



The Complete Alpha Dreamer

**All 34 Science
Fiction short stories
by expert dreamers.**

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MY PLAN PERFECT

An alien scouting mission takes a twist when two “specimens” are brought on board.

TERROR WAR III – JOURNYMAN’S LESSON

Two transit cops are stuck on a train bound for disaster.

DRIVING THE TRANQUILITY ROAD

Bobby McCoy wants to be the top freight driver on the moon.

RADIO

Shannon Redwine never expected to fight for her life when she got her new radio implant.

INVASION

Mankind came to plunder a planet, but every treasure hides a curse.

ONE LAST TIME

Holmes pursues Moriarty to regain the Shanshadar stone.

TIME TWIST

It was a simple time mission, but Chuck wanted to even an old score.

FU2

An alien pet isn’t all he seems to be.

BAD GODS

They seemed to be Gods to the natives, but to John, the pirates were a way to get home.

ABSOLUTION

Through the eyes of several watch-beasts, the forest stalked the struggling intruder.

THE SWITCH

When Timothy O'Brian's own wife double-crossed him, he was headed for prison and torture.

THE SINGER IN THE WOODS a *BigTree* story

Andy was an odd boy, but he had one talent.

LUCID DREAMS

Which life is a dream and which is reality?

APIHELION

Jenny was a space ship nearing Neptune and Mike her only "crew". Can love come of such a match?

THE PRECIPICE

Spano was a herder with dreams beyond the tribe's valley.

THE FIFTH EDGE

When Jason's molecular structure got blasted sideways, his future looked very dim indeed.

COLONEL HATCH'S BLUE HORSE

Hatch had enough problems fighting Rebs without the addition of a blue alien in his HQ.

HEAT

Johnny's a "hit man" who hates heat. So why is he looking for his victim on the sunside of Mercury?

THE CAMELFORD PROBLEM

The crew of a survey ship finds that if it looks to good to be true, it isn't.

THE RETURN OF FRANCIS T. McCRACKEN

Heroism is something that can transcend cultures, or even species.

ACROSS THE IRISH SEA

Those who ignore history are bound to repeat it.

DARK VOICES

Disembodied voices from the stars strip away all that Steve holds dear.

TIME TO REMEMBER

Time travel didn't work out well for Mary

RIPPLES IN TIME

When is a mirage not a mirage?

ARSE AND ALL

Charlie's client gave him a great container for smuggling. But there was a hitch.

VOICES

Saving a life can have unintended consequences.

NAIVITE

The power of stupidity should never be ignored.

SURROGATE

Metal can replace the flesh, but how about the heart?

LLANDOR A GUARDIAN

Jane was a superwoman and the object of Llandor's lust. Could he join the ranks of supersoldiers to win her?

DEMON BATTLE

Llandor stands between the invaders and Earth. Can he survive?

TERROR WAR III – THE EXTREMIST

In terror wars of the future, some will take the fight to any extreme.

GOD WHISPERER

In the frontier of Mars settlers learn redemption never comes without sacrifice.

SCHRODINGER'S GRANDFATHER

**Gottfried went back in time to set his life right,
but small choices create large consequences.**

ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

**Did humans ever exist? Are there any left? Dedo
wanted to know. Maybe the Siferi could help.**

The Complete Alpha Dreamer

**Edited by
Al Philipson**



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For Sue. Thanks for putting up with me all these years.

A big “**thank you**” to all the talented authors who worked so patiently to create this fine collection.

And another thanks the editors and staff at AKW Books for their time, patience, and help.

My Plan Perfect

by Al Philipson

"Beings those two, you think?" Gaidang pointed to the screen.

"Two? Nothing I do see." Ikala was confused. The picture transmitted by the probe showed native plants and soil, but none of the indigenous beings who dominated the planet.

"An adjustment make I will. To infra red show." Gaidang touched a couple of keys and the scene shifted. The heat from two bodies leaped out from the background.

Ikala turned to Gaidang. "The eyes of a hunter have you," she said and watched him preen at her praise, raising the decorative spines on the top of his head. "Agree I. Here bring them," she indicated the compartment used for alien specimens.

Gaidang maneuvered the quiet probe drone behind the two aliens and opened the lower cargo hatch.

A puff of gas and a short time later the probe spun on its axis. It sped silently to the orbiting ship where the two Alatta waited.

Ikala stepped back after they'd stripped the unconscious aliens and viewed the two. "Female seems to be the smaller and male the

larger. This way did they develop why? Illogical it is. Larger must be females, young to carry."

Gaidang looked up. "Nevertheless, correct seems to be your supposition."

Ikala shook her head in agreement. She loved working with Gaidang. "Their bodies note. Us than shorter, thicker. Very thick necks have they."

"The muscles on the large one, note," he replied. "Very strong must be it. But us like mostly, the hair for except."

Ikala marveled at the obvious strength of the large one. She had a sudden urge to be away from the danger it represented. "Their clothes leave we will." Ikala picked up the pack and primitive hunting weapons of the larger while Gaidang did the same with the smaller one's gear.

Begins my plan perfect now.

Ikala watched on her monitor as the two recovered from the sleep gas. The larger awoke first, looked around quickly, then bent to examine the smaller. It pressed its fingers against the small one's neck, then picked it up in both arms, moved over to a wall and set it gently onto the padded deck. Ikala marveled at its obvious strength. It constantly scanned the compartment as it moved about.

It then went to the pile of clothes, donned its clothing, retrieved the rest, and covered the smaller.

As she watched, the smaller alien stirred and then sat up with the larger alien's help. The smaller one looked around and made some noises to which the larger responded. Ikala listened carefully and turned on a recorder. Her careful plan required that she learn their language as rapidly as possible. Fortunately, it sounded like one she would be able to pronounce.

The larger alien faced away as the smaller donned clothing. Then both prowled the perimeter of the compartment, probably looking for a way out. They moved past the entry hatch and the hatch to their sanitary facilities without detecting them.

Ikala looked up from her notes as Gaidang entered the compartment.

"Your work is coming how?" he asked.

"My plan according to," she answered, then waved at the screen. "The mess they have made have you seen? The sanitary show them we must. A stunner obtain you," she indicated the locker that held a small armory. She rose from her desk and waited while Gaidang grabbed a stunner and joined her. She placed her thumb against the scanner and the hatch slid smoothly into the wall.

The aliens looked up as the hatch opened. The large one leaped to its feet and jumped in front of the smaller.

Gaidang entered first to cover Ikala from the hatch, which closed into the wall without a seam. Only the hatch's symbol gave a clue to its presence.

Ikala held both of her hands out to show that they were empty, then glided over towards the hatch to the sanitary. As she passed near the two aliens, the larger lunged toward her with a shout!

Gaidang shot it with his stunner and it dropped onto its face, well short of her. Ikala struggled to conceal her fear. If the alien had reached her, it might have been capable of tearing her apart with its bare hands. She breathed deeply through her nose to calm her racing heart.

The smaller one uttered a different cry and started toward her, but checked itself, as Gaidang aimed the stunner at it.

"Hold," Ikala said to Gaidang. She backed away from the body of the larger one, opened her 4-fingered hands and spread her arms.

The smaller one looked at her, then at Gaidang. It took another tentative step toward its fallen comrade, then looked toward Gaidang, who lowered his stunner.

Thus reassured, it crept to the larger to examine it for damage and then it looked up to Ikala.

Ikala stepped back to rejoin Gaidang. "Wait will we while recovers it."

A short time later, the large alien regained consciousness and sat up with the help of the smaller. It groaned and placed a five-fingered hand to its head.

Ikala stepped forward and waved her right arm from her chest, past the aliens and stopped pointing to a far corner.

The smaller spoke to the larger and helped him over to the indicated corner.

Ikala then walked over to the sanitary hatch and touched the hatch symbol. The hatch slid into the wall revealing the sanitary, which consisted of a small compartment equipped with a sanitary hole, a sink with a single water fixture, and a sonic shower.

Ikala pointed to the smaller alien and swept her right arm toward herself.

It only took a short time to show the alien how to operate the sanitary, food dispenser, trash chute, and the cleaning supply cabinet.

Ikala left the cabinet open, backed away two steps, pointed to the smaller alien, then to the mess they'd made in one corner, and finally to the trash chute.

"Gaidang Come, their labors leave them to we will."

"Intelligent seems to be the smaller one," she said as Gaidang replaced the stunner, "and dangerous less possibly. Their language tomorrow will begin to learn we." She glanced

at her monitoring screens and noted that the two aliens were industriously cleaning up the mess and sanitizing that area. Her carefully made plan was going well.

Ikala pointed to herself and said, "Ikala". Then she pointed to the smaller alien seated across the table.

The alien paused for several heartbeats, then pointed to itself and said, "Sally".

As each spoke, their words appeared on a screen to Ikala's right. The words of the alien were in phonetics, while Ikala's appeared in Alatta.

The alien pointed to Gaidang, who stood well back on the left side of the table with a stunner ready for use.

Ikala said, "Gaidang". Then she pointed to herself with her right hand and towards Gaidang with her left and said, "Alatta". After that, she pointed towards Sally and the image of the larger alien on one of the monitors.

Sally replied, "human".

The voice writer kept a written record of Ikala's notes along with the sounds, both phonetic and actual, the alien made in response to Ikala's prompting. Ikala would point to an object, wait for the alien to identify it, then would say the word in Alatta for her notes.

After 20 cycles, Ikala was beginning to grasp the rules of Sally's language. She was

actually able to hold simple conversations with Sally who seemed eager to help.

According to Sally, she was indeed a female and her companion, Bronc, was a male, and Sally's race were peaceful hunters and farmers. Sally seemed in awe of the two Alatta and eager to cooperate. When Ikala deemed it safe, she introduced Sally to the Captain.

Catana, the Captain of their small ship, spoke at length with Sally, using Ikala as an interpreter. Sally seemed quite impressed.

Five cycles later, Ikala and Sally were chatting fairly well in the alien's language. Ikala watched Bronc, who was running around the security compartment, the sound of his boots slapping against the padded deck audible over the monitor. She turned to Sally. "I have seen that when you and Bronc talk, I cannot know what you say to each other, Sally. Is there something gone from my learning?"

Sally looked over to the monitor that Ikala had been watching. "Bronc is not comfortable speaking English. His native language is called Igpay Atinlay, so we usually converse in that language."

"Your race has more than one ... ah ... language?" Ikala was intrigued.

"Oh, yes. Our world has hundreds of languages.

"And you speak all of them?"

"No," Sally lowered her eyes, "only a few, and not all of them well."

They spent the rest of the session discussing the nuances of English and the conditions on Sally's planet, while Gaidang lounged in a chair, reading a scroll, his stunner in his lap, occasionally interjecting a comment. Ikala's plan was working perfectly.

The next day Sally asked, "Why are you so interested in our language and about Earth? What do you want?"

Gaidang, who had picked up a bit of English himself, looked up from his scroll. "Did she what say? Suspicious is getting she?"

Ikala explained Sally's question in Alatta. "Think do you what her should tell we?" She was glad that Sally hadn't seemed to pick up her language as it allowed her to talk to Ikala freely.

"The truth, certainly not," Gaidang replied. "Cease would all cooperation if about the invasion finds she."

"Happy should be she that not to destroy her planet decided we," Ikala said. "Fire one planet buster would be easier it and home go."

"Well, said the captain home start we this day we sleep before," Gaidang said happily.

"Excellent!" Ikala said. "Arrive when we, a full intelligence report to give I should be able. Well goes all my plan." She turned to

Sally. "We intend to open trade talking with your planet. It should help both of our races."

"So, what is next?" Sally asked.

"Gaidang just told me we leave for home planet this very day. We will introduce you to our trade c ... c ... uh ... council when we arrive for starting talks."

"Us? We are not traders."

"It is not important. These will be preliminary -- is that the word? -- yes, preliminary talks to find what you have that we would be interest in trading for, and what we have that your world would value."

"How long will the trip take?" asked Sally, apparently eager. She stood up and prowled around the compartment. Gaidang looked up briefly, then went back to his scroll. He was used to Sally's restlessness by now.

"About 20 days. We can keep talking during the trip."

"20 days? This must be a huge, powerful ship to go to another star in such a short period of time."

Gaidang shrugged his shoulders in amusement. Apparently he'd understood enough to be amused at Sally's overestimation of the size of their small ship.

"How many people does it take to run this vessel?" Sally's eyes were wide with what Ikala had learned signaled amazement. She resumed her seat.

Gaidang actually snorted. "Disappointed would be she if fly itself can all but she knew this small vessel and too many by two are three of us. It could operate, a child read it could as long."

" True, but her should humor we her cooperation to achieve." She continued to Sally, "Forty beings are needed to operate this vessel. It is quite ... uh ... comp ... oh yes, ... complicated, but very reliable."

"Is it a warship?"

" You can conceive than more warship," Gaidang said quietly.

"No, Sally, this is a com -- com -- what is the word?"

"Commercial?" said Sally.

"Yes, thank you, a commercial vessel. We use it to exploring for new trading partners." She paused. "Is 'exploring' the correct use of the word?"

They spent the rest of the day refining Ikala's English skills.

After returning Sally to the security compartment, Ikala stayed a while to watch the two aliens interact with each other. She still couldn't understand what they said although some of the words had a haunting familiarity to English. *Maybe the two languages spring from similar roots.*

After a while Bronc approached Sally and took her head in both his hands, then slowly twisted it to one side.

Sally shook her head, said a few words as she rubbed her neck, and then did the same thing to Bronc. After that, Bronc nodded his head and bared his teeth in what Sally had told her was a smile. Apparently the twisting was therapeutic or pleasurable in some way. When the two settled down for a meal, Ikala grew bored and left for the companionship of her two shipmates.

The next day was much like previous sessions. Gaidang lounged in a chair with his nose in a scroll while Sally and Ikala talked about English and Sally's world.

Ikala was pleased she was obtaining so much good intelligence about "Earth". She told Gaidang of her intention to recommend the conquest of the planet. "A fine place to live will it be and fine slaves and a workforce will make the humans. Fairly docile seem they, the females especially. And strong workers will make the males."

Their bonus for this trip should be enough for them to retire in luxury for the rest of their lives. Ikala was toying with the idea of building a luxury home for herself on Earth with Sally as her head servant.

"Actually, the United Nations is not much of a world government." Sally continued a conversation they were having. She seemed a bit nervous and paced about the compartment. She stopped near Gaidang and

stretched, apparently to calm herself. "It's ... oh, I am sorry, you do not understand contractions yet," she turned to face Ikala. "It is a meeting place for..."

Suddenly Sally whirled, grabbed hold of Gaidang's head and twisted it viciously. Ikala heard a loud snap.

As Ikala stared, dumbfounded, Sally grabbed Gaidang's stunner, spun on one heel and aimed it at her. It was the last thing she remembered for a while.

"It worked just like you said, Sarge." Ikala awoke to the sound of Sally's voice and a splitting headache.

"You did it just right, Lieutenant," replied Bronc's voice from behind Ikala. "I figured his scrawny neck would be easy to break."

Ikala tried to rub her temples, but her hands wouldn't move. They were tied behind her.

Bronc moved into her line of sight. "What next, el-tee?" He held a stunner in one hand and wore some of the equipment he had when captured.

"Find the Captain and deal with her," replied Sally. "She's the only other one on the ship." She handed something to Bronc. "If you have to kill her get both thumbs."

Bronc went to the hatch and pressed the thing Sally had given him to the hatch symbol.

To Ikala's amazement, it opened and Bronc darted through in a crouch.

She looked up at Sally. "What happened?"

"Simple. I zapped you with Gaidang's stunner, then freed Bronc," said Sally.

"How? The door will not work for you."

"I dragged Gaidang over to the door and used his thumb," Sally pulled her usual chair over and sat on it.

A dozen questions fought for Ikala's attention. "Then how did Bronc operate the exit hatch just now?"

Sally grinned like a feral animal. "Gaidang no longer has his thumbs. We figured he didn't need them any more, what with being dead and all."

"Why did you do this?" Ikala cried as her world crumbled.

"To be slaves do not want we," Sally said in Alatta, which shocked Ikala out of her grief.

"Alatta speak you?" Ikala almost sobbed with fear.

"A language expert am I," Sally said.

"English were learning while you, Alatta was learning I." She paused and leaned forward.

"And it read I can well as."

Ikala switched to English. "And Bronc? His English now seems perfect."

"Always was," Sally leaned back. "Igpay Atinlay is what we call 'Pig Latin'. It's just a child's variation of English."

The hatch slid back and Bronc walked in. "The Captain put up a fight," he held up two bloody thumbs as he stopped and looked at Gaidang's corpse. "We'll have to dispose of the two bodies before they start to smell up the place."

"I can probably figure out the air lock and we can space them," Sally said. "With the Captain's thumbs I'm sure we can remove Ikala's clearance and keep her comfortable in our cell."

Ikala allowed her heart to start beating again. She would live! "What are you going to do now?"

"Well," said Sally, "since you've been so kind to supply the ammunition and we're already going there, I think we'll just dump one of your planet busters on your home world."

Ikala almost fainted.

"By the time we get this heap and you back home for the spooks to examine," Sally continued, "we should know where your other worlds are and we can either bust them or free the slaves and let them revenge themselves."

"But you said you are peaceful people," Ikala grasped at her last hope.

"Hardly," Sally laughed. "Bronc and I are soldiers. We were spying on an enemy when you snatched us. Actually, Master Sergeant Bronkowski is Special Forces. He's one of the

best warriors we have. He can whip his weight in wildcats and not even work up a sweat."

Bronc grinned at the praise.

Ikala's head fell to the deck as tears streamed down her face. Alatta was doomed and she could only hope to be an imprisoned lab subject for however long she was allowed to live.

Perfect is not my plan.

Terror War III: The Journeyman's Lesson

by Richard S. Winder

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Sam and Dan moved through the grand concourse of the LA Z-terminal like a well-oiled machine, just like they owned the place. Sam took the left side of the crowd, and Dan the right. Walking briskly, they briefly scanned the queues at the ticket counter for trouble and slipped passed them to the pre-screening area for security personnel. After the short formalities, they went down the main escalator to check the regular security gate.

The screeners at the x-ray machines stiffened when they saw the two transit cops approach. Most of them knew Sam and Dan by sight, and knew that these genetically enhanced transit cops could smell fear and catalog it far more efficiently than any bloodhound. They were a walking invasion of privacy. The two men stood like silent statues in drab gray suits, observing every passenger, every satchel, every word whispered.

Eventually, they made a test pass through the scanners. Alarms lit and weapons were clearly indicated, but a prescreen code flashed, and the screeners let Sam and Dan enter the secure area with barely a nod. As the

men departed, the screeners were visibly relieved.

“What do you think?” asked Sam after they cleared the screening area. Sam was a kind of short, dumpy man, getting on towards the end of his career, losing his hair, and increasingly wondering about early retirement. Dan’s youthful vitality kept him hopping.

“The new one at the left scanner,” replied Dan. “Carol. Smoking dope about a week ago, I think.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I caught it too. Very nervous, that one. I’ll have the super talk with her. What about the passengers?”

Dan shrugged, absent-mindedly running a hand through his dark blonde hair. “The usual suspects,” he said. “That lady with the bag of knitting, I’m sure that she’s been around gunfire. But there were also farm and game animal smells, so I’d say she was out doing some hunting. She must have come in on a connector.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Next you’ll be telling me the make and model,” he said.

“Remington thirty-ought-six, heavy bush load,” said Dan. “The animal scents were horse, cow, and, I think, coyote.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah, but what kind of cow?”

“I don’t know,” said Dan, awkwardly. “Should I know that?”

Sam laughed out loud. "You know, I really wish that they had those memory enhancements when I joined the force. Total recall would really come in handy some times."

"You mentioned that before," said Dan faintly, and then, "Excuse me, will you?"

They were just coming to the bottom of another escalator. Dan broke free to talk to a woman standing by the Z-line platform. Sam recognized her as a conductor who often worked on this route, waiting to take her place on the night shift when the train arrived.

The older man shook his head, found a bench, and waited for the train. He tried to relax and read, but old habits died hard, and he found himself furtively scanning most of the patrons while everyone waited for the arrival of the next liner. Just as Dan rejoined him, he heard his cell phone buzz, glanced at the number of the caller, and responded.

"What's up, Muriel?"

"Where are you, Sam?"

"I'm at the L.A. terminal, waiting for the two o'clock run. I should be in New York about six o'clock your time. Why?"

"You forgot about the financial counselor? At seven thirty?"

Sam swore. "Yeah, I forgot." He looked at Dan, but the younger man chose not to

comment, and instead watched for the arriving transport.

“Sam, you promised that you were going this time. You said you’re through with Transit. If we’re going to make this early retirement work, we’ve got to get those accounts straightened out.”

“That may take a while.”

“Darling, don’t drag it out. Just like you said before, we’d both be more comfortable if you had a safer job. Even if it means less income, you’re burned out, they don’t appreciate you any more, it’s time to get out. Look, you don’t have to commit to anything. Let’s just go see the man tonight, and see what our options are. Please? I’d like a chance to have the old Sam back. The one that couldn’t wait to get up in the morning.”

Sam paused, and then made his decision. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Meet me at the station, we’ll make it to the appointment. I’ll listen to what the man has to say.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” agreed Sam. “Look, train’s here, I gotta go.”

People were stirring impatiently. The arrival and departure of a Z-liner was always a big production, a spectacle to behold even if it happened every twenty minutes. A carefully choreographed parade of service personnel performed their assigned duties, and to Sam it always seemed that they were dancing to

some secret clockwork beat. Cleaners, conductors, and security personnel all moved about to some unknown rhythm, increasing the tension of the wait. The plain stripe of yellow paint next to the track suddenly blazed into a brilliant yellow line of light. A uniformed guard warned some teen-aged boys to get back behind the line. In the left hand tunnel, a wickedly streamlined nosecone with headlights appeared. The magnetically levitating Z-liner came to a stop, with only the barest whisper of a streamlined breeze to accompany its passage.

The show was in full swing now, with passengers boarding and conductors assisting them with their satchels. The interior of the train was shaped like a large, squashed tube, and conductors there were busy assisting passengers with the bent u-shaped restraints that would hold them in place during transit. There were two ranks of seats in the middle of the train, with each seat facing an exterior wall. More seats lined the exterior walls, facing inward, and aisles ran along either side of the central seats. Once the safety restraints were in place, the seats swiveled to allow the passengers to face forward. The two cops sat together in the center seats.

“So, lover boy, was that a security check you were doing with that conductor?” asked Sam. The train departed through the dark tunnel, and up into the bright, sunlit city.

“Eva,” said Dan. “Her name is Eva.”

An announcement explained that this was the direct line to New York, and their relative position appeared on digital displays at the head of the car. They were traveling one hundred and twenty-four kilometers per hour.

“Eva,” said Sam. “Where’s she from?”

“Don’t know yet,” said Dan.

Sam laughed. “A word of advice?”

Dan smiled. “You’ve given me four thousand, seven hundred and twenty-six words of advice,” he said. “Why should they stop now?”

Sam snorted. “Just listen, will you? With this Eva, you better do it the old fashioned way.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, get your mind out of the gutter. I’m talking about not using your talents around civilians. I was about your age when I saw Muriel at a restaurant. I followed her scent all the way to Brooklyn. When she found out how I tracked her down, she was *furios*. Still is, truth be told. There’s a fine line between looking someone up and stalking them. Ask this Eva for her number before you do something you’ll regret.”

Dan was silent for a while. “You’re probably right,” he said. “Was that Muriel on the phone?”

“Yeah. I forgot that we’re seeing the financial consultant tonight.”

“You’re going to take a package?” asked Dan.

“I’m thinking about it. All these genetic modifications add up to a pretty nice severance deal.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine working for Transit without you here, Sam. I don’t know how we’ll manage. Terror War III will never end.”

“You’ll manage,” said Sam.

“Will you?”

“Oh, yeah,” mumbled Sam, but he said it with very little conviction. It was obvious that he wanted to talk about something else as he scanned the passengers around him.

Dan laughed. “Do you ever shut down, Sam?”

Sam lowered his voice to a hushed tone that the other passengers couldn’t hear. “You never shut down son. Any one of these nice civilians could be an Equalizer.”

“Yeah, but they only bomb the stations. We’ve never actually had one in the trains,” said Dan, also lowering his voice.

Sam was oddly quiet for a moment, and then said, very quietly, “You’re wrong. The tube collapse we had on the north tunnel five years ago.”

“May twenty-fifth, twenty-one sixty seven. It was a failure in the steel reinforcing structure,” said Dan.

“No.”

“You know this for a fact?” asked Dan.

“I investigated it,” said Sam. “Maybe they’ll tell you about it some day.”

Dan frowned. “Every time you tell me things like this, it makes me wonder if I’m working on the right side.”

Sam snorted. “Both sides want power, and they’ll do anything for it. They wants it, they do. *Gollum*.”

Dan chuckled. “You’re not bitter or anything, are you?”

Sam snorted again. “Look, there’s a huge difference between reckless deceit and premeditated mass murder. We *are* working on the side of the angels. Just remember that it’s strictly at the operational level.”

Dan was silent for a while, watching the map as the train passed Indio at three hundred and twenty-five kilometers per hour.

Sam eventually resumed their conversation. “Muscleman over there with the bald top. He worries me. Did you smell anything on him in the luggage line?”

Dan thought for a moment. “No, he came after the knitting bag lady. One satchel, medium-sized, brown, no distinguishing marks, no particular scents.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s bothering me. I was closer than you. I didn’t smell anything, as in *anything*. I didn’t realize it until now.”

“Pretty odd,” said Dan. “Here we go. The first airlock.”

The train dove into the mountains, and worked its way through the regularly spaced airlocks of the main Z-line vacuum tube. There was a small vibration, the slight pressure of acceleration pushing the passengers against their seats, and the speed display below the map switched units to show a velocity of zero point twenty-two kilometers per second. The bald man began to fiddle with his restraining harness.

“Dan,” hissed Sam.

“I see it,” said Dan. The man was straining, bending the restraint away from his body.

Unable to remove his own restraint, Sam reached for his cell phone to alert the engineer and cabin crew. But the phone was already buzzing, along with Dan’s.

“Yeah, Transit Security” said Sam, as Dan listened in on his own phone.

A familiar, worried voice responded. “Hi Sam, Tom here. We’ve got a problem.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got a problem back here, too.” Sam tried to reach his gun, but the holster was pinned under the restraint. Incredibly, the bald man bent the restraint and freed himself. Looking neither left nor right, he jumped from his seat to move

toward the rear of the train. Sam tried to trip him, but it didn't work. He then tried the emergency release for his seat restraint, without success. He spoke into his cell phone again.

"We've got some happy idiot free of his seat and wandering towards the back of the train. Our seat releases aren't working, and we can't get out."

"Good grief, what the hell's going on?" replied Tom. "Central just told us that all of the controls west of Chicago are down. The failsafe power's locked on and we're at full throttle. Our liner's a runaway!"

Sam absorbed the news in shocked silence, and then continued with an urgent plea. "You need to unlock us. *Now!*"

"Our emergency release tool is missing" replied Tom. "We're sending Eva to locate one."

"Get a wiggle on!" growled Sam.

The speed display at the front of the cabin read zero point seventy-eight kilometers per second, when the phones signaled again.

"Go," said Sam, as Dan listened in on his own phone.

"It's bad," said Tom. "Central just told us that the Equalizers hit a kilometer-long section of tunnel west of the Des Plaines River crossing, about eighty kilometers west of downtown Chicago."

“So they’re trying to destroy the trains?” asked Sam.

“No,” said Tom. “It’s way more than that. It looks like they’ve undermined the tunnel and part of the bridge, where the grade stops rising before the river crossing. Sam, our end of the tunnel is an open gun barrel pointed straight at the city, and we’re sitting inside ninety tons of bullet-shaped harm headed right for a few million people. They’re saying that it looks like we’ll graze the east bank of the river hard enough to lose structural integrity, but the liner’s mass will be deflected upwards because of the shape of the cave-in and the sloping grade at the far end. With controls offline, our speed will be insane. What’s left of the train will hit the west side of Chicago about ten seconds after we leave the tunnel.”

Sam’s face seemed to compress decades of worry into a single, focused moment, and the tension swirling around the two transit cops was almost palpable.

“We need to find out what’s in the back,” said Sam.

“Nothing,” Tom replied. “Food stores, galley, some toilets for the crew, and the receiving equipment for the onboard entertainment and private communications or whatnot. All the vital stuff is up front.”

“Would the onboard entertainment include any navigation information?” asked Dan.

“For the map displays, yes,” said Tom.

Dan turned to Sam. “With precise navigational information, a bomb could be exploded just as the train leaves the tunnel, before we’re completely wrecked.”

Sam looked confused. “So? What’s the point?”

Dan continued. “With a sufficiently powerful bomb exploding in the front of the train just as it hits the bank, the whole thing would be dispersed by the explosion. We’d be like a giant shotgun.”

Sam had a horrified expression. “With ten seconds of scatter, they could take out a fair slice of Chicago.” He snarled with a sudden realization. “The maintenance guy grooming the front of the train. Short blonde guy. You were near him when you were with Eva.”

“Yeah,” said Dan. “His ID tag said John Smith. I can’t recall picking up any scents from him, now that you mention it.”

“That’ll be the bomb,” said Sam. He returned to his call. “Tom, our man in the back is an Equalizer, but he’s going to relay timing information to a bomb up front. Look everywhere in the control cabin. Pull every vent and console cover you have to, but find that bomb!”

Eva appeared at the front of the cabin, scurrying towards their seats with a large lever-shaped device in her right hand. The

display at the front of the cabin read one point twenty-seven kilometers per second.

She bent to insert the lever at the base of Sam's seat, and Sam exploded from the restraint almost the instant it was unlocked. Without waiting for Dan, he drew his weapon and dashed to the rear of the train. Passing through a series of doors, he finally faced the door to the last cabin, which was firmly locked. Peering through the window, he couldn't see anyone on the other side.

Sam called Tom. "I need access to the back of the train, but the door is locked."

After a moment, Tom replied. "The keypad on the right side of the door. Key in Charlie, Bravo, Tango, India, Zulu, Foxtrot."

Sam pressed the keys, but the door opened unexpectedly before he finished. A muscled arm shot out low, at an awkward angle, and dragged him into the rear car. Sam fired a shot blindly, but another hand grabbed the gun, and took it from him.

Sam managed to get to his feet to confront his assailant. He could see an access panel behind the man was torn loose, and there were wires dangling from the area behind it. Struggling to free his gun with one arm, he used his other to land a fierce punch on the man's head with a solid *thunk*. With inhuman strength, the man slammed Sam against the cabin's opposite wall, and fired the weapon. Blood began to soak the left side of Sam's

shirt, from a wound below his rib cage. Sam tried to stagger forward and fell as the smell of gunpowder filled the cabin. The bald-headed thug raised the weapon to fire again, this time at Sam's head. Hearing approaching footsteps, he instead turned to close the door as Sam reeled and stumbled. There was the sound of his weapon firing again, towards the interior keypad controlling the door lock. Sam passed out.

When he revived, Sam saw the strong man sitting against the wall beneath the open panel. Wires were leading from the panel area down to the base of his skull. His eyes seemed vacant, and he had the drooling, slack-jawed expression of someone in a trance.

Biocircuits, thought Sam.

The relay of critical information to the hidden bomb was apparently underway, via a human radio. Sam heard a pounding sound, and saw Dan's face at the window of the door. Dan held up his fingers to indicate numbers—first three, then four, two, four, five. Sam glanced at the ruined door lock, and then towards the rear of the cabin, at the lock for the rearward hatch.

He looked forward again, and Dan was nodding furiously, pointing towards the rear hatch.

Sam nodded, and slowly slid to the rear of the cabin without attracting the terrorist's

attention. Using a vertical post, he pulled himself toward a spare crew seat at the rear of the cabin, and slumped into it. Clearly, his enemy was preoccupied. He pulled down the safety restraint, took a deep breath, and entered the numbers into the keypad.

When Sam pressed the last key, the room seemed to explode, and the bald strong man was sucked out the rear hatch, along with everything else that was loose in the cabin. Air was torn from the cabin and from Sam's lungs, and there was one brief, terrifying instant where the bomber's bloody hand could still be seen in the gap of the closing hatch. Sam gave a quick kick, and the hand lost its grasp. Air pressure swiftly returned as the rear hatch sealed.

Sam looked at the bloody smear left on the rear hatch by the desperate bomber's hand. "You're under arrest," he managed to gasp, before passing out again.

As Sam regained consciousness, he found himself lying in the Z-liner's control cabin, with Eva on his left, and Dan on his right. Eva was dressing his wound, and he could see that a first-aid kit was strapped to his abdomen. Many glistening tendrils were snaking from the kit into his body.

"Ah, you're back," said Dan. "Don't try to move too much. The kit says you'll probably

make it, but we need to get you to a proper medical facility ASAP.”

Sam turned to Dan. “The bomb?”

“They found it behind an instrument access panel,” said Dan. “We tossed it out the hatch, too.”

Sam managed an expression of visible relief.

“The cave-in?”

“The Des Plaines crossing is coming up in seven minutes,” said Tom, sitting in the engineer’s seat in front of them. His hair was sweaty, and the controller sitting next to him was also looking wilted. Sam saw that even Eva’s blouse was soaked with perspiration.

“It’s warm,” said Sam.

“Our guys outside managed to blow off some emergency vents to create an atmospheric gradient,” said Dan. “That way, we won’t flatten when we hit the atmosphere in the open tube segment.” Dan gestured towards the monitors on the engineers’ control panel. “But now we’re picking up some aerodynamic heating. Tom has the air conditioning up as far as it will go.”

Looking at the monitors, Sam could see exterior views of the Z-liner, where faint multi-colored flames of ionization were spreading from the liner’s nose cone. Interior views of the passenger cabins showed people looking at the windows with some distress. The engineers were not listening to the

interior audio, however. They were focused on the audio communications coming from Chicago.

Hidden speakers crackled. "...so we think that the west-bound liner will be OK. A fireball was reported exiting the tunnel airlock at the mountain gateway, but we do have control west of there, and nothing showing up yet at Indio, so we must be slowing them down. Our eastbound plan is underway, and the first air-strikes look like they've done the job. The gap is clear, and we've got a few insane volunteers up there with mini-cats dodging around looking for debris. Crazy bastards, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near when those bunker busters come in. Standby for the final run..."

"What are they doing?" asked Sam.

"They're trying to clear the partial cave-in at the east side of the crossing," said Dan. "In theory, if they clear the debris and open the other end, we can jump the gap. They've tapped into the juice for the last tunnel segment, to give us an extra kick. If we get just enough lift from that, we can make it."

"Yeah," said Tom. "Assuming we don't flatten at full pressure. Or hit a big rock. Or melt."

The voice from Chicago returned. "Final run on alpha target... Ordinance away... It's a hit! It's a hit! I think the tunnel's open. O, God. No, it's not. I'm... I don't know what to

say. We've still got a blocked tunnel. They're coming around again for the beta target..."

Everyone in the cabin was gasping.

"I assume the beta target is our end of the tunnel, said Sam.

Dan nodded. "Yeah. They said that was plan B. They're going to seal us in and prevent damage to the city,"

"Beta run coming in," said the voice. "I'm so sorry everyone... Wait! Wait! We've got a second bomber group contacting us. They're saying they've got the crossing targeted and they can make the alpha drop zone! I don't know... C'mon guys, talk to me... O man, this is chaos. What! The first and second squadrons are both targeting their ordinance... khhhhhh...."

The speakers were silent, and the Z-liner began to rumble ominously in the thicker atmosphere of the tunnel.

"Fifty seconds, everyone!" yelled Tom, and everyone was grim.

"Ten seconds! Here we go!"

There was a jostling motion, and the monitors showed a brief flash of sunlight lasting less than a second.

The rumbling ceased quickly, as the control board lit up with new indicators, all colored green. The ionization flames disappeared from the monitors, and the cabin air eventually felt comfortably cool again.

Tom had a small expression of surprise on his face as he and his colleague checked their instruments. “We’re through!” he said. “We’ve passed the Chicago airlock, and vacuum is normal.”

There were shouts of joy, and Dan hugged Eva briefly. The engineer turned back to his controls, scanning his instruments in more detail. “Throttle control restored, communications restored, outer temperature returning to nominal range, sensors indicate that the hull is damaged but maintaining pressure. He turned to face the other occupants of the cabin, and shrugged. “Assuming nothing else goes wrong, we should be in New York more-or-less on schedule.”

There was more celebrating, and Tom communicated the good news to the outside world, while Eva left to inform the passengers. When the Z-liner arrived in New York, it was quickly swarmed by a mob of officials and emergency personnel. The gate area behind them was thick with anxious family members.

A dark-haired woman wearing a brown jacket rushed towards Sam just as two attendants were preparing to carry him from the train on a stretcher.

“Sam! Sam!”

“Muriel,” smiled Sam. “How’d you get past the police line?”

“Oh, Sam, thank God you’re alive!” She bent to kiss him, and they shared a momentary embrace. Sam’s phone interrupted them with its urgent buzzing.

“Yeah,” said Sam. He listened for a moment, and then said, “Sorry, but I think you better postpone the appointment. I’m, ah, I’m still in transit. When? I’ll, uh, get back to you, OK? Right, bye.”

Muriel gave Sam with a disapproving frown. “You’re staying on, aren’t you?” she asked, looking a bit angry.

“Yeah,” said Sam.

“You idiot!” Muriel pounded his chest lightly. “I just about lost you! You promised!”

Sam held up a hand to stop his wife’s outburst.

“I know,” he said. “I know. But there’s one more job I haven’t finished.”

“One more job? What are you talking about?” Muriel was near tears. “The train is safe, the people are off, and there will be promotions all around. Can’t you let someone else take over now?”

“Not just yet,” said Sam. “That’s actually the job I have to finish.”

“I don’t understand,” said Muriel.

Sam laughed. “You will in a second. In fact, I think you’ll approve. See Dan over there?”

They both looked at Dan. Sam’s junior partner was at the far end of the terminal

area, telling a few cops about the harrowing trip.

Sam continued. "He'll be a good cop some day. Better than me. But he's still got a lot to learn. There are a few more tricks that I still have to teach him."

Muriel looked dubious. "Such as...?"

Sam smiled, and punched Dan's cell phone number. "...such as how to keep your talents from causing a train wreck."

Dan lifted his phone. "Yeah?"

Sam was smiling now. "Dan," he said, "your lady friend Eva is leaving the terminal. Would you please get her number before I come over there and kick you in the shins?"

Muriel's expression changed, and it was clear that she was remembering how a younger Sam had once tracked her down. She laughed with Sam as they watched Dan sprinting to catch up with the pretty young conductor before she could leave the station, cell phone still to his ear.

Dan was nearly breathless, but he managed to reply.

"I'm on it!" he said.

Driving the Tranquility Road

By Bruce Davis

Bobby McCoy swore and blew warm air on his frozen fingers. "If I ever meet up with the son of a bitch who promised me a life of adventure and unlimited opportunity if I signed up to drive trucks on the moon, I'll break both his kneecaps with a lug wrench," he growled.

"What's the matter, Bobby?" laughed Thelma, his dispatcher. "Aren't you feeling the love this morning?"

"First, it ain't morning yet," Bobby answered. "And second, I'm freezing my ass off out here. The life support's on the fritz again, blowin' nothin' but cold air. When is this chicken shit outfit gonna spring for some decent trucks?"

"When you drivers stop belly-aching and show some decent turn around times," said Thelma. "When the sun comes up, you'll be happy for that cold air."

"Don't mean I gotta freeze in the dark waitin'," Bobby grumbled.

"You'd rather be driving a double axle flat bed back in, where was it? Pender County, North Carolina?"

Bobby didn't answer. Thelma had a way of making a man feel small if he complained

about his work. Even sitting in the freezing cab of his articulated transport, he had to admit it beat driving for his Daddy back home. And the money was good. Way better than Earthside. Still, he didn't seem to be getting ahead the way he'd planned. Living on the moon was expensive and his take home pay was eaten up by rent and life support charges. He made enough to live on and to put a little away, but he wasn't getting rich.

"How long 'til sun-up?" he asked Thelma.

"Less than an hour," she said. "You thinking about running dark?"

"Nope. Don't trust the battery pack. That's what I'm talkin' about, Thelma. Saylor jumped off ten minutes ago. He'll be thirty clicks down the road before I make the First Turn. He's got batteries that won't overheat and fry his rig before the sun starts to feed his power cells. Why are the rest of us stuck with this crappy gear?"

Thelma sighed. "He's the top driver, love. Top driver gets the best rig. You're in the top ten yourself. There are guys who would give half their shares to be in the rig you're driving right now."

Bobby just grunted. He knew she was right. He also knew he'd never save enough to buy his way back home if he didn't move up in the standings. Drivers were paid a share of the profit from each run. More runs per lunar day meant more money. The driver who earned

the most at the end of each day was top driver. Everyone else was ranked by shares behind him and both the rigs and the cargo were assigned by ranking. It encouraged drivers to push hard, but since the top drivers got the best starting times, the best gear and the highest value cargo, it was tough to break out of the pack and get into the top ten. Harder still to make the top slot.

Saylor held the top spot for the past twenty days, longer than any driver in Company history. Bobby heard all the talk in the bars where truckers hung out and drank away their wages during the long lunar nights. Talk of special favors, of cheating, of something better and more potent than the Road Drug for keeping a driver at the wheel. Bobby believed none of it. He'd clawed his way up from Newbie to top ten driver on nothing but his own grit and wits (helped by the Road Drug). He knew what drove Saylor and it wasn't the Company's special favors. It was a hunger to be the best.

The driver ahead of Bobby pulled up a few meters and then stopped. That'd be Thompson, thought Bobby. An old hand and always in the top five. He was just keeping his wheels warm and trim for the start. If a rig sat too long in the cold, the metal leaf wheels had a tendency to flatten out of true. That made for a bumpy ride the first hundred clicks and wasted energy.

Bobby followed his lead and rolled ahead until his front bumper almost touched the rear of Thompson's rig. A few seconds later he felt a jolt as the driver behind him bumped into his rear. Bobby sighed. Czecka again. He was just behind Bobby in the standings but was an erratic driver, sometimes rising to the top five, sometimes dropping back into the lower tier.

Bobby keyed Czecka's frequency and snarled, "Bump me again, asshole, and I'll feed you your teeth for breakfast."

"Best you stay out of my way on the road then, McCoy," Czecka answered.

"Don't worry about that, Czecka. You won't be within ten clicks of my bumper after sunup."

Two rigs rumbled past Bobby and started up the road. Bobby shook his head. Newbies, running dark, trying to get a leg up. Bobby had tried that himself once or twice. Running 'dark' or on batteries alone until the sun came up and powered a rig's solar cells was a trick that could get a driver a jump on the pack, but if only if the battery pack was strong enough. If you mistimed your start or the batteries overheated you'd find yourself stalled out on the road calling dispatch for a rescue. The smart drivers waited for the sun, then drove like hell and made up lost time on the turnaround at each end of the run. Except for Saylor. He always ran dark at the start. He

could get away with it because the Company gave him the best rig.

The line of trucks inched forward, a few meters every ten minutes or so. Finally Thelma called over the general comm, “Five minutes, drivers.”

Bobby ran a quick systems check and settled into his seat. This was going to be his day. Saylor might have a lead of three quarters of an hour, but the lunar day was long and Bobby meant to catch Saylor before it was over.

Sunrise came as a sudden burst of light on the horizon. The power meter on his heads up display jumped, then jumped again. Ahead of him, Thompson started rolling. Bobby eased his throttle forward and felt the wheels bite into the regolith. He fell in behind Thompson, accelerating smoothly out of the shipping terminal toward main road.

He merged into the six lanes of traffic and accelerated to eighty kilometers per hour, sliding into the high speed lane. Thompson led the way and the remaining top drivers fell in behind Bobby. Here on the flats in the bottom of Tycho Crater, the run was easy. Tycho City traffic control was strict and no one got out of line or broke the speed limit. That would all change when they hit the crater rim.

Bobby checked the power meter and his reserve cells. He was almost up to full charge

on the reserves and the solar cells were performing at their rated output. The cab temperature was up three degrees and Bobby knew Thelma had been right. Before he cleared the rim, he'd be glad for the cool air.

The road narrowed to three lanes and there was a brief slowdown as traffic merged or turned off for the spaceport and cargo yards. Then the road began to rise in a gentle grade up to the crater rim. Thompson accelerated and Bobby followed smoothly, staying right on his tail. Beyond the rim, the road dropped down to two lanes and Bobby didn't want anyone trying to slide in front of him.

The rim wall flashed by and Bobby fed power to the wheels, pulling smoothly out to the right and pushing hard up alongside Thompson. They ran side by side, barely a meter between them, accelerating past seventy, then eighty kph. Thompson glanced Bobby's way and gave him a one finger salute. Bobby grinned back at him and kicked in the power from his reserve cells. The rig leapt forward. He slid to the left just as his lane merged into Thompson's and cut the other rig off with a half meter to spare.

The First Turn, a wide sweep around a 400 meter high basalt pillar, was just ahead. Bobby throttled back and applied a gentle touch of his brakes. The cab slid through the turn, the trailers tracking smoothly behind it, no fishtailing, no loss of speed. Bobby

whooped. This was 'The Day'. He could feel it. He was on his way.

The run from Tycho City to Tranquility Terminus was a little over twelve hundred kilometers, most of it through the rough crater-strewn Tycho badlands. The road twisted and turned, up and down hills, through narrow rill canyons and across the backs of long rays of ejecta from the crater that gave the region its name. Two rough lanes, traffic in both directions with precious little room on either side. A good driver could average seventy kph, maybe a little more if he was good enough. Many weren't and the roadside was dotted with small shrines where some trucker had missed a turn or tried to pass at the wrong time.

The twists and turns had names, features that all the drivers knew well. Ask an old burned out trucker in any Tycho bar to recite the run to Tranquility and he could still do it, even twenty years after his last roll out. First Turn, The Staircase, Dragons Back, O'Leary's Puzzle, on and on right up to Tranquility Grade and the Terminus. They could recite speed and brake settings, their best times and the tricks to get past each one.

Bobby pushed hard for hours. On the Dragons Back he passed Clarence, the number two driver, swinging around his rig at the wide spot near the end of that winding

section of the road. That meant only Saylor was still in front of him.

There was a truck stop at O'Leary's Puzzle, about eight hours out of Tycho, where most drivers pulled in to recharge, grab a meal and maybe sleep for an hour or so. Bobby drove past, taking his first dose of Road Drug.

The drug washed away sleep and kept a driver awake and alert for another twelve hours. It was safe in small doses (according to the Company) and didn't impair judgment. But the truckers all knew that too much of it would burn you out and leave you shaking and paranoid for days on end. Burn out too many times and you'd end up blind from cataracts begging for *yuan* to buy the alcohol that was the only thing that would let you sleep.

Bobby rolled on, pushing harder than he ever had before. Second Turn, Highline, Spiral Grade, Tommy's End, the Slaloms, the Dips until finally, eighteen hours after he rolled out of Tycho he reached the top of Tranquility Grade and the long downhill run to the Terminus. Fifteen kilometers ahead, just reaching the Flats, was Saylor. Bobby grinned and pointed the rig downhill. *Got you, you son of a bitch*, he thought.

Bobby pulled into the off-load dock half an hour later and released his trailers. Saylor's rig was already in the dispatch yard waiting for the next load.

“Talk to me, Thelma,” said Bobby. “What’s my next load?”

“Vat meat and fresh veggies for Tutello’s Restaurant Supply. You want to place a bid?”

“What’s the delivery deadline?”

“Twenty-eight hours.”

“Penalty?”

“Ten percent per hour overdue.”

Bobby thought for a second. Four hours to eat and sleep, twenty hour run back to Tycho, allow an hour for traffic and other delays.

“Standard perishables rate, ten percent per hour bonus for early delivery,” he said.

“Done!” crowed Thelma. “Clock starts on acceptance. You’re runnin’ hot today Bobby boy.”

“Can it. Just get me the load,” said Bobby as he keyed in his acceptance code and scanned a fingerprint to seal the contract.

Bobby pulled around to the dispatch yard and stopped next to Saylor. He looked across, but the cab was blacked out. Saylor was either asleep or didn’t want company, which was fine with Bobby. He didn’t want to talk, he just wanted to keep tabs on the competition.

He called up a menu from the local food vendor and ordered a club sandwich, two liters of coffee and some soy chips to go. A service ‘bot delivered the food, passing it through the access port on the side of the cab. Bobby opened the food pack and took a bite of the sandwich as he watched the riggers

connecting a tandem trailer to Saylor's cab. He almost choked when the Saylor started rolling out of the yard as soon as the rigging was complete.

Bobby dropped the sandwich and called rigging chief on the radio. "Get my load rigged right now," he shouted. "C'mon, hurry. He's gettin' away."

The trailers were hooked up in five minutes and Bobby rolled out in six. Saylor was across the Flats and starting the long climb up the Grade. Bobby poured power to the wheels and the big rig gained speed. He reached the Grade in three minutes and started his climb. Fatigue suddenly tugged at his arms and he shook it off. He gulped another dose of Road Drug, washing it down with coffee. If Saylor could do it, so could he, damn it.

The return run was slower, as always. Spiral Grade was a bitch to climb southbound and there was now traffic coming in the opposite direction. Bobby focused on driving, guiding his rig through the switchbacks and turns as if it were on rails. Sometimes he kept Saylor in sight for long minutes. Sometimes the other driver roared ahead taking turns and grades at insane speeds that Bobby didn't dare try to match.

They reached Tycho within minutes of each other after almost twenty hours on the road. Bobby off-loaded his trailers and took only a second's satisfaction in the huge bonus

payment. Saylor was already in the dispatch yard getting his next load.

Bobby ground his teeth and gulped more Road Drug. This was now personal. Saylor had been top dog for too long.

“Thelma,” he called. “Get me a load.”

“Sure, Bobby,” she replied. “But don’t you think you should get some sleep first. You’re pushing almost forty hours now.”

“Saylor ain’t sleeping,” Bobby said.

“And you aren’t Saylor. Don’t try to take him head to head, Bobby. You can’t win.”

“Why not?” he asked. “Because he’s the Company Golden Boy?”

“Something like that. He’s got advantages you don’t.”

“Don’t tell me you believe that crap about the Company riggin’ the standings,” Bobby sneered. “I got to the top five without special favors. Saylor’s just a man and any man can be beaten.”

Thelma sighed, “I have an oversized load, a reactor housing for Tranquility Terminus. Pay is standard plus fifty percent, no delivery deadline.”

Bobby glanced toward the dispatch yard, thinking. A fifty percent bonus plus the extra pay for his latest delivery would buy him some time. But at the rate Saylor was going, he’d eat that up on the next two turnarounds. Saylor’s rig was being fitted for an oversized load as well, and that decided the matter for

Bobby. He'd match Saylor load for load or die trying.

"Get me the load, Thelma."

"OK, Bobby. See the dispatch supervisor. He'll move you to the front of the line."

Bobby rolled out just five minutes behind Saylor. By First Turn he was on Saylor's tail and stayed there. His vision narrowed. He saw only the road, Saylor's rear wheels, the heads up display, an occasional truck running in the other lane. He gulped Road Drug like coffee, coffee like water. His fingers were curled around the wheel and the throttle. He couldn't let go.

He matched Saylor, turn for turn through the switchbacks of the Staircase. They topped the last slope onto the Dragon's Back. Saylor accelerated, pushing his rig through the winding turns. Bobby followed, white knuckled and shaking, struggling to control his rig and keep Saylor in sight.

The Dragon's Back was an ejecta ray stretching for more than a hundred kilometers from southeast to northwest. The road wound in and out of basalt blocks and jagged rills of fused silicates along the top. Near the end, the road widened and surrounding terrain flattened out. It was a common place for truckers to try to pass as they jockeyed for position.

Bobby managed to stay within a kilometer of Saylor all the way. He was soaked with

sweat and aching all over by the time the wide patch came in sight. Saylor had almost reached the turn that would take them down into the crater-strewn basin called O'Leary's Puzzle. Coming toward them in the southbound lane, two trucks fought for position, each trying to be the first into the Dragon's Back.

Saylor drifted wider on the turn to avoid the oncoming rigs. His rear wheels slewed sideways as the top-heavy load shifted. The rear of the trailer left the roadway and fishtailed. With a normal load, he might have recovered with a little braking and counter steering. With the huge reactor casing swaying outward, he had no chance. The trailer crabbed sideways, chewing rough gouges out of the shoulder. The metal leaf wheels shed chunks of bright shrapnel as they disintegrated. The reactor casing spilled sideways off the trailer, snapping its cables and dragging the trailer with it. The cab rose up, lifting its left wheels off the road, hung there for a second, then crashed on its side. Trailer, load and cab tumbled down slope into a small crater.

Bobby braked hard, fighting to control his own rig. The two southbound drivers flashed by him, still locked in their passing duel. Bobby managed to keep his rig upright as he pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. He

sat there for a few seconds catching his breath.

“Dispatch, this is McCoy,” he shouted into his comm. “Mayday! Mayday! Saylor’s off the road at marker 857, north end of the Dragon’s Back. Send the medics and a salvage crane.”

He didn’t wait for the reply. He triggered his own emergency beacon and struggled into a pressure suit. He sealed the helmet, grabbed the emergency kit from under his seat and depressurized the cab.

Bobby climbed down the steep slope as fast as the pressure suit allowed. Saylor’s cab lay on its side, the wheels and axels torn away. The canopy was cracked and pitted, but looked intact. Bobby sighed with relief. At least there was a chance Saylor was still alive. He climbed up onto the superstructure and peered into the cab. He froze, staring at Saylor, or at least what was left of him.

Saylor’s body, below the waist, was encased in a black pillar instead of the standard seat. His eyes stared blankly at Bobby without life or recognition. Thick cables snaked out of the console in front of him and entered the base of his skull and the back of his neck. Thinner cables linked Saylor’s shoulders and wrists to the wheel and throttles. His arms and hands twitched as sparks danced across the shattered console.

Bobby pounded on the canopy, shouting Saylor’s name over the comm. Saylor’s eyes

may have jerked but there was no answer. Bobby was still pounding on the canopy when the rescue team landed a few minutes later. With the medics was a squad of Company security men in black fighting suits. They hustled Bobby away and put him back in his rig. A few minutes after that, a Company supervisor came on the comm and ordered him to finish his run, then report to the branch office in Tranquility.

He reached the Terminus eighteen hours later after a slow, cautious run. The medics had to pry his hands off of the wheel to get him out of the cab and he spent the rest of the lunar day in a Company clinic detoxing from the Road Drug.

Somewhere toward the end of his stay, he was visited by one of the Company suits, a smooth talking salesman type who made him an offer. How would he like to be top driver? If he signed a three-year contract to participate in an experimental Company program, he'd be guaranteed the top spot for as long as he continued driving. Bobby dumped a full urinal on the man's expensive suit and threw him out of the room.

A few hours after that, another man came. This one had the manner and look of an old driver. He talked to Bobby for an hour about driving, about the road and in the end, about Saylor. After their talk, Bobby signed an agreement to never talk about Saylor again. In

return he got a large chunk of money and a ticket back to Earth.

Three lunar days later, Bobby sat in a trucker's bar, his small travel kit at his side, waiting for the shuttle to take him to the spaceport. He watched the bookies taking bets on the driver standings that were posted in a large holotank at the back of the bar. He'd parlayed his settlement from the Company into a small fortune by betting on a long shot for top driver. Bobby smiled as he sipped his beer. He knew Czecka wouldn't have dumped something nasty on the man in the expensive suit.

Radio

by Ken Brody

You could just see the silver lines tattooed under Squint's pale skin in the bluish LED light. They scrolled under his straight, dark hair, down his broad back, and disappeared into his jeans. His hair was in one of his eyes, and the obstructed eye was squinched shut. Gristle, his frenetic companion, had wire lines down his skeletal arms and pear-shaped torso, but lacking the scrolls and doubled sections. The two of them were holding down a dark-skinned third fellow, Rudio, face down on a padded bench, while Elmer, a heavily bearded radio tattooist with the Greek letter "phi" tattooed on his shaved pate, drew lines on the prone man's black skin with a blue ball point pen.

"Twin J-poles, 2 meters and 70 centimeter dual band, right?" repeated the tattooist. "From his arms down to the ankles, that's what it will take. Curly-cue capacitance hats to reduce high-voltage discharges at the ends. And the eel cells all around the waist? Where's he wearing the rig?"

"Whacha got for the rig, Rudio? Elmer here wants to know." All radio tattooists had the honorific "Elmer", a holdover from 20th Century amateur radio. Radio folk had many such

traditions from the old times at the beginnings of radio.

“Ucom 1200, dual band. Right side love handle.”

“That’ll interfere with your belt. You’ll have to dress for it.”

“Nah. Flexible circuit board only a millimeter thick. New tech.”

“Power?”

“More than you got, Squint. More than my eel guts can make.”

“OK, Rudio, let’s keep the lead-in short. Elmer, double check the length and let’s see what your design is for the J-match. You’re using the anaerobes?”

“Only the best bugs, Squint. Harvested from the North Atlantic seamount. Converts four times as much silver in half the time. Zero rejection rate.” Of course this last had to be a lie. All radio folks knew that sometimes the bacteria that converted silver nitrate into pure silver under the skin led to allergic reactions and occasional immune response. That was the price you paid for avoiding the official medical clinics, which were controlled by the government-run insurance companies and wouldn’t do the tattoos anyway.

Phi, the Elmer, dipped his needle in some liquid that looked like diluted milk against the dark skin and proceeded to tattoo deep along the ballpoint lines. Squint could see he was making a good, broad stroke. This Elmer was

as good as his rep. After the J-poles were drawn, the Elmer weighed out a number of tiny packets - modified electric cells - according to Rudio's age, weight and build, then used a flat, spade-like needle to insert a line of the packets under the skin all around Rudio's waist.

"Eel cells?" asked Squint. They would convert Rudio's blood sugar to electricity for the Ucom rig.

"That's what we used to use, because the Amazon knife fish, *electrophorus electricus*, is an air breather. But they put out too much voltage. These are electroplaques from the electric ray, *torpedo californica*, along with gene mods to make them process your blood glucose into ATP with fewer free radicals. They put out about fifty volts, and you get about a kilowatt's worth."

Finally, he got out a UV light with a powerful magnifying glass and traced the connections to the transceiver buried in the fat in Rudio's right hip. The Ucom rig was previously installed by a Ucom tech. The rig attached to nerves Rudio used to control his stomach muscles. The bionic interface was strictly a black-market item.

The whole procedure took 90 minutes, as predicted.

"Rudio, take these silver nitrate pills three times a day with lots of water. They also have an amino acid that the bugs need. In two

weeks they will lay down a nice line of silver wire for you, and then you are out of pills and the bugs will die off and leave a layer of insulation around each wire. The eel cells will take about the same time to fatten up. Then you have to learn to use that fancy rig. You have a call sign?"

"Yeah, I'm legal. K3RST, I inherited it from my Dad."

"Nice. Call me in a month, I'm AB3BG. 73 till then."

Squint, Gristle and Rudio packed up and left the tattoo shop. The Elmer put the cash in his register and wrote "Rudio K3RST" in a little device that beeped once, promptly encrypted the information and went blank.

Shannon Redwine's Aunt Clarisse wore yards of white chiffon, gathered in pleats and folds under an ample bosom, a bosom displayed in a silhouette neckline. Clarisse seated herself at the dining room table across from the kitchen door, positioned so she had the best vantage of the culinary proceedings, and whatever gossip might pass over it. Her teenage daughter was dispatched to fetch the turkey to the table. Karen, a plain-looking fourteen year old still dressed in her school uniform, had a bit of trouble. The turkey, a ten pounder, stuck to the baking pan. She finally wrestled it onto a china platter but it tended to slither around the platter, lubri-

cated by an ample supply of grease. Balancing the platter as carefully as she could, Karen moved across the kitchen floor towards the dining room. The turkey oscillated around the platter in increasing excursions and Karen's eyes got bigger and rounder, her mouth pursed in alarm. She fairly trotted the last few steps and plopped the platter on the nearest part of the table, which, of course, was opposite her mother, Clarisse. The platter stopped where it landed. The turkey, having gained considerable momentum from that last dash, took off over the lip of the platter, drumsticks akimbo, in a perfect ski jump trajectory. It landed, neck first and greasy side down, among the flowing folds of Clarisse' white gown. It landed pretty hard, The cavity under the tail flap, propelled by some unfortunate pneumatics inside the bird, exploded with a pop and put a juicy giblet gobbet accurately into Clarisse' cleavage, where it proceeded to drip into the vast interior of her bosom.

"Ooooooh!" said Karen, on a rising note.

"Aiyeeee," screamed Clarisse at air-raided siren volume, with a ululation all her own.

Ten year old Shannon, videocam at the ready, caught every nuance, and edited it to close with a close-up of the errant giblets. The video had every kid in the family, and almost all the adults, rolling around the floor in hysterical laughter for years.

Shannon also caught Karen trying to hide in the tool shed, and Karen's older sister, Julie, making out in the shrubbery with the neighbor's boy. After that her stepfather, Jeff, took the camera away from Shannon to preserve what was left of the family dignity.

But it was too late. Shannon was hooked.

W1USA , Maxwell Burnham, alias “Max Burner”, was an enormous man, six foot seven and 465 pounds. Not many knew that about a hundred pounds of that weight was prime voltaic eel cells, and that, because he was a diabetic with a runaway glucose level often over 400, he had plenty of metabolic energy for them. The government agency who originally recruited him gave him a choice: Chase “squawkers”, as the Agency called them, or die horribly from the effects of advanced diabetes. Maxwell didn't care much about the radio folks. He knew the Agency considered them a security risk because they could talk to anyone, anytime, anywhere, without recourse to a central point of control, unlike a cell phone company or a telephone exchange, or even server nodes on the World Wide Web. Radio folks were a force unto themselves, and therefore a threat. What mattered to Max was that the massive spare tire of eel cells would consume as much blood sugar as he could make. That was a lot of

blood sugar, because Maxwell liked to eat, and eat.

So he allowed the Agency techs to work on him. They gave him an advanced antenna, a slotted array, that ran from his left wrist, across a meaty arm, massive shoulders, and his right arm, right down to his middle finger on his right hand. The gain was enormous. When Max Burner directed his right middle finger at you and wheezed, "Burn, baby burn!", you were standing in the equivalent of an industrial microwave oven. His beam was so tight he could burn a squawker from a hundred yards, and cook an unwired citizen at fifty feet. He always traveled in an insulated black van with his "throne", and an entourage of soldiers carrying machine pistols.

The Agency had fixed it so Max Burner could receive. He could send a nasty pulsed carrier, but he could not send coherent messages. He could not join the radio folks community. But he could burn them and he enjoyed it.

Shannon Redwine put down the camera. Vera and Nils were having an argument, not a discussion, in the American University student union about the novel "1984". There was an audience, and a precious comment was passed back and forth every so often. It was a frustration that she could not get the damned camera to capture the interactions. It was too

slow, too clumsy and too narrow a window on what was happening. It happens that Shannon was serious about *cinema verite*, and this was part of her thesis project. So she decided to go broadband. Money wasn't a problem. Shannon had a trust fund from her grandfather. Her stepfather was a top analyst at the State House, an expert on industrial espionage. Her mother lobbied for the energy consortiums. Shannon was certainly aware of the political and legal issues involved. Reporting was her life, however. She had to make her own way. With a few discrete inquiries she located an Elmer with a good rep. He had a beard. When he bent down to show her a design, she noticed an illuminated Greek letter on the top of his head.

“What's your call sign, Shannon?”

“How about just SHAN?”

“That's not a call sign. You don't have one, do you.”

“How do you know? And what business is it of yours?” Shannon had a way of looking deadly serious and California girl blonde at the same time.

“You're wasting my time. You can't join the community without a call sign. No one will talk to you. You won't be able to get a rig.”

“Then what do I do? I want to be a reporter, but not with a clumsy camera.” She tried her best please-help-me look. “I'm not trying to be trouble. I just want help.”

“I’m not worried about trouble. Once I wire you, you’re stuck with it, and even if the authorities put you up to it, they are going to burn you eventually. You know that?”

She didn’t. It was something to think about...but no. She had to make her own life. Radios weren’t exactly illegal, anyways. But it seemed the government had stopped authorizing licenses for them.

The Elmer rubbed his bald head and pulled his beard. “It’ll take three of us. We each get a fee, and unless you’re a fast learner, two months training. Yes?”

“Yes, do it.” Shannon said.

The Elmer stood up, spread his arms and closed his eyes. “What are you doing?” Shannon looked surprised.

“Shhh. I’m in QSO.” Presently, Squint and Rudio opened the front door. The Elmer introduced them by their call signs, N3QRN and KB3TVI. Squint sauntered in, walked around Shannon giving her an approving grin, and leaned back against a desk. Rudio turned a chair around and sat with his hands under his chin.

“Rudio just got his wires. How’s the new rig, Rudio?”

“Great! I got DX to Australia when the band opened last week. SSB and PSK31.”

Shannon shook her head. “What kind of gibberish is this?”

“You’ll learn, girl, you’ll learn.” Pointing to her, the Elmer announced, “She wants broadband!”

“Good Luck Sister.” Rudio and Squint chanted in unison.

“Even I don’t have broadband. You’re asking for the most difficult wire job, the most expensive rig, the longest learning curve...” He waved his hand. “Ahhhh.”

Squint interjected, “The Ucom rig weighs a ton, the only place you can hide it is in your boobs, and the power requirement, why would you want to ruin that sexy figure?”

“Wait, Squint, Redwood has the new flex-tech, something like Rudio’s.”

“Sure, it’s an arm and a leg. Retinal connections.”

“Retinal connections?” interrupted Shannon.

“Yeah, it doesn’t need a camera. Picks up image right from your eyes and converts to video. High def, data compaction, 32-bit QAM modulation, same as the commercial TV stations. In fact, those are about the only people you can transmit to with a rig that fancy.”

“I think it will do SSB and digital.”

“That’s exactly what I need!” shouted Shannon. And that was exactly what she got, a few weeks later.

K3NSA, Dr. Jay Fry alias “Frequent Fryer”, was diagnosed as a Type 1 diabetic from the

age of ten. He was appointed by the head of Echelon, the secret SigInt agency, during the Taiwan Skirmish. When China attempted to prop up the failing Communist Party cadres by institutionalized industrial espionage using high-tech Taiwan companies, Dr. Fry was instructed to “augment” the technical info with false starts, blind alleys and credible misinformation. The resulting debacle ended the Chinese Communist Party and led to a plebiscite with Taiwan’s leadership. Dr. Fry was a skinny man with a sphere of molecular batteries of secret design that made him waddle. It was a very determined waddle. No one knew if he could outblast Max Burner. Everyone understood he would be incapable of backing down from the fight.

Frequent Fryer was tasked with terminating any and every source of unofficial signal transmission under the “Enemy Communications Act”. That meant he hunted squawkers. There were about 173,000 squawkers in the country according to SigInt, hidden among 300 million ordinaries. They were connected and elusive, and the NSA was told to operate quietly, in cooperation with CIFA (Counter Intelligence Field Activity, a citizen database group established at the Pentagon, currently with nine secret directorates) and the Army’s 902nd Military Intelligence group. Squawkers were known to participate as volunteers in emergencies and they got good press. He was

working on a clandestine plan. He named it after the Angel of Death in Exodus, “Melech Hamovis”. His less scholarly staff simply called it the Movis Project.

The Redwood shop looked like an old garage. There were used tires out front and a sign with “Shop Rate \$95/hour” and a collection of wheels and hubcaps out front, all stuff for transport that had not been manufactured in forty years. Behind the door labeled “Rest Room” was a sterile operating room. Shannon stared, then entered, followed by the Redwood tech and her Elmer.

“Where do you want the rig, Miss? Neck, head or boobs? Can’t do waist or ass with this broadband.”

“Elmer?” Shannon asked.

The Elmer looked her over cautiously. “Safest and easiest is in your breasts. The rig gets good padding and it won’t show.”

Without a moment’s hesitation she pulled off her t-shirt and bra, looking Phi dead in the eye.

The tech scrubbed, put on a surgical gown and gloves and had the Elmer do the same. They unsealed a sterile airpack with a pair of three-inch flexible pads and two clear dots each the size of a freckle. The tech gave Shannon a pill and sprayed her skin under each breast and alongside each eye. “The leads are both power and control, uniwire connections.

That's all you have to hook up. The eyepieces will grow in to the optic nerve and muscles by themselves. This rig has a new visual interface. She sees a control panel superimposed on her view when she calls it up. She looks at a meter or readout, and from there on it's muscle control from the eyes, eyelids, eyebrows, etc. She's got multimode transmission, digital filtering, automatic band scan, store and forward video, and full range power control. Squint, raise one eyebrow, and you're transmitting full power. She's going to need a bit under two kilowatts. He inserted a large disk in the underside of each breast and the smaller eyepieces in incisions at the corners of Shannon's eyes. He sprayed the incisions again and they healed in a few minutes.

"Great stuff, eh?"

"Will miracles never cease! I have a bunch of twitches and twinges for my controls. What is that spray?"

"It's called *tFa*, transdermal fibrinogen activator. Makes connective tissue regrow."

"My ass was sore for weeks after my install."

"Your ass belongs to Ucom. Us Redwood guys get to work with, um, these."

"Get on with it, guys, before I get angry and feed you your own balls." Shannon said. The "guys" laughed, but they got on with it. Shannon was connected and wired in half an hour, ready for her eel cells and antennas. When the

tech handed her the bill, she had to repress a gasp. Phi's eyebrows seemed to migrate towards his scalp. It was a year's income for a salaried techie.

Shannon arranged payment from her trust account and the tech palmed off a small electronic tab to Phi.

Jefferson Shelby III was fresh out of Annapolis when he was posted to the Pacific Fleet Command. It was during the China Spy War, when the aging Red Guards in the Peoples' Republic, in their last gasp of power, made worldwide commercial espionage against high-tech nations a matter of national policy. For a while, a wave of prosperity brought about by the new technology kept the Maoists alive, but then followed the inevitable U.N sanctions, the repartition of Taiwan, the remilitarization of Japan, and a world on the brink of war with more than a billion Chinese. Jeff rose quickly to Commander rank, in charge of Intelligence Operations aboard the carrier George Bush. He was the epitome of the square-jawed, blue-eyed Naval career officer. In fact, he looked like a recruitment poster and resented it to the core of his being. So, when he met Cynthi Redwine, a fiery rebel, Green Party activist, and an exotic mixture of Hungarian and Amerind, he dropped his strict officer persona. After the collapse of the Chinese Communists Party, Jeff followed

Cynthi to meetings in small Chinese towns where they both learned Mandarin, shared the agony of the Micro Ice Age in France during the signing of the Global Warming Convention, and split up when Jeff got a call to serve his country in the State Department. Cynthi promptly shared a warm bed with a prominent climatologist and got pregnant. The little girl, Shannon, as wild and independent as her mother, settled Cynthi down. Cynthi took a job with a group advocating energy conservation and got sent to Washington. It was a strange culture, where words and glances had double meanings and “friends” didn’t often like each other. Gregarious and direct, Cynthi found the sense of isolation intolerable. She looked up Jeff, found he was single, seduced him, and moved in. Jeff took an immediate liking to Shannon, and Shannon, who had never before known a settled existence, became a spoiled little princess. Eventually Jeff and Cynthi were married.

Shannon, Rudio, Squint and the Elmer stood on the crest of Zion Hill. An occasional autumn gust chilled the foursome. The undulating land of northern Virginia spread out before them, gold and umber with a touch of color lingering on the trees.. The Elmer stood with his hands spread, facing North. The others stood in similar poses, facing West and

South. Each had that rapt look of a serious QSO.

Squint asked, "Give me your radio name and city, Shannon." "Call me Shannon, from D.C.," she complied. There was a pause of minutes. "The ARREL has reserved a call sign for you."

"What is it?" asked Shannon.

"Not yet. First, does anybody have Shannon on a blacklist?"

Minutes later, "No." He pulled a little device from his pocket and wrote, "Shannon, KB3SHN" on it. It beeped once and turned blank.

"I'm Phi, AB3BG, one of the D.C. Elmers. Many of you know me. I have duly recorded Shannon in my log. I have here Squint, N3QRN, Rudio, K3RST, and Gristle, KB3TVI. We have worked with Shannon here for the last 2 months and we vouch for her character and her radio knowledge. Does anybody have an objection, a challenge or a question?"

There was a lot of back-and forth chatter. Those who knew AB3BG, and there were a surprisingly large number, had to talk to those who didn't. A while later, there was a consensus, "Again, no."

"Does this radio group welcome Shannon?"

Minutes later, "They do."

Everyone dropped their arms and hugged Shannon. "I, AB3BG, as Elmer of this group, do hereby welcome you, Shannon, KB3SHN."

With a twinkle in his eye he passed the electronic tab under Shannon's right breast and activated her transmitter. She spread her arms and sent "CQ this is KB3SHN," and the world came into her senses. A Michael in Michigan, an Elsie in New Hampshire, a Nigel in New Jersey, a Paul in Pennsylvania, and more than she could remember. More than she could count.

And there were pictures, mostly grainy and weak, of tall buildings, the ocean, a family with small children, a dog. They could not see Shannon, but they could see what she saw, until her eyes blurred and teared. Shannon understood what they already knew. She would never be alone again.

"Shannon, you are coming with me whether you like it or not. Your trustee called me about a large sum he paid, and we are going together. You hear?" Her stepfather, Jefferson Shelby III, looked every inch a distinguished diplomat. He put on an air of authority with his pin-striped suit every morning. It was hard to fight.

Shannon sighed, downcast. The inevitable confrontation was here. "Dad, we need to talk."

Jeff Shelby glanced at this watch. "Not now, the limo is waiting and I'm late for work."

But no sooner did they get into the limo when the uniformed Sergeant, his driver, in-

errupted, “Sir, you have an urgent message to reroute to Langley. Important meeting with the NSA. That’s all they told me.” Without waiting for a response, the Sergeant drove off.

Another sergeant at the door of the meeting room was checking badges. “She doesn’t have clearance, Sir. I can’t let her in.”

A round man with thick glasses waddled over. “Sergeant, I’m Dr. Fry. She’s Jeff’s daughter. We called him here with no notice as a rep from Foggy Bottom. Let her in on my authority. You can check with Deuce if you want.” Deuce was the Sergeant’s unit, the Army 902nd. He knew Fry, and moreover, knew Fry’s reputation. Without further ado, he made out a temporary pass and let her in.

Fry led the meeting. “We want a sign-off from State on Project Movis. Actually, the NSA doesn’t need a sign-off, but we need access to the CIFA database to ID squawkers, and CIFA insists that you be in on this. Have you been briefed?”

“How could I be? I just got the yellow sheet on Movis yesterday. The folder hasn’t come down yet.”

Fry blew out a puff of air that shook his wattles. “Hicks, here, will brief you, and, Hicks, I mean brief. We got a lot to do and damn little time to do it.”

Colonel Hicks was up to the task, He passed a set of pictures across the table. “Mr. Shelby, these are Movis-equipped helicopters. Each

radiates 25 megawatt pulses alternately on the two bands most used by squawkers. Flying at an altitude of 2500 feet, they cover a footprint of one mile. Any squawker in range will have his or her antenna burned out. We have a fleet of 225 of these. They will fly patterns back and forth over every major population area on the same night.”

Shannon could not believe what she was hearing. She was shocked and alarmed, then angry, past angry, outraged. It was an instant flash, then she resumed her deadpan stoner, I-couldn't-give-a-shit face. She spread her arms on the backs of the vacant chairs beside her as best she could without attracting attention and keyed up a 161 megahertz TV feed channel she had previously marked. She raised one eyebrow and squinted a bit. She focused on the pictures, the faces. She caught every nuance. She was ready to boil the bastard in his own bile.

“Don't worry about sounding the alarm. The 'copters also block every known transmission band.”

“We leave open the military comm band.” interrupted Fry.

“What about squawkers in rural areas and in shielded locations?” asked a uniform across the table from Fry.

“We'll run the op several times at random intervals. We'll get a kill rate of over 90% and

mop up the rest on the ground with info from CIFA.”

Jeff looked rattled. Shannon was sure his Annapolis dander was up over this program of mass murder. She couldn't believe he would go along with it. But then, she also realized he couldn't stop it.

“What about the danger to the general population?” Jeff asked.

“They should be fine.” Fry waved his hand in dismissal.

“Well, there may be a few cases of people with defibrillators, women with copper IUD coils, fires caused by random pieces of metal that are accidentally on frequency. We didn't run any tests,” responded Hicks.

Fry jumped on him. “Dammit, there's no way to test this thing. As soon as we start to transmit, even in a test, we notify every squawker on the planet.” Fry turned to Jeff. “And that's why Foggy Bottom needs to be involved. Every country in the world will react when this signal pops up on their SigInt. You have to handle it.”

There was a long pause while Jeff weighed his options. “When?” Jeff asked.

“Need to know basis. We'll give you notice when it starts.”

“My God,” was all Jeff could say.

Shannon was exhausted and faint from hunger by the time they got to the limo. Transmitting broadband for any length of

time really wore you out, like running a marathon. She barely noticed the enormous man stepping ponderously from a black van nearby. But she snapped to full attention when she heard him yelling into a cell phone, "It's on CNN, you idiot. You had a squawker in there!" It didn't take her long to understand that there would be one face missing from that CNN piece - hers. She needed friends. She had them. She, and her friends, needed to disappear.

Squint looked out over the landscape. The fields were brown, corn stubble and hay bales showed among the bare trees. The sky was hazy and a chill wind blew from the east. "Sleet, maybe snow soon. I hear the weather is freezing up in the Midwest. Bad time to send people out of their homes."

"Better than having them burn down. We have to send a Code Red." Code Red was an encryption header. It told everyone to use a page of an unmentioned magazine, one that every Elmer knew without being told, and use that page as a one-time code for what was to come next. It wasn't real sophisticated, but it took a long time to crack.

Squint took his jacket off. He was a tall man, and he had elaborate silver scrolls barely visible under his pale skin, all over his back and arms. They were HF-band antennas, for long range communications. They made

good use of his height. "Need every watt. I'll be warm soon enough." He spread his arms straight out to his sides. Phi, The local Elmer with the Greek letter on his head, read him the message:

"QST, QST, QST. This is a broadcast message to all radio folk from K3QNT. Message from AB3BG, I spell, Alpha Bravo Three Bravo Golf. Using Code Red 43, I repeat Code Red 43. Message text follows." The rest of the message was nonsense letters in groups of five. Squint had no idea what he was sending. Then, "Message ends. This is K3QNT, please confirm receipt. K."

All of them now had their hands spread. They all heard, "WA6SDF Copy..N0AAC Copy ...N3BQB Copy..." and on and on. Finally, at the end of the list of receiving stations were some bursts of musical noise. These were Broadband. Shannon saw these as pictures of houses, landscapes, people, all with the letters of the senders' call signs superimposed on them. Shannon was ready. She had her own picture, a sketch of a Movis helicopter with her call sign near it. She cranked her eyebrow up to full power and sent it North, West and South. East was the Atlantic, too far for that kind of signal. She knew there were repeaters, however, and the picture would quickly travel all over the world.

"How'd I do?" She asked, switching to the local group channel, still on full power.

“Damn you, girl, that hurts! QRP, please, all you need right here is a few milliwatts,” yelled Squint.

Shannon glared, then backed off. “OK, I’m sorry. What did you send?” Squint was no longer shivering. The effort of transmission made him sweat.

“Essentially a get-out-of-Dodge call,” said Phi. “Evacuate to the countryside and spread out. We can always stay in touch, they don’t have enough helicopters or personnel to cover the whole country. And it makes it real hard to keep secret this way.” He paused, looking off to the North. “We have another job to do.”

“What job?”

“Forward scout. We need to find out when the raids start, give as much warning as possible. My guess is at least part of the Movis fleet has to come from Quantico.”

The word came down from the Agency to Maxwell Burnham to find a certain nineteen year old coed named Shannon Redwine, whereabouts unknown, who was guilty of violating the Enemy Communications Act, and who was fingered as the “leak” in the Movis Project, whatever that was. The fact that there was a Secret Project didn’t bother Max Burner. There was always a Secret Project. But he suspected it had to do with squawkers. Squawkers were his turf, and leaving him in the dark about a squawker project made him

angry. Very angry. When he simmered down a bit, he noticed that his anger was without a target. Well, he would find out. And he would start with that fat pompous bastard Fry. He slammed the door in his black van, eased his bulk into the oversized upholstered seat, and gave the driver instructions to head for Langley.

“Man, I am starved,” Squint squatted in the shade of a gum tree in a wooded area on a hill overlooking Quantico. He could see a line of black helicopters in the distance, with something like cages strapped under them. He couldn’t sit comfortable because the ground was littered with spiny seeds from the gum tree, and more were dropping all the time.

“Me, too,” said Rudio.

“All right, I guess it’s my turn to fetch food. More burgers?” said Gristle.

“Beggars can’t be choosers. Here’s my dough,” said Squint, as he and Rudio handed off a few wrinkled dollars each.

Gristle got up and took a few shaky steps until his knees recovered, then he loped, all knees and elbows, down the slope to the country lane, and walked the half mile to the parking lot of the Bigger Burger. There was a pair of black vans there, but he paid little notice, after all, this was a military area. He radioed back to his friends that he had arrived.

“Max, I just got heard a squawker, some KB3TVI,” said a corporal wearing earphones in the back of a black van.

“Yeah, I heard’m” said Max around a mouthful of Double Monster Burger. “I see’m too. Geek with a yellow ball cap.”

“Should we get him now?”

“I’m eatin. We’ll get him when he comes out. Send the other van down the road a hundred yards and have them triangulate. Let’s get his buddies, too.” One of the vans obediently exited the parking lot and took up a position along the lane that Gristle had walked down. Sure enough, Gristle emerged shortly with a bag of food too large for one person, unless that person was Max Burner. He walked out of the parking lot, and then noticed the van rolling alongside him.

The van stopped and two armed men got out. The ponderous bulk of Max Burner descended after them.

“Stop right, there, buddy.” Max had a wheezy low voice, punctuated by coughs. The diabetes was killing him in spite of the eel cells.

Gristle stopped. Max walked over to him. His strides were accompanied by seismic movements of flesh under his rumpled dress shirt. He had ketchup stains on his khaki chino pants. He stopped about ten feet away from Gristle. “Bring out your ID and put it on

the ground. State your name and social security number.”

“Hey, fat boy, I haven’t done anything! I’m not a criminal. Where’s your badge?”

“I’m Maxwell Burnham. Maybe you’ve heard of me. And as for a badge...” He nodded his head and one of his men pulled a Colt 357 magnum out of its holster and pointed it at Gristle. The barrel looked immense to Gristle, but it was the least of his dangers. One of the other soldiers took Gristle’s ID and went to the van’s comm system. He called back, “He’s from the D.C. area. Real name Lester Grisell, goes by Gristle. No criminal record. Not on any subversive list.”

“I told you I’m not a criminal,” whined Gristle.

“The hell you aren’t. You’re a squawker. You’re in violation of the Enemy Communications Act, Mr. KB3TVI.” Max paused to cough up some phlegm. “Keep your hands in the air and don’t move.”

Gristle put his hands in the air, a position that let his J-pole wiring act as omnidirectional antennas. So he transmitted, at low power, his situation. Max patiently waited for a reply. None came. “They’re wise, the bastards. Have the other van scramble in those woods, see if they’re there,” he commanded.

On the hill, Squint, Rudio, Shannon and the Elmer were listening. “No one transmit!”

growled Squint. "Max Burner and his goons have Gristle."

"Who's Max Burner?" said Shannon.

"Black budget military. Verrry nasty anti-radio type. We leave here, right now." said Elmer.

"Wait, shouldn't we be helping Gristle?" said Shannon.

"If those guys arrest us, and they will, a few hundred thousand innocent radio folks are going to die. We have to get out now. Argue later." Elmer had stated the plain facts, but in his heart, he was grim. He knew Max Burner. They crawled along the fence under cover of shrubbery and, with many a scratch, exited the far side of the hill.

"Buddy, Lester, Gristle, if that's what you want to be called, you and your friends have violated the Enemy Communications Act. Turn them in now and we'll let you off easy." Max said.

"I haven't been communicating with any enemies," Gristle yelled.

"Gristle, this country always has enemies. Lots of them. And you've been communicating with people by unofficial channels. We know that because we heard you on the air. Now, kid, how are you going to prove those radio calls weren't to enemies?"

"I believe the burden of proof is on you. I'm a citizen. That's the law!" Gristle stood with his arms in the air, transmitting as he spoke.

Max shook his head. When he first started this job he captured a few undamaged squawkers. The court just fined them, surgically disabled their radios, and let them off. Max took that as a lesson. He turned sideways to Gristle and slowly raised his arms.

“I believe you’re a squawker. I believe you were communicating with other squawkers. Squawkers communicate all over the world, who knows with what enemies. You’re about to lose your, ahem, license.” He pointed his middle finger. “Burn, baby burn!”

Gristle went rigid with electric shock and burning pain. A curl of smoke rose from his sleeves. His muscles froze and his face went into rictus with every pulse. He screamed until his lungs were empty. Max just stood there, getting rid of the excess sugar from his lunch. Eventually, Gristle collapsed. The smell of cooked flesh permeated the air.

On the other side of the hill, the rest of the group heard Gristle’s last transmission, followed by the grinding, grinding of Max Burner’s pulses. Radio folk over half the continent heard those pulses. A few knew what they were. Shannon was now one of the informed, and it filled her with a helpless rage.

They were huddled on the floor of a garage along the Rappahannock, screened by a row of sweet gum trees from the broad, calm river that wound down from Richmond to Chesa-

peake Bay. The garage was full of yellow Bluebird school busses, and their engines were still warm. It was winter outside and the heat was welcome. Shannon, huddled against Squint, had been moody and depressed. She was afraid to contact her father because the cell phone signal could be traced and triangulated. If she transmitted, she would have to move. They were moving from place to place anyway, guided by transmissions from radio folk across the area. Shannon was thinking about the Frequent Fryer and Max Burner. "Squint, I heard there were some tricks we could use to boost our signals. Show me!" Shannon demanded.

"You already know that propagation is to radio what weather is to farming. If the propagation is poor, you're just wasting your signal."

"No, no, not that. Phi already taught me about propagation. But he didn't want to tell me about ways to boost my signal."

"Probably because he's concerned about your safety. It's hard enough on the body tissues, radiating radio frequency from wires under your skin. Especially when you're putting out a continuous signal like your broadband QAM mode. Even now we sometimes make a mistake and get a little RF burn. Any more and you can cook yourself pretty thoroughly. And I prefer you half-baked."

Shannon swatted him. "See if I bake your cookie, Q-man! But seriously, with Movis coming any day and malicious bastards like Max Burner on the loose, how could we be any less safe? Maybe we should learn how to defend ourselves?" Squint regarded her through an unruly hedge of hair, one eye closed.

"These rigs aren't designed to be weapons, not like what Max has." Squint paused, thinking it over, pushed back his hair. "OK, I'll tell you what I know, short of hooking you up to a megawatt repeater station."

"When I first got my wires, I used to experiment, you know, how small a signal I could make, how strong a signal, how to listen to one person in a bunch of noise, that kind of stuff. Whatever boosts the received signal ought to also boost the transmitted signal. So go down to a few milliwatts and stand over by that tree." He pointed outside the garage door. Shannon got up, stretched out the cramp from having her arms around Squint, and trotted over to a tree a few hundred yards away. Squint ran down to the edge of a small creek in the opposite direction. Both spread their arms out sideways and faced each other. A quarter mile apart, they could talk to each other by radio as easily as they did when cuddled together.

Squint said, "Now watch my signal strength. Call up your S-meter."

Shannon twitched an ear and made faces to get into display mode then blinked away all the displays except what she wanted. As Squint slowly brought his arms into a shallow "V" facing her, the virtual needle on her S-meter climbed, then went back down as the angle grew acute.

"If I remember, this angle gives me a 3 db gain," he said, returning to the shallow V position. Shannon understood that 3 decibels meant the received power had doubled. That, she calculated, would give her almost three thousand watts in a directional beam. The additional power was coming from Squint's back direction, where the signal would be diminished.

Squint walked out on to a short dock over the Rappahannock, and therefore somewhat brackish water - a good conductor of electricity. He raised his arms again and, facing Shannon, brought them into a shallow "V" again. Shannon watched her S-meter rise another 3 decibels.

"Standing over water like this produces an upside-down image of your antenna, electrical image that is, nothing you can see. That ground plane antenna changes the take-off angle of your signal so less of it goes up into the sky and it concentrates the beam even more. But be careful. I once tried it standing in the water, and got a pretty good zap."

Shannon was amazed. Her already powerful 1500 watts could be focused to an amazing 6000 watts! But was it enough?

There were six of them, all very young for radio folk, teenage or so. They all wore short hair and a kind of sunglasses that turned opaque when they closed their eyes, giving them the appearance of blind men. The Elmer had heard of them, a subgroup of radio folk called "M&M's" because they operated mostly on millimeter waves instead of the usual 2 meter band. They were very quiet. There was no apparent leader, one started a conversation and another picked it up and a third went on from there. It was quite confusing:

"Elmer, I heard you were up for M&M wiring," said a yellow hair. "You know, with the new MCG virus," said one with bright blue pants. "Word has it that you have the stuff," said a tall one, "And you can do fractal arrays," said an Asian one with opaqued glasses, "On him," said the brown hair, pushing the silent one to the forefront.

"Groupthink? ESP or just a new twist on radio?" thought Phi, the Elmer. He had heard of the M&M's on the Net, but there was only a little cross-talk between the two meter generation and these folks. However, he had gone to the trouble to get the new tattoo ink they wanted. It came, not exactly contraband but passed hand-to-hand from the biotech lab in

Spain, in pure quartz flasks inside a silvered sleeve. Nothing touched the MCG virus fluid but quartz. It wasn't that expensive, but he had trouble believing it worked. Nevertheless, he carefully read the application inserts and he was ready if he ever had a customer. He had practiced the millimeter wave antenna designs until his practice antennas matched the patterns in the "Micro and Millimeter Wave Book".

The Elmer studied the silent one. He was a normal teenage kid with rainbow-striped hair, ears chopped to points, shirt and pants a vivid orange, tight at the cuffs and oversize everywhere else. Clearly some kind of subculture clothing, but not a religious nut or zaner. However, this kid, who was called Arigo, did not have the opaque glasses.

"I'm A0UPB, the call sign I got from my father. I have a NewRad Triple Zero in the back of my neck. I brought the spec sheet - I didn't think you would have it. Probably the first one in this country," Arigo said. The others, four blind men and their seeing eye buddy, all nodded.

Phi took the memory stick and pulled out his reader. The spec was a revelation. No matter how long you are in this business, he thought, you are always surprised at what technology brings forth. The thing was a solid disk about three centimeters across. It put out fifty watts on a frequency of 10 gigahertz, a

band so high not even his custom wideband rig could tune it, and five watts on two meters. That was the easy part to believe. It needed no power source – no eel cells, no batteries. It made its own power from some bio-mechanical device that looked like a piece of sponge in the diagram. The modulation pattern was a waveform so advance he could not understand it. According to the spec, it automatically adapted to interference by changing its phase coding pattern somehow. It adapted to signal strength, adapted to Doppler shift, adapted to gravitational red shift and gravitational lensing (what the hell was that for?) and had about a dozen different antenna outputs. Phi considered himself pretty strong in radio technology, but he never heard of stuff like this. Adaptation for gravitational lensing, indeed! But there was more. Apparently the damned thing used protein gradients to insert tendrils into the brain. It didn't send words, or require subvocalization, or even send pictures. It sent what you thought! And to cap it off, the receive sensitivity was a thousand times better than anything he had ever seen, noise floor right down to the quantum level. He shuddered and closed the mem stick reader.

Phi addressed the tall one whose glasses weren't opaque. "You know about this unit? Is this what you have?"

The tall one closed his eyes and sent Phi a blast of info on two meters. His call sign was AOUUO, his name was Canto, and his rig was nearly the same except for the quantum noise floor. During the exchange he did not speak a word. What he sent was indented, organized and formatted out like an outline draft. The details fell in under their headings. His transmission was crystal clear, as if his signal were perfectly adapted to Phi's rig.

Phi excused himself and went into the closet he used as a warehouse. He took out his encrypted ARREL call sign index and looked up AOUUO and AOUPB. They were duly registered over thirty years ago. Perfectly legit. He spread his arms and put out a call for info on the NewRad Triple Zero. There was some info on NewRad, it was the New Radio Corporation, established about three years ago. Its predecessor was a manufacturer of radio telescope gear. No one knew anything about the Triple Zero model. He walked back to the tattoo room with the quartz crystal flask and his brushes.

Arigo had his shirt off. "I need a short two-meter fractal, an omni ten millimeter. A medium gain ten mil fractal, and a really good high gain ten mil fractal on my left forearm. The bazooka, if you have the model."

The Elmer had the model. That much work would have taken days with a tattoo pen. This new MCH virus could be painted on. He made

the measurements and drew in the antennas with a ball point pen. Then he simply painted the bluish fluid over the pen strokes with a fine brush. There was a lot of detail in the fractal antennas, but they were tiny compared to the usual two-meter stuff. The bazooka looked like a pair of fuzzy fish linked tail to tail. According to the model's spec, it had a twenty-four decibel gain, effectively multiplying the output of the transmitter 256 times, concentrating the signal in a narrow beam like a good searchlight.

“Arigo, you know how this MCH virus works?” the Elmer asked.

“A little,” Arigo answered.

“It's an engineered virus, with the capsid protective layer from a virus found in a geyser at Yellowstone Park. It doesn't need silver, it eats almost any kind of cellulose or sugar and makes carbon nanotubes, then connects them into wires. The virus sinks through the outer layer of dead skin, the stratus corneum, and stays there. They claim the carbon nanotubes conduct better than the old silver granules, and that if they are ever damaged or broken, the virus heals them. You should have wires in three or four days. I don't think you will be able to see them, even in UV light, but your rig will know they're there. Eat lots of carbs, boy.”

It was done before noon. The group of six went outside into the strong Virginia sunlight

and stood around, obviously in QSO, but without raising their arms. Then Canto, the tall one, raised his arm, fist closed, and pointed at the sky. The Elmer was mystified. Millimeter waves go right through the atmosphere. What was he pointed at? He walked outside.

Canto smiled at him. "Yessir, it's moon bounce. Mil waves are only line of sight, but we can reach the other side of the Earth by bouncing the signal off the moon."

The Elmer just shook his head. The last moon bounce rig he saw was an array of four antennas, each the size of a truck, all mounted on a surplus Navy surface-to-air missile platform. Even then, the QSO was done on a pre-arranged schedule. These kids were connected to the world in a way no one in his generation had ever anticipated.

"Good luck and 73," he wished them, and they left them alone with his thoughts, thoughts of a kind they were probably capable of sharing with their new radio technology.

Fry was having a very good day. That meant he was having his way with the unmanageable bureaucracy of the NSA, and even better, he was making sure that some officials who did not share his point of view were getting the short straw. One of these was Jefferson Shelby III, the reluctant analyst from Foggy Bottom. Shannon's father had been called to

Langley at Beltway rush hour, a time Fry chose for maximum inconvenience to Jeff. Already under great pressure, Jeff had arrived at the tiny, uncomfortable interview room late and looked rather wilted in his pinstripe suit. Fry was already seated behind a gray steel table with a single folder marked with the NSA/SigInt seal.

Fry put on his most unctuous tone. “Jeff, I understand your daughter, Shannon, has gone missing. I’m so sorry to have to disturb you at a time like this. You and your wife must be terribly upset.”

“Jay, I’m sorry to be late, but thanks for your concern. Why did I have to come all the way out here, when a telephone call would have been enough?”

“Jeff, Jeff, I’m only trying to help. They say a picture is worth a thousand words.” Fry opened the folder and pushed across a photo. It was Shannon, taken through a security fence. She was a bit windblown and looked chilled and grim. On one side of her was a bald, bearded man and on the other was a taller, athletic figure. There was a date and time stamped at the bottom. Jeff saw it was two days ago.

“This is two days old. You’ve been sitting on this for two days? Where is she?” he yelled.

Fry carefully closed the folder. When he chose to respond, his voice was calm. “This was taken at Quantico. I understand there

was an unfortunate incident there. A young man was accidentally killed. We believe he was using an illegal radio. We suspect the two other people in the picture are also, um, squawkers.” Fry counted out a long pause while Jeff stared at the picture. “Jeff, how are you doing lining up support for us at State? Well, I hope.”

Jeff started, as if from a trance. His features hardened. “Jay, the Director asked Justice to look into the legality of this Movis thing. He has his doubts. I have my doubts. Radios aren’t illegal, and even if they were, having one would not be a capital offense. What you’re planning is, well, without mincing words, it’s a mass execution. Without so much as a trial.”

Jeff watched Fry turn beet red, but then he brought himself under control. Fry’s voice was smooth. “Jeff, your daughter, Shannon, is a squawker. That’s not a guess, we have evidence. Now, I don’t know how you conspired, pardon me, allowed this to happen.” Fry waved his hand in a circle. “For your benefit, I will assume you didn’t know. I’d like nothing better than to bring her in here where she can be safe, put her in a Faraday cage until Movis is over. But I don’t see how I can do anything unless State cooperates. You know how hard it is to keep control over things.” Fry stood up. “Why don’t you keep the picture. Tell me how to get in touch with your daughter and keep

her safe. And let me know when State is in line with this.” Fry waddled out the door. Jeff twisted around in his chair, jaw clenched. Fry stopped at the door. “And Jeff, you only have a couple of days.”

“I’m sorry, Jeff, but I’ve been stonewalled.” Dr. Ingrid Kalar was Senior Officer of Commercial Affairs in the China Branch. She was not Jeff’s superior officer, but she was known to be connected and she was not a bureaucrat. Dr. Kalar, who earned the nickname “Mother Ingrid”, had a soft spot for Shannon, who she had met on occasion.

“Whoever backs this lunatic, Fry, must be way up there,” Jeff shook his head and frowned. “No one outside of Langley admits to any knowledge of a Movis Project. They are all giving me “official denial” after that CNS news story broke. I heard a rumor of a Senate Communications Commission investigation warming up, but Romney’s office denies it.” Jeff slumped a bit further in his chair and shook his head again.

“How long since you heard from Shannon?” asked Dr. Kalar, very quietly.

“Ten days now. If that lunatic bastard Fry harms a hair on her head I’ll stand him up in front of a firing squad.”

“I didn’t think the Navy ever had firing squads. Wasn’t keelhauling the usual punishment?”

“Don’t mock me, Ingrid, I’m a distraught man. You should hear what Cynthi wants to do to him.”

“Better I don’t. The less that firebrand wife of yours knows, the more likely we are to stop this thing. Did you talk to Director Chapins?”

“Can’t. He’s avoiding me. Like any political appointee, his only reliable organ is his sniffer, and it smells trouble,” Jeff growled. “Let’s give it one more day. Something has to break.” He picked up his coat. “Good night, Ingrid, and thanks for your support. I owe you one.”

“You owe me nothing. Didn’t you steer me onto the connection between the revaluation of the Yen and the discovery of uranium in Mongolia? Besides, it’s the right thing to do, stopping this illegal carnage. Take care of yourself and give Cynthi a hug for me.”

Jeff turned and left the room. Her outer office was already deserted. He walked down the long, echoing corridor, said good night to the Marine Corporal stationed at the security gate, and descended the marble stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he was approached by three young men in brilliant street dress, with hair in primary colors, all wearing dark glasses. In fact, the two trailing youngsters seemed to be blind, their glasses were completely opaque, but they did not have seeing eye dogs or canes. Assuming they were veterans, he stopped and gave them his attention.

“Commander Shelby, sir, my name is Canto. This is Arigo,” the one with pointed ears nodded, “And this is Goan,” pointing to the Asian, who smiled.

“Are you China vets?” Jeff asked.

“No, sir, we’re too young. That conflict was before we were of age,” Goan said.

“We have news of your daughter,” Arigo said.

“Please don’t worry, Shannon is OK,” Canto, the tall one, continued. Jeff noticed he was the only one who could see, or, at least, his eyes were visible behind the dark glasses. This group began to spook him. His name and rank were on his uniform, but how did they know of Shannon? He jumped to the obvious conclusion.

“You are in radio contact with her? You are all radio folks? Don’t worry, I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Sir, we don’t have radio contact with her.”

“The Echelon people would pick it up.”

“There is a dangerous man, Maxwell Burnham, on their trail.”

“We have other means.” That last came from Canto.

“Where is she? Can I get to her?” Jeff asked. How did these guys know so much?

“She’s in the Chesapeake Bay area, on the move.”

“Be careful you don’t lead them to her.”

“Fry’s people are watching you.”

Damn them. How do they know about Fry? Jeff said, "Tell her I'm doing what I can from this end." That was reasonably safe to admit.

"We don't know when, or if, we can relay that message."

"But we will try." Canto handed a slip of paper to Jeff. On it was written, in block letters, "KB3SHN."

The three enigmas walked away leaving Jeff staring. "*Am I the only one who doesn't know what the hell is happening here?*" he thought.

Fry was bouncing and wobbling down a corridor lined with closed office doors. Two aides, both Army, paced beside him. "Carl, there was a sigint for a new call sign, KB3SHN, down south of Richmond. Is that new satellite, Songbird, in the forty degree orbit?" That would be an orbit inclined forty degrees to Earth's equator, so that the satellite would coast up as high as Canada. Songbird carried enough fuel to change orbits on command.

"Yessir. Do you want me to check its availability?" Carl replied.

"No, I don't want you to check its god-damned availability. I want it positioned to sweep over the lower Chesapeake for the next two days, and if that asshole bird colonel gives you grief, shove a copy of Directive 129-2025 in front of his beak. I want pictures at max

res. I want to see the pimple on Washington's nose if someone drops a dollar."

"Yessir," responded Carl, with the audible snap equivalent to a salute.

"Rick, put out a query on KB3SHN and any other data connecting her to Jeff Shelby's little princess. All databases, NCIC, CIFA, MasterCard, Visa. We're going to drag that kitten in."

"Yes, sir, I'll get right on it."

An hour later, the query against KB3SHN, all data bases, came to the desk of one Dr, Ingrid Kalar. At first she didn't know what to make of it, but suspected it might have something to do with Jeff's daughter. She placed a call to an old friend at Echelon, a newly promoted colonel who had something to do with a new surveillance satellite.

"They found a kitten in an abandoned barn down near Tappahannock." Jeff's driver relayed the messages to Jeff, who was sitting in the back seat of his limo. The call was on the limo's scrambled phone. The scrambling, the code, and the verbal misdirection would just serve to slow down Fry's people. There were no key words in the message that a computer could automatically flag for human attention, but every call was recorded.

"How far to Tappahannock?" Jeff asked his driver.

“Two hours. Do you have any idea how many abandoned barns there are down that way?”

“I’ll worry about that when we get there. Watch for cops, but stomp on it.” Jeff pulled a map of Virginia out of a seat pocket and studied it a while. When you get to the Route 17 intersection, take the parallel road, the old route 33.” It was straight as an arrow through flat land, probably empty at this time of day, and he could see any pursuit. Besides, he knew Shannon would not stay close to any main road.

Two hours later they were hurtling down a two-lane blacktop through fields just greening up with corn, grass, and onions. At the top of a rise Jeff scanned ahead and behind with binoculars. He saw nothing but road. Of course, there were other ways of tracking him. It was all a matter of timing, but he had a plan.

“This is WKIK, your local country and western station. Do you have a request?”

“Hi. I’m so thrilled to be talking to you. Can you play “Red Red Wine,” by Scott Free? My baby just looves that song.”

“Haven’t had that request in a while. Sure can, here it is. Comin’ up on WKIK, your country radio.”

Shannon was tuned in to the only “decent” station, in the doldrums, just lying low with Squint and waiting for Rudio and Phi to collect them. She perked up at the song, “Red Red Wine”. Her mom used to play that a lot - it was her name. But it wasn’t exactly a country and western song.

“That was “Red Red Wine” requested by Jeff for his princess. You’re listening to WKIK.”

“Squint, get up. Something’s happening. I think my dad is trying to send me a message.”

“Take it easy, Shannon, I’ve been scanning and I haven’t heard a thing.”

“Yeah, well here they come.” A pair of Army HumVees came up the road and made the turn into the abandoned farm road.

Squint ran out the back door and behind a hay bale. Shannon ran in the other direction, along the river, and climbed a tree overlooking the water. “What the hell,” she thought, “They already found us.” She tuned to the local TV news channel and began transmitting.

“Shit. We’re on TV,” exclaimed Fry. “She’s doing it again. We better get her and fast. Carl, have someone in Ops call that TV station and disclaim that phony signal.”

“Yessir”

“Rick, drive around the back of that barn. Signal the other driver to stay in front.”

“Sir, we have a visitor. A limo with State plates.”

“Double shit. How did he know? We have a leak somewhere. Carl, meet him in front, double time. Take one of the soldiers, lock and load.”

“Yessir” Carl jumped down from the Hum-Vee and gestured for one of the men in back to follow. They trotted to the farm road. Carl tried to wave the limo down. The soldier stood straddling the road with his automatic weapon at the ready.

The limo screeched and shuddered to a halt with its bumper nearly touching the soldier’s right knee. The soldier’s weapon never wavered. Jeff Shelby jumped out running and shouting,

“Shelby, Department of State, official business. Stand aside Lieutenant.”

“No, sir. I have orders to stop you. This is a restricted area under Directive 129-2025. Leave immediately or we will use force.”

Now Jeff was a few feet from Carl. “That’s my daughter in there.” Jeff planted a foot behind Carl and swung his elbow to the point of Carl’s jaw. Carl went down and stayed down. The soldier swung his weapon toward Jeff. At that instant the limo lurched forward and mowed him down. Jeff jumped back in through the open door and lay flat on the floor. It was old Embassy training, rehearsed until it was automatic.

The limo came under fire from the soldiers in the second HumVee. Jeff’s driver floored it

and plowed the eight thousand pound vehicle into the back of the HumVee. The soldiers went flying.

“Aahhh. Hmmm. Fine fall weather we are havin’ out here in the wilds of Virgin-i-ay. It seems my colleague Doctor Fry has gotten himself on public TV once more.” Max Burner had just finished lunch and he was easing his belt another notch. “Makes my job so much more enjoyable. And easier.”

“We have a good triangulation on the signal. Do you want to home in on it?”

“Yep, but don’t be in any great hurry. (cough, cough) I think we should be clean up hitter this time at bat. You understand my drift?”

“Sure. We can watch the proceedings from here, on live TV. When transmission stops, we show up.”

“We were never there. Whatever happens to the squawkers and that fat bastard Fry they did all by themselves. Makes less paperwork.”

“Ah, Commander Shelby. If you insist on crashing my party, you should know I no longer need you or State. In fact, you are just in time to see me, acting on Directive two oh one two dash one sixty-six, incinerate you daughter. Then I’ll deal with you.” Fry was at the river edge, trying to find Shannon, who he

knew to be up in the tree from the perspective of her TV transmission.

“Dad, run away, he’ll kill you, he’s a killer!” Hearing Shannon’s voice from the tree just motivated Jeff to move faster. He was out of the line of sight of the soldier’s in the back of the barn and working from cover to cover. He discovered Squint behind the hay bales.

“Shhh! I’m Shannon’s friend. I’m calling for help right now.” Squint was spread-eagled over the back of a bale trying to get his signal out. He was blinking away the hair from his eyes. Jeff took one look, nodded, and moved on.

“Come and get me, Frequent Fryer. You’re on live TV. Make it look good.” Shannon ducked around the trunk of the tree to where it overhung the water. Fry had a longer way to go and he was no sprinter. By the time Shannon got to the edge of the dock, Fry was just coming around the tree. Shannon ran to the dock and spread here arms, transmitting now at full power, putting out every watt she could make.

Fry approached the edge of the dock, raised his arms and pointed his fists at her. “You are going to squawker hell, and I’m the one who is going to turn up the heat. Then I’ll send your father to join you.”

Shannon vee’ed her arms the way Squint showed her. She screamed. It wasn’t clear whether it was a scream of pain or rage. or

possibly both. Her eyes squinted. Her camera caught the roiling turbulence in front as the crossed beams, hers and Fry's heated the moist air.

Jeff bolted out of cover from behind the tree and tackled Fry full tilt. Fry came off his feet and went into the river. It was quite shallow, less than a foot. It was enough. Shannon's powerful beam, amplified many times by the reflection and the tricks she leaned from Squint, smoked a nerve in his hip. But then she was out of the action, collapsed on the dock.

"Transmission stopped. Glad we could take in the show. Boys, move in," Max Burner commanded his convoy.

The pair of black vans rolled slowly down the rutted farm road. A few dazed soldiers gave him no resistance. He herded them into the barn and posted one of his men on guard. He wanted no witnesses.

He rolled his van down to the area of the dock, opened the door and got ponderously out of his oversized chair. He counted three people he needed to burn: Shannon, crumpled at the end of the dock, was no immediate threat. Fry was just getting to his feet. Jeff Shelby, who he had never met, was focused on Fry. He waddled over that way. "Keep an eye on this man while I get the fat one in the wa-

ter," he shouted to his team. One of them prodded Jeff away at the point of a M15.

Max approached Fry. "Time to see what you got." Max stood sideways and slowly raised his arms, pointing his right hand at Fry, finger extended. Fry felt the heavy pulses, burning, burning. Max was just having fun, not even at full power. Fry was having none of that. He stood up as well as he could on the edge of the dock over the water and pointed both fists at Max. Fry let fly with both barrels. Max went "Whooff!" and doubled over, but he had an enormous amount of thermal mass. One quick shot wasn't going to do him in.

It was enough to slow Max down, however. Fry retreated to the front of the barn where he hoped to find his soldiers. Max waddled slowly after him. Then Fry was aware that Shannon was up and transmitting again. He had double vision, himself moving away for cover, Max ponderously waddling in pursuit.

Fry was hobbling from the burns Shannon gave him in the river. He had no feeling in one leg. He had to hop. It made his fat wobble, but it got him out of Max's line of sight. Max Burner didn't move much, he just tracked Fry like a radar-guided cannon, berating him in a raspy howl, "You quivering ball of lard, you self-important son-of-a-bitch, you think you can just turn me off like a faucet! I don't have an OFF, but I got one, hot ON!" and he let fly with another series of pulses. Fry ducked be-

hind the HumVee. It looked like the tires were bulging near the ends of the wheel spokes, where the radio waves were stronger. The ceramic body didn't provide much protection and his wires were getting hot. All the time he was looking for that broadcaster, Shannon, and hoping he could turn her off. Damn, but he owed her one.

Then Fry noticed smoke curling out from the leg of his pants, the gimpy leg. The good leg seemed to grow hot and fail. Sweat burst from his armpits and groin in an attempt to cool him, to no avail. He looked on in horror as the bulk of Max Burner came around the front of the HumVee and raised his arms once more in his patent salute. Then the grinding noise came and burned him away.

About fifty of them, in bright primary colors, looking like nothing so much as a rainbow explosion painted by Gaughin, emerged from the edges of the field. Their glasses were opaque. They had Max Burner surrounded in the middle of a cow pasture. His supply of excess glucose was nearly gone, Nevertheless, he assumed his stance and turned slowly around the circle, threatening each one in turn. Whichever way he faced, the ones behind him would raise their fists and transmit, making Max turn their way. Max circled slowly like a bull at bay.

“Phi, we want you to bear witness for the rest. We want Shannon to transmit what will happen here.” Canto, the tall one, spoke quietly to a man with a bald head and a full beard. Shannon was nearby, transmitting every nuance.

The circle closed in on Max. Goan and Arigo moved in to either side of him and touched their fists to the sides of his head. Max stopped moving. After a while Max sat down. He was crying. The circle dissipated and the members moved off.

“He was a killer. He will kill no more,” Canto said.

“I’ve heard that millimeter waves can affect the brain. Is that what you did?” Phi asked.

“Something like that.”

“There is an endless supply of Max Burners and Frequent Fryers in this world. The urge for power without responsibility - you know. They’ll be after you again.”

“Tell me, where do you think our technology comes from?” asked Canto.

“It could be outer space, for all I know,” said Phi.

“Exactly.” Canto smiled. “Why do you think we need to compensate for gravitational lensing?”

Phi’s jaw dropped. “You... you’re in touch with an advanced extraterrestrial intelligence?”

“Have been for eight years. They help, but they don’t push.”

“I wish I understood you guys. You seem to be something new in the world.”

“Then, perhaps I have a gift for you.” Canto put his fist gently alongside Phi’s bald head and began to transmit. He kept it up until Phi began to get a headache. It was more than he could hold. Canto lowered his arm and smiled. Phi shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

Shannon came over. “I got it all. But what was Canto doing to you?”

“Ever hear of project SETI? Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence? Tell your father he’s got a new diplomatic calling. Tell everyone.” Phi had a big grin. He had lived to see this.

“Who are they, what do they look like?”

“Well, there’s more than one out there.”

Invasion

by Dan Needles

From the passenger seat I lined up the rifle sights on the driver of the oncoming truck. He couldn't be more than eleven or twelve years old.

A hundred yards, maybe less.

"John, he's going to hit us!" Steve shouted as he fought to keep our Hubblecraft on the road.

The wind pelted hail against the vehicle's armor and harried grains of ice across the two lane highway that separated us from the approaching truck. The grains disappeared into anonymous gray drifts, which lined the road and formed the island's ever-changing, frigid dunescape. *We shouldn't be here.*

Ninety yards.

"Hit the horn," I said.

"I already have!" Steve's voice cracked.

"Hit it again." I took a deep breath. The cold air burned and smelled like fuel. With my left hand, I pressed the cross, hidden beneath seven layers of clothing. The metal felt warm against my skin.

Eighty yards.

"Just shoot the kid. Shoot the kid!" He shouted.

Steve outranked me. I thought of cutting the boy down. I thought of my own son many

light-years away. I thought of my death and leaving Ben fatherless.

I ignored the order; it wasn't the kid's fault. We'd come to stabilize his world and extract star-salt. Instead, the government collapsed, the atmosphere degraded, and the planet warmed.

Through the rifle's scope, I focused past the smudged windshield and studied the boy's facial folds. They twisted and contorted like an angry river. But culture and genetics hid their meaning. *Is the boy angry or sad? Is this a joy ride or vendetta for a murdered mother?*

I remembered yesterday when I shot another boy's father. The son screamed in my mind as he clutched his dead father's bloody shirt. I thought of my own son - his blue innocent gaze. *God.*

Seventy yards.

I shook my head clear, lifted the barrel, and fired a shot above the vehicle.

The bullet ricocheted off the truck's roof. Sparks flew.

The driver kept coming.

A psionic attacker, I thought. He's trying to get within range. Wind shook the Hubblecraft. Perhaps the boy didn't hear the shot over the ice storm.

Sixty yards.

"John, take him out!" Steve shouted.

I aimed at the windshield and fired a second shot.

The Hubblecraft hit an ice clump as I pulled the trigger. The round flew wide to the right. It disappeared into a drift.

I aimed the riffle and fired again. The bullet punched a hole through the truck's front bumper.

The truck kept coming.

Fifty yards.

"If he's gifted we're dead John. Now shoot him! Shoot him now!"

I hesitated.

"That's an order."

I thought of killing the boy. I thought of my own son many light-years away. I thought of dying and leaving Ben fatherless.

Forty yards.

Hell. I took aim through the sights and pulled the trigger. Two rounds struck the front of the truck. The kid swerved. I held the trigger down. Five rounds peppered the hood. Black smoke rose from the engine. Two more bullets hit the windshield and it shattered.

I thought of Ben and kept the trigger down. Twenty rounds tore into the truck until the rifle's clip was empty.

The truck veered a hard right. After a couple of feet, its wheels sunk to the axles in a hail-drift and the engine stalled.

Thirty-five yards.

Steve stopped the Hubblecraft. I opened the passenger door and hit the ground. The air burned my nose and lungs. I pulled my mask in place. I withdrew a new clip from my belt; the metal froze against my naked hand as I slammed the fresh rounds into place. "Check," I said over my headset.

Steve grunted as he ran toward the truck.

From behind the door, I took aim at the truck. The rifle's sights jumped around. My hands shook, but not from the icy wind. I felt the metal cross turn cold against my chest.

Through the rifle sights, I caught a glimpse of a bloody arm that extended skyward from the twisted wreck. The boy was dead. *Sweet Father.*

Tears streaked my face as I thought of my own son. Ben's innocent gaze burned in my mind again. It felt worse than the cold. "I made the best choice I could. Sometimes any decision is the wrong one," I murmured.

Steve ran into view. He led with his rifle and swept toward the driver's side.

Through the sights I saw the boy's hand twitch. He was alive!

I lowered the rifle, jumped to my feet, and followed Steve.

Steve pointed the weapon into the truck and stepped back. "Get out of the vehicle," he screamed. He slipped on the ice, but recovered.

I fought the wind and ice until I could see into the vehicle. Beneath shredded metal and fur pelts darkened by blood, I saw a boy. He struggled to get up. His crystal blue eyes were open, wide with fear. *Oh sweet Father.*

“Stop!” Steve yelled at the boy. Steve slipped. With a thunder clap, the muzzle of his rifle flashed.

The bullet struck the boy’s leg.

The boy closed his eyes, pulled his head back, and screamed.

“Stand down,” I cried.

“Oh God. Don’t move!” Steve shouted with a hoarse voice. He got back up.

“Stand down! Stand down,” I yelled.

The boy thrashed in pain.

Steve kept his weapon pointed at the ground. The rifle shook in his hand.

I ran to the boy.

“He had a gun,” Steve stammered behind me.

The boy’s hands were empty.

A dozen deep wounds peppered his body. The worst were a gash on his right side and the gunshot wound in his left thigh. I covered them with my hands. The boy had lost a lot of blood.

I glanced back. Steve’s expression was blank. He stared past me at the boy. “Come here,” I yelled.

“I’ll radio the base.” Steve stumbled toward the Hubblecraft.

The boy laid still. His cold skin was pale.

“Get the medical kit,” I said.

Steve didn’t budge.

“Steve ...”

The boy grasped my wrist.

My eyes focused on him. His blue eyes tore into me. “Help.”

I nodded. “It’s coming. Help is coming.”

The boy shook his head. “No, the village.”

Oh God. I understood. Thick sheets of winter ice normally protected the harbor from the late seasonal storms. This year the ice had melted several weeks early and the storms had intensified. The village stood unprotected. The boy wasn’t a psionic. He’d come to ask for help. *And I shot him.*

“Steve, contact the base.”

He still didn’t respond.

I started to rise, but the boy held onto my wrist with surprising strength. I met his gaze.

“Return my body to my family,” he said.

I blinked.

“My father lives in the third house from where the road ends above the village.”

“Don’t... You’ll be fine,” I assured him.

I tried to pull away.

He held on tight. “Please.”

I twisted my wrist to break his grip. From the Hubblecraft I reported the disaster. They told us to rendezvous at the village. At the back of the Hubblecraft, I found Steve. He wouldn’t meet my gaze. I opened the wire-

mesh toolbox and extracted the medkit and thermal blankets. Alone, I returned to the truck.

By the time I arrived, the boy's facial folds matched the gray snow. His eyes had closed. He was dead.

I wrapped the boy's body in the thermal blanket. How can I return him to his parents? What would I say? I wasn't qualified or trained. I scooped him up and carried him back to the Hubblecraft. His body grew cold.

The Chaplain would speak for me. He would know what to say, how to comfort the boy's parents.

I opened the tool box and removed rope, crowbar and other items. I stared at the cold metal grate. It wouldn't do. I set the boy aside and spread out a couple thermal blankets across the bare metal. On top of them I laid the boy. The thermal had unwrapped, exposing his face. With his eyes closed, the boy looked peaceful. I couldn't believe he was dead.

"Get in here," Steve said over the headset.

I closed the thermal to keep his skin from freezing and lowered the lid of the toolbox. The rope, crowbar, and other items, I threw into the back seat of the Hubblecraft.

Steve hit the gas as I buckled in.

"Change of plans," he said.

I met his gaze. His eyes looked raw and red.

"You know the core samplers?" Steve asked.

I nodded. The glaciers in the center of the island had existed for millions of years. Trapped between the layers of ice, small pockets of air recorded the history of the planet's atmosphere. A dozen scientists studied the ice to understand the planet's weather and find a way to slow the warming trend.

"They've evacuated. The glacier is moving," Steve said.

"What?"

"Water has seeped through cracks to the bottom of the glacier. It's acting like skids. The whole sheet is moving."

"So?"

"So the village is in the way."

"I thought we evacuated the village."

Steve shook his head. "All but one family. They want to see the man who shot their son."

"But he died from the crash. You only shot him in the leg," I said.

Steve wouldn't meet my gaze. He kept his eyes fixed on the road.

The Hubblecraft mounted the rise. The road ran along the cliff above the village. I saw a dozen parked Hubblecraft. The soldiers and engineers stared at the village below. Only rooftops peeked out between sets of waves. Several of the engineers glanced at me, but they wouldn't meet my gaze. A mile down the road the truth hit.

“It isn’t you that the family wants to see, is it?”

Steve remained silent.

“You threw me under bus. While I was helping the boy, you spun a story to command!”

“What was I supposed to say? You unloaded an entire clip into the truck. You went berserk.”

Steve stopped the Hubblecraft in front of a hut – third from the end of the road.

I fought down my anger. God’s will placed me here. I had tried to dodge His will once and he found another way. *Your will, not mine.*

Made from ice blocks and supporting metal struts, the single room hut stood beneath a towering mountain of ice. As I lifted the boy from the toolbox, the mountain groaned and the ground shook. *Not much time.*

I hurried to the hut. The entrance fur pulled aside. An older native man met me; his folds of facial skin contorted. I could not meet his gaze. He looked at the boy in my arms and showed me in.

Two young girls, a young adult male and the boy’s mother surrounded a collage of pelts. On the corners of the makeshift bed, mounds of whale lard were lit like candles. The woman stared at me. The others kept their gazes on the boy.

A loud groan rumbled through the hut as the mountain of ice fractured. Outside, a crash and a loud thud told of falling ice.

The Hubblecraft's horn blared twice.

I set the boy upon the pelts and stepped back.

Ice fell and clattered along the roof.

I forced myself to look into the man's eyes. "I need to get you out of here."

The man smiled. "Thank you for returning our son."

I nodded. "I am ..."

Metal torqued, followed by a large crash next door. I jumped.

The Hubblecraft's horn blared three times.

The man put a hand on my shoulder. "Trust Mother Sun." She was the natives' god.

I shook my head. "Mother Sun protects those who protect themselves."

Everyone laughed except the boy's mother, who kept her gaze on me.

"Mother Sun does as she chooses," the old man said. "We are in her will."

The ice groaned and howled.

"How can you say that? Did Mother Sun not melt the ice that protected your village? Did She not crack the glacier, exposing more star-salt? Does She not threaten your home now?"

The Hubblecraft's horn blared again three times.

The woman dug into me with her gaze. I could feel her hate.

The man nodded. "We submit to Mother Sun's rule."

"Come with me. God will show mercy."

Once again everyone laughed. "You warm our hearts."

The ice groaned louder. Outside thuds and shattering ice sounded. *Sweet Father*. "Why are you laughing?"

"Mother, not father, rules the house," said the woman. The others fell silent.

"How can you trust her? Your god has abandoned you," I said.

The old man nodded. "Mother Sun had two sons, Ground and Sea. Every Spring, She awakens Sea, but intuition keeps Her from rousing Ground. All Summer we harvest the fish and crabs. It angers Mother, but we pray for Her forgiveness. By Fall, Sea has grown weak and Her rage explodes. She withdraws Her love and brings ravaging storms. Through the Winter, we remain silent. We bury the fish bones and crab shells. We burn the pelts that stink of our slaughter. By Spring, Sea returns and She has forgotten the previous year.

"As each layer of ice melts, the memory of our sin against Her is released and Ground remembers. He has told Mother of our sin against Sea. That is why She shows us no mercy. We show you mercy because we wish mercy upon ourselves."

The hut shook as blocks of ice slammed into the wall. Outside the Hubblecraft's horn blared. Steve didn't release the horn this time.

My thoughts returned to Ben. I couldn't stay any longer. I pushed back the pelt and ran out. A large block of ice tumbled from the glacier. The metal struts cut like knives through the hut. Mother Sun buried the family in debris. No one survived.

I should have listened to the old man and stayed in the hut. A month after the glacier slid into the ocean, sores appeared on my arm. Over several weeks the sores spread across my body and grew into lesions. Others fell ill. Many were sent home for treatment. A few stayed behind along with myself. Most of those are dead now. We do not hear from the home world anymore.

By the time we made the connection between the illness and the melting ice, it was too late. The ice had trapped more than pockets of air. We released something - a virus or a toxin; I do not know what. But that doesn't matter now.

As I lie here alone on my cot, I think of Ben. I wish I could see him one more time before I die. It has been so long since I have seen him on a monitor or felt the warmth of his hug in a simulator. I can no longer see him in my mind's eye; instead I see the dead boy.

I no longer pray to God. He cannot help me now, only Mother Sun can. The old man was right – a father's desire is to please the mother.

But nothing can quench a mother's rage over her son.