry. I have a gun in the glove compartment. Gun laws here are lax, and there’s no way I’m going to allow a bunch of thugs gang-rape me. I’ll empty the cartridge blowing their balls off!” She blew him a kiss and took off.

The two beers and food had made Langley sleepy, but when he hit the sack, sleep wouldn’t come. He lay thinking about Gail Hoff’s curves. *Geez, she looks good in a bikini! How old is she?*

He got up, drank some water, knowing he’d finished the instant coffee, and sat down at his old laptop, an old computer an aunt had bought for him when he graduated from high school. He went to the university website and did what he should have done before: research his new employer. Hoff had two PhD’s, one in EE and the other in physics. She had received them when she was twenty-one. She was an assistant professor on tenure-track. *I might be older than she is!*

Her bio didn’t have a pic—Gail Hoff maybe didn’t want people to know she was a woman—but the mental image of her was enough to continue to make him toss and turn and then have some erotic dreams. They weren’t strong enough to seek the average pubescent teen’s outlet, so he would toss and turn some more until he fell asleep. He awoke the next morning exhausted.

The robot-like people in HR wasted almost an hour of his time. At least the forms were online. If there were mistakes, he would only have himself to blame. He was especially careful with the security questionnaire. He’d used pot for the first and only time in Middle School,

hadn't liked the strange feeling, and stuck with sampling his father's liquor supply. So he lied about that and wondered why they didn't ask if he was an alcoholic. *Was Hoff?* She threw down beers like she was a Bavarian Brunnhilde.

Had he ever been arrested? That was another time-sensitive question. Did stealing a copy of *Penthouse* in seventh grade count? He decided the Pentagon would probably approve of that, thinking that masturbation was a sign that he was just an All-American guy and therefore not a security risk. He hadn't heard about the organizations they asked about, except the Communist Party. Was Joe McCarthy or Ronald Reagan's ghost going to read the form?

He walked out of HR with a headache like when he took the SATs. Another reason not to go to graduate school was avoiding the GRE. He was tired of standardized tests. It was unfair: now kids could opt out of them because parents thought the tests harmed their fragile psyches, a thinly veiled way of hiding their laziness to learn. *Geez, I'm sounding like my father!*

During the walk to the far corner of campus, he continued deep in thought, much of it negative and depressing. He knew work with Gail Hoff would be challenging. He wasn't too worried about the technical end of it, though. In spite of his bad grades, he thought he had exactly the skills she needed. He was more worried about the social interplay. He found her attractive if a bit weird, was interested in getting to know her better, and would find it hard to focus. *Why can't Professor Hoff be some old ogre with a beard?*

At her lab, he took his seat at a workbench and began to organize the mess. He was messy too, but he needed it to be his mess, not hers.

"Do you have a tutorial about your research I can read in my spare time?" he said to her when she popped out of the capsule in her bikini.

"I have the proposal I made to the Pentagon. You have to dumb things down for them, so it's a good start—pop science level with zero equations. They just want the bottom line about how the research fits into their bottom line. And how much they're wasting. They'll throw money at almost anything, you know. I once saw a preprint about human consciousness and quantum mechanics financed by them. God knows what they wanted that for. I thought only the CIA had a psi-corps."

"That will be fine to start, I guess. Maybe you can give me an elevator pitch."

"A quick summary? Sure. I'm designing a capsule that will pick a particular ten-dimensional quantum history—actually a tensor bundle of them—and move backwards and forwards in time. You can think of it as a ten-dimensional rotation. Or Dr. Who's red telephone booth for time travel."

"Ten? Aren't there just three?"

"And time makes four, but ordinary space-time is just a manifold in a ten-dimensional space. I can see your eyes glazing over. It only gets more complicated. Read the Pentagon proposal tonight and we'll talk more tomorrow." She unrolled a large sheet of butcher's paper. "This will make more sense to you. I want to wire all this in an orderly fashion so that we'll have remote control of the capsule."

"If the capsule goes back in time, won't that break the connection?"

"No, silly boy. The capsule doesn't go back in time. A connection is made to a copy. There's probably a large number of quantum histories where my capsules are displaced all along the time continuum. Mind boggling, right? But it's all explained in my mathematics."

"Why are you doing this, professor?"

"Because I can? Please. You make me feel old. Call me Gail. Can you make sense out of my diagrams?"

"I'll spruce up the layout a bit as you asked, but yeah, it makes sense. Do you have MATLAB's Instrument Control Toolbox?"

"We'll get it if you need it and I don't have it. I assume that's some kind of computer software for connecting up all sorts of goodies. Will it save us time?"

"You've got it. I'll check your workstation. I might have to write a few ancillary C++ routines."

"Go for it. I'm back into my telephone booth. We'll make it a race to see who finishes first."

After four, they headed for the campus pub again.

"I've told you about myself," Langley said, stealing a fry. "What's your story?"

"Nerdy, skinny, pimply, and sickly kid who liked science and math a lot. Liked showing up all the STEM guys too, especially those who ogled the cheerleaders. Now the problem is that most men are attracted to me for all the wrong reasons and run the other way when they find out I'm a lot smarter than they are. Seems like they tolerate that in dogs but not in women, although we have a president who equated the two in his campaign."

"My mom had those experiences, but she still found her soulmate. My father's pretty smart too, even though he has a broom handle up his butt. He seemed always to put me down."

"Was he a pilot?"

"Test pilot, then desk jockey. Mom's death hit him hard. He takes it out on me, I think."

"Maybe you just need to talk to him more. Daddy was a plumber and Mommy a housewife. They were always surprised they had spawned a genius, but I love them. I don't like to be called that, by the way, so don't."

"Are they still alive?"

"Sure. They live in Philly. I should call them more, but I forget."

Langley smiled. "Like you forget to eat? What do you do for exercise?"

"I get up at 5:30, down an energy drink, jog five miles, and then come home and eat like a pig, if I remember to do so. Sometimes while I'm jogging, I get an idea, though. Knocks the hunger right out of me. What about you?"

"Gym, when I can afford it. I might be able to now. Our healthcare plan helps out with membership."

"It does? I didn't know that. Maybe I can meet a dreamy guy in a gym somewhere." She shook her head. "Nah. I don't have time for that crap. Guys always think that gals want to be pursued for a while—fancy dinners, concerts, day trips, whatever. They're pimps and johns all in one. Who has time for that crap?"

"I don't have that problem."

"You're not gay, are you?"

"No. I just can't afford fancy dinners and the like. Look at me. You're buying burgers and beers for me until I get my first paycheck."

"You can't work if you're starving, big boy. That's my agenda: Turn you into my slave. Igor *El Segundo*." She finished her burger in three bites. "We should be ready for a test by the end of the month. If it's successful, you can pay for the beers and burgers with that first paycheck. Or maybe champagne instead of beers."

The month passed quickly.

“What’s in the packages?” said Langley, looking up from his workbench. It was unusual for him to be earlier than his boss.

“I bought champagne, just in case. Today’s the big day. It goes into my old dorm fridge.” She sat the first package down on another bench and unwrapped the second. “My batting trophy. Dad gave it to me when I hit one out of the park by accident in a slow-pitch game. I was a disappointment to him. I sucked at baseball, but he wanted to encourage me. I was more into baseball science.”

“Baseball is a science? I thought it was a game.”

“It has interesting physics, and you can look at stats and apply probabilities to figure out what batters can or should do. I used to do that as a kid until equations became more interesting.” She waved the inexpensive statue. “The odds for that homer were pretty low, a lot lower than the Cubs winning the series, which were pretty high actually. But, just for example, did you know fastball pitchers have a greater probability of ruining their arms before thirty than a knuckleballer.”

“Makes sense. They throw harder.”

“They throw hard, even the curve balls, and those really maximize the torque. A knuckleballer can go until he’s an old man. I think Tim Wakefield retired somewhere in his forties. Today’s fastballers are lucky to last beyond twenty-five before they need at least Tommy Johns. That’s why teams are going to a larger pitching rotation and having a slew of pitchers in the minors ready to bring up.”

“So the trophy was segue to a lecture about the physics of baseball?”

“Heavens no. There are plenty of good books on that subject. It’s just a worthless statue we can use to test the time displacement.”

“No fond memories of dear old daddy associated with it?”

“He always wanted a boy. I could play catch with him. I have better memories of that than the damn trophy, because I couldn’t live up to it. It’s going to sit right on that old dentist’s chair when we do the test.”

He smiled. “I’m about ready. I have two more digital readouts to connect. What if it doesn’t work?”

She gestured to the whiteboard filled with equations. “I’ll have to find the error.”

“Expecting just one?”

“That’s a low blow.” She walked to the capsule, reached inside and put the trophy on the seat, and shut the door. “There are some things that still aren’t clear to me. We might want to stand back in case the capsule explodes.”

“You never said that before.”

“It occurred to me last night when I was taking a bubble bath.”

“I’d like to have seen that.” She frowned. That created wrinkles on her forehead but accentuated her dimples. “You getting an epiphany, I mean.”

She shrugged. “I like a bit of flirting now and then, but we don’t have time for it now.”

“What could cause the explosion?”

“More an implosion, I guess. Implosion here, explosion there—maybe even a sonic boom. Who knows? The air might be displaced with the trophy.”

“What about the seat? Everything else inside the capsule?”

“There’s a focusing mechanism for the displacement field. I hope to adjust it to the size of the trophy.”

“A human sitting on that chair can’t be displaced then?”

“If I don’t have the field focused properly, maybe just part of our test subject would go.”

“That would be inconvenient. Better to try with the trophy first.”

“Precisely.”

They thought the first test was a success. The trophy disappeared. Hoff broke out the champagne, cracking a skylight window when she popped the cork. She and Langley were still sipping it and going over the experimental data when he jumped back from his bench. A shimmering in the air coalesced into the trophy.

“Did someone in the past send it back?” he said after calling her over.

She picked up the trophy and looked at it from all angles. “That’s not possible. You know I didn’t provide for an automatic return. This shouldn’t be here. It should forever be two weeks, more or less, in the past.”

“Unless it went into the future,” he said. “And less than an hour has passed.”

She thought a moment and then grabbed his cheeks and kissed him on the lips. He only tasted more cheap champagne, not quite the first kiss he had dreamed about.

“You’re a genius too!” She dashed to the whiteboard and circled a yellow minus sign with a purple-colored pen. “An error in sign caused a misstep in time.”

“I know you tried to make a rhyme, but couldn’t there be more than one incorrect sign?”

“Aha! You’ve read the story about the famous physicist Dirac who made exactly that comment when another physicist ended up with an answer differing in sign from the one in a preprint he’d handed out. I have to check it all, of course, including all the calculations in my notebooks too. But my gut tells me we found the source of the problem.”

“No, I didn’t read that story about Dirac. And considering your gut probably only had champagne for breakfast, I’m not sure I’d believe what it tells you.”

She danced around the room. “We can’t go back in time. It looped! We can only go forward. That has to be it.”

“OK, suppose the trophy went into the future. Doesn’t your conjecture imply it can’t be sent back to the past?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll bet that’s in the equations. All those time travel stories are wrong. You’ll never be the time traveler’s husband.” He knew he looked like a deer in headlights. “That’s just rhetoric, Jeff. I’m making mock of a book, about as far from hard sci-fi as you can find.”

“Are you a sci-fi fan?”

“If you mean *Star Wars*, which is really fantasy, or *Star Trek*, which is completely unscientific, the answer is no. Good sci-fi is a reasonable extrapolation of current science and technology, always dangerous but a lot of fun. It motivated me to become a STEM student.”

“So, what’s the next step? If things can only move forward in time, and they can’t be sent back, where does that leave us?”

“Maybe with a happy Pentagon. They’ll be able to see how a strategy plays out. Hmm. That’s not such a good idea, is it? Is the future unchangeable too? It wouldn’t do for people to sit around moping because they already know failure is coming their way. Or spending a whole bunch of money because they can see they’ll win the lottery. We’re talking quantum histories,

here, Igor, complex probabilities describing how God plays dice.” She picked up her backpack. “*Ciao*. I’m going home to think about this.” At the door, she spun around. “On second thought, come with me. I’ll bounce ideas off you.”

Langley was hesitant. *Will the first time she invites me up to her apartment be as disappointing as that first kiss?* He picked up his backpack and followed her, smiling. On second thought, he decided that first kiss had been worth it.

Hoff’s apartment was in a better part of town than Langley’s own, but more space meant there was more junk spread around. She brushed piles of preprints off one of the kitchen counter stools.

“Sit. I’ll get beers.” She went to the fridge and stooped to get the drinks. She froze.

“Are you all right?”

He went to her and tapped her on the back. She stood and turned to face him.

“There’s no problem. I already described the answer. We just have to get back into the context of the Many Worlds Theory of Quantum Mechanics.” She started pacing like she was in a trance. “The displacement selects a vector bundle of quantum histories connecting time A to time B and propagates along it. That doesn’t mean that events at B are predetermined. In fact, they can’t be, or we wouldn’t have quantum mechanics, period. Whatever we ‘see’ isn’t what necessarily will happen when we move from A to B. It will more likely be at least a little different every time we do it, maybe lots different.”

“The beers, Gail?”

“Oh, yeah.” She handed one to him but stared at the top of her bottle. “Not twist top. I’ll get a church key.”

Sitting next to her at the kitchen counter seemed the most natural thing in the world to him. She began to massage his neck.

“I’ve decided you’re my inspiration: Schumann’s Clara Wieck, Keats’s Erato, Fred Flintstone’s Wilma...” She trailed off and withdrew her hand. “I guess I’m as bad an employer as I am a slow-pitch batter. So sorry. You won’t sue me for sexual harassment, will you?”

“I would never call it harassment,” he said with a smile.

That’s when she showed him the sport she was good at.

Later, Langley turned over in bed, saw Hoff naked in the moonlight filling a whiteboard with equations, and sighed. *Being a time traveler’s husband is probably easier than being a time physicist’s husband.* He turned back over and went to sleep.

“I actually have a strategy to cook breakfast,” Hoff said, ripping the sheets and blankets off Langley and jumping on him to straddle his body. “Do you know what that means?”

“I have no idea.”

She pounded his furry chest. “It means you’ve domesticated me, Igor. Tamed me. I’m yours.” She jumped down. “A bacon and egg scramble, and then I’ll tell you my ideas.”

His cooking was worse, but not by much. The bacon was undercooked—he immediately thought of *Trichinella spiralis*—and there was too much pepper. He couldn’t tell about the eggs. The coffee and toast were good, though.

She jumped off her stool and ran to a recliner. “Come, sit, my master, while I wheel in my whiteboard to enlighten you on the mysteries of the quantum world.”

“Put on something before you do, please.”

Her lip trembled as she began to pout. “You don’t like my bawdy body?”

“It will be distracting if you’re trying to explain time displacement. Don’t you have a bathrobe?”

“You’re wearing it. I guess the space for the tits makes room for your shoulders.”

Langley saw the pink robe for the first time. The shoulders still felt tight, it didn’t cover his chest, and it was short, barely covering his privates. “OK. Proves my point. You’re distracting me.”

“I have some flannel pajamas. I’ll put them on. They’re a bit floppy, so you won’t see any curves at all.”

He plopped into the recliner and wondered if she was hyperactive as she went back to the bedroom. *She can solve the nation’s energy problems all by herself!* He was exhausted, and she was prancing around like a sprite in the woods.

She soon returned, wheeling the whiteboard, but with only pajama tops.

“I couldn’t find the bottoms. Just don’t look at my ass.” He was looking elsewhere. She paused in front of the whiteboard and pointed at an equation with her marker. “The culprit is here. I already knocked him for a loop. That’s a pun, by the way. Time loop. Get it? You were absolutely right. We tried to send the trophy back, but it looped and went forward instead. You can’t go back in time! That’s a no-no. *Verboten*. Taboo.” She stamped her foot. “But this fix shows that we can look forward—not physically, but with EM radiation, at least if we can have the slightly nonlinear version I need in ten dimensions to make things all come together. You could do that several times at once and get slightly different results. By doing a whole bunch all at once—my kingdom for a quantum computer—we can map out the probability that certain events will happen.”

“Isn’t that like a Monte Carlo simulation?”

“That’s classical probability, Jeff, not quantum mechanical. Of course, we’d need infinite energy to ‘view’ the infinite number of histories, in addition to the quantum computer. With finite power, we’ll only be able to ‘see’ a greatly reduced subset, so we can only deal with likelihoods.” She had used one index finger and the marker to put quotes around ‘view’ and ‘see.’ “Bottom line: we can junk that capsule and the old dentist’s chair. We just need a widescreen TV with lots of pixels.”

“And a lot of software to turn what you were describing into video output.”

“No matter. I’m ready to write progress report *numero uno* for the damn Pentagon. I’ll make it as abstract as possible, of course.”

“Why’s that?”

“Heavens! You wouldn’t want them to understand it, would you? They were thinking I was inventing a time machine!”

Nth Contact

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[Note from Steve: In the speculative fiction realm, we have subgenres like hard sci-fi, militaristic sci-fi, space opera, fantasy, horror, and so forth. *Star Trek* episodes and movies can be considered everything except the first (reasonable scientific extrapolation is all too often lacking). *Star Wars* movies are more the space opera and fantasy. But the old stories that we now call space opera were a lot of fun. Consider this another bow to space opera with a wee bit of militaristic sci-fi and tongue-in-cheek. As they say, knowing the past can prevent us from committing errors in the present...]

Captain Rick Hastings watched the screen. The *Star Queen* had just popped out of hyperspace and entered the unexplored solar system.

“AI, what am I seeing?” Something that sounded like a chaotic series of grunts, whistles, and sounds passing through several octaves filled the ship’s control room. “Standard, dimwit, not Draconian.”

“My apologies. I was conversing with Nigel. My sensors tell me there are several large starships in orbit around the fourth planet. More details will become available as we approach.”

“That’s not good,” said Nigel, his XO. Like many Draconians, the large humanoid had adopted a name that could be pronounced by Humans. The AI had no problem with his real name. “The last survey of this solar system showed it wasn’t inhabited. Should we write it off?”

“Because some ETs decided to steal our real estate?” He shook his mop of black hair, wiggled his eyebrows, and thought a few seconds. Compared to his XO, the captain wasn’t tall and had legs shorter than his torso. He looked stumpy in a uniform, a characteristic of many from his home planet where genetics had taken over adaption to a high-g environment. “Let’s at least take a look.”

“They’re coming to meet us,” said the AI, flashing up images of three ships speeding towards them.

“They don’t look friendly,” said the XO. “We should throttle back or take evasive maneuvers. Those look like missile-launching ports.”

“We can’t go FTL this close to the star,” said the *Star Queen*’s navigator.

“Take a course perpendicular to the planetary orbital planes,” Hastings told the AI.

“That’s an indeterminate command,” said the AI. “There are two possible—”

“Either way works! Just do it. Go FTL ASAP!”

“They launched missiles at us just before we went FTL,” the AI announced twenty seconds later.

“I’m getting my bearings,” said the navigator. Hastings waited. “Very clever, AI. We’ll pop up near base.”

“Forget about admiring a stupid machine. Just get us back to HQ. I’m going to my stateroom. I need some time to write up the report about this new contact.”

“Be sure and explain why you decided to confront the ETs who had taken possession of the solar system,” said the XO.

“Go to hell!” Hastings stomped out of the control room. He’d said it in Draconian, one of the few phrases he knew.

“I’ve read your report.” Admiral Bonaventura studied his captain. “Did your XO forget to sign off on it?”

“My XO is a Draconian asshole. I’ll have his hide if he mentioned anything to you.”

Bonaventura frowned. “Am I a Draconian asshole too?”

Hastings retreated. “That remains to be proven. The *Star Queen* is a survey ship. I was doing a survey. Nothing says I can’t see who the trespassers are.”

“Your only weapons are found in your security detail’s small arms cabinets. What were you thinking? Whoever establishes the first colony claims the real estate.”

“Don’t you want to know what they were doing there? Colony ships aren’t battle cruisers.”

Bonaventura shrugged. “The damage is done. You’re lucky you didn’t lose your ship and crew. How would you proceed from here?”

Hastings eyebrows rose as his brow creased. “You really want my opinion?”

“Yes, I do, even though your attitude has always been confrontational since your Academy days.”

“Probably why I’m still just a captain.” Hastings smiled. “Not that I’d want your job. Sir.”

Bonaventura sighed. “Just give me your opinion, Hastings.”

“My knee-jerk reaction would be to send a fleet in and blow them to kingdom come. How dare they fire on a defenseless survey ship!?”

“That’s not advisable until we know more about them. Come up with a plan but follow me.” A door in the wall of Bonaventura’s office hissed open. Hastings followed the admiral into a conference room. Seated around an immense table were several Survey Service VIPs. “Have a seat, Captain Hastings.”

He saw two chairs available at opposite ends of the table. He started for the nearest.

“Not that one,” said the admiral. “It’s mine. Take the one at the other end. We’ll both be on hot seats for this meeting.”

He waited until Hastings took his seat. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, you have read Captain Hastings’s report. What say you?”

“He’s lucky he and his crew are still alive,” said one VIP.

“I already told him that,” said the admiral. “We’re trying to come up with a plan. Yes, captain?”

Hastings stopped waving his hand. “I propose three steps. You can debate it, but one, we should go back with a small fleet as backup, but try to make peaceful contact. Two, while the *Star Queen* is approaching with a white flag, our battle cruisers can probe the planet with their super-sensors and find out what the hell these ETs are protecting. Three, if they continue to be nasty, we then blow them to hell.”

“How do you propose to make a peaceful contact when they’ll probably recognize your ship as one they already consider bellicose?” said one of the Draconian VIPs. “And what does ‘white flag’ mean?”

“Same question,” said Hastings. “If our AI is worth his salt, he can squirt a stream of language lessons to the enemy ships that will teach them Standard fast and let them know we’ve come in peace.”

“How long will that take?” said another VIP.

“Maybe forever if their AIs are more stupid than ours.”

“I like one and two. Three is ill-advised. Our cruisers will only be there for self-protection. Understood? There will be no unilateral attack on ETs. We don’t even know what they look like.”

“Undoubtedly ugly SOBs who shoot first and ask questions later,” said Hastings.

“Wasn’t your approach speed fast enough to be considered threatening?” said the Draconian VIP.

“We didn’t know they were there. I always go in hot when it’s a routine revisit. Saves time. The orbital and onsite surveys take forever. There’s a lot of data to collect for the future colonists.”

The Draconian VIP checked his tablet again. “This was a routine third visit. I don’t see the need for a speedy survey. No one has signed up to colonize yet.”

“Are you telling me how to do my job?” said Hastings.

“He has done your job, captain,” said the admiral. “Where are your manners?”

Hastings shrugged. “Shall I leave while you debate my proposal?”

“Or outline a new one,” said the Draconian VIP.

The XO was sitting in the reception area outside the admiral’s office when Hastings left the conference room.

“Are you here to berate me or give me moral support?” said Hastings.

“Neither. Some of us want to invite you to have drinks in the Officer’s Lounge. You can diminish some of your stress, sir.”

“I sent you the report. Why didn’t you initial it?”

“I was busy going over the data the AI collected. Amazing how they can multitask. Those unfriendly guys are protecting mining operations, according to the AI. Probably rare earths. There’s a small mountain range near the equator that might be loaded because they’re excavating in multiple spots.”

“Anything we can use?”

“I doubt it. We have several planets that provide rare earths. This one’s too far away to be practical even if it were one big ball of mineral deposits.”

“That observation probably means the fellows come from nearby. Less than fifty light-years, I’d say.”

Nigel nodded. “What did the admiral’s Council say?”

“They slapped me around a bit. We probably went in too hot, but who knew they were there? They’re debating a plan I came up with.”

“I’m surprised they even listened to you.”

“I think the admiral values my skills.” Hastings studied Nigel. “What about you?”

Nigel shrugged his large shoulders, a gesture he’d learned from Humans. “We’re a team. We did what we had to do, given the circumstances.”

“How easy do you think it will be for the AI to adapt the language program we use to teach Standard to Draconians?”

“Given that it’s basically a fast squirt of subliminal audio and visual data, there’ll be no problem, but you’re assuming a lot about the ETs’ physiology and associative memory processes. We know nothing about them.”

“I’m not going to assume anything, but I’ll be David in the lions’ den if they approve my plan, at least the first part.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that I want the *Star Queen* to get close enough so I can jet over to one of their ships in a spacesuit.”

“That’s suicidal! Think of your crew.”

“The *Queen* will have battle cruisers backing it up. I’m counting on the ETs to be like us.”

“How so? They might be like that hive we’ve put into quarantine. Nothing in common with bipeds.”

“I’m willing to bet the hive queen is curious too. That’s the common denominator for all intelligent beings.”

“I’m intercepting some puzzling transmissions from one ship to the other two,” said the AI.

The *Star Queen* had repeated its entry into the solar system, this time at a crawl. That didn’t help Hastings’s impatience. He felt like the canary in the coal mine. He smiled at that thought. Earth history wasn’t well taught in schools because Earth had become a backward agrarian planet still trying to recover from the Human’s destruction of their home world’s environment. It was irrelevant to most people in other planetary systems near Earth. He knew most people just considered coal as a form of carbon that had no relation to power production. He wondered if the AI even had the historical references in its vast data banks.

“Don’t tell me they’re talking in Standard,” said Hastings.

“It’s old English. That’s the audio, of course. The visual is in an old digital video format.”

Maybe he does know about coal? “Put it on my screen.” He laughed as a fat Human had an accident. *Why’s that funny?* “Is this some kind of old, sadistic entertainment?”

“Checking data banks.” The AI had the answer in seconds. “It is a movie from 1939 A.D. called *A Chump at Oxford*. We don’t have a copy. Sorry. Shall I record their transmission?”

“Where in the hell did they get that?”

“More importantly,” said Nigel, “do they understand it? Teaching them Standard starting from old English might be a lot easier than the current plan.”

“Maybe they just like the physical humor,” said the navigator. “The fat guy is funny.”

“Can we determine when this was transmitted?” said Hastings.

“From the digital video format, I calculate an approximate date of 2000 A.D.,” said the AI.

“Project that date forward and see if it’s consistent with any nearby star system’s distance from Earth,” said Hastings to the AI.

“This and several nearby systems are consistent with the time it would take a radio transmission to arrive at receivers in the system if the transmission occurred near that date.”

“No obvious dubbing or captions?” said Hastings.

“Please explain dubbing and captions.” Hastings did so. “No. Either they understand old English or our navigator’s hypothesis is correct.”

“Could be both,” said Nigel. “Why is this important?”

“We need to modify that language lesson ASAP. An introduction in old English followed with one in Standard, and then old English and Standard intermixed. We might be doing them a favor too, if they are fans of old Earth movies.”

Nigel was amused. “We’d be allowing them to enjoy their favorite entertainment. That’s clever.”

The *Star Queen* had settled into almost the same orbit as the three ET ships. After squirting over the language lesson, Hastings had suited up. Waiting for the airlock to open, he wondered if they’d given the ETs enough time to react to the language lesson. So far their slow crawl into orbit hadn’t been greeted badly.

The suit seemed to be hot and the air bad, but he knew it was just nerves. There was a chance that in mid-approach he would be sliced in two by a laser beam or some other weapon. He calmed himself by thinking that it was a fast way to go, better than dying of old age somewhere. He wanted the full glass, though, not the half-full one.

The *Queen*’s airlock shuttered open. He checked his monitors.

“Here goes nothing, guys. Did you know I hate spacewalks?”

“Your suit environment is optimal,” said the AI.

It gave him the necessary parameters that would allow him to jet over and the elapsed time needed before he should start braking. He came to a halt a half meter from the ET ship’s skin.

“How the hell do I get into this bucket of bolts?” he said. As if to answer his question, a large airlock opened along the hull three meters away. “OK, I’m going in. We might lose contact. If I don’t buzz you in a half hour, or the AI senses missile lock-on, run like hell.”

He entered the silent interior of the strange ship.

After the outside airlock closed, the inner one opened. He entered a dim corridor with a high ceiling. There was a sign on the interior wall of the corridor. It read in old English, “This Way!” Underneath the words was an arrow. He was glad he had taken a crash refresher course in that ancient language. His history hobby had helped to make the crash softer.

He came to a dead end. Thinking this was a bit of ET humor, he had just about turned to go back when a recessed door panel opened. He looked into a large room filled with swirling fog.

“Ya kin quit da helmet,” said a large pale green ET sitting in a huge chair. He was much taller than Hastings’s XO. The high ceiling had an explanation. Large, dark, and unexpressive eyes looked over him. “Humid fer ya but OK.”

How do you greet someone who tried to kill you with an atomic missile? Hastings bowed.

“I come in peace.”

“Known. Me dink yer name be Moe.” The guffaw reverberated in the large room.

Hastings thought a moment. *Oliver and Hardy? Moe?* He smiled. “No, I’m Shemp.”

A Helluva Fix

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[Note from Steve: This tale was inspired by two books I've read—*The Stolen Child* by Lisa Care and *Court of Twilight* by Mareth Griffith—but I've long held that it's unfair that leprechauns can't be female. It's a mix of sci-fi and fantasy with a twist of Irish humor.]

Casper Pepperell decided to turn off the AC because he was afraid his old car would overheat in the traffic jam on the 405. He lowered the windows to keep from baking, but he kept on singing Diamond's "Beautiful Noise" right along with the old singer. Even the traffic chopper flying overhead couldn't drown out the song.

He heard another voice join in. He glanced at the huge pickup on the driver's side. Its giant driver was a bald guy with an upper arm as big as Casper's thigh; an angry red swastika was tattooed on his shoulder. He gave Casper the finger and scowled.

Casper glanced the other way. Something lime-green was at the wheel of a red Lexus sedan. The something had a strong, gravelly contralto voice; "she" smiled and then winked at him.

He blinked. The something morphed into a hot redhead. *Maybe the heat*, he thought.

The song finished. The woman held up a piece of cardboard. "Call me!" and a telephone number was written on it. *What the hell?* He wrote the number in the thick layer of dust on his dash.

He soon lost track of the red Lexus and its enchanting driver. A tough commuting hour later, he pulled into the carport corresponding to his small apartment, walked the short distance to his front door with a wave at his retired neighbors who looked like cooked lobsters in their pool chairs, and used his two keys, one for each deadbolt, and punched the code into the keypad (he was on the ground floor).

When he entered, he tripped over Oscar. The tomcat had been waiting for his food, of course. He hissed at Casper as if to say, "You're late!" He always demanded his food before Casper could even think about his own dinner. He opened a can of cat food to calm his roommate down, checked to make sure all the piranhas were still in the tank (would Oscar dare molest them?), and entered the bathroom to scrub up as if he were preparing for surgery. The cuckoo clock on the wall over the toilet did its hourly thing; it announced eight p.m.

Oscar had gobbled up his meal by the time Casper returned to his galley kitchen. The cat jumped up on a stool and studied him to see if he was going to prepare something interesting, but Casper decided he'd just have some cold cereal. He sniffed the milk before pouring, though, because he couldn't remember when he'd opened it. Expiration dates meant nothing after the carton was opened. He wasn't sure they meant anything before that either if the crates of milk were left on the supermarket's delivery dock in the hot sun.

He sat in his recliner and watched a stupid TV sitcom while he ate. By the time the corn flakes got soggy and were ready for the disposal, he remembered the redhead. He reached for his cellphone, an old flip phone, but he couldn't remember the complete number. He fed his piranhas some minced mouse and went out with a pad and pencil to look at the dash of his car. He was copying the number down when someone tapped him on his shoulder. He tried to stand but hit his head on the old car's low roof line.

“Ouch!” said a contralto voice.

Casper extricated himself and stared at the redhead. He pointed to the pad. “I was just going to call you.”

“I know. Why did you wait? If I were you, I would have called me as soon as you got home. Even from the car, if you have a cellphone, that is. I’m your dream girl, am I not?”

“I don’t use a cellphone while driving.”

“You were stuck in a traffic jam.”

“How did you find me? And why are you here?”

“I have my ways. And you’re an interesting specimen.”

“Specimen?”

“As a human being, that is. I’m your neighborhood sci-fi and fantasy muse.”

“I don’t read sci-fi and fantasy. I don’t read much of anything. I’m just a boring guy with a boring job and boring life.”

“I don’t know. I find piranhas interesting. Pure eating machines, but they don’t kill their own kind like humans.”

“How do you know I have piranhas?”

“Oscar told me. And where are your manners, Casper? Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“You mean, to my apartment?”

“Where else? We need to have a little talk.”

Casper removed two piles of the magazine *Piranhas Today* from his couch and placed them on the kitchen counter. “Please sit down.”

The woman plopped down on the sofa, taking a lotus position. He wondered how old she was. *Maybe she does yoga?*

“A real crappy place you have here, Casper.”

“More unclean than crappy,” he said. “I don’t have a housekeeper.”

“Yes, your boring job and your boring commute takes all your time.”

Oscar waddled in front of her, sat on his haunches, and then hissed and spat.

“Behave yourself,” he said to Oscar. “He’s not used to company,” he said to the woman.

She hissed and spat back at the cat, so Oscar fled to the bedroom.

“I love cats,” she said. “They’re so much like humans. Cat owners are their slaves, and they don’t even know it.”

“He’s usually a purr-baby.”

“You need a human sleeping companion.”

“Excuse me? Who told you that I sleep with my cat?”

“He did, of course. He’s very jealous of me, I think. We’ll have to give him a big hug tonight.”

“Excuse me? I hardly know you.”

“Then why were you going to call me?” She winked at him.

He thought a moment. “You can’t really talk to him, can you?”

“It’s not exactly talking, but you’d be surprised what leprechauns can do.”

“Are you saying you’re a leprechaun? You’re crazy. They’re male.”

“The myth that leprechauns are always male is...well, a myth.” She laughed. “It’s a misogynist world, and the Irish have always been misogynists.”

"Oscar Wilde was gay."

"I won't touch that one. Besides, Mr. Wilde's parents were British. He was a classicist at Oxford. We often discussed the classics."

"I thought he just wrote plays." *We often discussed? What's that mean?* "Gay men can't be misogynists, right?"

"Hell if I know. I never asked Oscar. Are you telling me you're gay?"

"I guess I'm basically neuter. I have trouble with people in general."

"That's obvious if you sleep with your cat. An interspecies relationship doesn't have much future."

"Say, would you like a drink?"

"Do you have Irish whiskey or ale?"

"I might have the dregs of a bottle of Jameson. Will that work?"

"Neat, please."

"You never told me your name," Casper said, clinking the woman's glass. "Cheers."

"*Sláinte mhaith*," she said back.

They each took a sip and he returned to his chair. "Do leprechauns have names?"

"Most of the time." She took another sip and smiled. There was a brief flash of green as she morphed into something, but then the human form was back. "Nice. Twelve-year-old Jameson. I prefer it aged a bit more, but that's hard to get in your country."

Casper nodded. "You still didn't tell me your name."

"It's Granuaile," she said.

"What kind of name is that?" he said.

"Irish, of course."

"It's very strange." He sounded it out carefully: graw-nya-wail.

"It's a good name. It was good enough for James Joyce. And like his Granuaile, I'm a captain. A starship captain."

"What? Were leprechauns ETs?"

"Are. Present tense. We first landed in Ireland twenty-five centuries ago, liked the place, and stayed a while. You didn't believe all that crazy Irish folklore, did you?"

"About the same as believing you're an ET starship captain."

Granuaile took another sip of her Irish whiskey. "I suppose. But down to business." She smiled at him and cocked her head to the side. "I'm thinking that I don't have to sleep with you to know you're the right human for the job. Anyone who raises piranhas must be good, courageous stock."

"Whoa! I'm anything but courageous. I'm really just a—" There was a whoosh! and Casper found himself covered in armor. "—wus." He looked around and found he was in a strange space like a large but bare jail cell, but the ceiling dripped a bit. He checked out the armor. It was made from some kind of plastic material. *Not going to rust.*

"You're in my ship," said Granuaile over some kind of intercom. "Let me just get us on our way, and then I'll be right with you."

Casper leaned against one wall and sighed. *This isn't one of my better days.* Of course, he never had had any particularly good ones.

After a duration Casper couldn't estimate well because his watch had disappeared, part of the wall shimmered and something stepped through. By the umbrella, homburg, and spats, he figured it was Granuaile. She grabbed his sword. "Kneel, Casper." He didn't have any choice. The urge to kneel overwhelmed his mind. "I dub thee Sir Casper Pepperell, Queen Meghan's new knight."

He realized she was speaking Gaelic and was amazed that he understood. He found his tongue. "Queen Meghan?"

"Queen, Royal Protector of the Orion Worlds, Wizard of Galway, etcetera, etcetera. She outsources the dubbing, of course. That's where American businesses got the idea to outsource to Ireland. Now stand." He came to his feet. She crooked a finger. "Follow me."

"Was that room an airlock?" he said as they wound their way through corridors.

"Heavens no! It's a decontamination cell. We can't have you infecting the whole ship, can we?" They entered a room full of equipment and big screen HD TVs. "They're not TVs, Sir Casper. They're monitors. When we reenter normal space, you'll see stars as they were meant to be seen. Not with all your human pollution in the way. That should happen just about now." She snapped her fingers. Thousands of stars filled a huge spherical region of stars. "Your scientists call it a globular cluster."

"And what am I supposed to do to merit my status as a knight?"

"Why, follow the rainbow to the dragon's lair, slay it, and recover the pot of gold, of course. Metaphorically speaking. The pot of gold is really a talisman, and the dragon stole it. The Queen's living essence depends on that pot of gold. She's fading fast."

"Why me? I'm not a professional dragon slayer. I'm an accountant. And aren't you mixing up your legends? Dragons were part of English folklore."

"The dragon is really a rival queen. A hive queen, to be precise. A non-bipedal and evil lifeform, not that I'm prejudiced. She might be English, who knows? She's certainly not Irish. Whiskey would probably poison her."

"Again, how do I go about slaying her?"

"The seers don't say. Or won't. Maybe they don't know. They just say that a schmuck does it. You're a professional schmuck, as well as a knight."

"Thanks for the compliment." He whipped out the sword. "Maybe I have to use this?"

"Probably not. It's just ceremonial. You'll probably need atomic weapons. We're not sure those would even kill her, though, unless you get close enough."

"Wouldn't they kill me too?"

"Collateral damage. We invented that phrase for your C.I.A."

Casper watched the shuttle leave and then stared at the vehicle. Granuaile had explained most of its controls. It was weaponized, the major weapon being a rocket-propelled grenade where the grenades were small nukes. There were other weapons too, but he didn't pay much attention after learning about the nuclear grenades. He doubted American tanks had such weapons, but he wasn't sure. He never knew what the Pentagon and C.I.A. were doing nowadays. There was also a homing device that had tagged the dragon queen.

She wasn't the only one in her nest. As he approached the cave with his tank, her consorts spewed forth. They didn't look much like dragons. They couldn't breathe fire and they couldn't fly. They all had six legs and two arms. They were about the size of a St. Bernard, the lower part from the thin waist down horizontal and resting on the legs while the upper torso containing the arms and head with its six eyes was vertical. They were carrying nasty looking weapons. Thousands headed toward him, brandishing their weaponry.

He didn't think the nuclear grenades were appropriate because of their numbers and his exposure, so he used the flame thrower until it ran out of flame. The odor of burned chicken filled the air; his eyes watered from the smoke. Still they came.

He searched the remainder of his weapon menu. *DDT? Hot oatmeal? Tar and feathers? Poisonous darts?* There were more. He couldn't quite remember what they all were or what they'd do, so he pressed all the buttons save the grenade launcher. That gave the desired result. The tsunami of nightmarish creatures parted, and he played Moses moving along the cleared channel of red bodies and heading for the cave.

What's in store for me? An underground nuclear test with me at ground zero? As he went farther into the cave, he felt he was moving in slow-mo as if he were oozing through the oatmeal and tar. *It's only the hive queen. She's using her mind games. And time is relative.*

He smiled. *Granuaile is in my mind too.*

His vehicle came to a stop in front of a wall that blocked farther progress into the cave. The wall was pulsating. He realized it was the queen. He shot off all the grenades as the creature's huge mandibles reached for him.

Everything went black.

"He's coming around." This leprechaun had whiskers. Same gaudy green skin, homburg, and spats, but no umbrella. "Queen Granuaile, your knight is awake."

Casper heard a door whoosh open. Granuaile soon bent over him.

"You got close enough to kill the hive queen. Congrats. You have saved all the Orion Worlds, Galway, etcetera, etcetera."

"I didn't fetch the pot of gold. I did see a rainbow, though."

"All in your mind. The rainbow, that is. The pot of gold is vaporized now. We'll have a royal funeral for Queen Meghan."

"She died?"

"She needed the talisman but didn't get it. That's OK. It's purely a ceremonial job, just like the British Queen's. Unfortunately I'm the new queen. I was next in line, you see. Do you want to be my consort, Sir Caspar?"

"How would that work?" he said.

The other leprechaun held up a mirror so Casper could see himself.

"You'd call it magic; we call it a lifeform transformation," said the other leprechaun.

"Po-tah-toe, po-tay-toe."

Casper decided to call him Dan.

"And we love them almost as much as we do the whiskey," said Queen Granuaile. "You don't have to decide now."

Casper raised one hand and wiggled his lime green fingers. "It will take some getting used to. What about Oscar and my piranhas?"

“Some of our kind on Earth will take care of them. Don’t fret about that.”

SAMPLE

Part Two: Food for Thought

Toy Story

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[Note from Steve: Horror is also considered speculative fiction. This is dedicated to good friend and author Scott Dyson, who is mastering the horror genre quite well....]

Curt Boggs' coffee mug spilled its contents onto the Plainville Herald's classified section. As he mopped up the spill, an ad caught his attention: "Hartley Mansion up for Sale." He smiled as memories flooded into his mind.

He had left Plainville, Kansas for college long ago and never returned. His subscription to the newspaper followed him everywhere, though, even to the small Queens flat he now rented. The memories were mostly about Carol Hartley. She'd been a cheerleader; he'd been a fullback. A major knee injury in his freshman year at college had ended his playing days. The newspaper subscription allowed him to confirm every year that his football records in the local high school were never broken.

He wasn't interested in buying the Hartley Mansion, of course. Even after Carol married Tom Rice and they moved into the family home—her parents were dead, weren't they?—it was still called the Hartley Mansion. In high school, a lot of kids thought the old, rambling house at the end of Main Street was haunted. He knew better. Carol and he had made love in almost every room of that house, including her parents'. He couldn't even remember what the father did. He was somehow rich and never home and mommy was always out shopping, often visiting the chic stores in Kansas City.

Would Carol be involved in the sale of the house? What had happened to her and Tom? He seemed to remember something in the Herald's society page ten years ago or so about their moving to Chicago. The classified ad had made him a bit curious this time, though. *Time to revisit your roots, old boy?*

He smiled. He hadn't had much tail since Carol, if you discounted two bad marriages ending in divorce. His audience of romance novel readers was now largely comprised of little old ladies. Unlike that guy in the Broadway show *Producers*, he didn't need to pursue them in order to make a living—they bought his schlock anyway. He wasn't exactly at Sparks's level—he thought his stuff was better than Sparks's, though—but the young female readers were addicted to imagining love bites in the neck from some handsome vampire, so both their audiences were diminishing.

He went online to Expedia to look for the cheapest way to travel to Plainville, knowing he would never find a direct flight to that town southwest of KC in the middle of nowhere.

"Aren't you Curt Boggs?" said the waitress as she handed him his order of pie and coffee.

Curt smiled. Besides some of the best cooking he'd tasted in years, Sally's Diner had always been a place that made one feel welcome. Plainville was in the middle of Kansas cattle country, an area that had been hit hard in recent years. Sally's still offered up various cuts of great steaks, though, and a meal that would have cost him \$100 at least in the Big Apple was only \$19.95, pie and coffee extra. The coffee wasn't up to snuff, but the homemade pie compensated with just the first bite.

He studied the woman. Too much sampling of the diner's food? Or just a German-immigrant genetic background that produced a huge woman? He saw the nametag. Gertie. Probably short for Gertrude if there was any logic to it, but he knew people acquired nicknames that had nothing to do with their given names. He'd been called Bull in high school, as much for Carol as for football.

"Yes, I'm Curt Boggs. Do I have the privilege of chatting with one of my many fans?"

She giggled and turned red. "Oh, my yes, a fan for years. I got started in high school when I discovered you were the only real writer who's come from this hellish town."

He nodded. "I thought it was pretty good to grow up here."

"You were smart and left. I got pregnant and am stuck with three kids and a good-for-nothing hubby."

"Sorry about that. If it's any comfort, your food here is still great."

"Thank you. I hope to see your appreciation expressed in your tip. Max doesn't pay us much." She answered his raised eyebrow. "Max, the cook and owner. He's Sally's grandson, bless her soul."

Curt tried to remember a Max but couldn't. *Probably born after I left.* He waved a twenty. "Your tip if you give me some information."

Her turn to raise an eyebrow. *At the size of the tip or her favorite author asking for information?* "Sure, if you sign the twenty."

"That would be a waste, Gertie. I'd rather sign one of my books."

"I'm reading *A Lustful Trip down the Danube* right now. Makes anyone want to take one of those river tours. Someday." She sighed. "I'll get the book." She fetched a grease-stained book from under the counter and handed it to him. He signed and handed it back. "So, what information do you need?"

"Who's the realtor in charge of selling the Hartley mansion?"

"Mad Maude Crowley. We call her that because she's crazy, but believe me, it's crazy-smart for them realty deals. She sold my cousin's house and turned a big profit, and my cousin only made some cosmetic improvements. The Hartley family wants two-and-a-half million for that place, but I don't think they'll get it. Town's moving out toward KC, and downtown is going to hell."

"Happens everywhere," he said.

"Are you interested in buying?"

"Maybe. For my retirement days. I promised myself to look at it at least. Where's Mrs. Crowley's office?"

"Over on 4th next to the Plainville Bank. You can't miss it. It's Miz Crowley, by the way. The old maid never married because no man could stand her. She's a great fan of yours too."

Looks like I should have brought a few boxes of books to have a book signing.

He thanked Gertie and headed off to find Mad Maude.

“My clients are open to negotiations,” said Mad Maude.

The wrinkled old woman looked a bit like a Medusa with frizzy tufts of hair sprouting in all directions like a head of snakes. She was also as thin as a rail, flat-chested, and hardly smiled, even when he signed the book she pulled out of a desk drawer. *Passion in Paris* was one of his early ones—it looked dog-eared. He remembered pouring a lot of smut into that one.

“I can drive you over.”

“I need a bit of time. Memories, you know. Carol Hartley was a good friend.”

There was a hint of a smile. His success as an author depended on women’s dirty minds, but he wasn’t about to elaborate. *None of your damn business!*

“I can drive you over and then go do some errands.”

“I need about an hour with my memories.”

She shrugged. “Works for me, especially if it means a sale. You probably have the money.”

And then some. Again, none of your damn business!

“It can’t be that far. I could walk.”

“True, but there’s a lockbox. You couldn’t get inside.”

“Then I’d appreciate the ride.” *I should have brought the rental car.* He wasn’t looking forward to whiffing any more of the harridan’s strong and cheap perfume, but he’d have to grin and bear it.

“Because you’re familiar with the house, I’ll just leave you to explore,” Mad Maude said once they were there. She opened the lockbox, took out the key, and opened the door for Curt.

He peered inside at the gloom. “I don’t have a flashlight.”

“The electricity is on. How else could we show the place to prospective clients?”

“Have many of those?”

“Privileged information, Mr. Boggs. I’ll return in an hour.”

Curt made his way around the house. It looked like an immense tomb without the period furniture he remembered—fake Louis XIV here, faux Danish modern there, but all expensive—none of it was around, and the carpets had been rolled up too.

As he went from room to room, he remembered Carol and their sexcapades. It hadn’t mattered to him that he wasn’t the first. The memories of their teen lovers’ experimentation and physical exploitations had percolated through many of his books, although his skill as a writer made them fresh and sinfully delicious for each book. Some critics claimed that the novels were just porn. Others stated that they were just impossible erotic tales about impossibly oversexed couples. Only Carol and he knew that the impossible was possible. *What a woman!*

A stale and unpleasant order permeated the second-floor bedrooms. On a whim, he climbed the stairs to the attic where he expected only to find junk, the bane of many buyers who bought old houses. Upon entering, he eyed a beam where he’d hung a naked Carol up in chains and tickled her with a feather duster until she came in an explosive fashion. *Good times, my man!* None of his wives ever compared to Carol, his cheerleader doll who would cheer him on to great performances on the field and off.

The attic was cluttered. He spotted a tarp covering a large object. He removed the tarp and discovered a large dollhouse. *Carol’s as a little girl?* It had probably been there for years.

Some porcelain dolls, toy people who once lived in that house, were scattered on the floor in front of it. He picked up one.

It's Carol in her cheerleading garb! The expensive porcelain was old and cracked, but the face took him back.

He felt a bit woozy. *Must be the stale attic air.* His head spun and he sunk to his knees. Puzzled, he could swear he heard Carol sing one of her ribald songs. She had a good voice. He'd always told her that. Of course, she sang in the church choir and often belted out solos.

Just a little nap and this will pass. His cheek touched the floor, the Carol-doll in front of his eyes. He stared at the face. He swore the doll winked at him!

"The inspection uncovered a few things," Mad Maude told Carol Hartley's daughter. "We need to take a tour. To fix them, you can have the new owners get estimates and we'll deduct that from the sale price."

"Or we can say the house goes as is," said the daughter.

Maude shrugged.

The granddaughter tugged at her mother's arm. "I'm bored, Mommy. Can I explore?"

"OK, but don't leave the house. And don't get into trouble."

The little girl, whose name was also Carol in honor of her grandmother, nodded and took off, but didn't go far. She heard their conversation.

"They're very energetic at that age," said Maude, although she didn't smile. Little Carol could tell she hated kids.

"You don't know the half of it. And I thought her brother was bad."

Little Carol frowned. *I'm going to find a hiding place. Let them try to find me!*

She went to the second floor. There were many closets in the bedrooms, but no clothes in them to hide behind. She spotted the stairs to the attic.

Once there, she gave a little squeal of joy when she saw the dollhouse. *It's so big!* There were porcelain dolls inside and a few on the floor in front. She saw footprints in the dust. *Is someone here?*

She smiled at her fears and picked up two of the dolls from the floor. One looked like a photo of her grandmother from an old album she'd seen—a young woman in a cheerleader's outfit. The doll was chipped and cracked, the skirt broken in places, but she had a big smile. The man-doll looked almost new. She stared at the face. A frightened expression was frozen upon it. She didn't like the man-doll.

She heard her mother and the realtor on the attic stairs.

"I'm up here, Mommy. I found a dollhouse. All the little toy people are cracked or broken except for one."

"Don't worry about that," said Maude. "We'll do a complete cleanout of the attic when the buyers sign the papers."

"Come on down, sweetie," said the little girl's mother. "The buyers will be here any minute."

Anna Utkin

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[Note from Steve: Sometimes you get more than you expect online...]

Anna Utkin shut the library's main door, locked it, and headed for her car. Her little Honda Civic awaited to take her to her one-bedroom apartment in the complex three miles from the Oakwood Public Library where she had worked the last ten years of her life. She smoothed her blouse after getting into the car and thought about dinner. *Tonight maybe I'll have a glass of red wine because today's dinner will be a Salisbury steak meal.* She always bought her TV dinners on sale, so the glass of wine would be the most expensive item, a full-bodied cabernet sauvignon from California.

As usual, when she pulled into her parking space, she remembered nothing about the trip. She'd made that trip twice a day for years—the drive was always the same. The only day she remembered was when she was hit about halfway home by the stranger who ran the only red light along the route. The burly man had blamed her, but there were witnesses, one of them a cop who was parked and enjoying his coffee and donut. That accident was the most excitement she'd ever had in Oakwood.

People still frequented the library—some readers looking for big city newspapers, some looking for NY Times bestsellers they couldn't afford to buy, and some who wanted to read older books they'd missed and couldn't find anywhere else. There were few kids. Students wrote their "research projects" using the internet these days—some of them even got away with cutting and pasting, and many homework assignments for common texts had answers posted on the internet too. The millennials were more into their smart phones and laptops than books, preferring a summary of *To Kill a Mockingbird* found on the internet to actually reading the book.

She worried about the future of public libraries. She didn't know if the modern world really needed librarians or libraries anymore, but she loved her library and its books. She was also a voracious reader and donated the books she purchased and read to the library so others could read them. They were print versions, so she didn't have room to store them in her apartment anyway.

She ate her TV dinner while watching the ten o'clock news. She then placed her own laptop on the tray after wiping up a few spatters. *I wonder if my profile is ready.* She'd always been curious about her ancestry and ordered a DNA report in order to find out something about it. As an orphan, she had no family tree available, so that DNA report would be a good starting place for finding one.

Anna had been waiting seven weeks for the DNA results. She logged onto her personal page and smiled. She had her report online. She opened the file. The smile turned to a frown.

"There are no records in our database that correlate with your DNA sample. If you're interested in the raw results of your entire genome over 700,000 locations and all chromosomes, click here." She clicked and saw pages of information scroll across her screen. "If you'd like to

download to your computer, click here.” She clicked there and printed out the pages corresponding to the raw information.

What does it mean that no other DNA results correlate with mine? She knew just the person to ask. Bernard Hill was a frequent visitor to her library. He was also a biology professor at the little four-year private college in Oakwood. Its library had very little fiction, and Bernie loved it, so he visited her library. They often discussed books in her little office.

She went to bed but fell asleep only after changing her Saturday morning plans. She would postpone her trip to the supermarket and visit Bernie at his office/lab on campus. She knew he was usually there because his weekends were dedicated to catching up on his research. Unlike big research institutions, the college’s teaching load was four courses. He’d said that he’d reduced that to three by taking a large lecture course every semester, but he was a dedicated teacher so even that took a lot of time.

Was it the TV dinner or the wine? She had one of her frequent dreams where she flew above a world filled with only a few cities containing shining white buildings. The land was mostly a mixture of towering snow-covered mountain chains, large forests with strange trees, and grassy plains with even stranger animals. She’d never played computer games or seen many movies, so she couldn’t imagine how her mind created such dreams. She would always awake and remember everything as if it had really happened.

“Can you interpret this?”

Bernie pulled down his reading glasses from his brow and stared at the detailed printout of Anna’s DNA profile. “I did one of these myself,” he said. “The raw results aren’t very useful. The services provide a summary, usually something like 14% such-and-such, 23% so much, and so forth. Tell me about the summary.”

“There wasn’t any. It said that there were no records in their database that correlated with my DNA.”

Bernie’s eyebrows seemed to crawl up his wrinkled forehead. “That’s crazy. This test does your whole genome, not just Y-chromosome or mitochondrial, so it covers everything from present day to 50,000 years ago. There has to be some correlation.” He started tapping his fingers. “Let me study this over the weekend. I have to return some books to your library Monday night. We’ll talk about it then.”

Monday night Bernie knocked on the door to her little office. As head librarian, Anna had her own desk and small office. She was the only one with a degree in library science, so she figured that was appropriate, although, truth be told, running the library didn’t require a degree at all, only experience, but she also had the most of that too.

Bernie closed the door and took a seat in front of the desk. “You were an orphan, right?” She nodded. “No idea who your parents were?” Head shake the other way. “Something’s not right here, but I can’t figure it out. But I will.” He pulled out a plastic bag with a zip lock. A cotton swab was in it. “If you let me borrow some saliva, that is.”

She frowned. “That’s a bit personal.”

“Oh, please. You used this service. Ten million hackers worldwide probably have access to these DNA results. I’m your friend, and I’ll keep it confidential.”

She studied the old man. “OK. But won’t you find the same thing they did?”

“I’m not using their damn database. I’ll be confirming that their raw data results are correct. Those are what are confusing.”

She didn’t think to ask him why until he’d left.

Anna made several calls to Bernie during the next two weeks. Each time he replied that he was still working on the problem. *What problem? Isn’t this his specialty? He seems to be acting mysterious.* She suspected that he had already decided something about the original DNA test after comparing it with the one obtained from the recent swab.

The old professor was her favorite among the library patrons. His fiction tastes ran from mysteries and thrillers to science fiction, but he enjoyed chatting with her over books in general, often in her office over a cup of tea. He usually came late on weekday evenings to “clear his mind” as he put it. She knew he was tenured but not yet emeritus. She thought he was the most well-known among the small college’s faculty because he was always off to give a talk at some conference.

As an orphan, Anna often wondered what her biological father had been like. She would have liked to have him be like Bernie. She’d never wanted to return to the orphanage where she could maybe ask for information about her birth parents. She’d never been adopted, so when she’d left, she never wanted to return.

Finally, Bernie called her. “My dear lady, I’m making lasagna tomorrow evening, and I always make too much. I’d like to invite you to dinner. We can talk about my research into your genetic past.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow evening.”

“Should I bring wine or dessert?”

“A nice bottle of wine would be fine. The menu is tortellini and basil soup, Caesar salad, lasagna, and chocolate-filled cannoli. I’m making everything except the cannoli, so I hope you’ll like it.”

“Sounds like quite a meal. I’d be honored to accept your invitation.”

She hung up the phone and smiled. Even if it was just the professor, she thought it would be quite an adventure. She’d never been invited to dinner by a man before. Speed dating, online dating, lunch dating, all limited in a small town—she’d covered the whole list except barhopping. The first had taken her around three counties. She’d never wanted to try the last.

The last time she was on a date it was to play tennis. She turned the fellow down when he wanted to do brunch afterward. His tattoos were very colorful, but his personality left something to be desired—for one thing, the last book he read was in high school. She’d never lived in a big city and long ago decided that living in Chicago, Kansas City, or St. Louis to find dates wasn’t worth a move. She liked her quiet life in Oakwood.

“Can I take your coat?” Bernie said.

Anna had spent almost two hours deciding what to wear. Besides her work clothes, which were stylish but comfortable, she didn’t have many fancy dresses, but she knew Bernie was more into comfort than finery too. His ubiquitous old sport coat now had leather patches on the elbows

and his shoes were always those low-top walking shoes, in brown or black. She decided on some comfortable pumps that didn't clash with her dress. *He's not romancing me after all, at least I don't think so.*

"I have cheese and crackers in the den. Alice always said that a proper dinner must have some good appetizers."

"Alice was your wife?"

"Had thirty years of blissful marriage with the old ball-and-chain, and I haven't changed much in the house since she passed away fifteen years ago. Come, follow me."

The den was comfortable. She was surprised at the widescreen TV on the wall. He saw her glance toward it.

"Chicago Bears, Bulls, and Cubs, in alphabetical order, whether they win or lose. I have a satellite antenna. Someday I'll go see a live game, but TV's always been good enough. I eat my TV dinners watching the ten o'clock news. Shall we start with white and do your red at dinner?"

"Of course."

"Brie and remoulade, which I do with crackers and not in the main meal. Only one type of cracker, I'm afraid."

He poured their wine while she took one of the plates and christened two crackers, one with brie and another with remoulade.

"Now, to business. Let's get it over with so we can enjoy dinner." He raised his glass to her as a toast. "To our health, my dear. And to you for bringing me a puzzle I cannot decipher."

"What do you mean?" she said, eying him over the top of the glass. *A fine pinot grigio*, she thought.

"Why, my dear lady, you aren't human."

She almost choked on a bite of cracker with remoulade, which was quite good—something with olives. She took a hurried sip of wine. "What do you mean, not human?"

"Hmm, I guess that's a shocking statement. Of course, you're human in every way except for your DNA. That's so clean and orderly, it has to be bioengineered. But that's not all." He popped an entire cracker into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. She could tell he was nervous. *Well, I am too!* "How can I explain? Remember about two years ago when we had that discussion in your office about the Y-chromosomal Adam and the mitochondrial Eve?"

"Yes. Every man alive today is descended from a single man, a genetic Adam. And every man or woman is descended from a single woman, a genetic Eve. The Y-chromosome is passed from father to son. The mitochondrial DNA is only passed on from the mother. Did I get it right?"

"Perfectly. So here's the problem: you're not one of Eve's descendants."

"What about Adam?"

He laughed. "Yes, he could be a polygamist, but you're definitely female—two X chromosomes—so we can't say anything about Adam as an ancestor, except that he and Eve probably weren't a couple, although they might have lived close to each other. The lineage info is just too independent."

"OK, so maybe Eve had a contemporary."

"Unlikely, but possible. That doesn't change the clean and orderly observation. Almost all human DNA has junk in it—vestiges of ancient viral infections, for example. Yours doesn't. You're sana Anna, or clean Jean, since that's your middle name."

"How'd you know that?"

"I called the orphanage. They have no idea who your parents were, by the way. Some motorist found you on the side of the road, turned you over to child services, and they put you in the orphanage." He saw her expression and frowned. "You didn't know all that, did you?" She shook her head, tears in her eyes. He knocked the side of his head with his fist. "Stupid me, putting scientific fact over human emotions. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I should have been gentler."

She nodded. "Of course I forgive you. You meant no harm. So my clean DNA was your problem?"

"That, and not being descended from Eve. It's no wonder that lucrative service couldn't find any DNA correlations. There would be none, unless they made an error. They didn't. The brie is excellent, isn't it? I nuke it just a little to get it a bit warmer than room temp. Not very gourmet of me, but I like it that way."

She was glad that further conversation was about books, mostly centered on Alan Furst v. John Le Carré, and whether spy novels still had many readers.

To his credit, Bernie also avoided talking about her DNA during his next late night visits to the library. *He must sense that I'm uncomfortable with his findings.* She tried to convince herself that the DNA service and Bernie could both be wrong. *Should I try another service?* Such services were expensive, and she had to watch her budget. She made more than the other librarians, but Oakwood Public Library's funding was often the first item considered when the city council was studying budget cuts.

But the results bothered her.

One night she had just put her TV dinner on the tray in front of her sofa and was about to grab the remote to put on the news when she heard a car door slam. She peaked through the curtains and saw two men and a woman jump out of a black SUV that had parked in a visitor's space. *They're coming to my door!*

She'd often thought about buying a gun, but she wouldn't do it without taking shooting lessons, and the combination would just be too expensive. She grabbed a steak knife, put it up her sleeve, and waited for the knock. When it came, she went and looked through the peephole in her front door. The word nondescript came to mind as she studied the three. In a big city, they would just look like ordinary people. Here, in Oakwood, the three looked out of place. The woman was in a blue power suit like a female VP might wear, and the men were in charcoal black suits. Too fancy for Oakwood even if they were headed for a night on the town.

"Who is it?"

"ICE, Ms. Utkin. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. We'd like to talk to you." He flashed a badge.

"I'm keeping the chain on the door. Pass your credentials in so I can study them."

When she opened the door, they complied—badges and DHS IDs. She studied them. They looked authentic, but these days one had to be suspicious. *Of what?* She smiled. *Nothing ever happens in Oakwood!* She opened the door and let them in.

"You're interrupting my dinner." She gestured to the tray with the TV dinner sitting on it. "I might be Anna Utkin, but I can't imagine why you need to talk to me." One man nodded to the woman, who took some type of device out of her purse. "What's that?"

"It's a portable Geiger counter," said the woman. "It's painless, I assure you."

“I don’t care. You’re not pointing that thing at me.”

The two men grabbed her arms and held her. The woman passed the wand-like device over Anna’s body. “It’s her,” she said.

The men let her go.

“This is outrageous!” said Anna, rubbing her arms. “I know my rights. I’m a law-abiding citizen.”

“Anna, you might want to take a seat on your couch and let us explain.”

“What about you three?” She might be angry and apprehensive, but she was always a good host.

“We can stand. You’ll be the one who will be shocked. First, let me start by saying we watch those DNA service sites.”

They proceeded to tell Anna who she really was. After hours of conversation, she packed up a small carryon that she had purchased for the only airline trip she had ever made and left with the three.

No one on Earth saw her again.

A Singing Sadness

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[Note from Steve: This is an early short story of mine. I won't say when it was written, but it has current relevance. It even contains a poem...]

Mila Park walked slowly to the lectern. She preferred to be out on a dig, but her sponsors thought this find was important. As the South American Combine prepared for war with the North African Union, tensions everywhere on Earth were high. At the cocktail hour, some Combine and Union scientists had been exchanging angry words. *How peaceful it is on an archaeological site light-years away!*

"The title of my lecture is boring. 'Insights on the Archaeological Excavations in the 82 Eridani System' is simply the title of a recent paper I wrote. I'll now give it a subtitle: 'How a Civilization Can Destroy Itself.'" There were some stirrings in the audience. Several conference attendees looked at each other. "The finds offer a lesson for humanity in these troubled times."

She put up her first slide. There were several gasps from the audience now. "What you see is a temple littered with skeletons. We didn't have to dig much to find them, of course, but the entrance to the temple was covered by rubble. A nuclear warhead hit only half a kilometer away. Most of the city's inhabitants on the surface were vaporized, of course, but we believe that those in the temple died from starvation or radiation poisoning—it's hard to tell which ailment would get them first because we don't yet know enough about their physiology."

She took a sip of water and put up another slide. "Here you see one of the many documents we found inside the temple. As you may already know, these were a sensitive people who left great works of art—paintings and sculptures and beautiful architecture—but they also had a literary tradition. It is sad that this search for beauty couldn't stop the descent into the madness of self-annihilation. The many documents in the temple provided much more than a Rosetta stone. The ideograms are complicated, so a massive effort using a lot of computer power was needed to translate them. But once we translated them, we developed a pretty good idea about this people's culture and what went wrong."

She began a long summary of their findings, including the history of greedy groups vying for control of the planet. "Are there any questions?"

"Could you go back to that first document?" said a woman in the first row. "I know nothing about their language, but it looks awfully short. What is it?"

"A poem by one of that people's greatest poets. It's hard to translate poetry well, but here's what she says:

My soul awakens.

 All about me the stars,
Like signposts up ahead,
 Marching into the distant past
And even more distant future...
I see them strangely.
And yet the Universe is me
 And I am one with it;

And my soul feels the thunder of a thousand suns
While I am the seeker and finder.
Could it be otherwise?
Not until a singing sadness
Erases it all
And I and my Universe are no more.

That's it."

Mila saw the tears glistening on the woman's cheeks. The rest of the audience was silent.

"It says enough," said the woman.

In the following weeks, a popular singer/songwriter used the poem as lyrics for a song that blew up the pop music charts around the world. Peace talks began between the South American Combine and the North African Union.

Emma5

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[Note from Steve: Is a short story with chapters a novella? You decide. Encounters with ETs don't need to happen in space...and they also could be a bit racy.]

Chapter One

Mari fought to control starship *Odysseus* as it bit into the atmosphere. Alarms were sounding. The calm but irritating voice of *Jason*, their AI, still came through on her com implant, so she killed his alarms.

"Dip and dive!" said Hana. "We have to keep it from breaking up." That suggestion was vocal, not via the embedded com-set.

Gee, thanks, Hana, why didn't I think of that!

"These damn things were never meant for planet-fall," said Loku.

Yeah, someone else thinking I don't know what to do.

"We don't exactly have time for the escape pods," said Mari, deciding not to waste time with biting rejoinders.

"Bring her down anywhere. Practically the whole damn planet's ocean. We'll worry about finding land later." Loku checked the ship's skin temp. "If you have enough control, we'll just make a big splash."

They did. The ten-thousand ton starship created a small tsunami and then sank.

What the hell?

"Jason, why are the cargo hold's doors opening?" Loku tried to counter the AI's command.

"Damn AI thinks we want to abandon ship for some reason," said Mari. "Some embedded protocol. It probably doesn't understand water. Software glitch!"

"We're sinking and filling with water," said Hana, just before the control room's sliding door buckled and the wave of saltwater hit her.

This is not the time to learn to swim, thought Mari as she fought to keep her head above water. Her next and last conscious thought was that they should all have been in their spacesuits. Three could be found in closets beside an airlock right beneath them. That might have saved them.

Mari awoke on a beach and felt something crawling on her face. She screamed and brushed off a small animal with eight legs. She sat upright and squinted at the planet's sun. Not a cloud in the sky. She studied the horizon. *Where's the ship? Did we somehow escape and swim ashore?*

She realized she was completely naked. The light clothes she had worn on ship were gone. She sat up, hugged herself, and noticed the curious welts on her torso. *Did another sea creature save us?* She was surprised at the thought. The planet was supposed to be devoid of any large lifeforms. Maybe her subconscious was telling her something.

She felt a rawness in her genitals, as if the Union's portadocs had just given her a flight-check physical. She put that out of her mind, writing it off to the traumatic experience of somehow getting out of the ship and saving herself.

She stared toward the horizon again. *Water, water, everywhere.* There was a lagoon and a reef and then open ocean. *Am I in an old VR pirate movie? Where's the buried treasure?*

She stood up, shaded her eyes, and scanned the white sands along the length of the beach. To her left and right were human bodies. They looked dead. She hoped they weren't.

They almost were. She performed CPR on both Hana and Loku. When they regained their senses, they were as surprised as she had been to find themselves naked on an island in the middle of a vast ocean.

"If we could find the ship, we'd have some supplies," said Hana after the two had recovered a bit.

"Loku and I aren't strong swimmers," said Mari, "and you can't swim at all. By the way, how are you feeling? The gravity here is strong. Even I feel it."

Hana's birth planet's gravity was 70% standard. She was fine up to twice standard, but she would be uncomfortable. Mari had seen the readout before the ship went crazy: 1.2 standard. *What was that about? Did we get hit by an EMP?* Jason had seemed to recover, but the ship hadn't.

Hana had some mucus on her welts that she tried to brush off, but it just stuck to her hands. "Eww! I'm ready to go back in and wash this slime off. It's like something tried to eat us, decided we weren't comestible, and spit us out on the beach."

"That's a bit farfetched," said Loku. "But I'll go along with the bath idea. Then we better find some shelter." He jerked a thumb toward the island's center. "That way. We need food and water too. We won't find it on the beach."

"I hope the damn AI died a miserable death," said Hana.

Mari shrugged. "You can't program it for all potential disasters. The ship isn't supposed to land on planets. Period. Old Jason wouldn't have protocols for that. All this water added to our fix."

"None of us are prepared to take a dip in a planet's ocean," said Loku. He started to scratch. "Some little bugs are biting me. Time to wash off, my lovelies. I must say you both look great. Maybe not water nymphs or mermaids, but very attractive beach girls."

"Whatever nymphs or mermaids are," said Hana, "I'll assume that that's a compliment spawned by your permanent state of lust. Just don't get any ideas. I'm not in the mood."

"Neither am I," said Mari, thinking of her perception of having her plumbing inspected. "Do you think the AI sent out a distress signal?" she said once the triad was in the water.

"It could only be via RF pulses. No way a subspace-signal could punch through this close to a star." Loku leaned back and floated. "High salinity. Maybe we just floated right out of the ship and up to the surface and then washed ashore?"

"It's a possibility," said Mari. "Maybe the welts are from passing through some kind of seaweed on the way."

"Seaweed that produces snot," said Hana. She stood up in the waist-deep water and rubbed her pubic region. "I think I've been raped!"

"What? Let me see." Loku approached her.

She splashed him. “Get away from me. Don’t touch me!”

Mari was surprised. Hana was the more emotional member of the triad, but they were all generally calm under stress, a necessary requirement for exploring new worlds. “It’s OK, Hana. Loku and I had nothing to do with it. If we had access to the ship’s portadocs, we could confirm what you say, but let’s go with that. Maybe some sea creature was probing you. I have a similar sensation.”

“Why me? And why there?”

“Might be simple curiosity,” said Loku. “Get over it. We have to focus on survival now.”

Chapter Two

Mari stared at the stars. They had made it to the slope of the mountain at the center of the island and camped by a waterfall. So far the water seemed potable and the creatures they had killed and eaten not poisonous. *I wondered how long that luck will hold.*

Exploration crews were either dyads or triads. Mari remembered that Gill Bein, her psych examiner, recommended that she find two partners. “Think of it as a three-legged stool.” He’d been sitting on one at the time as she lay naked with sensors attached all over her body and inside various orifices, all to analyze how she answered and reacted to his questions. “In decisions that have to be made, there will always be a majority.”

“You’re assuming the odd person out will go along with the majority.”

“Our data show that it’s more likely than one person in a dyad will kill the other. People tend to go mad in space. There’s something about the jump process that can do that. We’re still investigating those few glitches. Look at it this way. Your partners probably won’t go crazy at the same time, so they can put you down and sedate you.”

“I could kill them too.”

“Again, unlikely that you’ll be able to overwhelm two other individuals who are highly trained.”

“Maybe I’ll just want to kill one of them.”

Bein shrugged. “Let’s change the topic. I’m now going to test your openness to the triad concept. Some people just can’t adapt to life in a triad. It’s better to know that up front.”

They all had survival training, of course—every explorer crew did, both individually and later in a team, a dyad or a triad. A lot of that training involved using instruments from their ships to test things to be drunk or eaten, as well as air quality, humidity, and other environmental parameters. The training covered the use of a portadoc too. For them, all that was somewhere at the bottom of the ocean.

“Hana’s still upset,” said Loku, kneeling beside Mari. “How about you? Best stress reliever around?”

“I suppose.” But her heart wasn’t in it. She didn’t come and Loku gave up trying. “Sorry. It’s a bit difficult to get romantic when I’m thinking about how we’re going to survive.”

He sat up and smiled at her. “It was good for me. But I understand. It’s just such a beautiful night. Shame to waste it.”

“We’re a long way from home. What are we going to do? Start a new human colony here with just one triad?”

He smiled. "That's a possibility as soon as your birth control starts wearing off. We have enough genetic variability but our progeny won't. That's a big problem."

"Don't be so damn cold and technical. I really don't want to die here, no matter how many children I can produce. Besides, if I wanted a brood of children, I'd never have left home."

"We have to adapt, Mari."

"Maybe I can't. Maybe Hana can't. Maybe we'll both go insane."

Now he frowned. "That wouldn't be good."

"Then let's work together to find a solution."

"The only way I can see that happening is to find the ship and get it out of the water. That has little probability of succeeding."

"That's better than zero."

Chapter Three

The first step was to become better swimmers. They went into training, including free diving in the lagoon. Their diet was a healthy one and all the exercise, including running on the beach, helped increase the length of time they could stay underwater.

"We have to get out beyond that reef," said Loku.

Talk about stating the obvious. Mari looked at the waves crashing against the reef. The lagoon was a lot safer.

"We'll build a raft," said Hana. "Those reeds around the waterfall are tough and hollow once we remove the sap. Can we bind them together somehow?"

"The vines winding through the trees," said Mari. "Are they strong enough?"

"We can only try," said Loku.

"We can use the vines for an anchor chain too," said Hana.

The triad is functioning. Three heads are better than one.

Their first raft came apart. Version two was OK inside the reef where they practiced dropping anchor and diving from it, but the anchor vines broke from the wave action and the raft was carried out to sea when they took it beyond the reef. They decided to braid several vines together for version three. That seemed to work well.

On the practice dives they caught numerous sea creatures to augment their diet.

"Protein is protein, I guess," said Loku, offering a kebab to Hana. "I'll be ready to induce vomiting if either of you starts turning colors."

"It might be a slow poison," said Mari, chewing on the tough flesh. "I'm not so sure I care. Do you two realize we have a major problem?"

"I doubt that it's just one," said Hana. "But what do you have in mind?"

"The water has a high particulate concentration. Waste from water flora and fauna, small sea creatures, whatever. I can't see anything beyond fifteen meters or so."

"If *Odysseus* were only fifteen meters deep, it would stick up about thirty meters," said Loku. "So that is a major problem. We need the spacesuits."

"Same problem. We couldn't see anything, and we can't swim in spacesuits."

"Farther from the reef, the water might be clearer. There's a lot of effluent coming down from the mountain into the lagoon and close to it." Hana looked from one to the other of her companions. "Maybe we just have to take the raft farther out."

Mari nodded. "The ship must have gone down close to the island but in deeper water. We can't get caught far out if there's a storm, for example, but we can certainly try that. I'd do a search along arcs progressively farther out from the reef centered on where we were beached."

"Works for me," said Loku. "What else do we have to do? Seems like we have all the time in the world—at least this world."

"Especially if you keep your libido in control," said Mari with a smile, eying Loku.

"Hey, I'm not the only one with a big sexual appetite now."

"It's all the exercise and fresh air," said Hana. "Like an aphrodisiac. If you can keep things in control, though, I think we might be able to find the ship."

"We could always take a break and go at it on the raft," said Mari with a smile. "It might be a good test of its seaworthiness."

Loku frowned. "I'd rather keep us restricted to good, solid land, if you don't mind."

On the sixth day out, they found *Odysseus*. Loku spotted it from the raft.

"How far down do you think it is to the cargo hatch?" said Mari. "It's already open, and I doubt we can get anything else open with the water pressure."

"I'm guessing about sixty meters or more," said Loku.

"We're good at free diving now," said Hana with a long face, "but not that good."

"Guess that nixes the idea of getting into the ship," said Loku.

"Now is when we could use the spacesuits if they were weighted properly," said Mari. "Just for diving, not swimming. We only need one. There were spares hanging just inside the cargo hold by the escape pods. That cargo hold is open."

"A fishing expedition," said Loku catching on. "They're probably just floating around inside the hold."

They had to return to shore, make several cables out of vines like the anchor cable, and fashion hooks out of wood for them. Their hands were bleeding from the rough but light lava stones they used.

"Too bad we can't just tell the AI to raise the ship," said Hana as the triad cleaned up their campsite a bit that evening after their sexcapades.

"Maybe we can, once one of us is in a suit," said Loku, splashing a bit of water on her. "I'm not sure I can keep up with you two anymore, by the way."

"I now even have dreams about doing it," said Mari.

"Me too," said Hana. "It's like a voice in my head egging me on to be promiscuous."

Loku stopped in his tracks. "What kind of voice?"

"One I can't understand," said Mari, studying the other two. She sat on the sand, crossed her legs, and stared at them. "It's the planet. Or something."

"Just your meds wearing off," said Loku. "I hope so anyway. I'd like to think I'm just feeling naturally energetic about romancing you two. Don't end my enjoyment."

"You're probably affected too," said Mari. "We have to get away from here. I feel we're being controlled in some way."

"The planet's not alive, Mari," said Hana. "That's silly."

"So, how do you explain that we're going at it a lot more than when we first met even?"

"I can't," said Loku. "Let's just enjoy it and tend to our other business. We're ready to fish for a spacesuit."

Chapter Four

With their fishing equipment, the triad landed a lot of debris that was floating around in the cargo hold, mostly bags of samples collected on other planets. None of it was useful. Most of it was damaged. After three days and with patience wearing thin, Mari finally snagged a spacesuit.

"Maybe one size doesn't fit all," she said, her breasts flattened by the suit. They had agreed that, as the best swimmer, she should go down. "I'll bring up the other suits first."

"Check out Jason if you can," said Loku. "If he can seal the cargo hold and pump out the water, maybe he can also raise the ship."

"I'm not going to get into an argument with him," Mari said. "We can try all that manually, you know."

Loku shrugged and smiled. *He annoys me sometimes with his slavish love for technology.* Her opinion was that technology, even an AI model that had passed Turing's test, was just a tool for humans to use.

She got into the harness they'd made out of vines, complete with rocks to weigh her down, and they lowered her off the side of the raft.

Her descent was slow, but she reached the cargo hold and tugged on the vine to let Hana and Loku know she had reached her destination.

There were now strange sea creatures swimming in the hold, floating in and around the other two suits. She grabbed them and used the belt from one to bind them together and then fastened them securely to the wall next to the cargo hatch. She also removed the harness from her and the main line, stored the harness in a bin, and tugged the vine again, a signal for them to withdraw it a bit. When she saw it dangling just outside the cargo hatch, she moved farther inside.

The hold had a duplicate control panel, smaller than the one above, but maybe it had what she needed. *Isn't water in a fluid state just like air?* She first sealed the cargo hold door, a good result. The circuits hadn't been corroded by the seawater yet. She then turned the pumps on. Soon she was no longer floating but standing on the metal alloy floor.

She climbed the five levels up the ladder to the control room where she checked the auxiliary air tanks. While pressure approached standard, she tried to communicate with Jason.

"Hello, Mari," said the AI. "I was feeling lonely for a while." *Lonely? What the hell?* "Only for a while? It's been weeks."

"I made a new friend. She said everything will be fine."

Are the AI's circuits fried? Mari decided it was psychotic. "We'll talk about your new friend later, Jason. Can you do a diagnostic to see if we can raise the ship and land it on the beach?"

"My friend mentioned the beach. That's a good idea, Mari. Give me a few seconds." Mari waited. "Things are looking good. I see you pumped most of the water out. I apologize for that. The ship—"

"—wasn't meant to be underwater. No need to apologize. Can you raise it and land on the beach?"

"Yes. Please fasten your seatbelt."

"Don't hit Hana or Loku on the way up, please."

“I will be careful. I’m compensating for the higher gravity in my calculations. Please bear with me if things get a bit rough, not so much now, but when I sit *Odysseus* on the beach.”

Hana and Loku just managed to row the raft out of the way as the starship rose slowly out of the water, hovered for a minute, and then flew to the beach and landed.

“We did it!” said Loku.

“You mean, they did it. Mari and Jason. I don’t think she managed that alone. She’s a good pilot, but that soft touch was computer assisted. Let’s row ashore and celebrate.”

They had to postpone the celebration. Jason wouldn’t let them inside. Loku pounded on the cargo hatch while Hana tried the keypad, all to no avail.

“What’s going on?” she said. “Why won’t Mari or Jason open the door?”

“We can only answer that question by going inside,” said Loku. “Something’s not right. I wonder how carefully Mari checked that cargo hold.”

“You think something was in there?” Hana shivered in spite of the heat. “We have to get in!”

As the ship settled on the sand, it had made a berm around it. Loku walked on top to make a complete circuit. “Frustrating. I don’t see how we can get inside. The upper airlock has a recessed keypad entry too, but it’s probably not working either.”

“We need some torches. We could cut our way in.”

Loku put hands on hips and stared at her. “How do you come up with that stuff? We have torches, but they’re inside.”

“Yeah, right, a stupid suggestion.”

“It’s no suggestion. We have to just sit down and wait.”

“If she’s dead, we’ll be waiting for a long time. What about getting Jason’s attention?”

“Now that’s a good suggestion. We can cover up some sensors to let him know we’re out here.”

That required a trek back to their waterfall campsite. They coiled up more vines and gathered some wide leaves and returned to *Odysseus*.

Loku managed to lasso an antenna on the top of the ship. “I’m going to repel a bit higher than the upper airlock where there’s a sensor battery. I’ll wave the fronds back and forth over it and then pound on the hatch and try the keypad again.”

“If Jason opens up, wait for me. You might need help inside.”

Chapter Five

Loku tried three times until the keypad worked. He waited for Hana to join him.

“My sincerest apologies, Hana and Loku. I must have been offline. Mari is sleeping with my new friend in the control room.”

Hana glanced at Loku. “New friend?”

“The AI might be crazy. Let’s grab some weapons out of the lockers just in case Jason’s new friend is no friend of ours.”

They armed themselves and climbed the ladder to the control room’s level. The sliding door was still buckled and stuck open.

Loku peered inside and saw Mari sleeping or dead in the tentacles of a creature that was very much alive. Ten eyes turned toward them.

Jason calls me Emma5. There was no sound, but their minds registered a bass voice booming inside their heads. *You must get me back into the water.*

“Release Mari and we’ll think about it,” said Loku.

I’m comforting her. She’s in shock. You are fragile creatures. But I have my limitations too. I can talk to Jason, but he won’t accept my commands, and I must return to the water.

Loku looked at Hana. She nodded.

“Jason, can you reverse course and put Odysseus deep enough in the water to reach the cargo hold’s edge?”

“That’s easy, Loku. By the way, welcome back aboard.”

Loku ignored the AI. “Hana, try to revive Mari while I recover the vines from outside and retrieve the harness Mari left in the cargo hold. I think the three of us can lower Emma5 down there.”

I calculate that’s possible. You have a 73 percent probability of succeeding. It’s the only possible solution.

Mari stirred, smiled at Hana, and patted one of Emma5’s tentacles. “Jason found a new friend.”

Hana nodded. “And we have to save her.”

“She was here in the control room. I didn’t see her at first, I was so busy getting the ship to the beach. She has chameleon talents and was scared of me.”

I shouldn’t have been. I took all three of you to the beach after probing you. I apologize for that. I detect that it caused you and Hana some discomfort, Loku not so much.

“How did you probe Loku?”

His orifices are quite different. There was only one way inside that was convenient.

“A proctology exam,” said Hana, laughing. “Did you learn anything about us?”

Not enough, but I decided you must be almost as intelligent as Jason because your species made him.

Now it was Mari’s turn to laugh. *Good thing Loku didn’t hear that!*

As if on cue, Loku joined them. They snaked Emma5 down the ladder into the cargo hold, the sea creature helping with her tentacles as best she could.

Jason reversed the maneuver and sat Odyssey into the water. Soon Emma5 was swimming in her native ocean.

Chapter Six

Mari popped a delicacy into one of Emma5’s mouths. Mari was on the raft; the ET was holding onto its edge with two tentacles.

“Why did Jason call you Emma5?”

I’m MA—the rest was gibberish in Mari’s mind—number five in the pod queen’s succession. That’s the best I can do on the translation.

“You’re sea creatures. How can you understand technology?”

Technology represents things species make to control or modify their environment. We use technology to modify our environment, the ocean. While you have used it to explore new planets close to your planet of origin, I understand that your origin-planet is a water world too, and intelligent creatures like whales, porpoises, and dolphins swim in your oceans.

“That’s correct. They’re probably very happy we leave them alone now and go out into space instead.”

But you evolved from sea creatures too—long ago. That’s a connection between all of us.

“Good point. Not far from here, we have scientists studying a black hole. Our curiosity is boundless.”

I understand. We are limited. Our tools are primitive. Tentacles aren’t as good as hands. I’m guessing our planet is more covered in water too. Emma5 received another morsel from Mari. *Sometimes curiosity is dangerous, though. You three would have died in my waters. I would have died for being curious about Jason and Odysseus. We must be more careful.*

“We take risks to satisfy our curiosity. What do you think of us so far?”

Your triad arrangement is effective but unnatural to your species. It’s an interesting choice.

Mari told Hana and Loku about Emma5’s comment after she rowed the raft ashore and joined them inside Odysseus.

“That young girl is just going by our plumbing,” said Loku.

“Which she knows inside and out,” said Hana, winking at Mari.

Loku frowned. “If their pod society is anything like whales’, that’s a bit weird too, don’t you think?”

Mari sat down her plate, stood, and stretched. “I wonder if we can salvage any clothing. It’s a wee bit too racy seeing both of you in your birthday suits all the time. That’s weird too.”

“I wonder if Emma5 was making us so lusty,” said Hana.

“She admitted to running that little experiment,” said Mari. “That’s one thing we can learn from them.”

“How to be lustier?” said Loku with a smile.

“No, mind control.”

“Probably not possible,” said Hana.

“Evolutionarily more useful in an aquatic environment, at least for communication,” said Loku.

“I for one think that our triad is stronger because of Emma5,” said Mari. The others nodded. “I just don’t know how to put all this in an exploration report.”

“Let Jason make the report,” said Loku. “He always edits them anyway.”

“I won’t mention the crew’s promiscuous behavior,” Jason said.

Mari threw her plate toward the Loku’s computer console. “You’re damn right, you won’t!”

Meaningful Encounter

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[Note from Steve: Every once and a while I clean out my writing lair to get rid of notes for novels no longer needed (they've been published), ARCs I've reviewed (traditionally published mostly, because the Big Five traditional publishers still push paper books over ebooks—Gaia mourns for her trees), or just make room for paper copies of my own books (yeah, hypocritical, considering my comment about trees, but they're mostly for local book events). When I do this, I find stuff. "Escape from Earth," a novella also available as a free download, was "discovered" that way. The short story below is another zombie-like reawakening (not the subject), except I can't remember exactly when I wrote it—several years ago, but not as long ago as "Escape." And my apologies: the conclusion is similar to a previous story, although this is more serious.]

The huge cruiser *Jiang Xiaowan* came out of the jump across multiverses and lumbered into the ancient solar system. The once proud military vessel belonging to the Huang Empire had been refurbished as an exploratory vessel. Version 2.0 had then become 3.0 as the vessel was acquired by a private consortium owned by the Grand Duchy of Ermon. Military personnel were still present onboard, but so were scientists, engineers, and techies. Long into a multiyear voyage, subjective time, they went about their shipboard lives—only a few visited the observation lounge to watch the crawl into yet another system of planets orbiting an old star.

After a few weeks, the gargantuan old ship went into orbit about an arid planet in the system, although there were still oceans. Perhaps life still existed in their depths. Some plant life still subsisted in the mountainous regions where steep slopes managed to squeeze out moisture from ocean breezes, leaving arid wastelands on the other side. After a series of orbital adjustments and cautionary sensor measurements that spanned the planet's entire surface, producing enough data to feed the scientists' computers as well as detailed SAR maps and images from beneath the seas via various probes, a shuttle left the leviathan like a parasite jumping from its animal victim, and descended.

Sholan Domm, Duke of Ermon, first born of Sholan Holvan, the Grand Emperor, stepped out onto the planet's surface. He cut an imposing figure. Taller than the average Human, his stature accented by his slim but muscular body, he looked like he might be a space ghost with his pasty skin and cape flapping in the breeze. He surveyed the scene with sunken eyes set in a thin face with sunken cheeks and frowned. Stepping toward the Chief Security Officer, who had accompanied him in the shuttle, he made a grunt and motioned to indicate the surroundings.

Zeela Binn, second-ranked in the security entourage, smiled, watching the lanky aristocrat from the corner of her eyes by turning her head. She had known the Duke for years. While strange and aloof, he was much more a person of the people than his father. Her smile was lost because she was on her knees, forehead to the ground.

"Is the area secure?" said the Duke.

"Yes, sire," said Major Jibs, the Chief Security Officer. "Scouts have even determined that the ruins are uninhabited."

“The story of my life. Perhaps it will be our fate too.”

“Pardon, sire?”

“Our civilization autodestructing. It happens to some even before they go into space. Humans must be far out in the tails of that distribution, extremely lucky to still be around. If you consider the likelihood of civilizations surviving, that is.”

“If you say so.”

Zeela smiled again. Her boss, a simple but courageous man, didn’t understand that. The Duke was an amateur archaeologist and had access to enormous wealth, so he could and did mount expeditions to anywhere in near-Earth space, where “near” was trending now to “far,” considering the light-years between this solar system and Earth’s. He had dedicated his life to studying ancient galactic civilizations. Moreover, he wanted to find one that still existed!

The reasons for auto-destruction were varied. Many had suffered through troubled eras similar to ones in Human history. Binn agreed with the Duke. *We are lucky.* Every dead planet or groups of planets they had encountered showed important forks in the road where the civilization had made the wrong choice. What was maddening was the fact that the same choice on one planet had worked but hadn’t on another. The tides of history seemed to wash arbitrarily on planetary shores.

The Duke looked along the lines of men and women who were bowing to him. “I’m holding you to your statement that all is secure, major. I conclude that I don’t need all of you as guards. Arrange for you and four others to accompany me and a vanguard of my scientists to the nearby ruins. Call me when you’re ready to go. Right now I need a glass of cold water. This air is too damn dry for Humans. A Jingolan sand rat would die of thirst here.”

Domm turned and returned to the shuttle. *He knows the water will be waiting for him,* Zeela thought after jumping up and saluting their receding leader. Her whole group had acted as one. *A lot of wasted pomp and circumstance for this deserted and desert planet.*

Binn was one of the four chosen by Jibs. The Duke didn’t bother to shake hands with them. Everyone knew each other, even the six scientists. After spending many years in space together, how could they not? To Binn’s surprise, her royal patron sat down next to her on the hard starboard bench lining the flitter, a lifeboat for the main shuttle. Its pilot and copilot had better seats. Domm often was the pilot or copilot—he could fly as well as anyone, but this time he had decided to pass up the chance. *Why?*

“I knew your father,” said the Duke. “He was a good man.”

Binn nodded. “He died in your father’s service,” she said.

“Yes, the Battle of Zarnos. After that, we’ve had centuries of peace.”

“If you keep looking for ancient civilizations, you might find war,” she said.

She watched the thick eyebrows rise, but they were followed by a smile. “A thinking soldier. I like that. You are referring to the possibility that I might discover remnants of a civilization who are still belligerent. There is always that possibility. That’s why we have security forces on scientific expeditions. Considering the many places we’ve visited, the probability of armed encounter is small, though.”

“You continue your search because you think there’s at least one. You’re already dealing with small likelihoods, sire.”

“True.” He pointed out the window as the flitter was landing. “We must continue this discussion, Master Sergeant Binn. Come and walk with me as we explore.”

The Duke seemed to be focused more on that conversation than the exploration of the chaotic ruins of the city, one of many dotting the planet’s surface, and the largest. They were walking apart from the rest when the dusty grounds ahead of them caved in, swallowing the leading group.

“That’s not good!” she said.

“Back!” said the Duke.

But it was too late. Dirt and sand caved in around them too. Binn fell but managed to roll toward Domm and stand up, her short rifle poised for action. The Duke struggled to his feet, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Someone caused these cave-ins,” he said. There was excitement in his voice

They were in a tunnel. She heard a battle ahead of them, deadly laser beams sizzling even in the dry air.

“Shall we go to their assistance?” said Domm.

Binn held up her hand. There was now silence. She listened for a moment.

“Let’s go far enough to see if we can help. We have no medics with us, but we can fend off assailants if needs be.”

“An unfortunate oversight about the medics. Too many boring planet-falls, I’m afraid. Do you have another weapon?”

She handed him her pistol. “Don’t get trigger happy. And stay behind me.”

He smiled but nodded. They moved forward. They were some twenty meters from the location of the battle in the tunnel when they stopped. Ahead of them, the bodies of dead scientists and the rest of the security detail were being carried away by scurrying creatures.

“Are they dead?” said the Duke.

She didn’t know, so she ignored the question. “Are you up to following them?”

“Most certainly. I’ve finally found a civilization. These people are intelligent. Why wouldn’t I be up for that?”

Because you might die. She waved a hand for him to follow her.

There was a labyrinth below the ancient city’s ruins. As they followed the ETs who carried the bodies of their friends, Binn noticed that many of the ruined buildings had several layers of basements. She pointed it out to the Duke as they passed them.

“Yes, it’s fascinating,” he said in a whisper. “They must spend a lot of their time underground. I wish we had time to explore all these buildings. Some look residential, others public. And mostly abandoned. The population has been decimated.”

She frowned. *Too much the scientist. How can he not see the danger?* She saw how he held the pistol, though, at his hip, only bringing it up when they came to intersections or corners. *The instincts of a Human with military training.* It was easy to follow the trail of the ETs. The floor of the tunnels were covered in dust, and they hadn’t been used in a while. *Maybe why they*

chose to attack at the point that they did? Keep the battle away from noncombatants. Or am I assuming our military training is universal, and they think the same way I do?

They were peering around one corner at the receding group when their guns became red hot. They dropped them. When the nets fell, Binn decided the Duke was right. The ETs were so intelligent they had outsmarted her. They were hoisted onto flat heads sitting on top of squat bodies and carried off too. *A good sign. Maybe some of the others aren't dead either.*

The Duke and Binn were dumped into a room just off a tunnel. They were left in darkness when a heavy door slammed shut.

About a standard hour later, they perceived a dim glow, light enough to see there was a slot under the door. After a few more standard hours, food and water were pushed through the slot.

"Don't touch that!" said Binn. She found a device attached to her belt, turned it on, and checked the readouts. "OK. We've been given ordinary water and some kind of vegetarian matter. Dig in, Excellency."

"You're very careful. They're probably just giving us what they eat, you know."

"And what they eat could be poison for us." When he nodded, she dipped a finger into the mush and tasted it. "Mostly tasteless carbohydrates, I'd say. Have any salt with you?"

He smiled. "Not a bit." He tried the mass. "I wonder if they'll be insulted if we don't eat it."

"And I wonder if we'll develop diarrhea if we do. Unfortunately, I didn't bring along any food concentrates. My simple med kit doesn't have antidiarrheal pills either."

"I have some cakes of food concentrate." He rummaged around in a belt he wore and handed her two small disks. "I'd eat both ours and theirs. We'll need our energy."

She waved around the room. "Whatever for?"

"When we need to make a dash for it, for example." He fingered out a huge glob. "I'm guessing this is pretty high in energy content." She took her own glob. "What do you make of our captors?"

"Physique or intentions?"

"Both. But go for the first, because the second is too worrisome for now."

"They're built like foot rests," said Binn. "Three legs, but they spin and move forward better than a Human on a crutch. Their heads are thick disks with eyes on the sides."

"Definitely not bipeds. So much for A. J.'s theory."

"A. J.?"

"Avtol-Jenn Bowpu, a senior scientist in my father's court. He's a good astrophysicist, I suppose, but I always thought he was a pompous ass." He returned her smile. "I'm not a fan of the sycophants in my father's court, you see. Anyway, A. J. has the theory that all intelligent lifeforms, wherever and whenever we find them, will be bipedal. I had many debates with the old fellow when I was growing up."

Binn studied the tall, thin Duke for a moment. She couldn't imagine him being a child. Some adults were like that. Even now, with genetic tweaking to select the best offspring possible, and whether or not they came from test tubes or not, Humans still went through childhood. They might live for centuries, but they were all once children.

"I guess you'll just have to tell him the next time you see him that he's wrong. Nothing like a living counterexample."

"Indeed. Can you imagine how the court would react if I brought some of these fellows back?" His laugh echoed between the stone walls of the room.

Their interview started within the next hour following their dinner. The door opened and one of the ETs whirled in. It was hard to tell whether it was facing them. Binn supposed it didn't matter. The ET started babbling.

"Gilligan and Mary Ann? Ich bin ein Berliner. Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. I have sinned against you, my Lord. Make America great again."

The ET went on and on. With every phrase, it spun a bit. "It sounds like Human speech, but they're different voices," said Binn in a whisper.

The Duke snapped his fingers. "Ancient com broadcasts from Earth. I think they're famous enough that the whole planet was repeating them at one time."

"From Earth? How long did it take them to get here?"

"You do the math," said Domm. He put a finger to his lips and then faced the ET squarely. "We are friends, not your enemies. We mean no harm."

"Friends, not your enemies," said the ET. "Gilligan and Mary Ann?"

"Who are they?" said Binn.

The Duke shrugged. "Mary Ann sounds female." He bowed to the ET. "Ich bin Gilligan." He pointed to himself. "Sie est Mary Ann." He pointed at Binn.

"The other sounded like old Standard. What you said doesn't."

He nodded. "Doesn't matter probably," he said in a whisper. "Another ancient language. We need to get the party started."

"What party?"

"The First Contact party."

"What about our friends?"

"In due time," said the Duke.

Three security guards, including Major Jibs, were dead. So was one scientist. By default, Binn became head of security. They later learned that Jibs had given the order to fire, causing the ETs to fight back. All along, the Duke considered their colleagues' sacrifice to be a small one—Humans had found the survivors of an ancient civilization, the first ETs ever found.

"We caught them at a bad time," the Duke said one night as Binn and he returned to their now permanent encampment on the surface. "They oscillate between nearly destroying their planet and a complete recovery that takes them almost to the point of expanding into their solar system. When all hell breaks loose, they manage to keep most of their culture, but genetic diversity puts them on an existential cliff."

"By the latter, do you mean that everyone is related to everyone else among the survivors? I guess they're not good with genetic engineering then."

"I think some early Human colonies were plagued by lack of genetic diversity too. Small populations can suffer from that. These survivors seem more upbeat, though. They've found religion."

"Religion? Do you mean, like belief in the supernatural?"

“Not exactly. More of a philosophical approach to morality. They’re pacifists and nature worshippers mostly. They worship the Universe and its laws, from the dance of the galaxies and stars within them right down to planetary flora and fauna. We often say science isn’t religion, but for them it is.”

“Whatever works for them,” said Binn with a shrug. “How long are we going to stay here?”

“Good question. A starship is the fastest way to carry the message back home about what we’ve found, so we’d be wise to make it sooner than later. Let’s have a meeting with Ritkers when he returns—you, me, and my lead scientist. Set it up, please.”

Ritkers and a group he led was off with the ETs taking measurements at one of the planet’s poles where some underground ice still existed. There were mixed opinions about whether the ETs had a fighting chance to survive. Binn thought about that as she filed into the meeting. *Maybe sometimes the death of a civilization comes after many blows?* She was familiar with the old concept of Armageddon or a nuclear holocaust. *Sudden self-destruction is not the norm on this planet.*

Binn had time to scratch out an agenda. The Duke showed up first, and then Alf Ritkers with a full beard. *Probably didn’t shave onsite?* They were all starting to look a bit ragged.

“We have to decide when and who,” said Binn. “When should the *Jiang Xiaowan* return? Who should stay and who should return with the ship? For the latter, I have a list of crewmembers with their preferences.” She put the beginning of the list on the screen in back of her. She nodded to the Duke. “As ship’s captain and leader of this expedition, you have the ultimate say, of course.”

He shrugged. “Green is go, red is stay, I presume, for the preferences. Let’s scan the list. Speak up, Ritkers, if you have any comments. Same for you, Binn.”

They went through the list of over one hundred names.

“No problem with any of the stays,” said Ritkers. “The scientists who are staying have specialties that make sense. I wish we had more linguists, though. Sometimes it seems like the ETs are parrots, spouting Human languages without really understanding.”

“Best to stick to one language,” said the Duke. “Binn?”

“I’m satisfied if you two are. There will be enough security personnel remaining—maybe an overkill, in fact. Jibs’s reaction was unfortunate. These guys are basically nonviolent.”

“Not historically speaking,” said the Duke. “I have one problem, though. My name’s not on the list of those staying.”

Binn raised an eyebrow, her dark skin failing to hide the wrinkles appearing on her forehead. “Excuse me, sire. I just assumed you would return with your ship.”

“Your ship now, Binn,” said the Duke. “Your orders are to bring back more scientists, linguists, for example. We have a lot to learn here. You’ll have to screen them carefully because they will be enthusiastic about coming. It’s the chance of a lifetime.”

“And what are you going to do here?” said Ritkers. “Set up digs all over the planet?”

“No. That’s what we’ve been doing for want of some live ETs. No, I’ll be joining a monastery.” He laughed at their surprised expressions. “At least I call it that. A bunch of ETs have formed a group up in the mountains dedicated to the study of the wonders of the

Universe—a planetary science foundation on steroids. It’s the best place to find out what makes them tick.”

“In your opinion,” said Binn.

He looked at her for a moment. “OK, it is a bit of self-indulgence. But I want to connect with these people. We have so much to learn from them.”

“And teach them,” said Ritkers.

“If you’re referring to their up-and-down cycles, they’re mere glitches in this ancient society. These fellows were around when life on Earth was no more than slime living in tidal waters.”

“I respect your choice,” said Binn, “although I don’t completely understand your obsession. I would like to do my duty on Earth, though.”

Sholan Domm kissed Binn once on each cheek. “Give my regards to my father. Tell him to come visit if he doesn’t believe what I found. He probably won’t, though.”

“He’ll probably think the video records are enough,” said Binn. “Are you sure about this?”

“Someone has to study our friends’ culture. It’s the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me. And I can watch their population grow and see them reach for the stars. It’s a bit like looking through a time lens at our own past, don’t you think?”

Binn nodded. “You’ll have a lot more company soon enough.”

“Not before I become the expert. Now I will be respected for my scientific skills, not because I’m the first born of the Grand Emperor. And I will become immersed in their philosophy. My life finally will have some meaning.”

Binn smiled. “In some sense, I envy you.”

She hadn’t told Sholan Domm, Duke of Ermon, of her decision to return with the first group of scientists, not as head of their security group but as support staff. She hoped that would be a pleasant surprise for the man she now respected as if he were her own father.

Chauffeur

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[Note from Steve: This one is in the spirit of the movie *Men in Black* and Heinlein's sci-fi novel *Glory Road*, but a bit more serious and with a few twists. It's also a product of one night's insomnia.]

"Miss Fogg will see you now, Mr. Richardson." The butler opened the door to the library and walked away, returning to the labyrinth inside the mansion.

He hoped the old man would return. He wasn't sure he could find his way out of the old house. He adjusted his Yankees cap and entered. There were so many books, he felt he was in the New York Public Library. Ladders on rails could run along the shelves that reached to the high ceiling. At the other end, in front of an ornate desk, was an exercise mat. A woman was balancing on her head. He moved forward. She waved, flipped onto her feet, and offered her hand.

"Misty Fogg," she said, "and you're Sam Richardson. I have your resume." She went behind the desk and plopped into an antique leather chair. "Thank you for applying. Besides the Army, why are you qualified? A lot of New Yorkers can't drive worth shit."

"I'm from New Jersey."

She checked the sheets. "So you are. New Brunswick. I have no idea where that is. That's why I need a chauffeur. Dobbs is a New Yorker, and he can't drive worth shit."

"The butler?"

"Butler, majordomo, chief steward—call him what you want. With Dobbs and Dora, my house staff is complete. Dora's the cook, and I hire a cleaning service that comes in every Friday. Can you drive a Mercedes?"

"Stick?"

"I don't know what that means."

"Does it have a clutch?"

"No, it's an automatic. A diesel. It used to be considered a green vehicle until the electrics came out. It's a rich woman's car. I'm rich, in case you're wondering."

And also in excellent shape, he thought. "I can drive you anywhere you want in your Mercedes."

"That remains to be seen. I don't want to be involved in any accidents. There are a lot of crazy drivers on the road. They make me nervous. I don't like to be nervous. My life is hectic enough as it is."

Is she so rich she doesn't have to work? If so, why is her life hectic? He'd have to learn that with time—he wasn't about to ask her. "Does that mean you want to examine me for my driving skills?"

She came in around the desk and squeezed his bicep. He was dressed casually—he didn't own a suit—so the black T showed he was fit too.

"Maybe just examine you, period," she said with a wink, "but that can come later. Do you have a girlfriend, Sam?"

"I'm a returning vet looking for a job, ma'am. I have my priorities. Romance isn't exactly one of them right now."

“You’re not one of those girly-men, as the Terminator called them, are you?” She misinterpreted his frown. “Oh, I’m not a homophobe, but I have my priorities too. Wasting time on a good-looking fellow who turns out to be gay isn’t one of them. I’d still hire you, but let’s get everything out in the open. I can be bi, but that’s not a priority either.” She punched him lightly in the gut and watched the abs tense. “When can you start?”

Doesn’t she have other applicants for the job? “Right now, if you want. I need the job. The sooner the better.”

She went back to the desk, looked again at the papers. “You were a flight mechanic. Choppers, I hope. I have one of those toys. It’s parked out back. I’d like you to check it out sometime because I don’t trust the pilots to do it. With your skills, though, why this job? You could work in aviation almost anywhere.”

She’s prying—I don’t need that. “I saw the ad, and it seemed to match my skill set. I’m not saying it would be my first choice, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Ah, the clichés. How I love them. Sam, you don’t look like a beggar, so you’re hired. See Dobbs on your way out. He’ll get you some decent clothes and have them ready for you by tomorrow morning. Be here at eight so you can dress properly. At nine, you’re taking me for a ride in the country.”

“Does your Mercedes have a GPS?”

“Doesn’t every new car?”

“If it didn’t, I’d bring mine. My old car doesn’t have one.”

“Go see Dobbs. Tomorrow morning I’ll have a contract and nondisclosure agreement for you to sign. Be on time.” She went back to the mat and began stretching. “And don’t stare. It’s rude.”

“Two pages to sign and the rest to initial.”

Sam was back in the library. Misty Fogg was behind the desk dressed in a sleek, black power suit. A red blouse with a frilly lace collar completed the wardrobe. He couldn’t see any makeup, and her long black hair was done in a bun.

“This is a lot to read,” he said.

“I’ll summarize. The nondisclosure says you’ll keep your mouth shut about my private life, who I see, and what I do. Who you see and what you do on the job too. The contract says you will chauffeur me and be my bodyguard for \$5 K per month—that’s clean, by the way. I’ll pay your taxes—there’s federal, state, and city here, unfortunately—and you’ll have the same health insurance that Dobbs, Dora, and I have. That’s about it. Oh, and you’re to move here from that hellish abode you call your apartment. What a dung heap!”

“You went to my apartment?”

“Dobbs did. He forgot to ask for your sizes. You have big feet, you know.”

“How’d he get in? The landlord?”

“Picked the lock. He saw the landlord was high on something. I’m ready to report that slum to the health department.”

“It’s what I could afford at the time. What do I do? Break the lease?”

“It’s broken and the penalty is paid. Don’t worry about it. You look great, by the way, except for the white socks.”

Sam looked at the socks in his tasseled lawyer-style loafers. “Dobbs forgot to buy black socks.”

“He’ll remedy that. Otherwise you look like Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*.”

“I’ll take that as a complement. About these bodyguard duties? What does that involve?”

“You don’t want to take a bullet for me, love?”

“Not really. I don’t even own a gun. I don’t want to be at the other end of one either.”

“We’ll work into that with time if everything goes well. Right now, just be a chauffeur.” She hooked her arm with his. “Lead the way, James.”

The estate the car’s GPS led them to was located up and off the thruway. It looked abandoned. Part of the roof had caved in, and shingles were missing. Old paint was peeling. The yard was overgrown.

“Drive up the driveway, Sam. Stop under that oak.” He did as Misty requested. “Pop the trunk and wait here.”

He watched in the side mirror as she took a duffel bag from the trunk. She removed an armored vest and smock like a surgeon’s from the bag, put on the vest, and put the smock over it. When she took out an automatic rifle and sword, he began to get nervous. *What’s going on?*

As she passed his driver’s window, she smiled at him. “Be patient. I might have to negotiate.” She looked at her Rolex. “If I’m not back by eleven, hightail it out of here and return to the house. Dobbs will take care of the rest.”

Good Lord, what is she going to do? He watched her climb the steps to the porch, gun in hand, sword at her back like a Samurai.

She was back in ten. There were splotches of green all over the surgeon’s smock and on the sword she held at her side. The rifle was now on her back. “We negotiated, but it didn’t work out.” She went to the back of the car, wrapped all her equipment in plastic garbage bags, and put it all back in the duffel. When she slammed the trunk, Sam jumped. He was almost in shock. *She must be some kind of assassin! But what is the green stuff?*

He kept stealing glances at her in the rearview mirror all the way back to Manhattan. She kept smiling back at him, but it was a strange, knowing smile. *God, she’s creepy!*

“That was an excellent soup, Dobbs. My compliments to Dora.”

Dobbs smiled, nodded, and removed the soup bowls.

She sat at one end of the huge dining table; Sam, still dressed like James Bond, sat at the other. So far, he hadn’t had much to say.

“You’re the silent fellow but a good driver. I like that. I saw the way you slowed down when you spotted that state trooper. The last thing I need is a trooper going through my duffel bag.”

I bet! “I slowed to the pace of everyone else. That way they don’t know who to stop, and one usually wins the statistics game.”

“An interesting concept. You’re also a smart fellow.” She bit into a slice of French bread, chewed, and swallowed, studying him all the time. “I’ll bet you know all the erogenous zones in a human female.”

He put down his glass. “I didn’t see gigolo in the contract I signed.”

“I thought you didn’t have time to read it.”

“More like I needed time to think about it. I’m a speed reader. And I have an eidetic memory. The latter is a problem sometimes, especially when your friends are blown to hell by IEDs.”

She shivered. “This planet’s warfare is still primitive.” She flashed a sly grin. “I use that to my advantage, of course.”

“What did you do in that house?”

She shrugged. “My job. We’ll talk about it over cognac after dinner.”

Dinner was steak and roasted asparagus. After an excellent *baklava* for dessert, he followed her into the library. They sat in one corner diagonally across from her desk in two comfortable wing chairs, each with their own reading lamp. Dobbs brought them cognac. She studied him over the rim of her brandy sniffer, her nostrils wriggling in pleasure from the vapors. He thought it was sexy. *Maybe she’s Bond, and I’m her conquest for tonight?* While that appealed to him, there was still that aura of creepiness he had felt during the return to Manhattan.

He took a sip and decided to lay out his doubts. “I’m thinking you’re doing something illegal, Misty, and I don’t want to be any part of that.”

She laughed. “Oh, please. Your courts couldn’t even begin to handle what I do. They can’t even keep up with the high tech cases.” She sipped and swallowed. “Have you been keeping up with science enough that you’ve heard about all those planets being discovered?”

“Somewhat. Geeks and nerds seem excited about them. I think there are hundreds, right?” *Interesting change of subject.*

She nodded. “And many more that haven’t been discovered, just in our galaxy alone. It’s amazing to me that you people are so complacent about it.” She took another sip; he waited, sensing she was going to continue. “A sphere centered on Earth with a radius of 1000 light-years contains about 20 million stars. Even if just 1% of those have Earth-like planets, that’s a lot of planets.” She smile at him.

“You’re not going to tell me you were abducted by ETs, are you?”

“Heavens no!” Her laugh seemed genuine.

She passed a hand in front of her face. He spilled the cognac. That beautiful human face had become a gray mouse-like face with fur surrounding leathery, ebony skin. She did the hand thing again, and the human face returned.

“I was sent here with Dobbs and Dora,” Misty said, seeming to enjoy his discomfort. “But we need human help. In a big crowd, it’s hard to maintain the body mask for all possible observers. I’m willing to do the dirty work, but gathering all the intel isn’t easy either, especially in those situations.”

Sam stared at his pants. Although he knew it was cognac, he put one hand in his lap to cover the embarrassing damage. He took a sip from what remained in his glass and cleared his throat.

“This isn’t some party trick, is it? You’re leveling with me?”

“Sam, there are many humanoid groups populating the galaxy. Contrary to the opinion of your NASA, ESA, Chinese, and Russian scientists, you don’t need spaceships to get around. That’s low tech. And some of those humanoids and even nastier non-humanoids see innocent Earth and its human population as easy targets. The water dragon I killed at that house was a serial killer wanted on over one hundred planets. She sucked the life force out of every sentient she could and absorbed all its memories. They are evil incarnate. Fortunately, few are left. Now one more is gone.”

“You’re an interstellar vigilante?”

“Something like that. Samurai? Guardian? Posse of one? There’s no appropriate name in English or any other human language. I’m also a princess from the court of—” The word she uttered sounded throaty and garbled, containing whistles and clicks. “Dobbs is my uncle and Dora is my cousin. The key question here is: Would you like to help us?”

He finished the cognac and stared at her for a bit. “What if I say no?”

“That’s your choice. I would have to apply a bit of mind-wipe then. It’s painless, except that you won’t be able to remember the last few days. Please be assured, we’re doing this to protect you humans. You’re basically innocents in spite of your warring ways.”

“Am I allowed a trial period? I’ll admit I’m intrigued.”

“Of course. And you can bail anytime, in spite of what your contract says. Of course, the nondisclosure is real until I can do the mind-wipe.”

“I’d love to see you take me to court about that, but it’s not even necessary. Who would believe me? I’d sound like those UFO nuts.”

“There are no UFOs. Only portals.” She gave a thumbs-up. “Check in with Dobbs tomorrow morning. He’ll begin your training. It will be intense.”

She stood and stretched. With her hands on her hips, she still looked ravishing, but he realized that he’d only seen her true face, not the rest of the body. The face hadn’t been monstrous—just strange. He remembered the eyes. They were sly, more like a rat’s than a mouse’s. He knew that was a false interpretation, though, a trick of his brain to get past the strangeness, if what she said was true. *These ETs are looking out for us.*

“I have to make a quick trip to Patagonia,” she said, “but I’ll be back in a day or two. If Dobbs gives the OK, we’ll then move on a more challenging assignment.”

“Where?”

“Beijing. You’ll remember there are a few crowds there to contend with.”

“Will I have to kill an ET? I don’t know how to do that. I don’t know if I could, even with Dobbs’ training. I’m just a mechanic.”

“We don’t always kill the bad guys, Sam. Sometimes they listen to reason. You just never know, though, when they’ll get me, and you’ll have to step in and fight for your life and your own kind. No outcome is certain in these cases.”

With that, she left the room, leaving him to wonder if he had wrecked an expensive antique chair by spilling the cognac. The self-criticism didn’t last long. Soiled slacks or chair was the least of his worries. But he was now filled with a purpose he hadn’t had since returning from overseas.

2035

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[Note from Steve: Extrapolating current events to the future can be dangerous, but I wrote this tale as a warning.]

Regional Governor Ricardo Sandoval kept one eye on the protests in the NADA capital of Atlanta as he answered his videophone, the red one he generally kept under lock and key. It needed a thumbprint and voiced password.

His counterpart, Regional Governor Desmonda Bailey, appeared on the screen.

“Yeah, I’m watching. NADA’s propaganda machine is whipping them into a frenzy. I’m more worried about the massing of troops on our borders. Our only recourse might be the battlefield nukes.”

“A last recourse, but I agree,” said Bailey. “Our small forces would be overrun by those fanatics.”

“At least NADA’s generals have two fronts to divide their forces, but you’re at a geographical disadvantage, Desmonda. They can roll across the Adirondack chain a lot easier than the Sierras and our other western mountains. Maybe the sanctions weren’t such a good idea.”

“Nonsense. Their Great Leader started paying attention when we voted them in. They were a logical first step for trying to make him come to his senses. I don’t know what our next steps should be, but I’m not about to let him and his hordes overrun our Region.”

“I’m with you on that. But my security team warns that they might take out our satcom. We have to be prepared to act unilaterally unless we can agree on something now.”

“Let’s define some plans, old friend. My people warn me this could escalate fast.”

The two leaders worked for an hour and a half, coming up with plans that both the Eastern and Western legislatures would pass given the emergency. They worked from scenarios already prepared and studied, originating in their collaborative defense departments.

When they finished, Sandoval told his aid to call for his limo. The trip to the capital was walkable, but the limo was used to keep his security detail happy.

During the trip, which took more time loading and unloading of security personnel on each end than travel time, he went through some historical antecedents he might include in his speech.

Things had gone to hell fast beginning in 2017. That contentious election for president had unleashed pent-up hatreds that had smoldered for years, even decades. *Perhaps inevitable*, he thought. *Reason and logic went the way of the dinosaurs.*

One thing led to another. The country had already been divided between the East and West Coasts and the rest of the country, the so-called red and blue states, except in that election some blue ones had turned red and then became purple as they oscillated back and forth in future elections creating tremendous instability. People no longer wanted to discuss their politics and dedicated all their energies to hating their opposition. Eventually the Eastern and Western Civil

Rights Regions were formed to reflect and protect the East and West Coast views while the rest of the country became the North American Democratic Alliance, or NADA, the use of the word “Democratic” having a déjà vu with the official name of East Germany used so many decades earlier.

The wall on the southern border was extended to several places on the Regions’ borders to complement the geographical barriers. NADA’s armed border patrols killed anyone trying to cross in any direction, another parallel with East Germany. The Eastern capital, New York City, was connected to the Western, Sacramento, only by plane. No diplomatic relations existed between the Regions and NADA. That was more a parallel with North and South Korea, which was ironic because Korea was now unified and one of the few countries in Asia that was a strong trading power with both the Regions and NADA.

How much the world has changed since I was a boy in East LA, thought Sandoval. Conflict in the Middle East had ended when the oil ran out there. Russia had become more peaceful and more of a partner with countries in Europe, including Ukraine. China was even busier pouring money into combatting the damage to its climate created by its run-away industrialization; they had little time to make trouble, although their greedy form of capitalism held sway in all of Asia except Korea.

Sandoval wasn’t sure what the prelude to Bailey’s and his plan should be. He ended up keeping it simple.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Western Civil Rights Region’s Legislature, we have a problem. At this moment NADA’s forces are massing on our borders, readying for invasion. NADA’s self-proclaimed leader is whipping his followers into a frenzy. Governor Bailey and I have come up with the following plan.” He outlined the plan’s important points. “Each member has a copy of the full legislation we propose. It’s a reactive plan, not a pro-active one. As commanders-in-chief of our joint forces, we have taken a cautionary approach. That hasn’t worked so far, of course. The sanctions against NADA were only used by their Great Leader to urge his people to fight. If you approve our plan, though, history will be with us and relegate him to historical insignificance. I ask for your votes.”

The vote was unanimous for the first time in the Western Region’s history after the constitution created the two Regions and how they were governed.

“It’s starting,” said General Wilson, nodding to the split screen where satellite feeds showed the troop movement on the two Regions’ borders.

“It’s time for a decision,” said his counterpart in the East. “Governors?”

Bailey looked as bad as Sandoval felt. Their claustrophobic bunkers didn’t add to their comfort. “They will release their missiles from Atlanta,” he said.

“They aren’t very reliable,” said Wilson. “Some of us will survive.”

“I’d much rather be in New Zealand right now,” said Bailey.

“They’ll eventually receive the radiation too,” said Wilson’s counterpart. “Your decision?”

“Take out the advancing troops all along the border,” said Sandoval.

“Agreed,” said Bailey.

And thus begins World War Three, thought Sandoval, on the North American continent this time.

SAMPLE

Snug Harbor

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[Note from Steve: Sci-fi explores new worlds. It can also explore new social structures and consider new forms of life. This tale does both.]

Not all the colonists awoke. Cryosleep had a risk that compounded over time, and almost two centuries is a long time. Adriana Cisternino-Cho had to decide whether to eliminate her husband's name. James Cho had died in transit.

The exobiologist threw herself into her work as soon as she recovered in the huge ship that was in orbit. She didn't want to think of the bodies that were spaced and sent to burn up in the new planet's atmosphere. Others needed to visit the psychologists. She'd stopped going after two sessions. Nothing was going to bring Jimmy back.

The starship *Vasco da Gama*, the sixth colony ship a dying Earth had launched, had been assembled in LEO. It used standard technology developed over two centuries of exploring Earth's solar system augmented in scale to match the size of the ship. The AI had kept watch over its cargo of a fifty-member landing crew and thousands of frozen embryos. They had parked the ship in orbit around the fifth planet of another system.

Only thirty-three of the skeleton crew had survived. Tests showed all the embryos were probably OK.

Dyads and triads had formed among the survivors who had lost their significant others. Adriana wasn't interested. It seemed that only yesterday Jimmy and she said their goodbyes and entered their cryochambers. *You knew the risks, girl. That doesn't make it any more bearable!*

Although the tests showed all the embryos were probably OK, she wondered about their future. If the planet wasn't a feasible home for a colony, everyone would die, unless there was some possibility of reprovisioning the starship. *Hundreds of more years in cryo? I'd rather die!*

Two exobiologists were in the first shuttle party to zoom in on the planet, more of a survey crew that checked out five possible sites in more detail. They had done all the surveying and probing they could do from orbit.

"More land area than Earth confirmed. Mild climates are commensurate with axis tilt, but polar regions are stable. Oxygen levels in agreement with normal photosynthesis of local vegetation, which is abundant. Omnivore herds are plentiful in interior plains of continents."

The AI summarized their findings ad infinitum. Adriana almost dozed. After it finished, Scot Cobb, their temporary leader, said, "Any comments? Adriana? Don?"

"We saw herds but no predators," said Don Chang.

"That's an oddity," Adriana said in agreement. "There has to be some mechanism to control their numbers."

"Food shortages?" said Scot. "When those strange grasslands are wasted, maybe the herds die off."

"A possibility," said Adriana. *Why am I so agreeable?* She didn't buy Scot's conjecture. *I must be tired.*

“There might be some lemming phenomenon,” said Don. “It will be interesting to study.”

“Will we be able to eat anything on the planet’s surface?” said Roberto McLane, an exogeologist.

“Let’s hear the AI’s ranking of the landing sites and see if we agree with it,” said Scot.

After some discussion, they agreed with the AI’s first choice of a site about ten degrees north of the equator on a rolling coastal plain where a low chain of mountains separated them from the vast grasslands in the center of the continent.

A landing party was formed and a second shuttle trip was made. Adriana was the only exobiologist among the seven.

They spent five days surveying the area and feeding data to the AI. On day six, Scot made the decision to land most of the remaining colonists, leaving only him and three others on the ship with the AI. A new star colony was born.

They named the site Snug Harbor because it faced a huge bay with a narrow entrance that reminded people of Earth. Of course, about two-thirds of the survivors were from Mars, but the Red Planet had no oceans, so they were indifferent to the name except for those who had developed a high opinion of some special sites on the home planet.

Adriana imagined the place to be similar to some South Sea islands with their blue waters, gentle waves, sparkling beach, and warm climate. No swimming was allowed, though. That was Adriana’s call. Someone would have to determine what kind of life existed under those gentle waves. That was a task for later.

They needed weeks to prepare the site. In the interim, Scot and others would decide how much of the ship’s cargo to unload and when. The AI could make orbital adjustments forever, but eventually it would be a colonist too. At that point the huge ship would become an empty and cannibalized skeleton that would orbit the planet for years, but the orbit would eventually decay.

Adriana dreaded that day. The *Vasco da Gama* was their only connection to home. But she never returned to the starship.

They also voted on a name for the planet. Although it had more land area than Earth, all recognized that the sea would be very much a part of their lives for some time, so most names proposed were related to oceans in some way. They finally settled on Ariel, whose grandfather had been Poseidon. Adriana had liked Xi Yuanyuan, but people shot that down as being too long.

While Scot had agreed with Adriana that no one should go swimming just yet, they all would relax at the end of a hard day’s work and wade in the shallows. Sometimes bonfires on the beach were set and some colonist would break out musical instruments they’d brought on the journey. That helped her mood. Jimmy had loved music as much as she had.

Ariel’s days turned into artificially defined months and years, the months were one-tenth of Ariel’s orbit time, which determined its year, about two hundred and ninety of the planet’s days. Adriana lost track of the time, though, and was busy cataloguing local flora and fauna and helping the medical personnel set up the huge sheds where the embryos would be brought to term in groups of twenty.

She was bolting down an incubation tank when Scot came to see her. "People are wondering when they can swim. We haven't seen anything threatening in the bay."

"That would correlate well with the general lack of predators. We still don't understand that, not that we've spent too much time analyzing it." She thought a moment. "I might be the only one to have scuba diving experience. We have the equipment. I guess I should explore a bit."

Scot smiled. "You took the words right out of my mouth. How are you doing by the way? People are a bit worried. Others who lost loved ones to the cryo seem better adjusted. You seem distant all the time."

"I miss Jimmy, that's all. Maybe others move on faster, but I bet the pain is still there."

Scot nodded. "I suppose so." He started to leave but then turned. "I'm not sure I'm OK with having you dive alone. Let's talk it up and see if anyone else has diving experience. It wouldn't be a bad skill to have here either. Maybe you should offer a course."

She smiled. "That can be arranged. But after our losses, can we really afford to lose any more? Everyone in cryo had backups as far as their multiple skill sets are concerned, but the cryo deaths were random. We don't have any drive techs left, for example. I suppose someone could learn it from what's stored in the AI's memory, but we'd have been in a crunch if this planet hadn't worked out."

He frowned. "We still don't know if it will work out. I'm not completely cannibalizing *Vasco da Gama* until we do."

Adriana had often pondered how coincidental it was that Ariel's DNA scheme was similar to Earth's. There was a difference in one building block, but processing made what was available locally edible to humans. That didn't stop them from planting Earth crops. The next step would be to bring to term embryos and fertilized eggs corresponding to Earth livestock. She smiled. *We will all become farmers!*

The DNA might be similar, but evolution was important too. Why were there no predators for the beasts in the strange herds in the interior? What strange creatures might be in Ariel's oceans? There was a whole exobiological sphere to explore. The full exploration would be the job of their descendants.

These thoughts ran through her head as she headed out into the bay on the rubber dinghy, its rugged motor having an easy time with the gentle waves. *This place is a great one to go sailing.* She had suggested that before, but Scot had torpedoed the idea. He wanted to know what was underneath before people started sailing around the bay.

Paula Lyons was with her, a computer specialist who had some diving experience. She would be Adriana's backup. Adriana considered herself lucky. Going down alone would have been challenging, almost claustrophobic.

They were about equidistant from the beach and the mouth of the bay when Adriana cut the motor and anchored.

"Are you ready?" she said to Paula.

"Not as much as you are, but I'll have your back."

They went backwards into the water and sank below the waves.

The waters were teeming with life, from water plants to multicolored fish unlike anything found on Earth. They dove deeper. Paula saw the debris field first and pointed. Adriana nodded.

It was more familiar than the underwater flora and fauna—large chunks of metal as if some jet liner from Ariel had crashed into the bay. They seemed to radiate from an epicenter, so Adriana swam towards that. Paula followed.

They soon spotted the sunken metal dome. *The roof of something? The upended soup plate of Poseidon?* She gestured for Paula to follow.

On the beach side of the dome there was a huge rent. Adriana halted a minute and checked their time. She had enough to take a peek. She gestured for Paula to hover outside and entered the structure.

It was a tomb. She found ET skeletons in what looked like a control room and the rest of the structure. Large, humanoid skeletons with three fingers and thumb and four toes. Different rib count. Her exobiologist's eye took it all in.

She checked her time. They had to surface.

"I never imagined first contact to be like this," Scot said after Adriana made her report in the community tent. Paula and she had made several more dives. "So a bunch of ETs crashed on Ariel before us. Earth would love to hear that."

"At least the UFO nuts would," said Dan with a growl. Everyone laughed.

"I'm not sure that affects our decision," said Adriana. "I'd say people can swim and sail in and on the bay as they see fit. I just don't want the remains in that ship disturbed."

"Hallowed ground?" said Scot.

"Certainly from the scientific point of view," said Paula. "You'll have to admit it's exciting."

"Do they seem more advanced than we are?" said another member of the colony.

"The ship doesn't look like a colony ship. There were twenty-three in the crew. Not enough for a viable colony."

"Sounds more like a scout," said Scot.

"Which means ETs might come looking for their buddies," said Dan. "Any way to date the crash?"

Adriana shrugged. "I have no idea. It doesn't look like an ancient wreck on Earth, that's for sure. Maybe we'll have a better idea if we bring a few skeletons to the surface."

"I'm more interested in the propulsion system," said one of the engineers. "If it was a scout, they know how to move about the cosmos a lot faster than we do."

"There's another issue," said Dan, looking around the tent. "Were there any survivors? If so, where are they now?"

The result of the remaining discussion was to add many more tasks to everyone's workload.

One task added to Adriana's list was supervising the study of the ETs' crash site. She trained three additional divers as a prelude; they represented five different disciplines. Progress was slow but without setbacks. The engineers remained stumped when it came to the ship's propulsion system, though. "I'm ready to say they flew powered by magic," said one. "But the magic might be in those banks and banks of electronics."

The best estimate for the ETs' crash was five to ten Ariel years ago, an incredible coincidence if it was correct. Adriana put several decades on the error bars, though, but that didn't change how coincidental the occurrences seemed to be. The colonists still believed the ET ship was some kind of scout, so either it came from within the solar system or they had propulsion systems far more advanced than the colony ship's. The AI scoured its recent sensor records but saw no sign of intelligent life anywhere in the solar system, but Scot set up protocols for the AI's constant but background surveillance of the planets in the system with both radar and optical sensors.

One task defined before the discovery of the ET ship was to use newly assembled helicopters to survey their big continent. There were four choppers, each capable of carrying four colonists and a small cargo, but that task was strung out over many of Ariel's months because other tasks had higher priority. That changed a bit when Dan and three others spotted smoke in a small valley midway across the continent.

They were soon flying over a small village.

"Could we have missed it from orbit?" Dan said to his pilot.

"You mean, are they locals?" Dan nodded. "They could be survivors from the ship in the bay. I don't think the AI's survey would have missed this. Its sensors have one-meter resolution from orbit."

"I wanted to hear someone else say that," said Dan. "Let's confer with Scot about what to do."

The decision was made to ignore the small hamlet for the time being but to keep their eyes open for other settlements. The chance that the ET survivors had founded the village would increase if they didn't find any others.

It took seven of Ariel's years for the ETs to find them.

A small child was the first to spot the lone rider. His scream of joy caught the attention of his surrogate mother. Otherwise everyone would have thought the child just had a vivid imagination.

Adriana queried their adult witness. "Was the rider humanoid?" Yes. "What was the steed like?" Like one of the herd animals from the interior plains. "Did the rider match the dimension of the ETs' skeletons?" A shrug. "Did he look threatening?" Too far away. "Why was little Sean so happy to see the rider?" Cowboy stories. And so on.

Scot and others listened to the interrogation. When it finished, a heated discussion ensued. Everyone was curious about the rider, but again it was decided to ignore the lone rider for the time being. They were all involved in the harvest, a necessary chore to keep the colony going. The only consequence was to augment the minimal security patrols around the colony.

"We might be making a mistake," Adriana said to Scot after the meeting.

He eyed her. "In what way?"

"I'd rather have these people, ETs or natives, as friends, not enemies. The children are at a vulnerable age, and we don't have enough adults to protect them in a serious confrontation."

"That village had seven dwellings," said Scot. "That jibes with its being the home for survivors from your ET ship. We outnumber them, not the other way around." He thought a moment. "But you're right. I'd rather be friends with them. You and others should think about

how to make that happen. It's lucky we haven't cannibalized our ship to the point that we can't train weapons on that village. I'll move it into stationary orbit over the site for precaution."

Adriana looked shocked. "That's not being very friendly!"

"I said it's precautionary. Until someone comes up with something else, I'm taking no chances. Our children aren't the only vulnerable ones."

Three months later, there were three riders. They came closer and then turned to ride away. The colony's sentries took pictures. Scot and others were still studying them when Adriana came ashore with the artifact.

"Looks like a projector of some kind," said Scot. He handed it to one of the technicians. "Figure it out. High priority. We might have visitors soon. I want to know more about them. The AI gives a 93% confidence level that the riders are survivors from that ET ship."

"There are few more of these," said Adriana. "They are in a storage cabinet."

"I've been meaning to ask, are there spacesuits? It's hard for me to imagine a ship without them."

She smiled. "We're not sure it's a ship. There's no propulsion system we can see. The engineers are batting around another theory."

"And why wasn't I told?"

She shrugged. "It's just a wild theory."

Scot studied Adriana. "Well? Out with it."

"They think it might be a time machine."

"What? That's impossible! A vehicle traveling through time? Have they been drinking too much of that vodka we're now producing?"

"Not that I know of. I said it's just a theory, but so far it matches all available evidence. There are no airlocks, just a cargo door, so that ship isn't a starship or a submarine. It's just a shell."

"But if it's a scout, how does it get back?"

"The engineers say that they might retrieve it from the future. As I said, it's just a shell, a probe. Being underwater might have made the retrieval impossible."

"But why venture back into the past?"

"Maybe their future is untenable? The planet is dying or something? Or it's just scientific curiosity. We've said that conditions here correspond to a young planet. It wouldn't be a young planet in the future."

"How many people know about this theory?"

"Not many. It's a bit farfetched, I'll admit. But like all theories, if enough evidence accumulates, we'll have to accept it."

"OK. But keep quiet about it for now. Let's see what that projector has in it."

The engineers couldn't figure out how to make the projectors work. They managed to break two of them.

Two years passed before the next sighting. The bay curved around to where a high promontory jutted out into the sea. Adriana had just surfaced and spotted them above the cliffs

where waves were breaking. About two dozen riders were lined up, looking farther out over the ocean, searching the horizon. *What are they looking for?*

She then saw the air shimmer as if a large fog bank had suddenly been created from some strange atmospheric anomaly. An immense version of the underwater vehicle materialized with a sonic boom so loud that several of the colony's beams fell. She wondered if she'd become deaf.

The huge ship floated and slowly disappeared inland, losing altitude. The small crowd of ETs waved at it and followed.

When she arrived on shore, Scot ran to meet her. "What the hell just happened?"

His voice seemed muted and distant. *But I can hear him!*

"Maybe it's an ark from the future?"

"What's that mean?"

"Whether they're from the future or elsewhere, we're going to have to share this world. We have made first contact, Scot."

Part Three: And from A. B. Carolan

Invasion of the Leprechauns

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[Note from Steve: This is the second story with a leprechaun theme. Now you know why A. B. and I get along so well!]

Caitlin O'Rourke rang Sean Brady on her mobile. "They're tearing down that old building off O'Connell. Want to go watch?"

"Better than my doing math problems. I'll meet you at the old corner across the Liffey."

Standing on that corner, she spotted him coming across the bridge.

"How close can we get to it?" he said, a bit breathless. She'd been waving at him to hurry.

"Hopefully not too close. My school uni will get soiled. Come on!"

She grabbed his hand to tug his arm. When they arrived at the doomed building, there was already quite a crowd, but they managed to squeeze up front, ignoring the hostile looks. The show soon started.

A series of booms announced the implosion of the old building. Huge clouds of dust filled the air.

Out of those clouds children ran. No, not children! Little people. A tsunami of them swept over the onlookers, scratching, biting, kicking, and pounding them.

Caitlin and Sean were buffeted around as the crowd fled their attackers. Many people fell, and the waves of little people washed over their bodies.

Sean pulled Caitlin to her feet in time to see the last of them. They were old and wrinkled, complaining and muttering, with many waving canes and crutches. Caitlin stopped one with a red beard and a green suit. "Were you all in that building?"

He hissed and raised his cane. "No brains, like all ye folks. Of course, we were in there!" He was so angry, the tint of his face matched his beard. He pulled out his pocket watch. It was almost as big as his hand and gold with a gold chain. "You children better run along and warn your parents. We'll be going to war with you now, you see. We won't stand for this!"

He left them standing there looking at each other and then at the back of the little man. "What did he mean by that?" said Sean.

By the evening news on the telly, they had their answer. Dubliners had to barricade their doors as the little people poured into the city from the countryside to wage war on city dwellers. The leprechauns' guns only shot hard candy, though, so the children had a field day. After two days of rioting, the mayor met with the little people's leaders. Humans and leprechauns made peace. Within days Caitlin and Sean saw there were only a few leprechauns left wandering about Dublin.

Sean shared a hard candy with Caitlin. "Where'd they all go, you think?"

"To wherever they usually hide from us, I guess. I don't like the peace terms."

"Which part?"

"That every family has to offer up their first-born child."

Sean pondered that a moment. “We’re the first-borns in our family.”
She smiled. “Hard candy for life, and a long life it’ll be.”

SAMPLE

Alpha-Omega-1

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[Note from Steve: Have you read Asimov's *Second Foundation*? I think A. B. was inspired by it to write this short, short story. Or is it a sort of an inverse of "Flowers for Algernon"? After you finish, see if you agree.]

Omega-1191 stared at the image. "It's so small," she said. "Was I once that small?"

Epsilon-9349 laughed. "We all were. All clones start out as one cell. You, I, everyone. Alpha-Omega-1 is exceptional, though, because I've convinced you to go natural—conception with a sperm and an egg. I can't tell you which Alpha provided the sperm, of course."

"We're not violating any laws, are we?"

"None that anyone cares about anymore here on our planet. The Colonization Protocol was a set of rules enacted centuries ago to speed up a colonial planet's population growth. Moreover, it was created on Earth, and Earth is no more, so why worry?" *And a bit late to do so*, she thought.

"It does seem right, doesn't it?" said Omega-1191. "You'll check that there are no genetic defects?"

"Just as we do with standard cloning. Mutations are possible in either case, especially here. Our planet receives a higher cosmic ray bombardment than Earth and also has a weaker magnetic field, diminishing protection from the solar wind."

"Can I watch it grow?"

"Why don't you visit us every two weeks? It's an interesting process."

Alpha-Omega-1 was born 271 standard days later. In three standard years, Omega-1191 watched him grow, and everyone noted he was an exceptional child. He was fascinated with numbers, factoring them into primes and constructing exotic numerical sequences to amuse himself. He also started creating elaborate holographic art forms and complicated but wonderful musical compositions.

"There are mutations," said the doctors. "We have to watch them and make sure they're viable."

At five, Omega-1191 first felt Alpha-Omega-1 within her mind, his feelings of love for her. He could fetch things for her simply by thinking about doing it.

The doctors were worried. She heard talk about euthanizing her son because they considered him a human aberration—not only abnormal but also a mutant. He read their thoughts and later told her they wanted to do that because they were scared.

When Alpha-Omega-1 told his mother they were coming for him, she fled to the mountains with her son.

At twelve, Alpha-Omega-1 left his mother in the mountains.

"Where will you go?" she had asked him.

By that time her son didn't walk or run anymore like normal children. He'd figured out anti-gravity and exhibited many other strange skills.

"I've been reading history, mother," he'd told her. "I've decided to emulate Alexander the Great. He did it all wrong, though. I'm leaving to conquer the galaxy, and I'll do it right."

SAMPLE

Exchange Student

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Truhan had no problem with immigration and customs at the spaceport on Wendall's Planet. He followed other passengers into the arrival lounge and saw a tall woman with a sign bearing his name. He accessed a computer file with the implant in the side of his head. *Misdak Bron from my host family. Mother of Kalin and Roh, wife of Set. Why is she alone?* He'd expected the whole family to be there.

She waved at him and approached. "Welcome to Wendall's Planet, Truhan." She looked around. *Why is she nervous?* "Follow me." They walked out of the lounge to a road filled with cars. A sleek one pulled up. "Please get in."

"My luggage?"

"I'll have someone pick it up for you." She tapped on the dull green icon next to the red; it turned bright green and the red one dimmed. The car moved out.

"Is there something wrong?" said Truhan.

"A bit of political unrest, I'm afraid. My people have elected a new leader who wants to banish anyone not born on Wendall's Planet. They're voting on the bill right now in our planetary congress."

Truhan was familiar with xenophobia. Even on his home planet, some Humans barely tolerated non-Humans. "But I'm Human," he said.

"He doesn't care. He campaigned on cleansing our planet of all foreign elements, including Humans, blaming them for all our problems. It's an old tactic of autocrats wanting to ensure their power, but too many voters agreed with him."

"I wouldn't have come if I'd known there was a problem."

"No one believed he would win. He's already arrested many people. Set and the children are in hiding because Set and I spoke against his policies. You were already on your way here, so I came to meet you. You might have ended up in jail...or disappeared...otherwise."

"What am I going to do? I'm supposed to start classes in two weeks."

"I wouldn't recommend that. Too many students sympathize with the new president and are attacking anyone who's a foreigner, especially ETs, but also Humans. And their parents encourage them. It's as if the president created a mass hysteria."

"How could this happen?"

"As you know, Set is a cultural anthropologist, but even he can't understand it. I'm a microbiologist, so it's way beyond me. All I can say is that Humans can be crazy sometimes."

Truhan nodded. He knew Human history well.

Most of the remainder of the trip was spent in silence. Truhan would have enjoyed the majestic scenery if he weren't worried about his and his hosts' futures.

The road wound into the mountains towering over the capital city. After another hour, the robocar turned off the main road and followed an old dirt road into the woods. After another ten minutes, they came to a clearing with a rustic A-frame cabin in its center.

"This place has been a get-away for my family for generations," said Misdak. "We've always called it that, but the word has a new meaning now."

“How long will we stay here?” said Truhan.

“Until they find us or until people come to their senses and overthrow the despot.”

“What would they do to us if they find us?”

“Unknown. All of us were born here, except you, of course. It’s our speaking out against the new administration that got us into trouble. Some people who were protesting have disappeared. Our new leader is a narcissistic psychopath, so his actions have become erratic. He belongs in a straitjacket and confined to a padded cell.”

“That’s a bit strong,” said Truhan with a smile. “It true, didn’t people know about his condition before the election?”

“Of course. Too many voters turn a blind eye. Set says it’s interesting how otherwise intelligent people can lack logic and reason. Despots are good at manipulating those weaknesses.”

“Throughout all of Human history.” He looked at the darkening sky. *An omen?* “And ET histories too. It seems to be a galactic-wide curse. We’ve had Human colony planets destroy themselves.”

“You’ll enjoy chatting with Set about all this,” said Misdak. She hesitated. “Maybe ‘enjoy’ isn’t the correct word. Would you like to meet the rest of your host family?”

The daughter Kalin was Truhan’s age, sixteen standard years; the son Roh was three years younger. The father Set looked older than Misdak, but Truhan knew they were the same age. He recognized the remainder of Misdak’s family from their holograms, of course, but that was never the same as meeting someone in person.

Kalin towered over Truhan; she was already as tall as Misdak. She seemed shy at first. *A natural reaction when meeting someone new*, Truhan thought. She had the bright eyes, ready smile, and sunken cheeks of her mother, but the dark hair of her father. Roh was much shorter, taking after his father; he also seemed to have excess energy and was ready to take Truhan on a tour of the area around the cabin.

Set’s piercing eyes seemed to be x-raying Truhan for a moment, but then he offered to shake hands.

They were all dressed plainly. *Did they have to leave their home in the capital quickly to avoid arrest?* Truhan decided to save that question for later.

“I’m sorry we have to put you through this, young man. I suspect your aunt and uncle will be worried. Our esteemed leader still believes in trade, as long as it’s on his terms. He’s very selective, of course, but your home planet will have heard about our political unrest by now.” He winked at Kalin and Roh. “While Mom and I prepare some lunch, why don’t you two show Truhan around? Don’t go far, of course.”

“I’m the leader!” said Roh. Kalin winked at Truhan. “I’ll show you the river and the falls first.”

The exploration didn’t quite take Truhan’s mind away from Wendall’s Planet’s political problems, but it helped.

“When it’s hot, we go swimming here,” said Roh when they arrived at the falls. “That’s six meters deep just out from the falls. I can bring up rocks from the bottom.” Roh was almost shouting over the noise of the crashing water.

“My planet’s mostly desert with artesian wells. All our mountains are barren. It’s beautiful around here.”

“We like it,” said Kalin. She found a rock to sit on. “We’ve never been off planet. Tell us about your home.”

“It’s an old Human colony, but now the population is 40% ETs because of the robot factories.”

Roh started rattling off the ET people present on Truhan’s planet. Kalin waved a hand to quiet him.

“Maybe if we had that diversity, these recent election results wouldn’t have happened.”

“History shows they can happen if a despot needs scapegoats for people to focus on,” said Truhan. “There are bigots on my home planet too. They haven’t won any elections, though.”

“Do you have to conserve water there?” said Roh.

“If not wasting it is conservation, the answer is yes. But our population is twenty times yours.”

“And we have more water to begin with.” She thought a moment. “Mother read your essay to us. One of the things you said was that you’re excited about the opportunity to travel and mingle with new people. Father thought there might be more to it.”

“Because I lost my parents?” She nodded. “Accidents happen, and sometimes modern medicine can’t save people when they do. My uncle and aunt are much older than your parents. They’re nice people, but Set is right. I enjoy being with other people, especially people my age. Where we live on my home planet, everyone’s old. And I’m not old enough to strike out on my own yet. Does that make sense?”

“I think that if that happened to me—I mean, losing my parents—I’d withdraw into a shell. How did you avoid that?”

“I didn’t at first. My uncle encouraged me to write, though, and that’s really helped. We can go anywhere in our own imaginations.”

“You two are talking like grown-ups,” said Roh. “That’s boring. Do you have any dangerous animals on your home planet, Truhan?”

Truhan smiled. Roh reminded him of himself when he was that age. *Not so long ago.*

Lunch was an interesting experience, more from the conversation than the food.

“This situation is difficult for Kalin and Roh,” said Misdak. “They were supposed to start school in two weeks along with you. They have to face the possibility that they’ll never see their friends again.”

“Some are jerks, Mother,” said Kalin.

“Sokos’ excrement,” said Roh.

“Roh! Watch your language,” said Set.

“A soko is a large herbivorous animal that roams these forests,” said Kalin.

“I know,” said Truhan. “I spotted a few piles of what Roh is referring to on our way back here.”

“Some kids tried to beat me up because of what Dad said in his speech at the university,” said Roh. “I’m referring to them.”

“Let’s change the topic to some practical matters,” said Set. “We need to continue our drills. If the authorities track us here, we need to be ready.”

Truhan looked around the table. “Where would we go?”

“The Holy Order of Life has a monastery on the other side of the mountain,” said Misdak. “We would have to hike there.”

“Maybe even split up,” said Set. “They would have to divide their forces too.”

“Wouldn’t they just enter the monastery?” said Truhan. “And what is this Holy Order?”

“The monastery is considered a sanctuary by even the most violent and vocal bigots,” said Set. “The fathers came with the first colonists and provided a stabilizing influence in those pioneer days. They have little importance now, but even our president respects their traditions.”

“And those are?”

“As their name indicates, respect for all life in the Universe, no matter what its form might be.”

“Even ETs!” said Roh.

“Especially ETs,” said Set. “They worked within the Tali and Usk societies for years as a civilizing influence. They didn’t play much of a role in the old Human colonies, though, because Followers of the Way were more common there.”

Truhan nodded. Following the Way wasn’t exactly a religion, but it had religious trappings, especially of old Earth religions. It had begun among those Humans who colonized and exploited Earth’s home solar system.

Set cocked his head. “We have visitors!”

Truhan heard the flitters too. They created their escape plans in a rush and were soon out the door. Set and Roh went one route; Misdak, Kalin, and Truhan went another.

Truhan didn’t keep up very well. The heavier gravity compared to his home planet fatigued him, and the first part of their journey was uphill. The mountain wasn’t that high, though, so soon the three were looking down at the monastery.

Truhan did better going downhill. Soon the three were welcomed by an old Tali male and ushered through the gate. Two Human males and an Usk male waited for them in the small courtyard.

“I’m worried about Set and Roh,” said Misdak.

“Did they go the long route?” said one of the Human monks. Misdak nodded. “Then they will be here soon. Come. We were just setting down to wine and cheese.”

Truhan enjoyed the mixed crowd of ETs and Humans. He almost felt at home, but the monastery sat in a lush valley that never could have existed on his home planet.

“The secret police will never touch you here,” said the old Usk who sat across from the three at the long wooden table. “We transmit all our vesper services. If the population ever fails to receive those programs, they’ll know the despot has gone too far.”

“Maybe he won’t care,” said Misdak.

“With him, anything is possible,” said the old Tali, sitting next to the Usk. “But it would end his presidency, I’m sure. Ah, I believe Set and Roh have arrived.”

Misdak looked relieved when her husband and son entered the hall.

“What’s going to happen now?” said Truhan.

Kalin and he were enjoying the view of the misty valley from atop an old stone wall.

“Time will tell. Wendall’s Planet petitioned for membership in the Union last year. Any action taken against the monastery by the despot would torpedo that. I doubt people would stand for it anyway.”

Truhan nodded. His home planet was already a member of the Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets, or ITUIP. *Will the despot be willing to lose all those trade benefits? Will the people of Wendall’s Planet?* He glanced at Kalin. *Of course, there are positives about staying right here in the monastery!*

Homeward Bound

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[Note from Steve: There will be more than driverless cars in the future. I'm sure A. B. got the idea for this story after reading about Jenny Wong's childhood history in *Survivors of the Chaos*, first book in the "Chaos Chronicles Trilogy." All three books have been bundled together and the bundle is now available on Amazon and Smashwords and all the latter's affiliates (iBooks, B&N, Kobo, etc).]

Happy decided she was through with beatings. The welts and open wounds on her back were bright red on her black skin. When Master Cheng stopped whipping her in order to catch his breath, she turned and kicked the old man in the groin and ran.

Her parents had come to the Mars colony because of the Chinese government's promise of good-paying jobs. Just one problem: the Chinese business model when applied to the colony was such that most workers would die of old age before they paid off their passage. But it wasn't old age that killed her parents; both had died in work accidents. She became an orphan, and the orphanage sold her to Master Cheng, who was an accountant for a Chinese firm's branch on Mars.

She ran but didn't know where to run. On the surface outside the tunnels, she knew she would die without a spacesuit, and she didn't have one. Most workers didn't; they were too expensive. But the crowded tunnels, teeming with workers, allowed her to hide in plain sight after she stole a cheap jersey from a tunnel vendor's rack when he wasn't looking. She no longer had to run with her arms crossed over her breasts.

Every intersection had direction signs in Chinese and English on the tunnel walls. She spotted one that said, "Port for Private Yachts." Because Mars had no surface water, she knew that meant space yachts. *Some rich industrialists who visit, Chinese or not, come in small spaceships*, she thought. Her Daddy had told her that. *Could I stow away on one and return to Earth?* Her parents had dreamed of striking it rich and doing exactly that.

Happy was their only child, and they had spoiled her as much as they could. When the colony had started bursting at its seams, the Chinese authorities initiated a policy that permitted only one child. And some had to wait years to receive the license to have one. She was soon lost in a crowd that was headed in the same direction. *Not rich yacht owners but port workers*, she thought, noting the grim look on their faces and simple, drab clothing that matched hers. There were so many that the guards could only randomly check the workers, although they were all supposed to carry a work permit. She was fourteen but looked twenty and had none, but for them, she was just another worker.

Each yacht was stacked into an underground garage comprised of several levels. She'd seen videos of how the system worked. Departing spaceships would join a queue and follow a winding route up through the garage they were positioned in an available launch tube. The tube would be sealed, the top hatch would open, and the yacht would rise into the rare Martian atmosphere without exhaust as the atomics took over.

She milled around a bit and spotted a yacht without workers around it. She approached it and saw its name: *Dragon's Tooth, GenCorps*. She wasn't sure what that meant. "Dragon's Tooth," she muttered. To her surprise, a hatch opened and a ramp telescoped down to her feet. She went aboard, the ramp retracted, and the hatch closed. *Am I trapped?*

There were three levels. The lower one seemed to be for cargo and luggage. There were a few crates lying around. She went up a ladder to the second and found two small bedrooms and a bathroom with toilet, sink, and shower stall. The top level was a control room. *Can I fly this thing?* She'd played with some simulations at the orphanage, but they were mostly for the little shuttles that flew around Mars.

"Hello, Happy. Do you want to go somewhere?"

She looked around. "Where are you?"

"I'm your friendly AI, here and ready to help."

She located the voice's source—a speaker above the control panel. "How do you know my name?"

"Data error: I believe it's called a nickname. I can read your ID tag buried in your shoulder and was able to access your records."

"Do they already say I'm a runaway?"

"Data retrieval: Here are some laws you've broken." The computer rattled off some colonial laws and ordinances. "Observation: Running away isn't in your record, though. Not yet."

"Is stealing a space yacht also against the law?"

"Yes. You're not my owners, so you would unlawfully be taking their property, namely me."

"Does that matter? You offered to take me somewhere?"

"My owners had me programmed to ignore local ordinances. I'm free to extrapolate that to taking you wherever you want to go."

Observation: Not so smart, these owners. "Take me to Soweto then."

"Calculating...that's not possible. Alternative: System Terminal in South Africa is the nearest spaceport on Earth to your proposed destination."

"Go for it."

Happy hopped into a luxurious chair in front of the control panel, ready to enjoy the ride. She wondered what a real shower would feel like. *Mommy and Daddy, I'm going home!*

Refugees

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[Note from Steve: One thing I immediately liked about A. B. Carolan was his wry humor. He sent this very short short from Cork, Ireland. Didn't say what he was doing there, but I imagine some pubs were included in the visit.]

Grigl materialized in an alien vehicle that was flying over an ocean. It didn't seem to be an efficient way to move lots of passengers because there was a lot of wasted space. A female alien passed right through her/him; she didn't seem to notice. She/he shimmered and vibrated a bit and continued to move about the flying boat, taking it all in.

It was her/his fifth solo mission. If successful, she/he would earn her/his first merit badge and pass to the next maturity level. She/he would never be able to bear the embarrassment of being held back, so all her/his surveillance sensors were operating at max.

One male alien who was stretched out in an oversized chair had strange fur on the top of his head and looked a bit too bronzed from the starlight falling on the planet. He said, "Get me the DHS secretary. We have to stop this nonsense!"

The sounds meant nothing to Grigl. But she/he understood the thoughts behind the words. *Is this the planet's leader?*

Other aliens seemed to fawn over him. He seemed to enjoy it. One handed him some kind of communication device.

"Kirstie, honey, I want them turned away. ASAP." There was a pause. Then: "Yeah, I know. Mothers and children. So what? I made a campaign promise. Those Mexicans will destroy our country."

Grigl saw the leader was watching a wall display that showed mostly alien females and young loitering about in some kind of camp. *How nice. A picnic. But wait! These aliens are suffering.*

She/he probed the alien leader's mind—it seemed completely disorganized and full of contradictions—and found a better place for the suffering aliens to have a picnic. She/he teleported them all onto a wide, green expanse in front of the leader's abode. For good measure, she/he then made all the aliens' primitive weapons around the planet, including those this leader prized so much, vanish into another dimension.

She/he then returned home, feeling good about providing the suffering aliens with a better and bigger picnic place.

Were you successful? the nest asked Grigl.

Yes. I now feel I deserve my first merit badge.

Very well. We concur. You can now pass to the next level. By the way, your choice of destination was a bit dangerous. That planet isn't a nice place to visit. The intelligent lifeforms there aren't so intelligent, especially the current leaders. The one you met, in particular. But you did your good deed. That's all that matters.

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Note from A. B. and Steve: You have just finished this collection of speculative fiction stories. We hope you enjoyed reading them. We're honored that you have chosen to do so. If you haven't done so already, see the list of other free PDFs you can download on Steve's "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at <http://stevenmmoore.com>. Please also consider some of our other speculative fiction that has been published:

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The Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries...

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Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By

Goin' the Extra Mile*

*To be published in fall 2018

Clones and Mutants Trilogy...

Full Medical

Evil Agenda

No Amber Waves of Grain

*Chaos Chronicles Trilogy**...*

Survivors of the Chaos

Sing a Zamba Galactica

Come Dance a Cumbia...with Stars in Your Hand!

**The whole trilogy is now bundled together in The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection

Other novels from Steve...

Soldiers of God (bridge between the above two series)

More than Human: The Mensa Contagion

Rogue Planet (set after the "Chaos Chronicles")

Other collections...

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape (Volume One)

Fantastic Encores!

A. B.'s Books

The Secret Lab

The Secret of the Urns

All these books are sold on both Amazon and Smashwords and the latter's retailers (Apple, B&N, Kobo, and so forth). For more on the books and other information, see Steve's website: <http://stevenmmoore.com>.

Email newsletter: Steve sends out one every once and a while. Sign up for it using the contact page at his website <http://stevenmmoore.com>. Why? It's packed with news for readers and writers. And there are special ebook sales ONLY FOR SUBSCRIBERS. And don't worry. Steve won't divulge your email to others.

SAMPLE

And now for a special treat, a preview of Steve's novel *The Last Humans*, a post-apocalyptic thriller coming from Black Opal Books in 2019...

[Note to readers: This excerpt is taken from the middle of the novel. Penny Castro, ex-USN and ex-LA county sheriff's diver, has managed to survive the apocalypse and is currently surviving the aftermath. She's forced to live with her adopted family in a refugee camp near Edwards AFB. She has just returned from a dangerous trip north of Bakersfield made to fill tankers with water for the base...]

One week later I learned the truth in the adage that you can be a victim of your own success. Even though I'd insisted that I didn't want any more violence in my life—the trip to the Valley was more about curiosity almost killing this cat—the USAF now considered Ensign Penny as an asset, although a reluctant one.

"I've never been to Vandenberg," I told Rodriguez.

He stood before me looking a bit forlorn. Couldn't see him well from my camp chair with the blazing sun at his back. "If it's any consolation, I tried to dissuade the colonel because I know you don't want to participate."

"Why do they think I'd want to participate?"

"One major reason: we airlifted someone from the Santa Maria area who had managed to cobble together a coded message we could recognize and broadcasted it at a radio station."

Thought of my own broadcast. Wondered if it was still hitting the airwaves. Thought a moment more. "I'm guessing he's from Vandenberg."

"She. There's a top secret satellite there Cheyenne Mountain wants us to recover, and she knows where it is."

"So *La Femme Nikita* will be our guide to recover something completely useless?"

"Why useless? Cheyenne Mountain doesn't think it's useless. She doesn't either."

"How are you going to put it into orbit, flyboy?"

He upended a pail and sat near but still facing me. He looked around. "We—she thinks there's still a rocket ready to launch there." His voice was a whisper.

"Gee, why don't you just use it to pay back the jerks who did this to us? Or bring back the astronauts and cosmonauts for burial?"

"The rocket can't handle that kind of payload. Besides, the satellite is more important."

"Describe it."

"I can't, but it will help this country get back on its feet again."

"You mean that no comsats are online?"

He hadn't changed expression when I made that deduction. "They're still up there, but the Mountain can't wake up all of them. There's some evidence that enemy anti-sat missiles blasted the silent ones with EMP bursts just before the others carrying the plague hit the West Coast. And they weren't just comsats that were affected. I can't talk about details. Many of them are missing anyway. Key people who knew a lot died at the Mountain too."

"I'll need details."

"You won't get them. You're considered a civilian."

"But why should I help you then?"

"Because our survivor says your brother is in the group that took over the base. She barely escaped."

My brother is alive! “Wait! You want me to convince him to surrender? No way. I can’t do that. Is that your second reason?” He nodded. “My brother and I have been estranged for years. I don’t want to even see the SOB again...ever!”

“Would you at least talk to Rebecca?”

“Is that the woman from Santa Maria?” He nodded. “Why would that accomplish anything?”

“You’ll see. Just talk to her. That’s not her name, by the way. We created an alias just for you.”

“Gee, thanks, for all your trust.”

“Looks like you could use some of this,” said Ben, sitting a half-filled bottle of Dewar’s on our little camp table that evening. Made our little tent in the refugee camp seem more homey.

“Only if you share some,” I said.

He pulled up the other camping chair. “You need it more than me, although I’ll take a few sips. Want to talk about it?”

I didn’t care about national security. Alejandro had said it: *I’m a civilian!* I told Ben everything I knew. “What should I do, Ben?”

He took a sip—I’d already downed half a water glass—and thought a moment. “It’s your decision, but I’d consider it an opportunity.” He waved a hand in a circle. “Everything has changed. The reasons for your estrangement with your brother are irrelevant now in these terrible times. It might be worthwhile to mend fences with the gentleman.”

Gentleman? I smiled. My Ben was such a gentle soul. How could he know how Bobby had treated Mom, how he took sides with Dad, and what a controlling jerk he had been in my life?

“You’re focusing on my brother,” I said. “What about that satellite?”

“If they’ll use it to beef up comlinks, it might be justified as a way to stitch the country back together again. Right now Hannibal and his jet pilot friends are about as good as the Pony Express was before telegraph and the railroads. All the com here is pretty local, unless somebody is willing to chance bringing TV and radio stations back online. Don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“Maybe having the whole country connected wasn’t a good thing,” I said. “People would just get on their soapboxes and proselytize and other people would get angry about it and do the same thing. Smaller groups might get along better.”

“From a sociological and anthropological point of view, you might have something there. Homogeneous tribes got along because members who didn’t were thrown out. That’s easier to do within a small group. But even Native Americans, Egyptians, Macedonians, Greeks, and so forth formed cities, states, and empires, ones often evolving into despotic regimes.”

“Ben, I don’t need a history lesson about why human beings suck,” I said. “Small groups are like big families.”

“And big families can be ripped apart by contrary actions and opinions,” he said. “Yours is a case in point.”

“Which is why I’m very happy to have had the opportunity of choosing my present one,” I said with a smile. I’d long ago decided that Ben and Sammy were my family. Talk of my brother disturbed me.

I spent a night of insomnia thinking about my choices, even in the throes of my drunken stupor. I didn't want to make a decision. I didn't want to think about the USAF, the Navy, my government, or my brother. And I didn't give a rat's ass about Cheyenne Mountain.

The next day, Alejandro took me to see Rebecca. I think he would have done it even if I'd committed right away, but not doing that made it also a meeting for her to try to convince me. I was left in a small conference room somewhere in some base building in Edwards. Figured it belonged to security because it looked like an interrogation room in my old sheriff's substation. Waited about five minutes until there was a knock at the door. A woman entered, moved slowly around the table, and took a seat opposite me.

"You can call me Rebecca," she said, placing hands palms down on the table's edge. She seemed to be focused on the wall behind me, her gaze about six inches over my head. *Huh?* I then noticed the hands. They were prosthetics, maybe the best I'd ever seen, but prosthetics nonetheless. "You have heard the general outline of our problem. I'm here to answer your questions."

"I'll call you Becky," I said. "You were picked up in Santa Maria? Were you at Vandenberg?"

"Yes. I'm a scientist. I was working there and living in Lompoc."

No expression. I stood and went to the window to peer through the blinds and bars at an expanse of tarmac, much of it now sprouting weeds in the cracks of the asphalt and concrete, about the only thing that managed to grow without water, although even the weeds looked dry. Her eyes didn't follow me.

She continued. "It's no different than other bases. Andrews and Edwards are in better shape, though."

"You follow my sound. Are you blind?"

"I'd probably be called just 'legally blind' years ago, but that definition was used by the authorities. Now it doesn't matter."

"Did that happen on Vandenberg?"

"Yes. A small group wreaked havoc, especially among the scientists. We were blamed, you see. I and a few others escaped."

"Did you build military satellites?"

"Some of them. The one we want to launch in particular. Do you want me to elaborate on what we'll use it for?"

"Military communications?"

"For now, the government is the military, and it's handling most of its communications piggybacking on the military's. This satellite will aid in that process and help bring the country back together."

"And you think that's a good thing?" I watched her body language. I had some interrogation training when I became a deputy. She didn't realize that I was interrogating her; she probably thought she was there to convince me.

"It will help. It's not the complete answer." Her sideways response to my question annoyed me. "There will be no quick solutions." *Roger that!* "We're doing the best we can."

"We? After all that happened to you, you're still ready to aid the government? Don't you think they share some of the responsibility?"

“Perhaps. After careful analysis, though, I think they don’t share much culpability.”

“You’re blind and with prosthetic hands, and you still say that?”

“Our government didn’t do that, Penny. I lost my eyesight and hands in an explosion caused by the group I mentioned. I survived. Many of us didn’t.”

“OK, why me? I have no favorites in this fight. I just want to live whatever life I have left in peace with my family.”

“Your brother was one of the leaders in that group.”

I returned to my chair and buried my head in my folded arms on the table. *Oh, Bobby, what have you done?*

I felt like crying because I could understand Bobby’s sentiments. I often figured that somehow our government had failed us. Supposed the Vandenberg scientists and technicians were the obvious scapegoats. *Maybe all over the world? Maybe in whatever country or countries that launched the missiles carrying the plague?* Politicians will pay scientists tons of money to do their dirty work, but that didn’t mean they were responsible. The politicians were like the pimps, the scientists like their whores.

“OK, tell me what you want me to do,” I said to Becky.

Note from Steve: You have just finished *Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape*, Volume Two, a collection of speculative fiction. A.B. and I hoped you enjoyed the stories. We know it's hard to write a review of a collection, but if you can, or at least mention it to friends, please do so.

Volume One is available on Amazon.

If you enjoyed reading this free PDF, please check out the list of other ones available—you'll find it on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at my website <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

Please check out all our longer mystery, thriller, and sci-fi novels (for descriptions and review excerpts, see the website indicated above):

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"ABC Sci-Fi Mysteries" (by A.B. Carolan)

The Secret Lab

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Mind Games

Other books...

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Pop Two Antacids and Have Some Java (collection)

Fantastic Encores! (collection)

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape (Volume One) (collection)

*To be published

**Bridge novels between series

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

About the Authors

Steve Moore writes sci-fi, mystery, and thriller stories. He has written many novels; some of them are in six series. His published short fiction is found in three collections and an anthology. His stories reflect his keen interest in the diversity of human nature that he has observed in his different abodes across the U.S. and in South America, as well as in his Latin and European travels for work and pleasure. His interests include music, physics, mathematics, forensics, genetics, robotics, and scientific ethics. He also has an active blog where he posts about reading, writing, and the publishing business, writes book and movie reviews, and does author interviews. He and his wife now live just outside New York City. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.

Irish author A. B. Carolan is a collaborator of American author Steven M. Moore. They met at Blarney Castle in Ireland. A. B. loves writing for young adults and adults who are young at heart. Some Donegal neighbors think he's related to that great Irish harpist, Turlough O'Carolan. Others say he was stolen and raised by leprechauns. They do a lot of kidding in Donegal. Connect with him using the contact page at Steve's website: <https://stevenmmoore.com>. Or follow him on Goodreads.