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For Ken

Not Far From The Tree

Foreword

It Takes A Village Idiot and *Moonshine Talking* were about bumbling invasion—good ‘old boys from Tennessee tussling with harmless interstellar get-rich hustlers. This time, it’s the real thing.

The first book spanned the year leading up to the 2016 US Presidential election, *Moonshine Talking* chronicled the next seven days—Jeb’s awakening to the reality he would speak for the planet Earth.

Both books featured much the same characters, alien and human alike. On the home team, a forty-something hillbilly, his security chief, two government pilots, an aged alcoholic astronomer, and an ambitious and pretty Poly-Sci intern.

For the visitors, a timeless implant ready for any host, a shape-shifting beauty, and two clueless entrepreneurs selling dreams by the glass.

A simple reconstruction of the story thus far:

Jeb, a self-employed sanitation engineer, bears a strong physical resemblance to the 2015 sitting Governor of Tennessee, the Honorable Temperance Good. And living right down the road from the Governor’s mansion, he’s sensitive to comparisons.

Ethyl, a ne’er-do-well Earth-orbiting alien with designs on the US Presidency, sends a bioclone down to impersonate the sitting Governor. In that robotic servant she burrows a tiny implant named Birdshot. The bioclone, instantly sundered by the ambitious Birdshot, kills the real Governor, takes his place, and with the temptress Sissy’s help, conducts a risible campaign to win the 2016 Presidential election.

Billie Sue, a gorgeous alien from Andromeda, herself eternal, fears for Earth. She conspires to meet Jeb,

introduces him to the cosmos, flying to Andromeda and elsewhere in a nice, clean PortaPotty.

At the conclusion of *It Takes A Village Idiot*, she replaces the Birdshot-driven impostor Governor with Jeb, granting him the highest office in the land, herself access to the mechanics of wholesale human governance.

Moonshine Talking is set during Jeb's first seven days as President-elect. Budget moonshiners have hit Earth orbit to sell their wares door-to-door. To add to his troubles, some people in Washington question his credentials, arranging a few tests.

Birdshot, re-assimilated in an ancient alcoholic astronomer named Boozer, joins Sissy the intern and the moonshining aliens to regain the Presidency from Jeb, only to be confounded by one of Mother Nature's little helpers.

This book, third in Man's awakening, begins with official recognition of Jeb's imminent destiny: Leading Man's membership into the cosmic country club.

Enjoy!

One

Jeb sat up suddenly, the Tennessee Gubernatorial Mansion's Red Phone ringing with the urgency of incoming ICBMs. He was in bed, the morning of November fifteenth, twenty sixteen, and in two months, he'd be sworn as the forty fifth President of the United States.

8:40 in the morning, his second thought: *shouldn't'a had that twelfth beer last night.* He got the phone off the cradle and heard, "Mr. President, the real President is holding for you. May I connect you?"

Jeb expected that call, the moment Barack Obama would congratulate him, maybe share some dark secrets.

"I'm ready." The staff member simply replied, "Good luck sir." A second later he heard a single click, the sound quality going NSA pure. Then, "Jeb, welcome aboard. You're the right man for this job."

Jeb recognized President Obama's voice, all his frustrations suddenly distant. He had arrived, but also knew this was the real thing—it was going to get official right now. "Mr. President, thank you. I hope you're right."

"I am. We've been watching you for months. You are the one."

Jeb was a country-boy, reared five miles from the Governor's mansion, a product of common folk. In the last year he'd gone from pumping septic tanks and plunging sewage lines to running the country. *Well, almost.*

He drew in his breath, remembering his extraterrestrial girlfriend's advice. *Give 'em a laugh.* "I seem to have been chosen. Maybe these aliens are as dumb as me."

Barack chuckled, every nuance communicated by flawless technology. Jeb thought he heard a slight wheeze, The Prez maybe still on the smokes. "Neither of you are. We'll talk more about that when you come up for the briefing."

"When's that?" Jeb caught himself on the last word, wanting desperately to sound decisive. Barack came right

back, “That’s up to you, Mister President. I waited a few weeks.”

Downstairs, the entire staff of the Governor’s mansion stood crowded into the kitchen listening to a hot-wired tap, compliments of the pastry chef. Certain he’d not made the cut north, he needed a new gig—tabloid snitch. It was supposed to be a one-way mirror kind of connection, but someone farted loudly, and Barack asked, “That you, Jeb?”

The pastry chef swung on the offender and made a slicing gesture across his throat. The room rearranged like a billiard break, banishment swift.

Jeb replied quickly, “Not me. You got somebody there?”

President Obama cleared his throat and said, “When I’m on the phone, about a million people are listening.”

Jeb was surprised by that admission. “Don’t you have blocking equipment, Mr. President? I figured you’d be able to fix anything.”

“No, we’re rather depending on you to do that.”

Jeb heard his mama then, her constant wit his co-pilot. *If you’re confused, just be quiet. Quiet folk look smart.*

He let the dead air mount, hoping the Prez was the first to speak. After an age, Obama said, “Can I send a plane down for you?”

“When.”

“Jeb, it’s always now.”

“I’ll get ready. Be out front in five.”

“See ya in an hour.”

Two

Jeb bolted from the room yelling, “Billie Sue, we gotta go.” His girlfriend from the stars was always wandering off, a motive pulsar. He dashed down the long central hall to the kitchen. To his surprise, every employee in the mansion was there, a couple guys busy stuffing wires into the wall.

He asked urgently, “Anyone know where Billie Sue got to?”

A young computer science chick with designs on a Parisian appointment stepped forward, “Yes, Mr. President. She’s out in the garden. It’s cold there, but I think she likes it.”

Jeb nodded, took a purposeful look again at the phone tappers and bolted, three minutes left. As he passed through the large double glass doors at the rear of the Governor’s mansion, he caught Billie Sue’s reflection. She was pumping hard on a child’s swing, zooming to the sky.

He half-stepped behind a hedge to marvel at her energy, sensing unrest. *What’s going through her mind?* He knew she favored action; this was something else.

As he approached from behind, without looking back, she dropped her legs and skidded to a stop. “Good morning, Jeb. We traveling?”

He exclaimed excitedly, “It’s the President, the real one, Billie Sue. He’s sending a plane down to get me right now. We gotta go!”

She hopped off the swing and said, “Guess we don’t have to pack, they can fix anything.”

Running hand-in-hand through the mansion a moment later, Jeb reflected on the expression *fix anything*. First Obama, now Billie Sue. He thought, *Expectations*.

They burst through the front doors and started out onto the lawn. It stood in eight inches of fresh snow, the grounds a large winter field. All around the property barren trees spanked in the twelve knot breeze.

Almost immediately, from the northeast came an airborne racket suggesting a crashing airliner. Loud and

very mechanical. Then, over the trees came a hybrid aircraft resembling an ill-tempered copulation between a helicopter and fighter jet.

Though shaped like a sawtooth B2 stealth plane, someone had bolted a monstrous swiveling jet engine to each wingtip. It was from these engines that the shrieking emanated, the pilot attempting a near-vertical descent on raw thrust alone.

Eighty feet up, it roared like a dragon. Jeb studied its ungainly descent, surprised it was shaking so much. As heavy as it obviously was, there must be some bad shit going on up in the cockpit.

It hit with carrier-crash certainty, and Jeb held his ground, hoping it didn't blow. Billie Sue giggled, amused again at Man's fantastic flying machines. From behind, Jeb saw his pilots Stempy and Rastus running up, the hyper-spooling turbines their siren call.

"Mean bitch," barked Stempy, turning to his flying partner Rastus for confirmation. They were the best of friends, joint partners in a moonshining business, and avid aviators. What made their business odd was not the product, but the manufacturing.

Months before, serving as the Governor's private pilots, and expecting a heavy Presidential schedule, they'd taken a bold move, swapping their deep woods kettle for an onboard stainless rig, ensconced discreetly in the forward lavatory. The Governor's jet might have been flying on official business, but just forward of CG she was carrying Tennessee mother's milk, and up on the flight deck, thirsty boys.

Rastus nodded with the affected consideration of a man who'd flown everything—twitchy aerial firefighters, improbable JATO-assisted LSAs, certified antique cropdusters, and aerobatic demons. Yet he'd never seen anything like this, hadn't even heard of it.

He remarked, "Shit, I don't know, Stemp. Gotta be a hard ride. And is that a B2? Looks like they welded some

Airbus 380 turbofans to the tips, even made 'em swivel like an Osprey.”

The monstrosity’s turbines wound down slowly, the air electric with the sizzle and pop of their incinerating heat. Billie Sue walked over to the flyboys and asked sweetly, “Can you drive that?”

Everyone knew the President-elect’s girlfriend was from some other world, but she looked pretty delicious right here. He drew in a long drink of her and said, “Sure, 'cept maybe that landing part.”

“But you have to land?”

“One way or the other.”

More pilot humor. She smiled at that acknowledgment, gravity pernicious on this planet. On her home world, two point three million light years away in Andromeda, gravity tugged more gently, like an ex’s embrace.

One that grows fonder in its absence.

Stempy remarked, “Don’t get the stealth choice. Not with those engines.”

Jeb walked over to join the conversation. He asked, “You guys think that’s safe?”

Rastus half-laughed, “What’s safe mean? Your girlfriend comes from another world, is that safe?” He’d saved Jeb’s bacon a few times, felt he could talk straight.

Jeb might be the newly minted President-elect, but he still liked frankness. Maybe more lately, since his election a week before. Billie Sue smiled and asked Jeb, “How ya going to answer that?”

“A man’s word is his bond.” Jeb liked country rhetoric. It was distantly proverbial.

“And,” she urged.

At that moment, the head of the Tennessee Governor’s mansion security strolled up, staring at the plane with amusement. Everyone shook hands and Billie Sue gave him a genuine hug.

He was well-liked, a muscular, courageous and humorous guy. Everyone in the mansion just called him The Chief. He asked baldly, “What the hell is that?”

Stempy said, “Rastus thinks it’s ugly, but I like it. Kind of a high-performance whirlybird with some secret agent coating. Foils radar.”

Rastus, jumped right in, “’cept those engines, the jihaders don’t need radar for that. Thing’s a hundred twenty decibels. Easy.”

“I heard it in the can,” exclaimed The Chief. “The one down in the basement.”

Jeb observed mirthfully, “That’s where the porn came from.”

Everyone laughed lightly, anything to lift the funk radiating from the massive black aircraft. Inside, the two pilots were cranking through an encyclopedic checklist, over eighty mandated safety steps to properly secure the over-torqued powerplants.

Rastus looked around to get their attention. “Why’s it here? This something Presidential?” He was already thinking how to get immediate stick time, build hours now and once they moved up to Pennsylvania Avenue, get one for himself. Maybe in a private hanger.

Stempy picked up the vibe, knew his partner too well. He remarked, “You’d look good in that.”

“I would.”

The lower hatch dropped suddenly, two marines hitting the ground like they’d been expelled under pressure. Standing, they separated and approached the President-elect. Their firearms were holstered, but Jeb noticed their eyes sweeping.

He strode forward to meet them halfway, feeling Presidential. He thought, *Better get my act together before I go meet the guy I’m replacing.*

They converged on Jeb, shook his hand, and stepped back, still vigilant. A moment later the pilots dropped through the hatch and sauntered up.

Stempy asked, “What’ya call that?”

The co-pilot answered, “It’s official designation is classified, but we call it SkyNet. You know, from *Terminators.*”

Rastus piped up, “But them birds looked sleek. This thing’s a swap meet. And a nasty one too.”

Most pilots take umbrage at disparaging words cast over their temples, but this crew had heard it before. “Naw, she’s not that bad. Landings can be tricky.”

Rastus only knew one way to figure this thing out. “Can I try it?”

The SkyNet pilots looked at each other and Jeb picked up the ball. “It’s okay, he’s ex-NASA.” Jeb wasn’t sure about that, but Rastus was the best pilot he’d ever seen. He added, “Could’a gone to the moon if they were still taking chances up in Washington.”

The pilots got the moon diss. “Yes sir. Let me show you the checklists.”

Rastus’s eyebrows shot up. “Plural?”

“Yes sir, nine of them. Follow me.”

As Stempy and Rastus walked towards the plane with the co-pilot, Jeb, Billie Sue and The Chief moved in closer to the pilot. The Chief asked, “What are your orders?”

“We’re to convey the President-elect and his advisors to Camp David. President Obama is en route.”

“How many passengers can you accommodate?”

“Two pilots plus eight. It used to be a bomber, but they added some leather chairs around the nuclear pulse turret.”

Billie Sue observed, “I used to own one of those.”

Jeb was excited but anticipated some future need. “You gotta bar in that thing?”

“Yes sir, just fitted up Tennessee sour mash on tap, plenty of beers. Maybe even a champagne for the lady.”

Billie Sue smiled. “No thanks, I’m a Bud girl.”

The Chief was pretty sure he’d once seen her in two-for-Tuesday ad, but they all set off across the lawn, no packing necessary.

*** Eight Weeks Later ***

Three

Birdshot dug immortality. Fourteen billion years before, whilst at maximum contraction, the universe shuddered and belched back out, no omnipotent life forms liking crowds. In that instant, an infinite number of recombinations occurred, some not so great.

Along with the early elements hydrogen, helium, and their half-breed isotopes, eternal spiritual forces gathered onto themselves, coping again with one hell of a bender. Though it came along only once every thirty billion years, each reincarnation brought fresh despair. *Cycle after bloody cycle.*

But Birdshot was different. A trillion plus years old, yet still peppy for living, each day a new adventure, especially if he was controlling a worthy host. *Not that he'd ever found an entirely satisfying one.*

From the first instant of his awakening as a pucker in the space/time fabric, he had obsessed over a solitary goal—*my universe.* And across measureless eons, Birdshot's tiny physical aspect found its way into the corporeal sphere of a thousand species; never an optimal outcome for said life form.

This time around, in the winter of 2017, Birdshot lay burrowed against the fibula of an elderly astronomer known lovingly as Boozer. Over the last week, he'd cranked the old geezer up to profound, if near-lethal exertions, balancing infarction against ambition, bent on planetary rule.

Now they lay together, like cell mates, in minimum security, awaiting dispensation. It'd been two months. Sure, previously, they had attempted to overthrow the President-elect, treasonous in some banana republics, but in so doing they'd also exposed a threat from great distance, parsecs far.

They expected leniency.

The jaillhouse's metallic environ was alive with chimpanzee impertinence mated to a surprisingly sophisticated advance warning system. Every little threat, whether official or unknown meat, was telegraphed with economy down the cellblock.

And now, almost lost in the cacophony, Boozer grokked a patterned tapping, the SOS resonating towards him. He reared up, his geriatric vitals abetted by Birdshot's unloving ministrations, both seeking reprieve.

Boozer, man of the world, but landlord one week to the in situ tenant from hell, asked inwardly, *We busting out?*

Tiny Birdshot, the seemingly inconsequential alien implant, burped a response up the leg's neural pathways. *Lay low, old man. Factors are moving in our favor.*

Boozer scented more bullshit coming up the brain wire, their cortical co-habitation sliding into genuine hatred. A door clanged nearby and Boozer heard an approaching voice bellow, "Professor, time to sing."

The old man moved to the bars and saw a pack of suited hyenas, disguised as law enforcement, come alongside. All six wore breast pocket badges, self-importance radiating like Chernobyl's Reactor Number Four. The lead Fed said, "Your alien president got sworn today. Important people need to know what you know."

Boozer expected Birdshot to punch up a rejoinder stat. A second later, he heard within, *They got nothing. String 'em.*

When their alien symbiosis was good, it was good. Boozer looked at the crowding pack, proclaiming loudly, "been here two months. You must need us."

The proximal inmates went acerbic, animated by every dashed hope ever falsely nourished. Then, suddenly, even the dimmest onboard, went sepulcher silent, grokking too Man's need to know. *Loved ones and all.*

The lead Fed was no piker, had come up through NYPD Homicide, did his twenty, gone federal. And, being fed, top of the hubris heap, he'd grown to hate aliens over

the years. Their actions fit the facts; some murders just *too* perfect.

And like fifteenth century Catholic inquisition, he had latitude. After all, them alien had means, method, and often, motive. They were “good” for it, always. But, they also had the means to *disappear* your ass.

His name was Patrick, a middle height, late middle aged, stocky caucasian with a hairless face. Staring at the old astronomer, thinking “Alien-possessed,” he said, “Professor Erstwhile, we’re taking you to an interrogation room.” Boozer was tired of living like a criminal, and though he wanted to give them shit, knew there were times when it was best to do nothing. He replied, “I’m ready.”

The door opened on queue and they moved as a loose knot through the cellblock and into the administrative area of the facility. Instead of metal bars and walls, everything grew softer; carpeting, paneling and furniture made from unpunished wood.

Patrick pushed open a nice oak door and they entered a twenty by thirty room with a long central table and found seats. Patrick began immediately. “I’m with a federal agency, which you guessed. As I said earlier, our new President, Jeb, as he likes to be called, will be sworn in today. First thing, I want a rundown of your involvement with him. Take us from the beginning.”

Boozer knew his implant Birdshot was listening in, nursing improbable designs. Hearing nothing on their internal channel, he took point, saying, “Sissy, the Governor’s former intern, who I’m sure you have somewhere in this hellhole, told me right after the election that an alien had been substituted for the old Governor. She said this alien was now the President-elect.”

Patrick nodded and asked, “What date was that?”

“November ninth, twenty sixteen.”

“Fine, proceed.”

Boozer smiled. “Turns out the alien who replaced the Governor got popped by Jeb’s girlfriend and she pushed Jeb into that slot. He was Prez-elect before he knew it.”

“Go on.”

“Well, Sissy wanted me to find the controlling entity that was in the original alien, and I did.”

“Where is it now?”

“In me.”

Patrick looked at the suits ranged around the room, everyone getting up to speed with triple overtime weird. Being from the Bronx, however, he'd seen some shit. “Are we speaking to him now?”

Boozer knew a deal would come at the end if he had the goods. He said, “With these aliens, identity gets fluid. That's how they'll take us.”

Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

“We're listening. Elaborate.”

Negotiation 101: Quid Pro Quo. Boozer looked to the water pitcher at table center, “Got anything stronger. Bar service here's been thin.”

Patrick expected the request. “What's your poison?”

“Fresh bottle of Jameson to start.”

“Proceed.”

“Well, eventually we teamed up with a coupl'a aliens selling alien moonshine and you know how that ended.” Boozer had heard the promise of a drink. Only problem, no drink was here. Time to be difficult.

Before the tension could ratchet, the door opened energetically and a guard burst in, driving a laden cart. It was a motive bar, fully stocked, and Boozer scented the good life returning. Late night Vegas, and The Chairmen of the Board singing “The Best is Yet to Come.”

Too bad Franky was cold dead and Boozer was ninety steps from Solitary.

Everyone got up to mix drinks, alien invasions on hold. Several human minutes later, after stiff bracing, they pushed back into their chairs and hoisted in union.

Boozer held his tumbler highest, already half-down, intent, and flying, “That pretty much brings you up to speed. What'ya got for me?”

Patrick was about to answer when a siren shrieked loudly, an unseen speaker announcing, “Alert, an alien ship has entered Earth orbit. Defcon Two Point Seven.”

Patrick turned to Boozer, “You know about this?”

“*We* should take it seriously.” He wasn’t about to go back to that cell.

Patrick stood, declaring, “Men, we are under attack, I can feel it. Time to execute.” The suits looked at each other like Bambi at CERN; 10 watts of human intellect running on two D cells.

Four

Jeb liked the crowds and all the waving flags. They called it Inauguration, but it was more like the CornBowl—like that time the Hoochville Shiners played the CopperCoil Twisters. Though downstate, there'd been people.

He spoke for fifteen minutes about enduring rights and principles, slowly turning to what he believed had made America great—Roosevelt's New Deal, most especially The Tennessee Valley Authority. As he described it, "Good work for solid folk."

More applause. He smiled at Billie Sue and lowered his voice. "Hundreds of years ago we invited the world to come here and find a new beginning. And now, today, I see this happening again. So let Billie Sue and me share some special words from our Statue of Liberty."

Billie Sue stood and joined him at the podium. Together, they harmonized,

**Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send
these, the homeless,
Tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!**

**Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the
imprisoned lightning,
And her name, Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome;
Her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor
That twin cities frame.
Keep, Ancient Lands, your storied pomp!
Cries she with silent lips.**

**Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free;
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless,
Tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!**

Jeb concluded his speech by saying, “I want a New New Deal, not just for America, but for everyone on this planet. I want mankind to once again open its arms to fresh ideas and those with energy. And I don’t care where they come from.”

Across the Mall Jeb and Billie Sue saw millions of upturned faces, every color and origin aspiring to personal freedom and opportunity. But the subtext was loud and clear—the next immigration might come from way farther, say out past Aldebaran.

The crowd applauded thunderously, the white noise of momentary ebullience going on and on, everyone envisioning this New New Deal turning first to their private shore.

But nature abhors a vacuum, most especially one of wit, and as if on queue, a dark round shadow moved rapidly up the Mall’s reflecting pool, its owner looking for his own New New Deal.

Five

The Secret Service trains vigorously to identify threats, a large spherical spaceship qualifying nicely. They mobilized, whisking Jeb and Billie Sue through a little door hidden behind the grinning life size display of Jeb promising The New New Deal. One minute he stood before an adoring throng, the next rushing down a sloping ramp in near total darkness.

They all reached a vault-like door and Jeb turned to his Girlfriend From The Stars. Overwhelmed by the pace of events, he asked, “Billie Sue, who are they?”

Usually she giggled at Man’s overreacting folly but instead spoke evenly, “Jeb, I’m thinking Ordog.”

A radio clicked rapidly in code and one of the agents barked, “Mr. President, we’re taking you to the Situation Room beneath the White House.”

Jeb asked, “Who?”

“Ordog. His presence signals greater problems.”

The Secret Service guys, used to all manner of circus acts, turned to Billie Sue. One of them whispered into his cuff-mike. “Need wants and warrants on an Ordog.”

Billie Sue laughed. “Boys, forget it. He’s not from Jersey.”

The lead security asked, “Outer space?” Even the dullest was getting on board. “Yip, last I heard, he was snooping a protection racket at Proxima Centauri, just down the road from here.”

Jeb knew his girlfriend could be playful but he was the freshly-minted President, needed answers. “What’s he gonna do?”

The vault door swung open and they rushed through. Moving steadily forward, the floor still angled down, the light grew more intense and the agents switched off their piercing flashlights.

Several passages and an elevator ride later, Jeb, Billie Sue, and the presidential security retinue entered the Situation Room located deep beneath the west wing of

the White House. Jeb looked around, as curious as anyone about how the government spent secret dollars. The main conference room was perhaps fifty by thirty feet, its walls festooned with dazzling displays showing scenes from panning cameras all over Washington D. C. None, tellingly, were pointed up.

A central mahogany table stood empty, his National Security Council staff still topside. Jeb looked around and asked no one in particular, "Where's the bar?"

One of the Secret Service guys picked up a remote control and pointed it at the wall opposite the lectern. A second later the heavy wood paneling slid noiselessly aside to disclose a deep recess, within a well-stocked hardwood bar. Ranged behind were dozens of bottles; all the good stuff for those who ran the world.

"Billie Sue, what'ya drinking?"

She looked around at this nexus of human intrigue and answered, "Bud."

He quickly found the beer frig, grabbed two cold, frosty Budweisers, and asked the lead Secret Service guy, "You joining us?" His inflection let it be known a new sheriff was in town, drinking on the job cool when the shit was flying.

All four agents nodded and moved swiftly to their own poisons. Jeb asked, "What happens now?"

The senior Secret Service guy, Stuart Randolph, poured a menacing scotch, replying, "We wait. We're impregnable to anything manmade here." He winked at his men and smiled at Jeb. "And we protect you. Maybe have a few of these."

Billie Sue sipped at her beer, not so sure. Up to this point, Jeb's species had been amused by tangential exposure to buffoonish extraterrestrials, losers selling pipe dreams and half-baked visions of grandeur. Nothing to get armed over. Though they didn't know it yet, this new visitor could imply something altogether different.

She reflected on what was known of Ordog. Though no scholar of eastern Milky Way legend, Billie Sue knew what

everyone knew, that is, anyone who had done any serious spacefaring. Setting the facts straight in her mind, she turned to Jeb. “You guys want to hear a story?”

Without answering, they sat down at the conference table. Nothing about Jeb’s nascent presidency was normal, he’d not even chosen his cabinet, and when asked about a running mate, his answer was simple, “Billie Sue is my Vice Alien. How can I beat that?”

As such, the new government of the United States was right here, with its most immediate security apparatus, ready to hear stuff Spielberg would love.

Billie Sue began, “Gentlemen, Earth, like all habitable planets, has been visited continuously by the good and bad. Some sought virgin forest and field for sanctuary, others preyed on the emerging precociousness of Man for sport and amusement.

“Still others brought historical perspective, an odd mixture of academic interest and pretension. These sophists pose graver threats. They presume what’s right for your species, and have redirected your culture in the past.”

She took a sip and continued. “Nobody wants to be told what to believe. Even within a nimbus of technological deceit, belief systems should be intimately held, the product of personal experience and vetting. Being told how to interpret life is just plain wrong.”

Jeb had known this alien female for just over a year, traveled the cosmos with her, but could not say he really understood her. These heartfelt statements, though exposing a fresh concern, also fleshed out her inner world.

He nodded, encouragingly. She smiled and said, “It’s said Ordog comes under the guise of a mentor, offering clarity and protection. Frankly, the cure may prove more lethal than the disease.”

Stuart remarked, “You’ve laid the groundwork. Please tell us Ordog’s intent.”

Billie Sue’s face went cold, a look Jeb remembered seeing only once before. She said, “I’ll get to that, but first, some background.”

Everyone thus focused, she continued. Your *Star Wars Trilogy*, especially *The Empire Strikes Back*, dialed it in. Across the Milky Way, empires abound, most contained by geographic effect—that is, the farther away another civilization, the less they're liked. Also, mounting a far-away campaign takes enormous power and stamina. Most fail."

One of the agents nodded, murmuring "Afghanistan."

She continued, glad they were following. "Rigel A, the brightest star in Orion, is immense, and orbiting at great distances are two dozen planets. Outermost, at thirty six astronomical units, is Greer. It's rustic and its people simple, folksy. Not much government.

"About four hundred Earth years ago, the ruling body of Rigel B, the less stellar binary partner, reputedly self-conscious about their dimmer position in the sky, elected to land-grab A's farthest-out planet.

"All of the Rigel A and B planets had clunky ships. The distance between A and B is nothing, maybe three lightyears, but it took almost a year for the marauding B ship to reach the burbs of A."

One of the agents observed, "Three lightyears in a year? That's fast!"

Jeb burped overlong, rejoining, "You need to get out more. Did two point three million lightyears, way out to Andromeda, in twelve minutes once. Rode in a nice, clean PortaPotty."

Some things suffer no rebuttal, and Billie Sue moved on. "They circled the planet, radioing down their desire to take over. The brethren of Greer caucused the offer and politely rejected, citing the common law notion of self-governance.

"The B-Team had been told not to return without success so they carpet-nuked a chunk of Greer as an opening counter. Tempers ran high and the Greer populace dug in, determined to resist. Since the invaders depended on communication no faster than their ship, which was dog-ass

slow, the campaign withered, and they soon felt isolated and rudderless.

“They couldn’t return to Rigel B without victory, so they radioed back, seeking obsequious wisdom. That didn’t work for either party, most especially when the first returning epistle from senior B-Team management, two years later, said, “Your deal, handle it.”

The agents all nodded around the table; seen that shit.

“Of course, what they needed was a local negotiator, and eventually, after everyone in the sector knew these guys were stranded, in steps the Jimmy Hoffa of backwater collective bargaining—Ordog.”

Stuart asked, “The same Ordog we have overhead?”

“Yip. He’s immortal by human standards. That’s one of Mother Nature’s little secrets; darkness persists.”

Jeb didn’t know where this was going, but liked the way Billie Sue was laying out the inanity of the universe to his people. He welcomed any action that cast him in a more cosmological light. To drive his point home, he said, “Billie Sue, I’m glad you’re explaining what it’s like out there.”

Billie Sue let that go, her affection for Jeb, above all else, charitable. She asked, “You gentlemen need to recharge before I explain how Ordog fits into the here and now?”

Everyone busied themselves with a fresh round. The agents knew the official government mechanism was spooling up, soon they’d be mired in reactive nonsense. Before that, they needed to understand the genuine nature of this threat. That meant listening.

Stuart asked, “Madam Vice President, what happened next?”

“Gentlemen, Ordog ended up killing everyone on Greer. Something about intransigence and professional ethos. Keep that in mind. And in four hundred Earth years, he’s likely learned a few things.”

The tale had turned, arousing DefCon sensibilities.

Billie Sue had picked up on Jeb’s fascination for the “Best one hundred movies of all time.” She’d watched all

hundred of his favorites, knew he believed he needn't watch any more. His words: "Once you found your hundred, you're done."

It was a logic all impenetrable, but in so doing Billie Sue had learned a lot about the average Earthman's view of the world. She said, "Ordog is not here to destroy, he only does that when he stops thinking. We'll help him think."

Everyone liked that around the table, visions of "as long as my thinking is the blueprint" lifting off like fetid swamp gas. Billie Sue smelled that, enough coaxing.

"Jeb and I will meet with him, we'll sort it out."

Jeb picked up the concluding tone, got to his feet. He said, "Gentlemen, please leave us now. The Vice President and I must discuss this alone."

The cool thing about being the President is that everyone does what you say. The room emptied out. Billie Sue stared at Jeb, her whole demeanor nothing like the pixie he'd meet on an alien lake in Andromeda.

But he'd been in some stare-downs, and even tho' he loved her, this might come down to every species for itself. And he could make that call. He said, "Let's go on home, back to Tennessee for a spell. If this Ordog needs to talk to us, I'm sure that ship can come there."

Billie Sue moved over to Jeb, again taken by his country wit, hugging him like he might evaporate. Then they stood together, silent for a time, wondering over Man.

Six

As the cellblock TVs showed Ordog's ship cruise into Washington, the prison sang with rancor, the criminal gestalt broadcasting "ALL CLEAR for that guy who knows them new aliens."

Inside the conference room, Patrick took a fresh look at Boozer. He said, "Okay, bozo, a spaceship just buzzed the Inauguration. The new President bolted somewhere secret. What'ya got for me?"

Though they'd been drinking for two hours, Boozer was waiting for the clarity of the bottle to grant insight. He proclaimed, "I got nothing here. I need to be on the street."

Patrick had seen *48 Hours*, knew he was being worked. "Okay, you got the street. But I got better."

Boozer was always angling for a quick ride, his onboard alien implant not overfond of waiting. "Talk."

Patrick said, "Just got approval to send you up to the ISS for scouting."

Boozer wasn't sure about that approach. He said, "That the best you can do?"

Patrick smirked. "At this point, it's orbit or the cellblock."

"Deal. When do I go up?"

"I need to tell you something," said Patrick gravely. "The ISS has been abandoned for nearly two years. Funding issues. It'll be operational, but you may need to do some basic maintenance."

"Okay. I'm good with a wrench. We're departing today?"

"Come this way."

By 2004, everyone believed personal sport aviation would soon achieve Earth orbit. Why not? In response, a few legitimate manufacturers developed original spacecraft. Some trundled cargo to the ISS, a few even attempted breathing payloads.

Too bad it didn't work out. Actionable "G forces" and dramatic failures, the kind described by "lost with all hands," stopped the mainline cobblers. Yet the mantra of "we can get to space for pennies per mile" prevailed and amateur aviation builders reared, thinking pilfered zero cost R & D. It was perfect—no FAA oversight, plus a chance to use explosive propulsion.

Typical flatlander pilots endure low horsepower sold as more. And they're happy. A few rare souls want a plane that kicks like a mule, and then there are the deep pockets. They want weird shit. Lethal shit.

So a meet was set. Extreme pilots wanting more, builders without a clue. A royal wedding. A lot of cash changed hands and it was decided to go ahead, build an affordable low Earth orbit recreational vehicle.

Many low-bred designs followed, some even computer-tested, the resultant body count chalked up to "the spirit of Columbus."

Boozer, hearing nothing from Birdshot down in his leg, studied the images Patrick had handed him. He remarked snidely, "What's that? An Ethiopian ICBM?" Boozer, though no aviator, knew malformed design when he saw it. And low-bidder construction.

Patrick didn't care. This ancient gomer, with his hitchhiking alien was his road up. This mission needed a federal officer in space, and he was the man to repel the first wave.

Boozer sized up the pictures of the bargain basement spacecraft. They both looked at each other, needfully. Patrick began. "You never had a choice. You were the one to speak for us all." It was cheesy line, ripped heartless from one of the ten movies Patrick had ever seen.

"Boozer, heavy by thousands of movie references, replied, "I am the one."

Seven

Strangely, the steady drip of Birdshot's commentary to which Boozer had grown accustomed, even dependent, was utterly absent. The old astronomer stood quietly as Patrick processed him out of the prison, anxious be free of loco parentis. One thing was certain, he was going to make up for lost time by getting blind drunk.

As they strode from the facility, Patrick said, "In addition to some advisors, I'll be joining you on the station."

It was meant to be off-handed and Boozer let it go. He replied in the same vein, "I need to get some equipment from my laboratory. How about we meet at the observatory tomorrow?"

Patrick had some things to do too, agreeing with the plan. "Okay, I'll give you a ride home and tomorrow, at nine in the morning, I'll be at the Swanson Meats Memorial Dome. Be ready for an adventure."

Boozer was already thinking ahead. "Do I have a weight limit?"

Patrick chuckled. "That thing was meant to be a poor man's nuclear launcher. It will lift almost three thousand pounds to the ISS orbit. You can bring all the booze you want."

The settled, Boozer got in Patrick's Crown Vic and off they went; the adventure of their lives. And perhaps everyone else's.

Eight

Jeb and Billie Sue caught a flight back to the Tennessee Governor's mansion, explaining nothing to nobody. They'd just taken an elevator up to the White House, asking the first person they encountered to take them home. Everything else worked like a child's charmed dream.

Arriving back at the mammoth white log cabin, itself a grand old White House, Jeb and Billie Sue retired to their palatial fifth floor suite and hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob.

Meanwhile, a one hundred foot diameter spherical spaceship hung dead center over the Washington Monument, spinning slowly five inches above the tip of the five hundred, fifty-five foot tall obelisk. Looking exactly like an upside down exclamation point, the glitterati of Washington went hyperbolic.

In lockstep, national media aped cataclysmic prose.

(AP 1/21/2017) The First Wave? Jeb's Plan?

THIS REPORTER, LEFT STANDING AT THE INAUGURATION AS THE NEW PRESIDENT HOOFED IT WITH THE FIRST ALIEN, WONDERS WHO'S NOW ON FIRST. MEANWHILE, THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT, BUILT TO COMMEMORATE AMERICA'S FIRST PRESIDENT, IS THE SITE OF THIS CAPITOL'S LATEST URBAN RENEWAL, IMMIGRANTS FROM ANOTHER WORLD TACKING ON A ROTATING PENTHOUSE.

FAA RESTRICTED AIRSPACE CONSIDERATIONS ASIDE, THE WORLD CHANGED TODAY, INVADERS IN OUR MOST SECURE CITY, AND BETWEEN THE SHEETS WITH OUR NEW COMMANDER IN CHIEF.

AFTER THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY DISBANDED IN CHAOS, THE JOINT CHIEFS REPORTEDLY RACED TO THE PENTAGON ONLY TO DISCOVER THE PRESIDENT

'GONE HOME TO TENNESSEE, NOT TO BE TUSLED WITH.

HE MAY BE SAFE AND SOUND, BUT THIS REPORTER, AND EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD ACROSS AMERICA FEELS A DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE. ONLY TIME WILL TELL IF WE VOTED IN A FELLOW MAN TO LEAD US THROUGH THIS NEW ERA, OR A TURNCOAT OF COSMOLOGICAL PROPORTIONS.

Stempy and Rastus, Jeb's Tennessee pilots, stood together at the far end of the Mall's reflecting pool, admiring the new profile. Rastus produced a large thermos of their latest backwoods distillation, tentatively named *New Beginnings*, from a leather satchel and asked his partner, "You drinking today?"

"Bear shit in the woods?"

"Just checking."

He filled two cut glass tumblers and handed one over. They clinked and downed the contents without remark. First tasting was a thing never to be rushed. Some were like creosote, others as silky as a baby's bottom. Point was, you just didn't know 'til you *stood guard*.

Both men stolidly appraised their creation's complexity, the deep coal tar notes and stout earthy finish. Finally Stempy observed, "Might be our best yet. Maybe we should put the Presidential Seal on it, complete with the Washington Monument and its new companion."

"That'd work," agreed Rastus. After another minute of silence to ensure they hadn't been poisoned, Rastus continued. "We own the FAA now, being the new President's pilots. We should usher that in by having another round and then doing a fly-by of that new spaceship."

The new blend proved to be irresistible, and six rounds later, our favorite pilots found themselves at Potomac

Airfield (VKX), a small general aviation strip just minutes from downtown Washington.

It was perfect.

Owing to the Inauguration, the already restricted airspace surrounding Washington D.C. was locked down in a TFR or Temporary Flight Restriction. That meant nothing could move in the skies without explicit Air Traffic Control permission. That is, unless you were military or operating under a Presidential warrant.

Stempy and Rastus had flown with generations of Tennessee governors, knew the ropes. But just in case, right after the election, they'd swiped some letterhead and dummied up a Magna Carta of Bullshit, looking like something Himmler gave to traveling spies. Emblazoned with seal the Great State of Tennessee and the US Presidential, its imprimatur read:

Whosoever, whether civil or military, will provide assistance to these Federal Officers who operate under my direct authority and protection. It is a violation of Presidential edict to refuse them any courtesy.

Though admittedly over the top, it had a plausibly commanding ring, as well as a Jeb's forged signature, and they knew it would bludgeon all obstacles, at least until they were officially ensconced in Air Force One.

Rastus had always said, "The world makes way for a man who knows where he's going." That aside, right now they weren't going anywhere, but standing, albeit a bit unsteadily, on the ramp at VKX, looking at the parked planes.

Stempy remarked, "For this mission, we need a bird that flies low and slow, something that isn't the least bit threatening."

Rastus saw it then, a 1939 Piper Cub. Flown by nearly five hundred thousand pre-WWII training cadets, the venerable Cub could be found everywhere, its characteristic

yellow, high wing taildragger shape known to all. “That’s our baby,” he confirmed with a respectful belch.

No vintage Cub has an electrical system so Rastus told his partner, “You man the mags, I’ll hand prop her.”

This maneuver, dangerous in a sober state, now presented near-lethal potential for Rastus. As instructed, Stempy climbed into the ancient airplane’s thin rear leather seat and scanned the instruments quickly. Though jet-rated, he wasn’t current in this plane by any stretch of the imagination, but a plane is a plane. *Stick and rudder.*

Rastus checked the wheel chocks and reviewed what he knew about hand-propping. The books said it was safe if communication between pilot and propper, as the danger partner was called, were clear.

He said loudly, “Gas on, switch off, throttle closed, brakes set.” This instructed Stempy to turn the fuel cock on, set the magnetos off, set the throttle to minimum, and put the brakes on.

Stempy confirmed loudly, “Gas on, switch off, throttle closed, brakes set.”

Rastus stood directly in front of the plane and pulled the descending prop blade to the ten o’clock position. Then he said, “Brakes and Contact.” That meant the brake setting should be confirmed and the magnetos set to on.

Stempy replied, “Brakes set. Mags hot.”

Rastus moved his right foot in front of his left. He knew he had to swing with the prop, allowing the propping motion to carry him away from the shredding metal scimitar. This was a zero tolerance procedure, ‘specially blowing a one point eight blood alcohol.

But these men had been flying friends for over a decade, no time to go wimp.

Rastus sucked his gut in and pulled the prop through its combustion cycle. It caught instantly, evidence of recent use. Stempy pulled the throttle sub-idle, let it stutter as Rastus moved away, then ran it up so they could hear her voice.

Rastus hopped in the front tandem seat and they began taxiing. Potomac's runway is twenty-six hundred feet long and oriented southwest by northeast. Gentle winds were out of the north, and Stempy said, "Gonna use zero six, light left crosswind."

He reached the threshold end of runway zero six, ran through a mag check and a brief pre-flight checklist from memory, and asked, "Ready?"

Rastus leaned back, saying, "If this is the original sixty-five horse we might get four hundred feet per minute. What'ya think?"

Stempy ran the throttle up and down, said, "She's not stock. Feels like a high compression, big-bore upgrade. I'm thinking the ninety horse. We'll get six hundred feet per minute."

Rastus allowed, "Might be. She fought on the start. Never hurts to have more power."

A pilot's watchword. Just like gas left on the ground. Or runway behind you.

Stempy fire-walled the Cub and she shot down the field, the tail flying instantly. A moment later they were airborne, climbing into the evening shades with surprising vigor. Rastus waited the bare minimum and asked plaintively, "Can I take her?"

He was the more impulsive pilot, ex-fighter jock and experimental aircraft junky. If it had wings, he wanted to try it.

Rastus grabbed the stick and yawed her around to the north northwest. They climbed to one thousand and skirted Reagan Washington National Airport to the east. Ahead, and to the left the Capitol and Washington Monument came into view.

They had no headphones but the Cub wasn't too noisy in cruise. More wind than engine. Rastus yelled back to Stempy, "We've busted the Class B and broken about twenty FARs—no worse than that spaceship. Let's fly around it and see what she's made of."

At the top of the Washington Monument, the shaft spans thirty four feet. Directly above the tip spun

the spherical spaceship, its one hundred foot diameter comparatively monstrous. Stempy observed, “Big bitch. Don’t piss her off.”

Crossing directly over prohibited airspace above the Capitol Building, they flew up the reflecting pool and then around the spaceship counterclockwise. On the second orbit, Rastus tightened the circle, bringing the left wing level with the equator of the sphere and a scant hundred feet away.

It was utterly featureless; a smooth, dull, black surface. As they went round and round the visitor our boys passed the rest of their New Beginnings moonshine across the seat to one another, dumbstruck by the scale and seeming menace of this silent beast.

Finally, they turned south, happy no fighters had scrambled to down them. On final to Potomac, Stempy took the stick and summarized, “Nobody likes that thing. That’s why we weren’t hassled.”

As their tires kissed the runway, both pilots, veterans of countless Afghani combat missions, whispered their blessings. It wasn’t everyday you got to reconnoiter the enemy’s camp.

And live to tell about it.

Nine

On Sunday morning, January twenty-second, twenty seventeen, the western world woke to the reality of their alien visitor. Even if Jeb wanted to stay in bed and sleep through it like a backwoods methanol hangover, the federal mechanism of government wasn't gonna wait.

At sun-up, out on the Tennessee gubernatorial front lawn, eight VTOL aircraft landed with crack decision. Awakened by the clatter, Jeb and Billie Sue showered and came down, hoping to get some flapjacks 'fore the jawing began.

The dining room crew spooled up to maximum velocity, seating sixty-plus visitors quickly. As the President and First Alien entered, everyone stood, and Jeb and his girl nodded as if to say *let's get this over with*.

Jeb had become President by the landslide assumption he was "The One" to lead Man's evolution, joining the intergalactic country club. And perhaps the aliens knew that—they hadn't wasted any time, dropping through Earth's atmosphere the moment Jeb got sworn.

Jeb seated Billie Sue and stepped up on a small dais in the corner of the room. "You're here to see what I'm going to do. Truth is, I don't know, but my mama always said don't do nothing on an empty stomach. Let's eat, then we'll talk this out."

On queue, the doors burst open with free-wheeling carts of pancakes, sausage, hash browns and all manner of down-home gustatory sustenance. Everyone took the President's advice, and tucked in to the vittles.

Jeb soon got his fill and smiled at Billie Sue. He asked quietly, "You ready?" She nodded and they both re-took the dais. "I'll begin with some questions. Gotta warn you though, most of the answers are *Out There*. I may have to do some traveling."

Billie Sue liked that, knowing the journeys they'd taken together had rubbed off a little.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs stood, wiped his mouth, and said, “Goddamn good meal. Thanks.” Jeb smiled broadly, his mama had also always told him to treat his visitors well. Especially at meals.

“Mr. President, we’re here to listen. This threat, if it is one, is so far from our standard operational procedures as to be laughable, but, as everyone here knows, this is no joke. Let me just ask you one question.”

Jeb didn’t like that type of approach but stood tall, feeling Billie Sue’s energy flow to him. The Chairman asked, “You’ve been off the planet, to the Andromeda Galaxy and other planets. Do you know who is in that spacecraft?”

Jeb knew he was addressing a ceremonial government figure. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, though a prestigious title, had no command over combatant forces. That was, alone, his own purview. As such, if they were talking war, he should be speaking to his direct report, the Secretary of Defense.

None of that mattered, of course, in the current situation, and he answered. “No. Billie Sue, my Vice President, advisor, and friend tells me the alien within that ship is likely Ordog, a confidence grifter currently working this sector of the sky.”

Three fresh carts, laden with stiff morning libations burst through the rear doors, fanning out to ease that cultural rift. Man had arrived, but to quote Paul Townsend, “Welcome to the new boss, same as the old boss.”

Everyone started speaking at once as the drinks were passed, and after a polite period, Billie Sue took Jeb’s hand and said loudly, “No one is going to attack today.”

That got things settled down, and with drinks in hand, they all sat, wanting more from this ravishing redhead from the stars.

She hoisted a Bud and continued, “Jeb and I will sort this out. We need to leave the planet for a bit, and renew some old acquaintances. To the best of our ability, we’ll keep you informed.”

She paused, then realized that needed clarification.

“As far away as Jeb and I go, we’ll be able to reach government representatives here. Depending on where our journey takes us, the method may be direct or convoluted. We want to leave you with one thought—Earth is precious and we will do everything we can to preserve this special world.”

The room went quiet, everything changing so fast. Man was growing up, the larger picture the same and yet invigoratingly new. It was a charge that filled every breast, all of us kids again, and yet, still, hanging over a national monument, a probable crook, looking for a piece of the action.

Ten

At the same time, Patrick bounced up the gravel road towards the Swanson Meats Memorial Dome, said meat packer's hapless attempt to cut the gristle from their image through scholarly endorsement. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions—the dome being modeled after a huge ham hock with a bone hole for the telescope.

Making the last turn, he was surprised to see Boozer out front, a dozen boxes stacked neatly by size. Patrick had requisitioned a full-size crew cab pickup, anticipating such a hoard. That went with the other's moniker.

He got out, counted seven cases of whiskey, and said, "Good morning professor. How long you planning on being up there?"

"Hard to say. I was an Eagle Scout."

"Seven cases?"

"Might have to share."

They loaded and took off. En route, Boozer asked, "Who are these advisors?"

"Past associates."

Boozer's recent incarceration proceeded from colluding with two clueless aliens selling moonshine abetted by a fetching Poly-Sci intern who'd gotten her start working for the old Tennessee governor. It had to be them.

"Tell me that's not your only plan for Man's future?"

"They're anxious to see you too."

The rest of the trip was thus endured in silence, Boozer grateful to be out of stir.

An hour later they pulled through the unguarded gate of a small residential airpark near the town of Difficult, Tennessee. As they drove along the narrow street that ran parallel to the short grass strip, Boozer asked, "I was expecting a major launch facility. We stopping for a burger?"

"Nope. This is the world headquarters of Nuke'em Warhead." They drove to the last house, a ramshackle economizer never blessed by a building inspector. Tacked

onto the end was an afterthought of a hanger, and beyond an unpainted steel tower nearly ninety feet high.

Perfect for an uncontrolled airport.

They got out and Boozer walked towards the erector set gantry as he scanned the mated launch vehicle more narrowly. It was cylindrically squat, thirty feet in diameter and fifty in height, not long on craftsmanship. From its sides sprouted four swarthy fins.

Patrick came up behind. "I'm told it's got it where it counts. Eighteen separate rocket motors bolted together for a total thrust of two hundred thousand pounds. She'll get us there."

Boozer knew redundancy was good unless used to gloss over knowing faults. He asked thinly, "Where's the fuse?"

Atop the rocket cylinder sat the cargo module, a large hemispherically domed capsule fifteen feet high. Boozer asked, "Is that man-rated?"

"We'll find out."

An old man wandered out, wheezing like a Marlboro cheerleader. Patrick did the introductions. "Professor Erstwhile, this is Rufus Barringer, descended from the Civil War general of the same name." Boozer was no hawk, preferring to let a good, stout whiskey settle his quarrels.

"That so?" asked Boozer. He knew some local history, had heard the tale of General Barringer. "Didn't your great-great granddad build those exploding canons?" Clearly Patrick was running this operation on a budget, Boozer needed to suss this guy's credentials fast.

Sometimes personal chemistry factors just don't work. Rufus spit a wide pattern of bacc'y juice and answered, "Hell, you're older than me. You up for this ride? It'll be fast and rough."

Not unlike Boozer's wooings back in the day.

But Boozer was an academic, conjoined to arrogance. "You build this Estes hobby boomer?"

Pleasantries aside, Patrick went salesman, “Rufus and his associates design and construct custom purpose launch vehicles using proven techniques and materials. They climbed aboard the entrepreneurial space exploration bandwagon at the start.”

Rufus picked up, “Yip, we saw the opportunity, my brother and me. Used to be coal miners up in Kentucky, learned everything about chemistry, what with dynamite everywhere. I miss Andy.”

Everyone took a reflective breath and Rufus continued. “After the funeral, I decided to work for myself ’stead of Big Coal. They’ll kill ya.”

Boozer peered up the gantry to the cargo capsule. It looked like the top of a grain silo, three hundred bucks at Grangers. Boozer asked, “Let’s talk thrust mechanics. For example, what is the ascent flight profile in Gs?”

“Flight profile, shit, this thing’s designed to nuke them terrorists. You know, in Pakistan or Toronto. And it can do it. This baby can lift a five megaton Rooskie MIRVing warhead. Got one on backorder.”

Boozer generally approved of batshit crazy, it got things done. He clarified, “Patrick tells me it can lift three thousand pounds to the ISS, that’s about two hundred fifty miles up. How do you do that with a single stage burn?”

Rufus pushed an overlarge chunk of chew into his maw, an unsung Goddard. “Didn’t say it was survivable. We only ever bombed things in the Sahara. Once we hit a place in France but she had some asphalt sealer slapped on. My own stealth tech.”

That was new information to Patrick. He’d hooked up with this lunatic after casting to low quarters for an affordable orbital passage. Cost was stressed as the principle factor. His connections in law enforcement made him proud, working dark circles, intersecting with darker-still fringe elements. One thing led to another.

What wasn’t divulged was Patrick’s lack of operational oversight. He’d been given tacit approval from nothing near command level, hence a matching budget, to establish

a “high frontier outpost” using the old astronomer and his has-been alien compatriots. The sentiment: *What did they have to lose?*

By all appearances the two captured aliens were brain-damaged, on Earth simply to pimp bad moonshine. And the ex-Governor’s strumpet had gone mute, refusing to utter a word. It was a low cost plan with subterranean expectations.

Patrick’s captain, a cold war veteran, preached proactivity. Accordingly, he’d run a quick cash grab, driving local children door-to-door hustling confiscated Girl Scout cookies. \$83,000 later, he was in the space business.

His verbal instructions: *Get up to the ISS, watch Man’s back.*

Boozer needed a fresh tack. He asked, “Where are the other cosmonauts?”

Patrick replied instantly, happy to depart dicey technicalities. “En route.”

Just then the roar of a burdened aircraft echoed across the not-too-distant grassy knoll. A moment later a high-wing taildragger came into view, its paint job shabby. Boozer tracked the bird and remarked, “Looks like an Air America reject.”

Rufus knew his planes. Especially the oddball ones. He said, “That’s a Pilatus PC-6 Turbo Porter. Thing can land anywhere.”

Sure enough, the pilot overflowed the field at five hundred feet to get the lay of the land, rolled upside down, and descended through a half inside loop to line up with the runway. Rufus was impressed, saying, “Nice split-S.”

A second later the plane hit the threshold numbers with a resounding crack, making it look easy. Boozer mused aloud, “Hope he’s our pilot.”

The plane rolled down to them and everyone stood expectantly, Boozer not a little excited about the prospect of seeing Sissy again. She’d gotten him into this whole mess with the aliens, and now, after a brief holiday in lockdown, she was back in his life.

He hoped.

The pilot killed the turboprop engine even before the Pilatus reached them and Boozer strained to get a good look at the inhabitants as they rolled up. He recognized Amway and Shaklee, the two moonshining aliens looking a little shrunken, and a second later saw Sissy waving wildly. His heart sang and somewhere deep in his mind he heard Birdshot whisper “Viagra.”

The doors popped open and Sissy squealed, ready to spend the allotment of words she’d held back in captivity. An instant later, dressed coquettishly as always, she burrowed into Boozer’s arms, each doing a perfect impression of reunited lovers.

If anything, to Boozer, she’d grown prettier through separation. Horniness will do that. Patrick and Rufus looked on, a mixture of delight with such human abandon colored by the realities of gender mechanics.

Rufus, no less the horndog, side spit discreetly and asked, “Ain’t ya gonna introduce us?” Meanwhile, Amway and Shaklee disembarked, visibly weirded-out.

Boozer gave Sissy another vertebrae crushing hug and stepped back like she was a show dog. He proclaimed, “Sissy and I worked with the new President to defeat an alien threat. These off-worlders helped.”

It was a serviceable lie, compact and not blatantly false.

Amway and Shaklee both turned to Rufus’ rocket, their alien body language scarcely revealing contempt. They could have made helpful suggestions, but weren’t up for it; still shell-shocked from enduring months of isolation in prison. Quarantined from everyone, in part to sequester snarky pathogens, but also as a punitive measure, these two harmless moonshining partners had grown to despise each other and everything about this hostile planet.

Though obvious to Patrick, he didn’t give a shit. The captain had given him a mission to lead. Putting on his best smile, he said, “Rufus has arranged some refreshments and entertainment for our reunion so let’s go have a good time.”

Rufus and Patrick motioned for the releasees to join them in the hanger, the vibe one of convivial adventure, the reality more distant than their destination.

Eleven

Later that evening, Rastus and Stempy were waved through the main gate of Joint Base Andrews in Prince George's County, Maryland, their Himmler warrant good as gold.

It was time to check out Air Force One, make some volume calculations. With the world-traipsing schedule they anticipated, capacity would be key to meet international demand.

During the previous year, as the Governor of Tennessee criss-crossed the US seeking the Presidency, they'd made a command decision—time to bring their gentile country side-business into the air. Accordingly, they sacrificed the forward lavatory of the Tennessee State Gulfstream to the cause, welding closed the door and installing a stainless steel distillation unit.

That had served them well on the gubernatorial level, but it was time to leave the eighty gallon rig behind and move up to Presidential production. If non-essential safety equipment, like the escape capsule were removed, they reasoned, a multi-stage four hundred gallon array could be hammered into the VC-25's lower level.

Rastus remarked, "I asked The Chief to join us. He was in town for the Inauguration and thought we ought'a take 'One' out for a spin."

Stempy nodded, fond of The Chief. They'd weathered some shit together, especially since the election. He asked, "You type rated in the VC?"

"Nope. You?"

"I rode a 747 jump seat once to Tahiti. 'Bout the same."

Their vehicle's navigation system led them directly to to an immense hanger, its doors drawn back to expose the gleaming Air Force One. A dozen workmen were scurrying around the monstrous aircraft, and as they got out of their rented car an officer strode out to meet them.

He was recruitment poster tall, strapping, and self-imbued. His hand came up with military precision as he addressed Stempy, “Good evening gentlemen, my name is Edward Simmons. I understand you are the new Commander-in-Chief’s pilots.”

There was a taste of interrogative about the statement, and Rastus considered for a second having some sport. Stempy jumped in, knowing that open animus could shatter the nimbus of deceit they were navigating. He answered, “Colonel?”

“No sir, this is Air Force. Chief Master Sergeant. I’m responsible for both Air Force One aircraft.”

Stempy enthused, “Quite an honor. Can you give us a tour?”

“After I see some identification.”

Rastus whipped out the warrant, having the time of his life. The world was being invaded by aliens and this clown was going SS on them, asking for “Papers.”

He added, sounding a little pissed, “This clarifies our authority.”

The officer read through the document, incredulous but knowing the deal had changed: Everyone knew the new President was shacking up with a professed alien babe. *Strange times*. And some other alien’s sphere hanging over the Washington Monument; he’d already been told to tow the line. Extend every courtesy to the new regime.

They might know something. Vital.

The military was standing down, the tech to suspend a massive spaceship transcendently emasculating.

Ed handed the document back to Rastus, visibly cowed. “If you’ll follow me.”

Typical pilot fashion, they went right to the office, better known as the cockpit. Stempy recognized every switch until he got to the countermeasures panel. He said, “These are new to me, please explain.”

“Those controls are IRCM or infrared countermeasures. They actuate twelve kilowatt transmitters near each engine exhaust including the APU. The idea is

to emit pulsed infrared radiation at incoming IR-guided missiles to destroy their lock.”

Rastus liked that. He asked, “What else you got?”

We can deploy flares and metal foil to create false targets. Obviously we only do that as a last resort. The idea is to let our escort fighters interdict.”

Stempy eased into the left seat, letting the enormity of this ship and its purpose sink in. Essentially a three level aerial command center complete with launch codes and someone who could push the button. He thought, *Responsibility*.

Ed continued, “And we have a down-looking doppler radar for radar-seeking and laser-guided projectiles. Together, these countermeasures support our best defense—strong intel. Frankly, we just don’t go anywhere hot. Not with the football.”

Everyone present had seen *Dr. Strangelove*, got the subtext.

Rastus said, “Let’s see the lowest level next.”

It was indeed cavernous, glass-faced coolers lining the hull, stocked with the pampering treats befitting a world leader. In the center stood the well-known escape capsule, ready to jettison the President.

Rastus was running the numbers in his head, humming the little “We’re In The Money” ditty favored on Wall Street. *It would fit*.

He said, “I’ve seen enough. Let’s take her up.”

Ed wasn’t prepared to let his bird go joyriding but he remembered the words of his commanding officer. “We’re going to see some shit in the coming days. Aliens in droves and our new leader probably one of them. We gotta hope he’s got a human heart.”

“She’s topped off. Need any crew?”

Stempy answered, “No, but we are expecting our security man any time now. Can you check on that?”

“What’s his name?”

“We call him The Chief.”

Ed pulled a radio from his hip to call the main gate. They all heard, “Some guy just went through. Should be there now.”

Twenty minutes later Stempy, Rastus and The Chief were seated on the flight deck, forty feet in the air, all the turbines spooling. Stempy keyed the mike, “Andrews Ground, Air Force One Two Eight Zero Zero Zero taxiing to One Right with ATIS.” They lumbered along, the experience nothing like the purloined Cub.

After the engine check, they called Andrews Control Tower and were cleared to depart. Stempy grasped the four thrust levers, nodded to his partner and The Chief, and fire-walled the beast. Air Force One, powered by four General Electric CF6-80C2B1 engines, each producing fifty-six thousand seven hundred pounds of thrust, surprised them by making the fully-fueled eight hundred thirty three thousand pound aircraft accelerate like a funny car.

Stempy hauled back on the stick to see what she had. He immediately thought, *These aren't stock GEs, somebody at Area 51 must'a reverse-engineered Roswell tech. Bitches can climb.*

Nose impossibly high, “Rastus yelled, “Shit, ya gonna stall her!”

“Stempy barked sideways, a perfect Jimmy Stewart in *Flight of the Phoenix*. “There were times when you took real pride in just getting there.” Rastus rejoined, “My favorite line!”

Stempy put her hard over, sixty degrees of right bank. Rastus observed, “Heard these babies can do rolls and loops if you're good.”

“Maybe Chuck Yeager good.”

“He still flying?”

“Saw him at Oshkosh last year, still kick your ass.”

Rastus bowed solemnly, “He's a God.”

They went on, pushing the mammoth bird to know what she could take. The world had changed overnight, and with aliens in the sky, best to know your hand.

Twelve

The following morning, Monday morning, Billie Sue arose before dawn and called down for breakfast. It was raining hard, very agreeable to her. She liked Earth, a planet so much like her own in Andromeda, just a piddling two point three million light years away. Maybe it was the water everywhere; something about water and life.

Renewing.

Jeb liked to sleep a little later so she wandered into the sitting room. An orderly pushed a cart in quietly and left without a word. Standing at the window with a cup of coffee, watching the rain drive through the winter trees, Billie Sue thought over her times with Jeb, by Earth reckoning a little over a year.

Man's time had arrived, and soon an overwhelming immigration of off-worlders would be coming here, not secretly as before, but out in the open, changing this bucolic place in one generation.

She had taken Jeb to her home in Andromeda and several planets in the Milky Way to give him a broader view. And then she had rigged the course of history to place him in a world-leading role.

Now, with the appearance of Ordog, the putative fixer, they must lead, and that meant travel. Time to get back out there in space, see some people and cut a few deals.

Accordingly, she woke Jeb, telling him they were leaving right away. He trudged off to grab a shower and Billie Sue called down to the staff. "I want a brand new PortaPotty placed out on the front lawn in the next hour. And put a case of Bud in it."

Right on schedule, the New President and the First Alien said their goodbyes, promising to write, and stepped into the worksite toilet. It shook and was empty.

Come what may, it'd be a hoot.

Thirteen

Stempy, Rastus and The Chief had fallen in love with Air Force One, so much so they decided to commandeer her to Tennessee for a spell. After buzzing Canadian airspace just because they could, Stempy hauled the big bird around to the south and landed at Nashville International, causing a momentary stir, but this was the New New Deal, everyone young again with flexibility.

They didn't get up to see Billie Sue and Jeb leave, not with that new batch of moonshine driving the bus late the night before.

As they slumbered on, Sissy, Boozer, Shaklee, Amway and Patrick were getting situated in the roomy capsule atop the bargain rocket. Instead of expensive custom-fitted seats, every place not lashed with cargo bags was covered by a two feet thick waterbed mattress. Rufus had explained, "Lay real quiet on that mattress, it'll squish around you and spread out the Gs."

The first hundred thousand feet or so were supposed to be the worst, then the inner, smaller rockets would ignite and they'd second-stage it through the last of the atmosphere. If they got that far, they were good.

Boozer asked about navigation and Rufus smirked. "Got vernier engines clustered all around the capsule. When the rocket is spent, she'll kick loose and those tiny thrusters will knock you towards the station. I even added a universal Korean airlock so you should be able to mate up. Won't take an hour."

They all had a thousand questions but answers didn't come with this package. Yuri Gagarin would have had second thoughts.

Before they knew it, Rufus had slammed home the hatch and dogged the lugs. Several minutes later, the single speaker announced, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one," and the loudest sound in the universe stopped time, crushing G forces knocking them out mercifully.

Rufus' homebuilt ICBM leapt off the launch pad, burrowing into the sky on a pillar of flame and soot. He was trying out a new mixture of solid rocket fuel, pilfered from a North Korean formulation, and it was something! As the tailfire disappeared from view, Rufus thought, *If they survive the sixteen Gs of ascent, Guinness might be interested in talking to them.*

Man was rising up to meet the threat—Jeb and his alien girl utilizing the mythical Einstein-Rosen Bridge to twist nature's wormholes; at the other end of the spectrum, Boozer and his clan, riding a 99¢ Korean mortar shell.

Ordog watched these adventurers fly away from Earth, unmoved by either technology, biding his time until events conspired to grant him a piece of the action.

Fourteen

Even as Boozer and his crew were arcing up to the ISS, things were entering the atmosphere all across the north Atlantic. Small, solid masses slammed into the ocean, rifling to the seafloor. Tens of thousands of things, all identical, uninhabited, and intentional.

Beneath the Atlantic, midway between Spain and Newfoundland runs a north south mountainous rift valley known as the Maxwell Fracture Zone. Into this tectonic plate impact formation the projectiles dug, penetrating Earth's submerged crust, driving towards the volcanically active outer mantle.

And even as the first reached the molten rock, three hundred miles down, more diggers entered the atmosphere. Man's radar tracked the incoming fusillade. In addition, a few ocean-going container ships couldn't help but notice a sea gone crazy. In no time, Man, already expecting more alien hi-jinx," went on alert.

Drones were dispatched from both coasts, instructed to loiter over the effected area. In no time at all, giant geysers of smoke boiled from the sea, blotting out all visibility. A patch of the ocean, roughly circular with a diameter of eighty miles, became enshrouded in dense clouds, impenetrable to any of Man's down-looking satellites.

The few ships in this zone fled, the seas ragged and unnavigable. It was if part of Earth had been usurped, or perhaps more accurately, annexed.

Terraforming had been suggested for Mars and Venus, scientists speculating that with centuries on their side, and clever technique, these nearby worlds could one day be shaped to Earth-like standards.

What was happening north of the Azores, two miles down, was nothing like patient planet-making, this has happening in hours. Beneath the surface, molten rock ejaculated out of the Maxwell Fracture, cubic miles per second, driving the sea back, and a newborn landmass tunneled towards the sky. In one day it surfaced dead center

in the cloud, and kept growing. By day two, it was half the size of New Jersey without the mob.

Not yet, anyway.

Five thousand square miles of new land, wrought in a weekend's time. Good tech.

The silent black spaceship spinning over the Washington Monument was suddenly yesterday's news, displaced by the scientific community's roar. The international weekly journal of science, *Nature*, ran a special edition named *Deccan!*

The introduction was riven with spiritual torment, the very foundations of modern scientific hubris shredded by incalculably more advanced technology. It ran thus:

IT IS WIDELY ACCEPTED THE DINOSAURS PERISHED A PALEONTOLOGICAL INSTANT AFTER THE IMPACT OF A COLOSSAL ASTEROID, MOST LIKELY IN THE DECCAN TRAPS OF INDIA. THAT IMPACT TRIGGERED CATASTROPHIC CLIMATIC CHANGES, TOO GREAT, IN FACT, FOR THE PLODDING ADAPTIVE MECHANISMS OF LIFE TO OVERCOME.

SIXTY MILLION YEARS LATER, DESPITE ALL THE TECHNICAL ADVANCES SCIENCE HAS DELIVERED, WE SIT IDLY BY AS OUR WORLD IS AGAIN SHAPED FROM SPACE. THIS TIME, IT IS NOT A LIFELESS ROCK, BUT RATHER THE WILL OF EXTRATERRESTRIALS THAT IS THREATENING ALL LIFE ON EARTH.

FIRST, WHAT WE KNOW: OVER TWENTY-TWO THOUSAND OBJECTS ENTERED OUR ATMOSPHERE, STRIKING THE OCEAN ABOVE THE MAXWELL FRACTURE ZONE AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE NORTH AMERICA TECTONIC PLATE AND THE EURASIAN PLATE.

WHAT WE SURMISE: THEY CONTINUED DOWN INTO THE RIFT, TUNNELING, WE BELIEVE, INTO THE MANTLE. THERE THEY RELEASED ENERGY SUFFICIENT TO CAUSE ENORMOUS LAVA FLOWS INTO THE SEA. WITHIN A WEEK, BY RADAR MEASUREMENTS, A LANDMASS OF NEARLY FIVE THOUSAND SQUARE MILES ROSE ABOVE

THE SURFACE, REACHING HEIGHTS OF SEVERAL THOUSAND FEET. IN SHORT, A NEW MICRO CONTINENT BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE.

BY INFRARED MEASUREMENT, WE KNOW IT IS STILL HOT BUT COOLING WITH UNEXPLAINABLE RAPIDITY. AT THIS RATE, IT COULD BE HABITABLE, BY ANY CREATURE WITH OUR TEMPERATURE TOLERANCES, IN A FEW WEEKS.

CALCULATIONS HAVE DISCLOSED THE ENERGY REQUIRED FOR SUCH A FEAT. THEY REPRESENT THREE ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE ABOVE THE TOTAL COMBINED ARMAMENTS, INCLUDING NUCLEAR, OF ALL THE ARMIES OF THE WORLD.

AMERICA'S NEW PRESIDENT, WHO ADMITS HE'S BEEN OFF THE PLANET AND IS BETROTHED TO AN ALIEN, HAS VANISHED, PRESUMABLY WITH FORE-KNOWLEDGE OF THIS CRISIS.

WORLD LEADERS ARE WITHOUT GUIDING PRECEDENT. A WORLD CONGRESS HAS BEEN PROPOSED, PERHAPS IN WASHINGTON, D.C. WHERE ANOTHER ALIEN PRESENCE HANGS MENACINGLY OVER THE MONUMENT OF THE SAME NAME.

IN TWO SHORT WEEKS, THE WORLD HAS CHANGED IMMEASURABLY, SCIENTISTS AS ABSENT OF ANSWERS AS OUR SPIRITUAL OR POLITICAL LEADERS.

The entire issue of *Nature* was released gratis worldwide, streaming to five billion mobile devices. In a day, much of Earth's reading population was enraptured with one sentiment—we're being invaded, and they're building a new kingdom from which to rule.

In America, the cry went up for Jeb, the man elected to meet this alien threat. Many demanded a replacement, but cooler minds interceded, knowing this hillbilly from Tennessee, wherever he'd gotten to, was man's best chance for survival.

The consensus: Let him be. He's got our back.

Fifteen

Ordog had been having a bad run. Though a plastic robot of infinite lifespan, with time to get it right, he just couldn't. His last debacle, on Orion Six, still lingered like a zombie's undead fart.

All powerful entities, especially despots, like to tell others what to do. Failing that, they will negotiate. Some will even tolerate independent fixers if there is no other way. That's when Ordog usually got the call—when there was no other way.

In real world terms, that meant shots had already been fired.

True, Orion Six had ended a disaster, but hey, that was a long time ago, by his current planet's timeline, and over a thousand lightyears in his wake. He'd just stay away for a local millennium or so.

Anyway, Orion Six was old news; Ordog had a new gig now, something he'd been "let in on" at a seedy space ranger bar near Proxima Centauri. It had gone something like this:

Ordog, with two officers from his ship, had just sat down when a lounge lizard sidled up, offering to parlay a bit of local gossip.

He was a short, furry biped, the rural type who populate dimly-lit establishments throughout the realm. Perhaps the distant progenitor of a good Tennessee moonshiner, but with better hygiene. He had an easy approach, smooth and unassuming.

"Good evening, travelers. If you have a fast ship, I have valuable insight regarding a developing opportunity. Can I buy the first round?"

Ordog had been stuck with "all the rest" tabs, and said, "Have a seat, stranger, we'll pay as we go."

A server came, took their drink orders and left.

Ship's company looked much like Ordog, perfect humanoid features and build, cynical, and galaxy-weary. Ordog did the introductions. "This is Miesha, my navigator." A stunning female redhead gave the stranger the once-over, thinking "loser."

"And this is my mathematician, Vecto." In truth, Vecto was a null-set dropout from a numbers racket on one of Collux's lesser worlds, but mathematician sounded way better. Vecto sported a bulked-up male android body, v3.14159265359

He nodded to the stranger, wondering where the round had gotten to. His mantra: *You should never have to wait for the first drink.*

"My name is Furta."

Meisha allowed, "Sounds right. Tell us what you know."

Such an open invitation, especially from a luscious fembot, was calculated to trip verbal incontinence, the quickest route known to flush an information peddler, Ordog's crew already assuming the "best consumed by" date long gone.

The drinks arrived, a double for Furta. He tossed it back and held up two fingers—hit me again twice. Ordog, figuring this clown had maybe ten cogent minutes, got to the point. "Tell us or leave."

The bar's staff grokked a "pipeline drinker" and rushed both fresh doubles over with a blinding shooter on the side. Furti quickly achieved the requisite chemical imbalance to tell his tale.

He began, "The Moonshining Guild scored a big deal in a parallel universe and are fat with cash. After the last re-org, someone decided to use a tiny portion of that to break into new markets closer to home. They're taking chances."

He tossed back another double and continued, "For someone with the right skills, and speed, a whole sector of

the sky can be seized. They need people who can conquer new markets.

“And I can make that you.”

“For a price” was left unsaid. Ordog inclined his head to the watching barman and yet another duo of doubles took flight, Furta already locomotively shit-faced.

Ordog cut to the chase. “What sector?”

Furta was losing any bargaining power, his mind a spinning kaleidoscope of emotion, colors and noise. He tried to focus and stammered, “Not far! The Guild sent moonshiners to a place called Earth, not five lousy lightyears away. Made a splash, then nut’in’. I could’a done better”

Ordog had never been to this part of the Milky Way, a backwater on the western spiral arm. He’d simply told his navigator to “get us the Hell out of here,” and a few hundred days later they were at Proxima.

He looked at Miesha who gave a shrug.

Eight days later, they entered Earth’s atmosphere, unimpressed, Googled the seat of power, and decided to hang over a cool-looking obelisk. Ordog was all about image.

Two Earth days after that, as Ordog watched the incoming projectiles, he knew his luck had turned.

Sixteen

The blanket of smoke over Earth's new continent tightened about its shores, thickened, as if by design, and went satellite-opaque. Then, suddenly, objects once more rained down, this time speculated to be the building materials or the invaders themselves. Radar signatures were much larger and decelerated without a whisper.

More in-your-face tech.

And still no Jeb, elected to handle this shit.

Twitter-borne snark went acerbic, the world asking what was next, scraping subservience to Klingons?

Washington had no answers, the ruling glitterati beseeching the populace to wait for the hillbilly savior—the official response: *he'll be back soon*.

But if Ordog despaired over a “lousy five lightyear journey,” he should have bought a PortaPotty. An instant after Billie Sue and Jeb stepped into the shiny clean crapper on the front lawn of the Tennessee Governor's mansion, they stepped out on a speeding bass boat, two point three million lightyears away in Andromeda, cutting across a huge, deeply wooded finger lake in high summer.

This world was teeming with life; insects, birds, and flying fish filling the sky, a fantastic day to be alive. Jeb was instantly ecstatic as they climbed up the rough-hewn tuna tower for a purchase on nirvana.

Seated high in their two favorite wicker chairs, Billie Sue said, “Coupla' Buds would git it, Jeb.”

He plunged the oversized cooler, yanked two, and passed a cold frosty one. They toasted. He pleaded, “Can't we just stay here a while, let things on Earth work themselves out?”

Billie Sue smiled like a million candles and drained her beer. “'nother, Jeb. Been too long.”

They snaked up the lake for hours, one of the best days in Jeb's life, the familiar waters and engine roar rejuvenating them both. Words weren't necessary, unspoiled

nature, simple sensual pleasure and a few cold beers alone sufficient.

In the afternoon, they pulled into a cove, did some fishing and made love. Everything a country man could ask for.

Near dusk, as they cruised up the lake, Jeb felt a sullen tug. Maybe it was the tail end of a good beer buzz, or maybe the more substantial pull of responsibility; billions of people quadrillions of miles away calling to him. He asked, "We going back to your treehouse?"

She whipped the boat around in a long left turn, carving the flat lake with compass precision. A little later they bumped alongside a wooden dock, tied off, and took the short path leading to her treehouse home. Once inside, Jeb swept his eyes around, remembering the last time he'd been here.

An eternity ago.

The structure was roughly round with eight foot walls that went conical above, then twisted like a Dairy Queen curl. Against the rear wall from the single door were several tall bookcases filled with gold-leafed embossed legends.

In the nook between the two largest cases an enormous bed stuck out like a tongue, nearly three feet high with a short ladder against one side. Around the room, a small kitchen with bright, brassy utensils, and then a writing desk, carved right into the wall.

He wondered if a Hobbit had ever lived here, perhaps still did. The place begged fanciful thoughts, so far, far from Earth.

Jeb sat down, asking, "What are we going to do?"

Billie Sue climbed up on the queenly bed, crossed her legs, and leaned back into a forest of plump, colorful pillows. "Jeb, the invasion of Earth has begun. We both knew that was coming. It's not Martians, or bug-eyed reptilians from Procyon, but profit-seeking opportunists. They're landing right now, setting up a new world on yours."

Jeb, used to being confused in matters alien, tried to put a box around it. “You mean Ordog in that spherical spaceship?”

“No, he’s just waiting to see where he can cut a little fat out of the deal. I’m talking about The Builders.”

“Who?”

“The action chain starts with the Moonshining Guild. Word has it they scored big in a parallel universe and are flush with cash. Now they’re moving out to the fringe of your galaxy, trying to deepen their hold.”

She let him process that morsel.

“Jeb, The Guild sent those two buffoons Shaklee and Amway, the ones who tried to take your Presidency. Even on that level, they nearly succeeded. Their psychodynamic technology is formidable.”

“But I had Jack Daniels. Our tech is good too. We whooped ’em.”

Jeb was a simple man, liked simple solutions. He asked, “Then how do we protect Earth?”

“First you must understand the actors in this drama. At one end is the Moonshining Guild, at the other your precious world, her people, and creatures.”

Jeb added, “What about Ordog?”

Billie Sue nodded, “And, yes, Ordog. Not someone I’d want to depend on, but the universe is a strange and wonderful place. For now, we need a good night’s rest, then we’re off to get some answers.”

Jeb stripped off his clothes, climbed up on the phantasmagorical bed, and gave Billie Sue a lusty hug.

“I trust you and so do my people.”

It was genuine statement, another of the things she so loved about him but wasn’t certain such faith was deserved. That would be posterity’s call.

Seventeen

Rufus' capsule sported a rudimentary control system: surplus game controller hardware and lightly-tested online software. But what he really lacked was the talent to mate his budget ship to the International Space Station, all his other projectiles simply destined for screaming re-entry.

His solution was genius-grade. While the hapless crew hurled up through the atmosphere, unconscious, internet game junkies were virtually aboard, competing with each other to hit the ISS airlock with a kiss.

Rufus had reasoned this way—why hire a complete mission control when you can tap the vast denizens of basement-dwelling gamers? They'll work manically hard for free, and some of them are good. Very good, in fact.

So he ripped off a space game interface, offered an online expense-paid vacation to *the* gaming convention Strategicon and waited. And just like *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come."

Eighty minutes after liftoff, the capsule coupled gently with the International Space Station, the winning gamer oblivious yet "totally bragging" to be high scorer, and going to southern California for Strategicon, the industry's Mecca.

With the death of the Shuttle program in the summer of 2011, private enterprise was encouraged to fill the void. The Russians had stepped in, providing a budget-gutting taxi service at thirty eight million round trip for two, extra for waiting time.

Nobody liked that, Cold War vibrations and all.

Seeing an unmet market, fledgling astronautics manufacturers started working on budget capsules modeled after Apollo. But private spacecraft are the Corvair of astronautics—*unsafe at any speed*. After two consecutive failures, both resulting in media-sensationalized loss of

life, the world's spacefaring community decided to "take a breather, and re-assess our goals."

The wind out of everyone's solar sails, the ISS was abandoned, "more pressing Earthly matters demanding attention" the spineless rationale.

As such, under international derelict salvage laws, and in view of the practical impossibility of defending title, the station became free territory. That was Birdshot's kind of deal, no-rent digs with a view, perfect for high ground squatting.

Sissy was the first to come around, her mood poor. She looked about, surveying the squalor of inert bodies and jumbled cargo, wondering if her old lover Birdshot was still alive in Boozer.

Sizing up her situation, she knew he wouldn't have had anything to do with this low-rent rabble. He'd have seized a real ship.

The air was foul, a cross between Serbian locker room and petroleum distillates, neither too sexy. Secretly she hoped Birdshot would re-emerge, controlling Boozer's body, and this situation. She needed a strong alien in charge.

Patrick looked dead as did the alien moonshiners. Boozer's body was face down, a soft snoring sound burbling out. She asked, "That you Birdshot?"

Muffled through the mattress, "Yes. What a ride! Just what I needed to choke back that old man, take over again."

Sissy, a stranger to zero G, half crawled, half floated over. She thought, *The implant is in charge*. He grasped her firmly, not a timid human. She liked that, whispering, "Glad you're back."

Birdshot, a trillion years old, creature of the cosmos, now entombed in the ancient Boozer, asked, "That ascent from Earth should have killed all you corporeals. Have you checked them?"

Sissy answered unabashedly, “Not all that interested really. Those two aliens are useless, and the human is a cop with an agenda.”

Sissy looked at Boozer’s face intently, trying to peer behind the flaccid mask. She knew her old lover well enough to realize Birdshot was still waking up, not yet capable of fine motor control. Instead of answering, she asked, “You’re behaving as if you’ve been far away. Explain that to me.”

Birdshot, driving the old man’s mouth, answered, “Very perceptive. I’ve been dormant for a time. Let’s just say there’s some creatures, actually one creature, newly arrived on Earth I wish to avoid.”

“I heard an Ordog mentioned?” Sissy piqued.

“An old nemesis. He and I had dealings in the past. He didn’t like the results.”

“But that can’t be why he’s on Earth?”

“No. Like me, he has time on his side. And, also like me, a long memory. He is here on business.”

That jump-started Sissy’s core modus. She urged instantly, “Let’s airlock these losers and finish what we started, eliminate that hillbilly President and grab this world.”

Birdshot was coming around, his vast memory, the ultimate cloud computing model, refreshing itself from redundant storage all across the panoply. After a few seconds, during which he downloaded ten to the twenty-ninth bytes, he said, “We’re safely docked at the International Space Station.”

Sissy said, “Which is abandoned.”

He corrected, “It’s in standby mode. Keeps critical systems operational. I will restart it.”

Sissy looked at the husk that was once Boozer. The trip up hadn’t been kind. “You might need a new body.”

Boozer’s head swiveled around horribly, Dr. Josef Mengele and Mary Shelley in orbit.

“No problem, I can use any of these.”

Sissy had known this alien invader for over a year. First it inhabited the Governor of Tennessee, later, after a

faultless miscalculation, had invaded Boozer to godfather his strings. Still, on an intellectual level, she knew this creature had near God-like powers, animating often nearly-spent lifeforms well beyond original spec.

But also, it made a multitude of mistakes, the kind born of unbridled hubris. Sissy would have to watch that, now that they were in space, a notoriously unforgiving environment for humans.

Sissy asked, "Want a suggestion?"

Boozer's head rotated back caustically like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*. He snapped, "I'll choose logically."

Sissy had heard that shit occasionally before switching to pre-law, thereafter every day. She rolled her eyes, another round on the carousel.

Boozer's head moved back and forth with reptilian consideration, solving for about nine thousand variables. The cognitive load would have been manageable without her, but he was bewitched, the first human female he'd ever hooked up with. *She done stole his soul.*

He waffled, "Which body you like?"

Sissy giggled, ever the manipulator. "Maybe we should see who comes around, let survival of the fittest decide."

Boozer's head nodded, Birdshot in full control once again. "That *is* logical. In the meantime, I'll start reviving the station."

He studied the Kmart-grade lock mechanism on their end of the coupling and after some straining, Sissy felt the gentle whoosh of air. Birdshot said, "Station has atmosphere." He sniffed and continued, "And the right mix of nitrogen and oxygen you humans like. I'm going in."

"Can I come?"

"No. There may be danger. I promise I'll be back in ten minutes. While I'm gone, see if you can rouse my next host, I'm doing everything I can to make this one move."

With that, he disappeared through the narrow connecting passage and was gone, leaving Sissy alone with her thoughts, two B-team aliens, and a cop named Trouble.

Eighteen

Thirty minutes later, bored and a little worried, Sissy pulled herself into the International Space Station. The original habitable volume had been brought up piece by piece in the Shuttle, essentially a series of interconnected cylinders and specially constructed habitats.

Attached to these modules was an external latticework of solar arrays and sensors. Over a decade, at a cost in excess of one hundred billion dollars, a few well-heeled nations added their own living quarters, the ISS taking on a sophisticated international flavor.

Sissy remembered the initial collaborators included Brazil, the Ukraine, Canada, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the European Space Agency, each adding laboratories and living space to the American backbone.

Then, right after the 2012 US election, political courage for exploration evanesced, along with any attendant oversight, and seventeen countries immediately exercised their United Nations membership rights, while they could.

In a mad rush likened to the 1848 California Gold Rush, the world's most autocratic leaders employed all manner of robotic space haulers to balkanize the scientific outpost with personal Doomsday bunkers.

Overnight, the station morphed into a gritty, turkish bazaar. And though all the nations of the world then pulled their maintenance crews home for want of safe personnel carriers, their odors lingered.

Sissy yelled into the darkness, "This place smells like shit. You there?" From somewhere distant, echoing harshly through the metallic right angle labyrinth, came the sound of a violent struggle.

Fearless, and admittedly a little thrilled, Sissy pulled herself forward, digging zero G.

Happily, they had docked at the upscale end of the station, the gamers referring to detailed diagrams, maximum points for hitting the so-called Hilton hub.

Sissy pulled forward, past finely-machined alloys and serious tech. Still following the struggle's echo, she moved through a narrow communicating cylinder, then into a tighter tube with four branching exits: up, right, down, and left.

Her pappy had always told her, "When the way is unclear, go left." She ducked down the left passage, no sound at all now.

A seedy dorm room bead wall stretched across the exit end of this passage, tightly restrained with elastic to give the right zero G effect. She parted the multi-colored beads and slithered through.

Boozer's body hovered against the bulkhead, his neck bent lethally. Just beyond floated another body, this one young, buff, and wearing shorts that favored a tight ass. He was decidedly male, much to Sissy's instant delight.

From Boozer came a croaking voice. "I surprised him and we fought. Used every trick I know. Before this body dies, you must transfer me."

Sissy showed no hesitation. "I'm ready."

"Get a knife."

Not twenty feet away was a primitive galley. She rummaged around, pulling a small paring knife from a drawer. "Got it."

From somewhere distant, a loud noise propagated throughout the station. Boozer sighing wearily. "Our fellow cosmonauts have left the station. I thought that might happen."

Sissy couldn't care less about the departing crew. She was psyched for field surgery. "Where do I cut?"

"Remove the pants from Boozer's left leg. "A moment later: "Okay, now what?"

Sissy was in a personal power zone, controlling her dreams. In a moment, she'd have her lover back, this time in a hot body.

"I'm burrowed up against the outer face of the tibia in the mid lower leg." The voice was getting very hard to

understand, Boozer's body failing. Not that Birdshot gave a shit; he was trading-up.

Sissy stabbed the knife in and sliced the entire calf open knee to ankle. Blood spheres sailed away in every direction as she filleted the muscle like grandpa gutting a Sunday roast. In a minute the tibia was fully de-bulked, shining white and ghastly. She ran her finger along the bone, feeling for something that shouldn't be there, imagining a large metal implant.

Boozer gasped, "Body about dead. Find a small pellet, pull it out, and push it into that young guy's ear. Either side, but I like right. Push it down as far as you can. I love you."

The body shuddered and went still.

Boozer was dead.

As far as Sissy knew, she was alone on an abandoned space station, no return to Earth, digging on a possessed corpse. No Poly-Sci syllabus ever mentioned this. A second later her fingernail caught on something, a nugget burrowed deep into the bone like an Alabama tick.

It pried loose with considerable force, a bloody pellet no greater than a millimeter across. To imagine this held all of Birdshot's knowledge was beyond her, but an instant later she grasped the other body and shoved it deep into the right ear.

Human determination!

Good things, great and small, demand time and patience. Sissy found a bottle of something Russian that smelled alcoholic, decided to explore. He'd either come around or he wouldn't, but Sissy was betting on *her* alien. And her new man.

Nineteen

Though construction of The International Space Station began at the turn of the millennium, it wasn't until the world's biggest cowards gave up hope that the world's greatest lunatics made it a village.

The opposing regions of the station quickly became as bipolar as the once-present occupants. The original end, dominated by severe American, European and Russian anal retentiveness; the new environs, Rio on Saturday night.

The original builders brought scientific rigor and dazzling engineering, the latter-day vagabonds the human condition—fear, uncertainty, and doubt. It was like two ends of a bar magnet.

Or a good bar at quitting time.

Sissy cradled the wine bottle under her arm and pulled along the main backbone passage, peeking into the connected modules that told of their owners' neighborhoods. Rich fabrics and wood, strange, custom furniture suited to this unique place, and wall art that defied the imagination.

It was if the warlords and infant emperors who built these last ditch enclaves wanted their most precious keepsakes held dear for the final days.

Down one junction, through a long tunnel that must have stuck out into space well away from the station core, she sailed into a small spherical hub. Radiating outward were six communicating bulkhead portals, all locked, unimaginable treasures and secrets beyond.

Like an entire, mysterious sub-continent.

Feeling suddenly very alone and vulnerable, it crossed her mind that other hardcore survivalists might still be aboard. If some nutjob was lurking in one of these passages, the sight of a beautiful woman might give him ideas. *But let him try*, she thought, the knife in her pocket ready to yield an inoperable wound, a world away from 911.

Twenty

Ordog liked the good life. His spherical spaceship had eight full levels, the uppermost his aerie, ample room for a decadent study and opulent stateroom. In was in this study that he now repaired, enjoying a fine cognac and the company of Meisha and Vecto.

One entire wall was a view plate, their attention on the massive transformation of the new continent. Though Man could not penetrate the enshrouding cloud cover, Ordog's tech cut right through.

Meisha observed, "Whoever's behind this has resources. The refining capacity of the visible structures exceeds everything on this planet. They might be making a run on Exxon."

She had done some light reading on Earth's major industries; petroleum cracking and distribution a global cash cow, Exxon the herd leader. The dollars were impressive, maybe enough to attract extraterrestrials.

Vecto burped and said, "It's not oil, my dear. No, clearly something more profitable per unit volume." He enjoyed being cryptic, ever the pretentious mathematician.

Ordog snatched a gargantuan cigar from a humidor at his elbow, gesturing to the others. They each plucked one out, the air quickly filling with the lusty miasma of Cuba's finest. Meisha said, "I approve of your little trip. This planet has some enchanting vices."

Ordog, feeling cosmopolitan the evening before, had taken one of the small transfer ships from the hanger deck and gone out for smokes and some package goods. He could pass for a human in low light, but in Cuba, with hard currency in hand, nobody asked questions.

Ordog liked Vecto's bullshit when it served his purposes. Right now it didn't. He exhaled a cumulonimbus apparition and asked, "So what are they building, brainiac?"

Vecto knew who buttered his toast. "It's a distilling operation alright. Just not oil. Gotta be moonshine."

"Why?"

“Look at the math.” He always said that when he was disassembling. Ordog, recharging his sniffer for the windy oration, allowed, “Enlighten us.”

Vecto lived for such pomposity. “Oil distillation, this planet’s second largest industry, is principally used to generate fuel and malleable construction material. It should be horrifically profitable given the appetite for said products.”

He paused for effect. “But it isn’t, at least not on a per unit volume basis.

“A gallon of oil must be pumped from the ground, moved great distances from fearful places, processed in intricate and expensive facilities, then moved again for use. After all that, Exxon for example, nets less than 10% before taxes. Cost of the raw material alone is seventy five percent of the selling price. The only way they survive their huge fixed costs is to produce oceans of the stuff. It’s a high stakes game demanding enormous capital and unrelenting thirst.”

Nobody in the room liked that model. Ordog said, “No thanks. What’s the moonshining business look like?”

Vecto stretched back expansively. “Worlds apart. A bottle of medium grade bourbon sells for about thirty five US dollars. Three bottles is about a gallon. So, a gallon sells for about one hundred dollars. At a premium distillery, it costs about three dollars to make that quantity. In the woods with a copper still, next to nothing.”

He was coming to the best part. “And here’s the kicker, bourbon, or rot-gut moonshine can be made by any idiot with primitive equipment, no patents, and zero taxation. That last cost component is non-trivial.”

Ordog stood up and walked to the view plate. It was centered on the enormous facility, gleaming metal pipes and storage tank farms. It went on for miles. “Can you estimate the capacity of that?”

Vecto walked over to survey the domain like a vulture capitalist. “Each person on this planet consumes about two gallons of pure alcohol every year. Call it fourteen billion

gallons. Moonshine is the most potent variant at about fifty percent alcohol so you can more than double that quantity. At least thirty billion gallons. That's a lake one mile by one mile and four hundred feet deep. Lot of booze."

Meisha clarified, "That's Earth's demand, but what can this new facility produce in a year?"

Vecto fumbled with a small computer, wanting to look certain but lacking many of the critical variables. "I'd like to be more precise but I have to guess. Judging from the visible storage and average rates of distillation, I'd say these guys are setting up a parsec-wide distribution facility. Maybe ten times Earth's requirements, probably more as they won't get all of Earth's. No competitor does."

Ordog laughed gruffly, "Unless they came to win."

Meisha joined them, all staring at vanishingly small robotic machines toiling away to assemble the staggering complex. One thing was for sure, some locals were gonna be pissed. Man's history was a tapestry, interwoven with the mirth and magic of spirits, and now, a new outfit was setting up shop, certain to upset the balance of power and privilege.

But as they say, the only constant is change.

Twenty One

Stempy and Rastus slept off the new batch, clocking through twenty one hours, paying down an usurious biological vig. Late in the evening, The Chief checked in on them, thinking the Governor's mansion doctor still might be sober enough to dispatch real medics.

"You guys alive?" The Chief had a great sense of humor and a good heart. And he liked the Governor's, now the President's, pilots. Stempy cracked an eye and said, "Give us thirty."

No stranger to dire hangovers, occupational hazard for any moonshiner, the pilots manned up, and shook it off. Nothing a hardened liver couldn't handle.

Later, near midnight, the three men sat in the lower dining room, nursing coffee and dense sustenance. Rastus said, "Radio's talking about a new continent boiling out of the sea off Labrador. Some kinda Captain Nemo's Atlantis. That right, Chief?"

The Chief smiled. "Let's see." He motioned to the waiter. "Roll us in a TV, we want to look at that new continent."

The young man bobbed his head up and down, the story captivating everyone. Within a minute he wheeled a small cart to their table, a 42" flat panel sitting on top.

He needn't have worried about finding the right channel, every station was following the endlessly-breaking story 24/7. A breathless idiot sat at a table, facing three other talking heads, gesticulating manically. A red bar across the bottom of the screen flashed "INVASION."

The Chief grabbed the remote to up the volume.

BREATHLESS IDIOT: "SO WE CAN'T SEE INTO THE CLOUD BUT WE KNOW THEY'RE LANDING SHIPS CONSTANTLY?"

TALKING HEAD ONE: "THAT'S RIGHT. THEY'RE BUILDING SOMETHING VAST. WE'VE FLOWN A FEW

DRONES NEARBY. FROM THE SOUNDS RECORDED, IT'S METALLIC, BEARS THE ACOUSTIC SIGNATURES OF PIPES, TANKS AND HEAVY PUMPING EQUIPMENT."

TALKING HEAD TWO: "WE THINK IT COULD BE SOME KIND OF PROCESSING FACILITY. PERHAPS TO CHANGE OUR ATMOSPHERE TO MAKE OUR PLANET MORE LIKE THEIR OWN."

BREATHLESS IDIOT: "LIKE TERRAFORMING IN REVERSE?"

TALKING HEAD TWO: "PRECISELY."

TALKING HEAD THREE: "WHATEVER FACILITY THEY'RE BUILDING IS NOTHING, SCALE-WISE, COMPARED TO THE TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED TO BUILD A CONTINENT. THAT'S GROUND-BREAKING, LITERALLY."

BREATHLESS IDIOT: "RIGHT. WHY CAN'T WE SEE IT? HOW ARE THEY HIDING IT?"

TALKING HEAD TWO: "THEY'VE GENERATED AN OPAQUE CLOUD THAT BLOCKS OUR EMR TOOLS."

BREATHLESS IDIOT: "EMR? WHAT'S . . ."

TALKING HEAD TWO: "ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION. BASICALLY OUR INFRARED HEAT SENSORS, ALL VISIBLE AND NON-VISIBLE IMAGING TECHNOLOGIES. IT'S SOMETHING WE DON'T UNDERSTAND, CAN'T REPLICATE. BUT I'LL TELL YOU THIS . . ."

BREATHLESS IDIOT: "CAN'T WE SEND SOMEONE TO LAND THERE?"

The Chief turned to his friends and hit the mute. “That’s the question. You’re the President’s new pilots, can’t we go land there? Sounds like a matter of national security.”

Rastus replied, “We’d need a stout whirlybird. Gonna be a zero-zero visibility approach.”

Stempy was seeing the big picture—Presidential pilots and world class adventurers. He added, “We have some latitude here men. Plus, Jeb likes initiative. I say we go for it.”

The Chief asked, “What about that SkyCrane chopper?”

Rastus answered, “Mission perfect. And I love that beast. How do we get one out in the Atlantic?”

The Chief chuckled. “You gotta start thinking big. We whistle up an aircraft carrier. Probably got one stationed off that new continent right now. You ready?”

Both pilots echoed, “Shit yeah.”

For nearly a century, everyone outside Washington D.C. said the federal government was too big, too many bureaucrats. One thing about bureaucrats though, when their jobs are genuinely threatened, they can lean up quick.

It was just past midnight. The Chief sat at Jeb’s Gubernatorial desk, his two buddies listening on speaker phone, all nursing single malts, and called the Pentagon. He had no idea who he’d get, but when you have the power, who gives a damn.

He reached the switchboard, a male operator saying, “Pentagon, state your business.”

“This is President Jeb’s chief of security. Get me the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.”

The Chief liked going in strong, people at the top got shit done.

He heard nothing and barked, “Now!”

The phone clicked through a busy arcade of code/decode electronics, and then went absolutely silent, more advanced technology de-cluttering the signal to pure voice. The kind of technology that commands attention.

“This is the chairman. To whom am I speaking?”

The Chief got wood, this was the big tent. He answered, “Chairman, Jeb believes this new continent poses a national security threat. I’m his top security man. Do we have any assets standing off?”

He’d seen The Duke in action, knew the lingo.

“You represent the new President?”

“Been with him for years. Saved his life twice” It was a concise resume, punchy.

And the Chairman needed anybody, *please*, to start barking orders. “USS Reagan on station. State your requirements?”

“Extraction for three from Tennessee mansion, fastest transport to the Reagan.”

“What else?”

Rastus cut in, “Need a fully fueled SkyCrane on the carrier’s flight deck. Integral fuel tanks for eight hour endurance. Plus some specialty equipment.”

He was having the time of his young life, commanding “The Mechanism.” As a pilot he had always respected the FAA like police, and NASA like Jesus. Now he was a peer, uncontested access to everything.

“Describe equipment.”

Rastus almost came in his pants. Precise obsequiousness from someone who controlled the world. *That never happened.*

“Loud speakers hung off the ship like *Apocalypse Now*, and an iPod with lots of Floyd.”

“Transport landing your location thirteen minutes.”

The Chief signed off, saying, “Copy that.”

They would have packed, but why? Granted time to focus on the mission, they recharged their glasses. Halfway through a rare bottle from the mansion's most private cache, the sound of heavy thrust came at them.

As before, it was another VTOL apparition. They ran out, urgency's spirit, bounding in. It lifted rudely, Hell's own ire responding.

At a thousand feet the turbines rotated horizontal and they climbed rapidly. The cabin speaker said, "Hold on, we're about to test the new supersonic drive."

Stempy was trying to figure out how a heavy vertical lift aircraft could possibly fly faster than the speed of sound. Lot of compromises to make that work. *Tricky math.*

He leaned over to Rastus and keyed the intercom, "Is that possible?" His partner, always impetuous, unbuckled and scampered to the flight deck; even if they crashed it was too good to miss. The co-pilot nodded as he entered and motioned to the jump seat. Rastus snapped it down, cinched his harness tight, and grabbed another headset.

They were at thirty two thousand feet doing five hundred forty knots. Typical airliner speed and altitude. The left seat pilot said, "Here's where the shit gets thick."

He pulled a large lever on the center console and the entire airplane shook violently. "What'ya doing," yelled Rastus over the clatter, more intrigued than scared. "Swinging the wing back for supersonic flight."

Rastus thought, *That's a busy wing, jet engines at the tips plus variable-sweep geometry. Hope they worked out the loads.*

The airspeed indicator wound up rapidly as the pilot pushed the engines into the red. He screamed with mad hilarity, "Keep your headset on, this thing's one twenty decibels when she gets fully wound. It'll dry paint."

They nosed up to seventy thousand feet, leveled off, and quickly hit one thousand four hundred miles per hour. The co-pilot pulled out a bottle of Dom, bellowing proudly, "Mach two!" and thumbed out the cork. At the reduced

cockpit pressure equivalent to nine thousand feet, bubbly shot out enthusiastically all over the panel.

It was surreal, but that's what a good alien will do for you. A world gone young again and crazy.

Eighty minutes later, the pilot pushed into a descent. At thirty thousand feet, they slowed, swung the wing forward to subsonic, and were cleared to the USS Reagan. In no time at all, they'd lifted vertically from Tennessee and flown two thousand miles to hit a precise IFR carrier landing in the dead of night deep in the north Atlantic.

Rastus shook his head in wonderment. Sometimes his fellow man seemed a tad alien.

Twenty Two

They hit the deck of the USS Reagan hard, nobody bitching. The deck crew swarmed out to lash the aircraft against the tipping seas. Everyone struggled into a driving rain, great clouds of steam billowing behind them from the super-heated wingtip power plants.

Rastus, Stempy and The Chief were instantly seized by the scale of the USS Ronald Reagan. At eleven hundred feet long and grossing over one hundred thousand tons, she was a big girl.

They crowded into a flight deck structure at the base of the island house. One entire side stood open to the storm, rain sheeting across the four and half acres of metal deck. Rastus strained to see through the lousy visibility, expecting and then seeing an Erickson S-64F Air crane rising up to their level on an aircraft elevator.

The captain walked right up to The Chief and stuck out his hand. “Captain Robert Hammer. Welcome to CVN Seventy Six.”

It isn’t every day you meet the commander of a nuclear aircraft carrier, especially one stationed as the first defense against invaders from outer space. The Chief introduced himself and the President’s pilots, adding, “Our mission is recon only. We don’t intend to get in your way.”

If the captain was amused, he didn’t show it.

“You requested a SkyCrane. What you’re getting is an AirCrane, a more powerful version. Do you intend to depart now?”

Under normal circumstances, flying against an unknown adversary in such weather would be considered foolhardy. The Chief counted mentally to five, Rastus not letting him down. He heard, “Sir, I’ve plotted the coordinates. We’re ready to commence our reconnoiter.”

The captain of the USS Ronald Reagan smiled thinly, the rulebook he lived by his entire career thrown overboard. “Very well, your bird is fully fueled. We’ve installed the public address system you requested.”

They nodded their thanks.
The captain saluted and said stiffly, “Godspeed.”

Twenty minutes later Stempy and Rastus sat in the cockpit going through the preflight checklist while The Chief thumbed through an iPod hooked to ten mammoth speakers slung to the sides of the helicopter.

He yelled forward to them. “Some swabbie likes Floyd, got everything from Meddle forward.” He wasn’t really surprised, though, the USS Ronald Reagan was home to six thousand crew and aviators, many likely ethereal thinkers.

They thought, *That makes sense—Floyd is the most emblematic band in the history of Man, atmospheric and timeless, perfect for first contact.*

Stempy barked back, “They might be from some advanced civilization, but we got rock n’ roll.” It was an endearing human sentiment, quickly blotted out by the seventy two foot rotors as they spun up, twisting the air into a class five tornado.

The enormous helicopter lifted into the storm, losing sight of the Reagan instantly. Stempy yawed the beast to the northeast and climbed.

The aircraft carrier lay about ten miles off the new continent’s shore. Their plan was simple: proceed direct, play some tunes, snoop. The Reagan’s captain must have known the mission was mindless, owing to zero visibility and equal intel, but his downside was nil. He risked nothing but an aged firefighting chopper.

All three men wore the latest active noise canceling headsets, the cockpit soundless despite the howl of the engine and mother nature without. Stempy said, “No terrain data for the navigation computer. I have no idea what’s ahead.”

Rastus unbuckled and joined The Chief at the audio control panel. A moment later he observed, “Tunes machine is jury-rigged to turbine two generator. Them navy boys made sure we had the extra juice if the aliens liked the show.”

Both pilots knew the AirCrane had two powerful turbines, each producing forty eight hundred shaft horsepower. Stempy did the math in his head and said, “If we hover on one turbine and use the other engine to drive the iPod, we got three and a half million watts of broadcast power. Those speakers look milspec, might take it.”

Rastus was nodding slowly, half-remembering a Dead concert. They had no missiles or armament, but maybe better—righteous, loud tunes. Man’s most creative and potent weapon. Since his first instrument, a thirty five thousand year old flute, music had accorded human life.

“Terrain,” barked Stempy.

All around them swarmed thick fog, visibility maybe a few hundred feet. Stempy arrested their horizontal and vertical motion, black, volcanic rock right off the nose of the helicopter. “Climbing. Let’s find the top.”

They crept upward, perilously. At eighteen hundred feet the ground flattened, and Stempy moved forward slowly, feeling his way across this new world. The rain had abated and he pushed the helicopter’s cyclic control gently where he wanted the big machine to go, his touch ginger light.

Suddenly a field of metallic apparatus came into view, then in every direction massive structures crisscrossed beneath them. Stempy said calmly, “Rastus, get up here.” Rastus was building “Our counter-invasion” playlist. He replied, “Chief, you pick the rest.”

He came forward and plunked down in the co-pilot’s seat. A moment later The Chief yelled forward, “Sixty minutes of Floyd. Seven songs. When we’re ready, we’re ready.”

The AirCrane's cockpit is designed for close-in work. In addition to seating for a pilot and co-pilot, there is an Observer Station from which a spotter can watch the colossal suspended loads. The Chief came forward and climbed into this seat, everyone hushed by the scale of the alien machinery below.

Stempy said, "Gentlemen, I give you the face of invasion. Last week, this was Titanic-deep ocean."

Rastus said, "Funny thing, I'm not getting a GPS signal. You think this fog blocks all radio?"

Stempy nodded, replying, "Yip. We gotta use dead reckoning." The Chief knew that was the stuff of Lindbergh's day; pick a heading, compute location by time, magnetic compass and speed. Low tech but infallible.

Mostly.

They traveled on, slowly, looking down at the unending latticework of pipes, tanks, towers and things unknown. Finally Rastus said, "Might be time for some tunes. Wake 'em up."

A quorum of nods assented and he climbed back to the audio panel. Stempy and The Chief heard him through the headsets, "I'll start out at a tenth power, then dial up the amplitude."

Suddenly *Us and Them*, Pink Floyd's haunting saxophone orchestration filled their world. It was crisp, full, and way loud.

But not loud enough.

The Chief yelled, "Crank it on them bastards!"

Rastus spun to max volume, and the helicopter rocked hard with turbulent acoustic energy, local aerodynamics suddenly ragged. Without the noise canceling headsets, they've have been instantly and permanently deafened. It was like sleeping in a concert tower speaker, awesome and lethally potent.

Rastus yelled, "Yeah, bitch, take that!"

Erickson, the diligent manufacturer of the AirCrane, no stranger to hostile working environments, had never tested for this variable.

It was the *Dark Side* version, written by Richard Wright with lyrics by Roger Waters and David Gilmour doing the vocals. *Us and Them* was a timeless masterpiece, a statement about class stratification, perfect for sizing up an alien culture.

If they were here.

Twenty Three

Though Stempy had no GPS, his internal computer, honed by tens of thousands of hours in the air, was certain of its relative location. They were crawling forward through the EMR-opaque fog, nothing at all on the VHF communication radio, as lonely as Lindbergh's gallant solo crossing ninety years before.

The iPod switched to *Comfortably Numb*, then *Marooned*, and on to *Wish You Were Here*, the AirCrane's occupants wondering if anyone really was. Almost a half hour of distinctly moving music, served up ferociously loud, and no missiles or lasers or anything.

The Chief asked, "How far we come?"

Stempy replied, "We're making about thirty knots what with this visibility. Maybe twenty nautical miles inland."

The Chief observed, "And that machinery is still in every direction below us. You think the whole continent is covered?"

Rastus added, "If we do end up fighting these guys, we'll lose. I remember my freshman history teacher said we ultimately won World War Two because we built things faster than anyone else. Same thing doomed the confederate forces eighty years before."

That brought a pall over the cockpit as they continued on, the Pink Floyd playlist working through three more classics. The last song, *Run Like Hell*, ended, and a creeping fear invaded all.

Without a word, Stempy yawed the ungainly bird around one eighty, back to the Reagan in silence.

Twenty Four

Sissy made her way back to Birdshot's fresh host, hoping to find a "rebooted" and plaint stud. She eased through the beads and was surprised to find neither Boozer's dead and bloody body, or the now-implanted survivalist.

Smears of blood led off and she tracked, pulling along with thoughts of Edgar Allan Poe. If that dark necromancer could reincarnate here, this station would make a fine new Baltimore.

Suddenly a whining noise came to her ears, then a slight change in pressure. An instant later, she heard a Russian accented voice echo, "Had to flush him, smelled like a Gulag defector after a truth session."

The voice was completely foreign, but the words had Birdshot's sprightly, if foppish ring. Twenty seconds later they faced one another, *journey's end in lovers' meeting*. Bard aside, Sissy was consumed with passion, all her prayers answered. Here she was, enraptured with an old lover in a renewed body, orbiting high over the world they would soon take, everything fresh and possible, except the smell.

"What's that stench?" she barked.

Birdshot was grappling with a host who didn't cotton to possession, this struggle particularly vigorous given the virile nature of the possessed. Anyone who could survive on an abandoned station had consummate moxie and verve.

And attitude; this guy was pissed and not giving up without a fight. Birdshot quipped, "'bout got him whipped, give me a few minutes."

Sissy had witnessed the transformation in Boozer as Birdshot had gained dominion, a progressive ying and yang that extinguished Boozer's self-determination, another host flogged to the middle earth of shared actualization.

"You go boy," she commanded, "Take down that beefcake. I want you pure this time."

But Boozer was near seventy when Birdshot took command of his body, this new meat was less than half that.

She floated back and watched her new man. He was tall and sinewy with a coffee hue, suggesting a cauldron of influence; her guess: Cuban. His hair and features were dark, to her delight. Now, if only Birdshot could punch out whatever original personality raged in that body and turn this gorgeous human into a full-fledged, courageous alien.

That she could, in turn, influence. Then, from this orbiting vantage, operate on humanity's fears and retake the US Presidency, thence the world.

It was a plan running on thin rails, but humankind surged forward, often in the wrong direction, on similarly shallow ambitions. Prohibition, hula-hoops, Microsoft. All one hit wonders, conceived with splash, gone by puberty.

What should I name him? Sissy thought. Birdshot wouldn't care, but it mattered to her. Then it hit—Desi, famed husband of Lucille Ball, uncontested latino babe magnet.

'cause I'm destined to become Cleopatra of the post-contact era, she mused.

The Cuban hunk bellowed and twisted violently, vigorously pronounced in zero-G. Then suddenly he went still, and she heard Birdshot, for it was clearly just him now, say, "It is done." The voice was warm, calm, and richly colored by the ex-host's island roots.

Sissy asked expectantly, "Is that just you?"

"Yes. You have reason to question. I admit struggling with Boozer, but I was ankle down in his leg. Now, thanks to your field surgery, I'm in the best zip code."

Birdshot liked local vernacular, always made a show of mastery, or lack thereof, of his current world's manner and custom. About a third of the time he even got it right. Other times, like just before Custer, his new ride, got hit with a billion arrows, he'd been certain factors were moving in his direction.

Given their locale, aka "proximal to the vacuum of space," Sissy needed a little more. "Can you control all his muscles?"

The human skeletal system is controlled by approximately six hundred and forty muscles. Being bilaterally symmetrical, each human being has three hundred twenty unique pairs of muscles.

Nothing like a demo. Birdshot flash-contracted each set deliberately, firing control neurons one group at a time to demonstrate dominion. She watched the rippling flesh, sexually aroused by Birdshot's control save nothing of the potential for good loving.

He was back!

Birdshot, no graduate student of human affairs, most especially sexual affairs, would have been interested to learn more about the fiftieth Shuttle flight in September 1992. That mission, eight days in low Earth orbit, boasted a first for NASA—presumed space sex.

NASA had always encouraged decorum in the matter of weightless sexual congress, depending on the special problems of Newton's Third Law and HR's fascism for enforcement. But on that mission, two of the astronauts were married, and astronaut-fit.

Uh-oh.

Mark Lee, Payload Commander, and Jan Davis, Mission Specialist, knew their astro-corp was pulling for them, and the Shuttle *did* have a lower deck. The rest is the stuff of whispered agency lore.

Birdshot didn't give a shit about lore, he was back, and Sissy was willing. Time to take this new Cuban body for a test drive. They tore at each other, clothes flying off in spinning arcs.

Sissy and Desi, nee Birdshot, the origin of their passion divided by parsecs, sought and found the solace of flesh within flesh. And soon they would move as one to descend upon the planetary interlopers, ignorant of plan and peril.

Twenty Five

Birdshot was not into post-coital cuddling or pillow talk. He was into taking over the universe. But right now, after jettisoning Boozer, and reconnecting with his past lover, he sensed it was time to take stock.

Despite a trillion plus years of existence, he'd never known anyone like Sissy. She had stuck by him, been his unqualified supporter through three bodies, taking the good, the bad, and the ugly, meaning Boozer. *What a carcass haul that had been.*

He asked, "You like the new bod?"

"Everything about it," she purred.

"I have a confession." Birdshot needed to tell someone his dilemma, now that it might come home.

Sissy was in his arms, high on the ISS above Earth, ready for anything. "Tell me."

"That ship poised over the Washington Monument could be trouble for me, and by association, you."

"You said you'd had business dealings with the owner, Ordog. And you mentioned he still held a grudge. Is that it?"

"Not exactly."

"Okay. Can he be turned?"

Birdshot, having seen Star Wars, liked that. Up to this point, he'd never factored anyone else's objectives, always favoring a "fall line" assault. He said, "Maybe. Ordog can't possibly understand this new continent's builders. They're way beyond anything he's capable of."

When Sissy met Birdshot, in control of the sitting Governor's body, she was slumming as the Tennessee Governor's political science intern, spending time at the Governor's mansion learning the machine. Her first take-away as intern: *there's always a better way.*

Thomas Edison originally said that, but he was trying to upgrade the candle, not divine the motives of an extraterrestrial. She said, "Let's think this through. Why is Ordog here?"

Birdshot had been asking himself the same question. He replied, “Ordog is a primo fixer. A guy who gets in the middle of things, takes a percentage. Those types barrel willfully into the unknown. They’re adventurers, drawn by the sizzle of potential. Because of this, they covet insider knowledge, their stock and trade.”

Sissy was human, acquainted with these concepts, intrigued by play at this level. She asked, “So what does he know that we don’t?”

Birdshot had done some traveling in his time, all across the Milky Way. And like all nomads, he liked to stay in touch with his favorite news services as well as old friends, not that many survived the association.

Long before Earth’s internet came into being, the far-flung worlds cobbled together a sub-space ethernet protocol to keep everyone connected. Many packages were available, some comprehensive, offering accurate and timely content. At the opposite end of the spectrum, for the “See The Galaxy on Twelve Altarian Dollars A Day” crowd was a free service, driven by advertisement more tenacious than herpes.

That route fit Birdshot’s sensibilities and budget, because when your time is worth nothing, and you have lots of it to burn, you will wade through endless dreck for an occasional morsel.

Birdshot responded, “Ah, let me check my sources.”

What his service lacked in reliability, it made up in bandwidth, better known as the “all you can eat bullshit buffet.”

Sissy understood immediately, herself a victim of grocery store tabloid racks. She asked cynically, “You hitting the Galactic Inquirer?”

Birdshot fell silent, seining for a nugget. Even at petabytes per second, the task was infinite, the soft underbelly of a million worlds excreting useless information faster than the greatest supercomputer can process. And Birdshot was no supercomputer.

It had to be luck then, a serendipitous nexus, one shot in a billion, that delivered prophetic gestalt. Birdshot gave it forty two seconds and rested.

“I have it!”

Everyone loves omniscience, Sissy knew better. “Spill it.”

“It’s a bit of a story. You up for that?”

“Yes, this girl loves a good story.”

Sissy was digging her new man. He projected a warmth quite unlike anything she had ever experienced. The words were decidedly Birdshot’s but the manner was island soft and open.

Birdshot sensed the approbation and gave her a moment. “Sissy, I’ve controlled many beings during my existence. Some started easily and worked well for both of us. Other began poorly and never worked at all. And most were somewhere in between, such as Boozer.

“Each melding is as different as the host. A few are strong-willed and wrestle for control constantly. Nearly all, though, just give up along the way, preferring to fade away. Perhaps that’s how most sapient beings wish to expire, slowly, enduring no instant of sudden pain.

“What I’ve learned is that each pairing transfers a bit of the host to me; in a sense I am the voice and sinew for thousands. I grant them immortality.”

Sissy smelled the distant waft of hubris but let it go. Like all guys, he needed to be heard. Then he’d get around to his point.

But something else was intruding. In her PolySci studies, she was struck hardest by the first principle of political ambition—*are your skeletons deep enough?*

Sissy made the connection and cut right in, “Did you control Ordog once?”

Her island man went inward, the dark features at sea in a destructive hurricane. Finally he said, “Ordog and I are identical in origin. We survived countless iterations of the universe, living through expansions, the depressive contractions, followed again by explosive re-beginnings every thirty billion Earth-years or so. There have been so many cycles I can no longer remember the first. He and I would just call it forever.”

Sissy wanted to find a positive. “So you’re colleagues?”

“Not really. We briefly shared a living body, and he would say I destroyed that creature and nearly did the same to him. For an immortal being, granted by the fates to live forever, that is the only unforgivable sin.”

Sissy thought to herself, *I can see that. If you have endless time, you learn to forgive anything but losing that infinity.*

She asked, “He is sharing a new body now?”

“Our injury rendered him incapable of inhabiting a living body. He’ll never get over that.”

“He’s a machine?”

“Last I heard, he’d taken up residence in a plastic humanoid body, what you’d call a robot. That’s gotta suck.”

“Why?” Sissy wanted to understand but she also wanted to nurture her new lover, strengthen their bond.

“Living tissue learns. It is subtle, biologically complex and reflexive in ways that the best robot builders can never replicate.”

It was as good a time as ever to ask “The Question.” Any human would. She released all hostility, filled her mind with genuine desire to know, and asked, “Is there a God?”

Birdshot had heard the question before. What infinite-life creature hadn’t? He replied, “Before I answer, let’s return to why he’s here.”

“Okay.” Sissy wanted to pout a little now; so close to the ultimate answer then put off as if she had asked the going rate for Polaris carrots.

Birdshot registered the slight but needed to keep moving forward. He said, “Ordog will attempt to cut himself a piece of the action. From my most recent sources, I’ve learned the continent has been constructed under the distant direction of the Moonshine Guild. Their third party has already built the manufacturing facility. Next they’ll set up local distribution. And by local, I mean a contract-standard radius of five parsecs.”

Sissy did the math in her head. “And Ordog wants a twenty three lightyear diameter territory liquor license?”

“Exactly. And maybe we can cut him out.”

Sissy was intent on only one thing, besides her new man—she wanted the US Presidency back, thence control of Earth. She asked, “Can we use that to regain the US Presidency?”

“Of course.” Birdshot had no idea but continued, “You’ve seen how upset the Earthly media is. Once we bring order to this situation, we’ll bump that hillbilly and become the new messiah.”

Birdshot always proceeded from a position of near-zero knowledge, velocity his only companion. Sissy saw his bullshit for what it was but was getting comfortable with the notion of constant uncertainty. At once anxiogenic but also incredibly intoxicating.

“Okay. What’s your plan? Birdshot was really digging this new body. “Let’s test this body again and then I’ll tell you how we’ll take this world.

Twenty Six

Stempy bumped the gigantic helicopter down on the deck of the Reagan and worked wordlessly through the shutdown checklist. The other two ruminated, the scale of what they'd seen eclipsing human context.

The rain pelted hard against their machine, vicious winds rocking them as if the Earth herself were worried. Several men ran out to secure the chopper. Eventually The Chief, Rastus and Stumpy climbed down and were shown into a briefing room.

They found hot coffee and danish waiting. Not long after the captain entered. He greeted them warmly, saying, "I'm glad you're safe. That was brave action."

Four other officers entered, helped themselves to middle-of-the-night coffee, and took seats. An aircraft carrier never sleeps but this was uncharted territory.

Everyone settled, the captain spoke. "We'd like you to tell us what you saw. Everything you can remember."

Rastus began. "We encountered dry land about ten miles from here. The shoreline is a vertical cliff rising to about two thousand feet. We climbed up the face and proceeded inland over barren rock, no vegetation of any kind visible."

One of the officers asked, "What altitude?"

"We flew at about a hundred feet. Visibility might have been twice that."

"Go on," intoned the captain.

"The surface is one continuous manufacturing facility. Pipes, tanks, and structures extended into the fog every direction. None were taller than fifty feet. It's a very dense, intricate apparatus."

Another officer was taking notes. He asked, "How far did you travel inland?"

"Stempy nodded to his flight partner and answered. "We were crawling along, doing maybe thirty knots. Traveled a little better than twenty nautical miles.

The machinery below never varied, never let up. It's intimidating."

"Any sign of animal life?" asked the captain. Everyone in the room got that question. The Chief, who had been quiet to this point, replied, "No life of any kind. And with the decibels we were pumping out, we should have pissed somebody off."

That got a gentle laughter, anything to diffuse the after-action tension of reconnoitering an invader's camp.

The note-taker asked, "Any sign of ships or vehicles?"

Rastus answered. "Nope. Just refinery stuff. Could be Galveston raised three powers!"

"Did you capture any images?"

Stempy's face fell, an obvious mistake. He said, "Sorry, we didn't think of it."

The captain allowed, "No problem. We didn't ask and you had plenty on your mind. I can't imagine flying that mission."

They all pushed back mentally, the unspoken message: thank God, no reprisals! Powerful as the Reagan was, she wasn't equipped to phalanx spent uranium into flying saucers. And the captain, like all captains, loved his ship and crew.

He stood, "Gentlemen, it's been a long night. Let's get some sack time. The joint chiefs can wait a few hours."

Twenty Seven

Amway and Shaklee had been through a meat grinder. Lightyears from home, bent originally on selling moonshine to this new market, they'd fallen victim to another's plot and ended up in lockdown, looking at an endemic double nickel.

Amidst creatures that challenged the worst the Milky Way could sire.

Human DNA, contained in forty-six chromosomes, is a big molecule. About a third of the way to Mars if stretched out. Lots of room for good, evolutionary wisdom. Too bad Man's DNA is mostly empty, as if the creator were waiting for parts on backorder.

Distant paleopathologists, who studied where a given planet's genetic code went awry, would have been amused to stumble across Man's genome. In three point five billion years, he'd reared up from pond scum to vote on NIMBY windmills.

Not all scientists, most especially the ones earning advanced degrees at Orion University, the one in the Orion star cluster, would have been amused by the contretemps that was Man. They would take umbrage, decrying Homo Sapiens an aberration, not encountered elsewhere anywhere.

It would be argued deftly, however, political correctness rife even in Orion. But as contentious as race comparisons can become, try planetists. "Oh, you're from Rigel Four. Do you still eat each other?"

After Amway awoke from the hellish rocket ride up to the ISS, he discovered Sissy and Boozer gone and his other companions out cold. Being locked up in prison had given him one single mission—never go back. He thought, *We're leaving!*

Disconnecting the capsule from the ISS airlock was child's play. He stabbed at the only attitude jet they had and their Home Depot Soyuz sheared off the station raggedly. Free, he suddenly recalled the flying junkyard of broken satellites that surrounded Earth, an ensheathing carapace of

high energy projectiles. With no guiding radar, he activated his only possession hidden in a gaudy ring.

It was a vanishingly tiny emergency control for the distillation ship they'd left in Earth's orbit. It had one button labeled "Get Me."

Several month's before, he and Shaklee had been ignominiously towed into high Earth orbit to set up low-rent moonshine distribution. To call it a spaceship was above generous. It more closely resembled an enormous honeydipping hauler, ignobly used to ferry the flushings of myriad worlds into the deepest recess of space for unlicensed disposal.

Its propulsion system was crude. Using massive pumps, the mammoth vessel maneuvered by spewing effluent and counting on Newton's third law of equal and opposite motion. With millions of gallons aboard, she could wallow for eternity.

He commanded the hauler to close on their position, not knowing how far that was. In the meanwhile, he needed to revive his partner. The human could fend for himself.

Some time later, Shaklee shook as if exhumed and stared blindly. "I dreamt I was in a grape press being made into cheap wine. How much force did we sustain?"

Amway was secretly overjoyed to see his partner alive and apparently none the worse. He answered, "Enough to kill lesser beings. In fact, the human might be."

Shaklee was coming around. "Where is Sissy and that fossil?"

"They disembarked. I woke later and fired the only reaction jet we had. Tore us off the airlock. We're not going back to any prison."

"Never," agreed Shaklee. "What's next?" He was still off balance, expecting Amway to make the calls.

"I instructed our orbiting ship to find us. Once it does, we enter the cargo hold, and we're back in business."

"Okay."

Amway understood the crushing mechanics of a new competitor entering the market. Like Bob of Bob's

Hardware watching a Walmart go up across the street. Deep, cold pockets.

Shaklee observed, “Maybe we need to move on, find another planet to sell our moonshine.”

Amway’s gizmo had told them the same thing Birdshot had learned—the Moonshine Guild was setting up regionally. In his view, their only option was boutique distiller, offer something special the big boys couldn’t.

“No, we need to offer a super premium product. I say we stay put over Earth, go after the Apple clientele.” Apple was revered everywhere, iPads scalped to all the golden corners of the universe.

A beep came from Amway’s pocket and he said, “Our ship has arrived. Get ready to blow the hatch.”

Amway, always the presumed junior partner, younger and green, had emerged with vigor. Shaklee nodded, peaceful in the knowledge they’d escaped prison, and ambitious to take on an aggressor from out of town.

Us and them.

Twenty Eight

Jeb awoke in the high, puffy, silly bed, cushions soft against his world. Instantly he knew Billie Sue was gone, not just not here, in her crazy treehouse, but gone.

She'd done it before, running off only to return without explanation. And why this time? Why strand him infinitesimally far from Earth? How was he supposed to do anything about the invaders?

Accordingly, he did what any confounded hillbilly would do—he went back to sleep.

Twenty Nine

An indeterminate time later, Jeb woke refreshed, Billie Sue warmly nestled at his side. *Was it a dream?*

He crept out to take a swim in the lake. Billowy clouds scudded across the sky, white cotton against a baby blue backdrop. Back in Tennessee it was winter but the air here was silky warm, suffused with the aroma of a million growing things, inviting as young love.

Jeb dove right in, indifferent to carnivores. Billie Sue and he'd swam once at this very spot, seemingly a million years ago. Now he was back, a little older, his world-view fractured by the prism of invaders who'd come and founded a beachhead on his home world.

Soon he climbed out and lay on the grass, squinting upward, enjoying simpler patterns of light refracting within his eyes. As the old saying goes, *position determines perspective*. And at two point three million lightyears distance, he had to admit he didn't know what to admit.

Billie Sue's voice came to him. "You gonna sleep all day? We got places to go."

She was standing behind him holding a bright yellow towel, her expression distant. "I'll fix us something to eat, then we go."

"Where to?"

"Ever been to a competitive eating contest?"

It was an absurd question that made as much sense as any other destination. "Always wanted to."

All sports boast their own legacy: rules, traditions, champions and spectators. The Intergalactic Federation of Competitive Eaters knew this, according their august sport the gravity it richly deserved.

Across the great gulf of space, top contenders for the Biggest InterGalactic Eater of All Time crown journeyed

forth. Like the Heisman Trophy, except way messier, the promise of BIG-EAT supremacy conferred universal praise. Its prestige and renown reached to the very farthest edge of the expanding cosmos, drawing only the keenest athletes.

The stakes were high. After local, regional, planetary, sector and galactic contests were settled, the best of the best alone were invited to BIG-EAT. Thence, sixty four superbly-trained victors met each Quanta, roughly nine Earth years, to test their masticating mettle.

Tradition permitted one winner, one High Gustator, who would don the Golden Sash of Gluttony. In so doing, his or her reign would stand unassailed for another Quanta, heralded throughout the greater worlds.

“We taking the boat?” asked Jeb after they’d eaten. Billie Sue’s transportation system relied on two factors, a small volume, like a PortaPotty, and a handheld controller. The half moon head on her lake boat worked just dandy.

“Yip,” she replied.

They climbed aboard and lit out, the blueprinted Mercury Verados galloping. On plane she said, “Let’s go, we’re late.” How one could reckon time flitting between galaxies was beyond Jeb, but he went with it, every man, in the end, servant to his gonads.

They climbed into the head and Jeb pulled the door to. He was waiting for the acoustic tell, the instant everything without went absolutely vacant, when they had left the boat bathroom and entered a wormhole or some such shit. He’d taken physics in high school, but this was way beyond anything Mr. Rockwell taught.

The lake sounds went poof, Jeb, the seasoned interstellar traveler, asked nonchalantly, “How long?”

“A ways. No direct route.”

The cracks in the rough-hewn wood paneling went alternately bright and black of light, the small space getting

stuffy and bumping more than Jeb remembered. After a particularly hard knock sidewise, he said, "Feels like we're going somewhere remote." It was his witchy woods nose, smelling Arkansas swamp land.

Billie Sue nodded. Jeb gave her a quick look, something off. "You don't want to go there, do you?"

"No choice."

They soldiered on, nothing pleasant about the turbulent ride or stifling atmosphere. Jeb had traveled many times before with Billie Sue in such a way, and a few times alone, but couldn't remember such discomfort. And given that they had traveled from Earth to Andromeda in twelve minutes, they must be going really far.

Her reticence quelled any desire to converse and he turned inward, again, to consider his station in life. In truth, he depended on Billie Sue to save the day. And as a man, especially a rural man, he knew when to give thanks.

Bowing his head, he dug in for a long ride.

Thirty

The half moon outhouse thumped hard and Billie Sue said, “First stop.” She pushed open the door and strode right out, Jeb’s sense of abandonment freshened. Sometimes his girl from the stars was inscrutably alien, as if he didn’t know the first thing about her.

In her wake, he heard, “There’s a real bathroom straight ahead. Use it, could be a while.” She disappeared through another door to leave him sitting there, as desperately alone as he’d ever been.

Here he was, President of the United States, with no idea where he was nor why. But basic biology can be relied upon to instigate action, and Jeb wandered out to take a leak.

After using the facilities, which seemed to operate the same everywhere in the universe, the strong smell of flowers and fresh vegetation became apparent. He pushed through a small green door and was surprised to find himself in a gigantic domed space filled with wild plants surrounding a perfectly manicured grass landscape.

It reminded him of the indoor botanical environment he’d visited at Longwood Gardens near Philadelphia on his senior high school class trip.

He wandered along a stone path, marveling at the variety and beauty of the plants. Hundreds, maybe thousands of species crowding, their aromas narcotically entrancing. A thin stream ran beneath a raised bridge-like structure and he plunked down on a reflection bench just to appreciate the sentiments of whomever had designed this place.

It was peaceful. And Earth-like. Jeb had always considered himself a man’s man, country-bred, tough, and resilient. He was more stout than most he knew, and the firm upper body muscle he worked to maintain brought comfort now.

This spot suddenly stirred something, bringing back the teachings of his momma, now dead and buried on a

distant world. The sounds of running water reminded him of springtime in Tennessee, and strangely, his youth. And the un-healing death of his father. A moment later he ruefully remembered the preacher who presided over his father's funeral, feeling suddenly racked by painful memories.

"Jeb, it's time to go." He looked up and Billie Sue was standing right next to him. She looked mirthfully worried. "At the edge of a cliff?"

It was true, he sensed a descending hollowness. Billie Sue shot him her million candle-power smile and said, "Those Lamentia plants will make you want to fall off a personal cliff. Let's go."

She grabbed his hand and pulled hard. He looked back longingly as they half-fled, seeing now deep purple flowers bent to his spot.

"What the Hell were those?"

"Lamentia. They induce strong depression. Starts with introspection, ends in suicide. More of Mother Nature's devilish ways." Moving on, he felt a yearning, Lamentia's postpartum grasp evil.

"Jeb, time to go."

He tagged along, life unreasoned. The rough cedar outhouse had been their incoming wormhole conveyance, delivering them to the botanical garden. Jeb wasn't surprised to see them now enter a small closet, any tiny volume serving the purpose. This time they stood. Billie Sue dialed the controller, and everything went silent; back in space.

After a few minutes, she said, "We've got some serious traveling ahead of us but I think we can shave some if I find the right person. She likes sports and in this universe, there is no greater venue than competitive eating. She's gotta be there."

Jeb had heard of such events on Earth, most notably the Nathan Hot Dog's Annual Fourth of July Championship. Though he had't followed the sport closely, everyone everywhere had heard of Kobayashi.

Takeru Kobayashi is as controversial as he is ravenous. Born in Nagano, Japan on March 15, 1978, Kobayashi warped the continuum with a quantum leap of achievement by consuming 50 hot dogs in 12 minutes at his first eating, the Nathan's Coney Island July 4, 2001 contest. Shattering the previous record of twenty five dogs, he was destined to dominate the sport.

No world had never seen anything like him. At a speed-eating contest in Hong Kong four formative years later, he consumed 83 vegetarian Jiaozi dumplings in 8 minutes. The next day he ate 100 roasted pork buns in 12 minutes.

His career suffered a setback in 2003 when he went up against a 1089 pound Kodiak bear in the *Man vs. Beast* competition, the bear downing 50 hot dogs in 2 minutes. Kobayashi, fear in his eyes, had managed but 31. Many said he'd quit the sport, cross-species battles likened to going up against hormone-induced protohumans.

By like all true champions, he bounced back, going on to win the Alka-Seltzer US Open of Competitive Eating and the Glutton Bowl in 2005. Then in 2006, he crushed another world record by inhaling 58 bratwurst sausages in ten minutes at the Johnsonville World Bratwurst Eating Championship. Later that same year he ate 41 summer shack lobster rolls in ten minutes, annihilating the previous record of 22.

All athletes struggle with injuries, and Kobayashi's fans were soon saddened to learn of a jaw injury suffered in training. A dedicated competitor, he still participated in the 2007 Nathan's competition, but his total intake of 63 dogs was insufficient to surmount Joey Chestnut's startling 66.

The champ was mortal!

Then in 2009, Joey again out-ate Kobayashi at the annual Nathan's event, consuming 68 dogs and buns to the ex-champs' 64.5. As a consequence, Nathan Hot Dogs

forced a contract on the former world champion, demanding unacceptable gustatorial terms.

Like a punch-drunk boxer, Kobayashi's actions became erratic, resulting in arrest and banishment from his beloved sport. Major League Eating's executive leadership pronounced Kobayashi *persona non grata*, rendering the former champ to the status of Dennis Rodman and other fallen heroes. The sport would never be the same and fans everywhere despaired over the loss of an outrageous and colorful gustator.

The closet thumped once more and Billie Sue took a deep breath. "You up for this?"

Having no Earthly, or any other heavenly body's idea what lay ahead, Jeb nodded passively, feeling more than ever he was just along for the ride. They'd been to many far-away places together, but this was different; now he felt almost unwanted. This was no longer strictly about his education.

Perhaps it was the lingering effect of the Lamentia, or more possibly something akin to Stockholm Syndrome where the abductee falls under the spell of the captor. Jeb felt his identity slipping away; too many world-bending influences coming too quickly.

They exited into a large grain room, sacks stacked to impossible heights. Snaking between the dusty pillars of burlap, Billie Sue pulled Jeb along for several minutes, the enormity of place just more intergalactic nonsense.

A moment later they were outdoors, the air heavy with the ripe odor of food. Lots of food. To Jeb, it appeared as if they were at the service entrance of a mammoth stadium. Dozens of low, flatbed vehicles were parked everywhere, all tarped as if to hide their contents.

Stepping out into the sunlight, he suddenly felt at home, stands arcing up in every direction to form a perfect

circular amphitheater more than eight hundred feet high. Could have been LP Stadium in Nashville, home of the Tennessee Titans except this stadium went to ten levels all the way around, seating for maybe one million.

Humans?

He reminded himself again he was far from home, and might be cheering next to a super-intelligent koala bear or something. But stadiums are for spectating, and that pursuit is the same everywhere.

Instead of a grass field, even from their ground floor vantage, Jeb looked across acres of flat black tile to a center platform. It matched the stadium's circular shape and rose at least thirty feet like a center spire. Around its periphery were sets of stairs all leading up to where he presumed the action would occur. At the moment, all was quiet.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

Billie Sue had slowly walked out a bit farther, panning around to take in the venue. She replied, "Saw Pink Floyd here once."

Jeb might have been born on a Wednesday, but not last Wednesday. He found that impossible to believe. On the other hand, after Roger Waters left, David Gilmour was open to new influences.

"Who was on sax?"

Billie Sue knew her concerts. "Tom Scott on the alto and soprano sax, Scott Page on the tenor."

They both stood marveling at the setting, lost in personal imagination. Jeb had seen Floyd, remembered the experience as life-altering. Even across untold lightyears, and species, some things are constant. Perhaps therein was a clue for his planet.

A few minutes later, he asked, "When does the competition begin?" He was guessing the next day.

"Stadium will be full in thirty minutes."

Jeb had stopped rejecting quantifiable verities a long time ago; the people and places outside of Earth's tiny sphere were batshit crazy. *Everything, all the time, now.*

As if on queue, humanoids, most quite furry, streamed through dozens of entrances and up into the stands. Billie Sue grabbed his wrist and said, “Come on. We’ve got a box, let’s go.”

Thirty One

And what a box it was. In Tennessee, like all of Earth, a person's station was often inferred by their residence, conveyance or sporting seats. Having a stadium box only admitted to one conclusion—you *had bucks*.

Maybe his girl from the stars owned her treehouse, or the whole planet, or the sun around which her world warmed. He had no way of knowing. Like Star Trek, he imagined the refined future generations had discarded the divisiveness of money for the equanimity of socialism.

Wrong!

Situated at the top of level one, the outside portion of the box extended over the stands below, offering a patio experience for ten. Within, a fireplace, private bathroom, bar with bartender, screens for following the contest close-up and two waiters. Also, along an entire wall, a buffet table set with tiered trays of appetizers.

Sixteen plush chairs offered luxuriance inside, but Jeb grabbed a beer and headed for the deck, ready for a “day at the park.” It had taken them just minutes to find the box, but already the stadium was bursting with energy. Jeb plunked down like a country boy at NASCAR to study the setting.

The center pinnacle rose from the larger grounds and terminated at a roughly two hundred by one hundred foot platform. Dead center was an oval table, tracing the dimensions of the platform. Within the table circumference was a busy apparatus set in a deep hollow.

Suddenly the public address system popped, and a crystal clear sound system announced, “Welcome to the nine hundredth Milky Way Calorie Intake Championship. We have some new contenders, our returning champs, and a special guest here today.”

The crowd roared. The announcer struggled over the din, “With the return of Kobayashi, this promises to be a match of universal proportion. Please, a special greeting for the Greatest Gustator of them all.”

The sound was deafening as the stadium continued to fill, packing even the nose bleed section up as high as a small aircraft's landing pattern. In no time at all, a city more populated than Nashville had sprouted from zero. Jeb estimated the attendance at "better than half million," unimaginably all here to see who would wolf the most hot dogs or pancakes or whatever.

The announcer continued, "This year we have three tasty events. First off is a 'sweets' category featuring strawberry pies. Two dozen entrants will race the clock to see who can devour the most pies. The current record, set by Randy "The Disposal" Higgins, is seventeen full BadBerry pies in eleven minutes."

Next up is a new entry, Hot Burritos. We'll be pushing alimentary limits with Momma Inferno's punishing Fiero Maximos, guaranteed to ignite both ends of the unprepared alimentary."

Jeb was no fan of hot food but he sensed this challenge could have some upsets.

"Our final heat, one that packs 'em in every time, is the venerable Hot Dog Championship. Look for Kobayashi to make another strong showing, his recognized record an amazing sixty nine dogs and buns in ten minutes."

Jeb remembered that score had been disputed by Earth's Major League Eating conference, but that congress was lightyears from here. In this realm of the cosmos, Kobayashi's time-honored achievement stood.

Suddenly the space over the stadium went white and then became an enormous screen, in effect a stadium display super-sized to the scale of everything here. Jeb could see the oval eating table clearly, and then the camera zoomed to the center.

Inside the ring of table was a huge metallic octopus-like contraption, several dozen arms stretching and warming up. He wondered for a moment and then got it: the food handler. From below, great masses of sustenance were bench-pressed up and set before each waiting contestant.

They had thought it through.

Jeb's beer was spent so he rose to grab another, maybe see if Billie Sue would join him. Most of the inside seats were now filled, friendly-looking vaguely human middle-aged folks chatting and drinking, prepping for the sweet pies.

He would have appreciated some introductions but Billie Sue was nowhere to be seen. He nodded to a few, slipped a beer in each pocket, loaded a plate of wing-like goodies, and went back out. The twenty four contestants had filed in around the eating table, taking equally spaced positions faced inward. Apparently they would compete standing up.

As Jeb sat waiting for the strawberry pie extravaganza to begin, he realized that apart from the huge stadium and somewhat odd looking spectators, this could be Earth. The contests featured Earthly food and at least one real live Earthly hero. *What was going on here?*

Another box guest wandered out to take in the view. Jeb saluted with his beer, smiled and studied him unabashedly. If he were human, which he clearly wasn't, he'd be a well-preserved eighty. Dressed nicely, Jeb's new companion projected an air of comfort, both in achievement and self-knowledge.

"May I join you?"

Jeb smiled, his focus softly divided among this new visitor and the festivities below. A cannon sounded and the contestants lit into their first pies. Like wrecks at NASCAR, Jeb knew the real action would come at the finish. He turned to the elder gentleman nonchalantly. "Name's Jeb."

The other replied, "Stengard. Please call me Gard."

Jeb decided to blast right in, scratch a nagging itch. "You been to Earth?"

Gard had taken a nearby seat but swiveled around to face Jeb. "Many times. Most everyone here has. Incomparable food."

Jeb smiled, that made sense. Earth enjoyed a rich biosphere offering 20,000 edible plants. Add to that all the animals and the permutations thereof and you had teeming

variety. Then given Man's artful penchant for cooking the possible dishes swelled like a turgid belly into the millions.

Gard watched Jeb's face with the openness of an elder's calm mind and observed, "Many creatures travel across the Milky Way to savor the riches of Earth. Some from farther still."

Like Andromeda, thought Jeb.

Jeb asked, "Have you heard of the United States of America?"

The other nodded. "Of course. The last of the so-called Superpowers."

"I'm the elected leader of that country." Jeb felt a squall of emotion course through him, pride mingled with longing. He hadn't made the statement to garner praise, he needed answers and his mama had always said to "put your best foot forward."

"I'm honored to meet you. Are you here to see Kobayashi or to compete against him?"

It was a jesting question but Jeb chuckled to show he could take a joke. Unlike Nixon.

Jeb had nothing to lose. "No, I'm traveling with my intergalactic girlfriend. Earth has been invaded. We've come to get some answers."

The old guy had been around. He asked quietly, "Is this a destructive invasion or a cultural one?"

"No bombs or anything but they've attacked our ocean floor to form a new continent. Many believe they're building a base. We don't possess the technology to determine their real purpose."

Some people loath cocktail party banner for want of substance. This wasn't that kind of exchange.

"Maybe I can help. I know people who know people. A few are here."

"Sure, I'm open to suggestions."

Gard excused himself quickly and left. Jeb, like everyone else, had heard "it's who you know," but this was way beyond chatting up someone at Rotary to rig a bid.

Thirty Two

Jeb stared at his cell phone, surprised to see a signal, then thought about roaming charges and put it away. AT&T was already on his shit list, a \$12,354,649.23 phone call would really piss him off.

Besides, our country needs to cut back on spending.

He looked up at the sky screen. Twenty four aliens of vaguely human proportions were going to town on the strawberry pies. Behind each was an unlikely three digit counter, some already into the teens. Jeb almost puked thinking of that much sugar and dough.

The metal octopi's arms were flying, pies conveyed from below and landing gently before each competitor. Every few seconds another pie was replaced, the timing and motion tricky given the wildly gesticulating performers, for what else could they be considered?

A powerful cannon boomed—ten minutes down in the contest, one hundred twenty seconds left to pound pie. Jeb tasted a little bile in his throat just thinking of it. The lead pie eater, a gargantuan spherical creature with an enormous mouth, had already obliterated sixteen full pies, the counter behind him blinking as if to say, “Two more to break the record!”

Jeb wanted this competition to end. Sugary food was quickly sickening but he had to admit to morbid fascination for the next round—Momma Inferno's Fiero Maximos. He thought, *I'll bet tomorrow morning is gonna be rough for those combatants.*

As an ex-sanitary engineer, the judgement was purely professional.

The cannon boomed again and it was over. The score: eighteen full pies. The victor had apparently rallied at the very end, folding the last pie, tin and all, to shove it wholesale into his rapidly masticating orifice. Jeb shook with disgust, wondering idly if the pie container was biodegradable.

The overhead screen ran through the highlights, each especially slobbering moment recounted for the cheering fans who went on and on like uncorked diarrhea.

Jeb half-watched the medal bestowing ceremony, wondering if this carnival would find its way back to YouTube. Mercifully, the announcer abruptly terminated his hyperbolic sports-patter, clearly crashing like the pie-eaters from sugar highs.

A thirty minute break ensued to give the crowd time to abet appetites freshly aroused by circus-like consumption. Also, the stadium's vendors had been suffered to pay gagging day rates and needed to pursue contractual rights.

Thirty minutes to sell everything you can. Professional sports is first and foremost a business whether dressed in legacy uniforms or pinstripes.

Jeb glanced at his watch but knew it displayed accurate nonsense. How could one reckon time's passage flitting between planets in a wink? As he looked up, wondering over Gard and pyrotechnic Mexican food, his new elder friend pushed through from the inner section of the box wearing a smile. Before reaching Jeb, he said, "We're in luck. Follow me."

Jeb stuffed the unopened beer in his pocket and fell in behind Gard as they passed out of the box. He gave one quick glance around; still no Billie Sue. *Perhaps she'll be joining us?* he thought.

Outside the box, Gard turned back to Jeb and lightly clutched his upper arm, the gesture avuncular but maybe too familiar. "We're taking an elevator up to a senior skybox. There's someone who'd like to speak with you."

Ahead an empty elevator opened and they got in. Gard hit the uppermost button. Jeb expected a climb of many levels but the elevator stopped two floors up and the doors slid apart. Two large, expressionless humanoids came into the elevator, and Gard stabbed the top button.

Jeb was Tennessee bred, backwoods savvy, and possessed with a moonshiner's twitchy intuition. Something

didn't feel right. He turned to Grad, felt a tingle and the world went instantly black. Gard said, "Take him to my ship, do it quietly. He's a planetary leader with friends who can reach us. Do not underestimate."

The elevator dropped back down to sub level and the two thugs lugged Jeb's body to a waiting ground vehicle. As they moved away, Gard smiled privately, imagining the chain of events that would put Earth under his thumb.

Thirty Three

The history of the universe, at least the last few iterations between absolute single point compression and weary expansion, can be reduced to the folly of self-importance. Beings arise, spawn a cohesion of fools, and thence whither like fallen leaves.

Again and again. You'd think heaven's windings would tire. Perhaps they would if not for a creation-spanning gag or two.

The Moonshining Guild, like all ambitious movements, sought selfless adherents, known pejoratively as customers. Such following brought bulk, readily confused as assent, but much more importantly, cash flow. That was something you could leverage.

Flush with cash from a parallel universe windfall, the edict had gone out—The Milky Way's outer spiral arms, all four of them, had planets, lots of them, and on said planets, thirsty palettes. Find and slake them!

For the farthest, least promising fringes they used small-time hustlers who in turn dispatched B-team employees to explore single planet potential. Nobody ever got rich doing that but those sent didn't care; they were driven to be out on their own, doing it "my way."

Some called that individual spirit, others ineptitude. Shaklee and Amway fit the latter criteria to a tee.

Towed to Earth in a busted flush of a ship, an ex-honeydipper swollen with effluent for propulsion, their only working apparatus was a still for making one of the The Guild's recipes. Falling in with Birdshot and Sissy for a local connection, they'd collectively made a play for the US Presidency only to be bettered by the mother's milk of Tennessee's—Jack Daniels.

Such are the travails of under-capitalized ventures. Most fail.

Word of widespread bungling worked up the CYA chain to The Guild, someone seriously needing to take the hit. That's a different story but executive management met

and decreed to “spend the bucks to show it could be done right.”

Breaking into distant markets suffers without knowledge of local conditions, not the least of which are statutory laws like protection of property. Though the South Florida Realtors Association might welcome new oceanfront land to sell, proximal land owners, say anyone in England, could be counted on to despise unregulated development like a new continent.

But you can't please everyone. Not that the Moonshining Guild gave a shit. They had one mission—*build volume*.

After the initial small-time ventures failed, The Guild went right to the top, hiring the Cosa Nostra of the Milky Way known deceptively as The Builders.

The Builders hefted the moxie and muscle to tackle the biggest jobs, and they promptly launched a campaign to construct regional production and distribution facilities on twenty outlying worlds. And as negotiating land purchases and permits communicated weakness, they chose worlds with oceans and just created new continents.

A clean and forceful business model.

After the facilities were constructed, The Guild sent contract workers to promote their moonshine. Each facility was enormous, built at humungous one-time expense and anticipated to support a volume of space measuring parsecs in radius.

Earth was perfect—not only did it have abundant oceans, but also a reputation as a thirsty place.

Each contract sales force was given a fixed cost, all revenue above that figure theirs to keep. They were expected to provide their own sales, management and security personnel as well as ships for bulk deliveries to their new distributors.

It sounded good but the devil is always in the details.

Thirty Four

Billie Sue reentered the box, anxious to introduce Jeb to her best friend Karina, a gorgeous brunette. Knowing he was a little shy with strangers, especially strangers from way out of town, she grabbed two beers and pushed through to the outside.

Billie Sue looked around, saying, “He must be in the can, let’s do these Buds. The burritos should be the best heat.”

The cannon went off and twenty-something contestants lit into supernova mexican food. Immediately an eater barfed, his immune system five-alarming. The announcer exclaimed, “We have our first *reversal*, this match certain to challenge the worthiest epiglottis.”

Next to each contestant stood a personal fire extinguisher, the small pressurized canister filled with icy surfactants to deactivate capsaicin, the chemical responsible for head-fire. Being also an emetic, it telegraphed instant defeat, its use reserved for dire runaway oral infernos.

As in all high-performance sports, timing is key. Like a super-critical nuclear reactor, a point is reached when no countermeasure halts meltdown. Every spicy food eater endured this knowledge, straddling the line between ignominious expectoration and celebrated fame. That’s what packed stadiums—the personal equation.

Suddenly a rail thin gustator urgently grabbed the extinguisher and sprayed manically at his face, instantly inducing a violent eruption. His head whipped from side to side in agony, barf spewing in wide arcs. The crowd leapt to its feet, all fans coveting a thirty car NASCAR crash!

Karina observed, “I heard they’re using battery gel, avocados and cheddar in those burritos.”

Billie Sue nodded, entranced by the thought. She asked, “Another Bud?”

“Yip.” A second later, “Hey Billie, where’d your man get to?”

Billie Sue sat up, her seventh sense aroused. “He’s been taken. Let’s go.”

She pulled a chemical assay device from her pocket. “We’ll follow his local scent.” Like a Tennessee hunting dog, they quickly found the sub-basement where he’d been loaded. Karina asked the obvious. “Can you trace him across space?”

Billie Sue dug in her fanny pack and pulled out a one quarter inch bright white cube. “Yip. I bugged him right after I realized he was the one. You don’t want a goodie to get away.”

They both looked at each other, dismissing any doubts about the propriety of treating a lover like a pet.

Billie Sue pleaded, “Find a PortaPotty.” Best friends need no clarification, that’s what makes them best. *Simpatico*.

Three minutes later both girls crowded into a nearby stadium worksite toilet as Billie Sue punched at her navigator. “Hold on sister.”

Thirty Five

Owing to the effects of time dilation, over a month had passed on Earth while Bille Sue and Jeb traveled to her home planet and the Eating Competition. In their absence the tension on Earth had ratcheted up, then spiked when Deccan came alive with activity.

CNN broke the story.

DECCAN (CNN)—ALL EARTHLY EYES HAVE REMAINED ON THE NEW MID-ATLANTIC CONTINENT OF DECCAN SINCE IT ROSE FROM THE SEA LIKE A GREEK LEGEND. IN THESE LAST SIX WEEKS THE US NAVY HAS POSITIONED WARSHIPS OFF THE NEW LANDMASS AND EVEN SENT A HELICOPTER CREW INTO THE ENSHROUDING CLOUD COVER.

TWENTY HOURS AGO THE BLANKETING LAYER THAT FRUSTRATED MAN'S ORBITING INSTRUMENTS SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED. MANY ANTICIPATED THIS CIRCUMSTANCE, EXPECTING DECCAN'S SKIES TO CLEAR JUST BEFORE THE TRUE INVADERS LANDED. IT APPEARS THAT PREDICTION WAS PRESCIENT.

THIS MORNING, THE USS RONALD REAGAN RECORDED THE ORDERLY DESCENT OF NINE COLOSSAL SPACESHIPS, EACH DESCRIBED AS BEING "CAPABLE OF CARRYING THOUSANDS OF TROOPS." THE INVASION OF EARTH HAS BEGUN IN EARNEST.

LIVE VIDEO OF THE LANDING HAS REACHED THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE PLANET. IT IS BELIEVED EVERY LIVING MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD NOW KNOWS THESE FACTS. THIS IS AN EVENT WITHOUT PRECEDENT.

WORLD LEADERS WHO PREVIOUSLY EXPECTED THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES TO INTERVENE HAVE NOW CALLED FOR A RULING BODY TO BE FORMED. THIS SO-CALLED

DECCAN CAUCUS WOULD REPRESENT ALL NATIONS, NEGOTIATING WITH WHATEVER POWER EMERGES FROM THESE SHIPS.

AT THIS POINT, ALL THE WORLD'S MILITARY ARE STANDING DOWN, NOT FOR LACK OF CONSIDERED RESPONSE, BUT RATHER IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE TECHNOLOGY DISPLAYED BY EARTH'S NEW INHABITANTS MAKE A MOCKERY OF OUR OWN.

After reading the story aloud, The Chief set down the morning paper, still favoring old-fashioned ink on paper. Rastus and Stumpy sat at a table with him in the Tennessee Gubernatorial mansion, enjoying leaning stacks of flapjacks.

Rastus remarked, "It's their move. They built a new world capital on our planet, and now they've come to rule."

The Chief wasn't so sure. He said, "We might have that wrong. I say they're here to do something, but it ain't to rule. I say they are here to make something."

Since their overflight, he'd been thinking non-stop about all those pipes and tanks and stuff. Looked like a refinery, not an administrative complex. He added, "No, they're here to create some liquid. That's my gut. At first I thought maybe it's something to pump into our planet or atmosphere, but that don't feel right. I'll take a wild guess."

Stempy levered another eight pancakes onto his plate, doused the pile with a quart of maple syrup, and stated, "We got competition, hun?"

Rastus got it. "Ah shit, they're moonshiners."

"Also," said The Chief, "I'll bet these new invaders are representing the same guys who sent those two moonshining aliens we ran into before. This time they mean business."

It was a creative leap and the men turned to their pancakes with renewed vigor, letting the syrup fuel their imaginations. Rastus, his mouth half full of diabetes-inducing blueberry delight exclaimed, "We gotta tell somebody. I wish Jeb was here."

It hit them then, their homegrown President, employer and friend had been gone too long. Something pushing seven weeks. Rastus looked into the faces of his two best friends searching for an answer. He took another bite and asked, “Anybody got his cell phone number?”

The two pilots had used every type of terrestrial communication device known to man, but placing a call to parts unknown, maybe way far away, sounded pricey. Rastus observed, “Hey, his phone’s gotta be on the mansion plan. And nobody’ll know who called.”

Like all good schemes, once responsibility is obscured, no real roadblocks remain. “Let’s use his office phone,” remarked The Chief.

Light travels at a geriatric three hundred thousand meters per second, about one and a half seconds to Earth’s moon. That speed is latency-free for planetary phone calls but not too sprightly for person-to-person on different planets.

Forget stellar chats.

The average distance between stars in the Milky Way is about eleven light years. Nobody, not even a telemarketer, is going to hold that long.

The universe’s promoters knew this and accordingly built a new system that ignored the pedestrian limitations of Einsteinian law. They called it SkyNet. Originally constructed from ion-migration copper and fiber optic backbones, it soon grew to employ wormhole conduits. If the technology was tortuous, that paled to the complexity of tariff law required to keep the lawyers happy.

A passing tourist grafted Earth’s cellular network in to keep tabs on his then-errant girlfriend, and though few humans knew off-worlders, Earth’s first genuine reach into the stars was born.

The boys made their way to Jeb's office and locked the door. Rastus had grabbed his portable bar on the way and despite the early hour, a "bracer" seemed indicated. After toasting to the recovery of their boon companion, they pulled chairs up around Jeb's nice oak desk and The Chief opened the desk side file cabinet.

"Here's his Verizon bill." He hit the speakerphone button and dialed Jeb's cell number.

It rang a few times and then started clicking. Just as The Chief was about to disconnect, a low superheterodyne wail coursed from the speaker. Like a whale song, it boomed and fluttered, communicating a sense of distance and backwater intrigue.

Suddenly a little ditty spat from the speaker. "SkyNet, bringing the universe to you." The phone then resumed its melody of transfer clicks, the boys pouring a fresh round as they traveled amongst the stars.

Rastus whispered, "I'll bet Jeb'll get some nice points in his account. They got fine cooking ware you can get."

Meanwhile, across the gulf of space, Jeb awoke in the dark, a relentless phone ringing off the hook. He yelled, "Answer that." A moment later he realized it was coming from his pocket and fished out his cellphone.

"Yip. Jeb here."

The Chief, Stumpy and Rastus yelped in delight and all began speaking at once. Finally The Chief broke through the clatter of excitement, asking, "Where are you?"

Jeb sat up sensing he was on a cheap bed. He didn't know how long he'd been out or anything else but the place smelled okay and he wasn't in pain.

"Damned if I know. I dun got took from some eating competition, now I'm alone in the dark. I'll bet there's a lock on any door I find."

The Chief clarified, "Billie Sue is not there?"

“Nope. She went off to meet some people, I got talking to an old guy who offered to help but did me wrong. All I got now is my wits and this phone.”

The boys looked at each other, unclear how to proceed. Though they’d “gotten on” with the USS Ronald Reagan’s captain, this was beyond the US military. If they were going to rescue Jeb out in space, they needed Billie Sue.

“We’re surprised we reached you. You got a cell phone number for Billie Sue?” asked The Chief. Jeb thought a second. “Might. I gave her one of the cheap ones we had laying around the mansion. Told her it was for emergencies. She laughed at that. Just call them all. Can’t be more than a dozen or two in Persimmon’s bucket. Find one that’s gone.”

They all nodded, each remembering late night anonymous nine hundred number calls. Rastus got practical. “How’s your battery?” Jeb looked down. “I’m good. Call me after you reach her. Best I get off. Might have visitors.”

The signal dropped and the boys mobilized, heading for the mansion manager’s office. Persimmon kept a small bucket of phones near her spittoon. As they entered the office, Rastus observed, “Don’t reach into the wrong bucket.”

Ten minutes later they had the probable number of her phone. Rastus was anxious. “Let’s go back to Jeb’s office, have another round and call Billie Sue.”

Once re-seated, Stempy poured each of them a generous glass of morning moonshine. It was a fresh batch that had the arousing aspect of turpentine. The Chief hit the speakerphone and dialed Bille Sue’s number. Immediately they got a bad connection signal.

After a minute they tried again. The line had cleared and they listened as the call routed across the panoply to God knows where.

The transfer clicks and noises went on and on, an unimaginable chorus of strange orchestrations suggesting one handshake after another between mismatched technologies. Stempy caught himself thinking of the Reis telephone that transmitted the first full phrase on Earth.

The 1861 receiver of that signature transmission had barely heard “The horse does not eat cucumber salad.”

Reis, a German speaker, had chosen the words because of their trying inaudibility in his native language. Before Stempy could wonder if Billie Sue’s words might be equally distorted, she answered. “Hi guys, checking up on the gals?”

Rastus laughed hard, the moonshine adding a sparkle to the day. He answered, “We sure are. Are you being good?”

They heard a cacophony of feminine giggling. An unknown voice said, “Or good at it.” The Chief, Rastus and Stempy all grinned at each other and then The Chief took over. “Jeb’s been abducted. We just spoke to him somewhere out in space. Can you come home to help us plan his rescue?”

“Yip. We’re traveling now. We’ll reroute. Be there in two shakes.”

The connection went dead and then a public service message spit from the phone. “Thank you. Your account has been debited sixteen million Altarian dollars. Have a nice day.”

Rastus leaned back in his chair wondering how interstellar collection agencies worked. Maybe they had enforcers who called on deadbeats. Or maybe Washington would just throw it on the heap with all the other incalculable debt.

Thirty Six

Dead center in the middle of Deccan, nine heavy ships touched down lightly, not a whisper of smoke or exhaust. The heavies landed in an exact three by three grid, everything by the book. That is, Gastro's book.

In the master ship, recognized by its tawdry Las Vegas gold foil sheen, the project's leader, Gastro, sat in his overstuffed command chair sucking a cocktail hour libation. The Moonshining Guild paid its contractors well, but in return, you better be ostentatious in the consumption of their product.

Which suited Gastro fine.

He barked out a terse communiqué, "Secure all ships." It sounded official but meant nothing on this backwater planet. They'd all been watching on approach from deep space—this planet had shit for defense. Some nukes, sure, but no will. As he'd told them all, in seventy years they had only detonated two in anger.

The rest exploded as a show of impotent intent. Gastro came up through marketing, was old school: *use it or lose it*.

He also wasn't much to look at. Painfully short, hirsute like most Rigelians, and possessed of a striking personal force field more accurately described as bioactive stench. Add to that an uncompromising flatulence, and you have a thoroughly unsexy package.

What he did have, however, was a sincere disregard for the feelings of others. His motto: "I may not be right, but I'm not in doubt."

His mission on Earth was simple: Move product.

The ships were indeed huge, but that was to carry their liquid gold, not troops. Phase One sales targets were set based entirely on in situ consumption, that is, every living soul on Terra. Achieving that milestone, the *BigBelly* ships would barrel out into the nearby systems, carrying Deccan's best.

In truth, the personnel requirements were as meager as Gastro's operating budget. A dozen shock troops for

defense, and three hundred warm bodies to man the phones. Telemarketers were supposed to cost you nothing, even union ones, you only paid them if they produced.

The quotas he set were simple; take the world population, multiply by one gallon per week. Like all initial forecasts concocted by a disaffected spreadsheet jock, namely Gastro, they were utter bullshit.

The production facility was enormous by Earthly standards, comprised of tens of thousands of miles of distillation equipment coupled to storage ready for any ambition. Not a single warm body was required to operate the entire complex, but not unlike every venture across the breadth of the universe, across all time, nothing happens until someone sells something.

Sales. That's what Gastro had promised to get this contract and the time had arrived to deliver. The Guild didn't want to know the details, *just show me the numbers.* And as everyone on the nine ships knew, now that they had landed, the stopwatch was ticking.

Thirty Seven

Billie Sue and her girlfriend Karina stepped out of an elevator in the Tennessee Gubernatorial mansion. The Einstein-Rosen bridge mechanics their navigator employed didn't care what small volume it tunneled into, anything less than about eight feet cubed would do.

If you tried to terminate a trans-galactic journey using a larger volume, say a twenty foot ocean shipping container, the kind found all over Earth, you might sprout a second head. Accordingly, Billie Sue favored PortaPotties, rustic outhouses, the odd broom closet and elevators.

A minute later the girls were seated round a table with The Chief, Rastus and Stempy in one of the mansion's bars, fresh drinks for all. The Chief began, "We don't know where he is but I'd guess you have some gizmo for that. What we mean to do is get him. Can you lead us?"

All the boys were stealing glances at Karina, her beauty drop-dead captivating. Playboy-grade. She picked up on the approbation, smiled deliciously, and answered, "Me and Billie got him tagged like a cute kennel pup. He's coming here, that is, to Earth. Somebody's bringing him in a small, fast ship. He 'll land in the next few hours."

Rastus took a generous gulp, asking, "To Deccan?"

The Chief answered, surprising everyone. "Makes sense. They've invaded, but for when things get dicey, they'll squeeze a world leader."

Billie Sue pulled on her Budweiser, quietly evaluating the budding bravado. Judged on the surface of things, this might be confused with just another snatch n' go, but she'd tangled with The Builders, and once even, The Guild. To them, business was war.

And she wasn't too sure the crowd here was ready, let alone equipped for that.

Thirty Eight

Gastro stood in front of his assembled telemarketers; time to light a fire. He surveyed the room, and measured the visage against the Everest-grade quota he needed to hit to make a profit. He then recalled the drooping-lid insouciance of The Guild's exit interview: "You will deliver on those sales targets, right?"

Into his mind's eye sprang the spineless non-verbal response, his head sinking like a fallen monk.

"Speak up," intoned the voice.

"Yes, My Lord, I strike a personal covenant."

The warbling solemnity of pseudo-religious prose was back in vogue, at least in the inner systems of the Milky Way. It was best to "go along to get along."

"See that you do. We expect daily updates."

Now it was time to ignite the telemarketers he had been compelled to rustle up at the Amalgamated Promoters and Montebanks union hall. He would have preferred free agents but The Guild expected all subcontractors to use union labor.

That challenge notwithstanding, he still had to pack the sales pipeline. He began, "We are here to achieve a galactic first. We must put aside personal gain against the promise of our collective glory."

He let the crowd take in the mumbo-jumbo opener. Visceral mission statements had to be consumed a piece at a time. Not that he'd really said anything, save that those assurances of a fair and progressive workplace were going to be "set aside" for a while, at least until production was up.

Everyone heard that.

He continued, "In the first phase, we will contact every significant wholesale distributor on this planet. I don't care if they're selling paper, machines, or land. We let them know a unique product has now entered this market, with potential twenty percent margins, and they can get in for two days."

There was presumed genius in this. Once Earth learned a single-source product was available, every reseller, whether they sold socks or horse shit, would want “first right-of-refusal.”

“I’ll invite questions now.”

A forest of hands flew up, Gastro selecting one well back in the auditorium. If revolution fomented there, the shock troops could barricade the front. Everyone thought the soldiers were there to repel indigenous competition, Gastro knew different. If this crew got uppity, they were emigrants.

All the telemarketers anticipated returning to the real galaxy, far from these hayseed spiral arms. Until then, they expected top union wages for this hardship assignment. What they hadn’t been told was that their contract was funded “inboard.” Simply put, “Don’t hit your numbers, welcome home.”

The chosen recruit asked, “Where are the leads?”

Gastro loved this guy’s hunger. “Coming. We’re proud to announce these fresh lead books are choked with customers waiting to help you achieve your sales goals.” Gastro had intended to wait until after the pep talk, but the timing was right.

His shock troops fanned out across the room dropping local Yellow Pages before each telemarketer. “You’ll find anxious prospects in these handy guides. And we’ve procured, at our own expense, one for all twelve hundred sales territories.”

He paused to let them fission the math. “That’s right, the top achievers can earn additional territories.” Each tome landed before a stupefied telemarketer with a solemn and empty thud, the full scale of who had been “sold” dawning.

Another hand flew up. Gastro nodded to his personal guards to be frosty. This could go either way.

“Sir, back at the union hall, we were told this was a vibrant market ready for a premium product. We assumed already established relationships that we would manage?”

Every loser wants to manage, eschewing the hand-to-hand combat of developing new business.

The low murmur aroused by the phone books suddenly winked out with this question, every union employee suddenly realizing they were a long way from home and without representation.

Gastro cleared his voice. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. Every one of you has the tools to succeed. We provide free housing, food at reasonable cost, and a safe workplace with the latest telecommunication equipment. All we ask is that you give it your best.”

Gastro had used his “voice of reason” approach, heads turning to one another as they sifted through the unctuous oratory.

As most of the telemarketers descended through the twelve steps of denial, a few explored the books for a silver lining. In less than a minute those more ambitious hands, six of them, popped up in earnest.

Gastro knew the drill—deliver the blow, find advocates.

He motioned to one in the first row, a keen producer by his vibe.

“Go ahead, son.”

“Sir, it’s no secret we need to cut our teeth on local buyers, that is, this planet’s consumers, before we can expand to the nearby systems. What special incentives can we offer to effect this important first step?”

Gastro didn’t have much budget for incentives, certainly not before he balanced the books. Right now, with the cost of transport here, he was already deep in the red.

Basically he was no different than the workers before him. His contract with The Guild was to sell “X amount” per unit time. They provided the manufacturing facility, stated a landed cost, everything above that was his.

He soft-balled. “What did you have in mind?”

The young man answered, “A word in private.”

Thirty Nine

All interstellar spaceships operating in the Milky Way employed varying implementations of the same GraviMetric propulsion that worked by taking advantage of Mother Nature's loophole between the force of gravity and mass.

The force due to gravity is supposed to be straightforward, directly proportional to mass and inversely proportional to distance. But since traveling great distances is tedious to all but the most insipid races, someone clever built an infinitely massive super black hole that could be switched on and off and fit in your pocket.

The concept worked like this: turn on the mass generator, point the resultant gravity beam at a distant star, and get sucked along quickly to where you wanted to be.

Lots of special problems arose but those were other people's problems. Most were funny such as distorting the passage of time in star systems between you and your destination.

Try litigating that. *Defense asks the plaintiff to specify, again, to the court the exact date of the alleged time distortion?*

The upshot was swift and low-cost travel between distant places and unintended but hilarious inconvenience for the "flyover" worlds. But, as a rule, nature has never much regarded shitty places.

Ordog was enjoying a particularly fine single malt with Meisha and Vecto when his onboard navigation system announced the presence of an incoming ship. All interstellar voyagers are always on the lookout for other GraviMetric vehicles, crossing paths an instant singularity. Bad. Supernova-class stuff.

By loose agreement, space-distorting transits were supposed to terminate near stars. The rest of your journey, say to an orbiting planet, was to be conducted at low Gs.

That worked for all but the most impatient races.

Vecto looked up from his cut crystal and said, “Ninety-two thousand metric tons. Looks like a courier ship.”

Ordog burped and poured another snootful. Vecto consulted his instruments and continued. “Just popped out of GraviMetric Sol transit outside the orbit of the inner planet.”

Meisha added, “Locals call it Mercury. A blistered rock.”

Ordog asked, “Coming here?”

After a few moments Vecto answered. “Yes. An hour or so. I’m guessing The Guild is ferrying a VIP. Maybe a christening ceremony.”

Ordog and his crew had watched the nine ships land on Deccan the day before and expected someone to throw the switch. “Shouldn’t we park ourselves over The Builder’s new continent? I’m guessing that’s where our play will be,” asked Meisha.

Ordog, ever the political animal, replied, “That’s The Guild’s land. The Builders just turned some wrenches. I sense there aren’t any Guild representatives there?”

Winners seek out the folks at the top of the pyramid. To a fixer like Ordog, The Builders were simple pipefitters.

They all sat in silence then, ruminating on the possibilities. After another quiet and deliberate round, Ordog reached into his chair side humidor and plucked out a fresh Cuban bought in Havana earlier that day. Vecto eyed the new smoke and let his gaze drift over to Ordog’s cache.

“Got another one of those bad boys in there?”

Local goods, especially those banned by thorny political angst were Ordog’s favorite. Their absolute value was fleeting, but a small act of kindness can be redeemed forever.

“Sure, help yourself.”

Vecto got up and approached Ordog's deep leather chair with teetering obsequiousness. Projecting the resplendent face of a windfall recipient, he leaned over the open arm to the proffered bounty. A honey colored wood cavity went stogie deep, a seeming cord of rolled cigars tips reaching up.

"Looks like you're building inventory. Smart."

Anytime you flatter someone with the "smart" coin, you haven't got two to rub together. Ordog did the payroll, remembering Vecto was on a "deferred payment plan." The contract was terse: *All funds, whether promised or earned, become payable upon satisfactory completion of task assigned.*

"I am. We're reaching a crisis, what I'd call a 'three smoke problem'." Ordog always loved to study local planet heroes, the one he identified with now was Sherlock Holmes.

He went on, professorially. "I've been doing some reading about this ball we're over. The cleverest guy ever hatched in these parts was a bloke named Sherlock Holmes. Lived about two hundred planetary orbits ago."

Meisha rolled her eyes, Vecto snatching a cigar as admission charge. The show had begun. Time for Ordog to wax.

"This planet Earth is amusing. Hundreds of nation-states, six thousand languages, a babble of currencies accepted and circumvented. Add to that mindless racial tensions for a DNA that varies by less than one thousandth of one percent. In my neighborhood, that's just me."

Ordog was a robot but they let it go.

He smiled thinly, "And it would be an absolute knee-slapper if a dozen of those political entities weren't also primping nukes."

Ordog pushed back and drew in lethally on his cigar to drive the point. He liked showmanship.

Vecto had brought flame to his new Cuban and was towing the line by feigning rapt ure.

Meisha coaxed, “What’s going to happen next, Sherlock?”

Already lost in character, Ordog barreled ahead. “Whenever you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

He looked at his companions like he’d birthed an immutable truth instead of a pilfered one. Meisha asked, “What have you eliminated?”

“That The Guild is personally managing this undertaking.”

Vecto was feeling the first gentle tugs of a fresh Cuban addiction. Time to lay some track to the supply depot. He asked with enthusiasm, “So who is going to run this new operation?”

Ordog nodded sagely. “Elementary. The guys in those nine ships. I’m thinking now they have to be subcontractors. The Guild favors arm’s length and we’re way the hell out on a spiral one.”

Meisha heard dim sleuthing and butt in like Irene Adler, the only woman ever to best Holmes. “Or the guy in that courier ship.”

Gastro surveyed the telemarketers and declared, “With these new leads, I’m sure you’re all anxious to perfect your pitches. We will meet tomorrow morning to discuss the Phase One goals.”

He motioned to the go-getter to follow him and strode out, happy no shots had been fired. The two moved down a hardened corridor and into Gastro’s private office.

They both took seats and Gastro got to it. “I have no budget for incentives until we show a profit.” Remembering the little manners he possessed, Gastro asked, “You’re different from that rabble. What is your name?”

“Melton.”

“Okay, Melton. What’s your big idea?”

“Sir, you’ve invested a tremendous amount of capital, your own I’m guessing, on this remote venture. That’s commendable, but unless we gain a rapid foothold here, displacing indigenous competition, this plan of yours is stillborn.”

Gastro was not pleased. “That’s quite an insight for a newbie. Enlighten me.”

“Sir, you’ve doubtless asked yourself why The Guild didn’t send their own promoters. What was your answer?”

Gastro preferred to be asking the questions but this one had plagued his sleepless thoughts. *Why did The Guild need him?* Though he longed to find someone with whom he could discuss his doubts, he didn’t trust his supplied muscle who were light on abstraction.

“It’s a tough gamble but the prize is commensurate.”

Melton made an incredulous face. “In all honesty, it’s a bitch of an assignment. One for which you should have chosen better salespeople. I’ve gotten to know many of them on the trip here. Those union types will likely call a strike when they learn the true task before them.”

Deep down Gastro hated the messy business of selling and realized in that moment this guy could isolate him by becoming his sales manager. He admitted, “The Guild is staunchly pro-labor. I’d never have gotten the contract without an APM union bug beneath my signature.”

Melton nodded. “So that’s it?” You’ve bet your own capital on these order-takers?

“No. I have a Plan B. If you’re so smart, why don’t you tell me what it is,” asked Gastro sourly.

“If you can’t improve your sales force, your other play is to weaken the indigenous competition.”

Gastro nodded. “We both know those telemarketers can’t crack a cold market. What am I going to do?”

Melton’s forehead wrinkled in consideration. “I’d use our superior technology to apply pressure.”

Gastro exclaimed, “Exactly!”

“Where do I fit in?” asked Melton.

“We’ll discuss that later. A colleague is landing soon with a focal point for that pressure.”

Melton wasn’t quite ready to go. “One more question. If you’ve made a deal with someone else who is taking even more risk, why would I report to you? Won’t he take over once he arrives?”

Gastro had had enough of questions that were already running around inside his head. He replied, “Leave. You got off to a good start but your welcome has worn out. When I’m ready, I may have an important role for you. For the next few weeks, go out there and make sales.”

Melton nodded, knowing the only way to get ahead was to out sell everyone else. And that’s what he would do. As to who would be running the show when they discovered the actual nature of his fellow telemarketers, his best insurance was also to be the most productive. Anyway you cut it, he had to perform.

As he left Gastro’s office, he shot one more look at his boss and wondered if he understood how weak his position really was.

Forty

The Guild, like all far-flung corporate entities, cherished fixed assets over personnel. Machinery could be run to death, liquidated without regard, and relocated to the worst Hell-holes on a whim.

Semi-intelligent machines hadn't yet unionized, but cool and calculating minds down in accounting were on the look-out for "organizers." Warm-blooded bodies, however, had already been lost. The living and breathing all had collective bargaining and ironclad contracts.

Salespeople, perhaps the most entrepreneurial non-owner population within any organization, were the last to unionize. They loved their independence and distrusted anyone barking solidarity. In the end it was the classic battle of Man and machine that felled freedom's final domino.

Automated dialers, tirelessly working through endless databases to find one buyer in a million worked well for siding and spaceship tuneups but failed entirely selling complex products. Nonetheless, and simply because such idiot savants pounded through the leads without complaint, the software improved, steadily encroaching on traditional sales campaigns.

The argument was compelling: *robots are less expensive than salespeople. Lower consequent product cost means more sales.*

For the same reason good salespeople excel—driving self-interest—they refused to band together until it was almost too late. In the end, the remaining ranks capitulated to collective representation for sales jobs that could never be automated—selling abstract concepts to virgin markets.

Ordog exhaled disconsolately, the big picture beyond his grasp. He reached for another single malt instinctively.

Before the glass had left his lips fresh doubts assailed him like an uranium reactor tumbling from decayed orbit.

Time for honest self-assessment. If he was to make this play, he needed an unequivocal advantage. Like it or not, that meant relying on an old nemesis—Birdshot. They were two of a kind, fiercely ambivalent to one another but stronger together than apart.

He turned to Vecto. “I need to locate an old business associate. Can you run me a galaxy-wide skip trace?”

Now solidly hooked on the Cubans, the other answered, “Sure, has he got a shit sheet?”

“Doubtless. He and I were both involved in the Greer transaction.”

“Is that what you call it, a transaction? I heard the whole planet got popped.”

“Whatever. He and I were tangentially involved. Can you pickup the trail or not?”

Annihilation of an entire world usually leaves behind a wide debris field, and more than just figuratively. “If I can’t, I’m useless.”

Ordog nodded to the room’s trash can to suggest where useless items go. Vecto pulled out a tiny pocket device and went feverishly to work. Meisha asked nonchalantly, “You pulling in some extra talent?”

“Maybe. This deal is more complicated than it appears. I need someone who knows The Guild.”

A drink later Vecto said, “This partner of yours has gotten around. Seems he’s one of those immortal types who perpetually resurface with new identities. Happily his credit is absolute shit and lenders cling like disease. I’ll have his locale in a minute.

Ordog perked up. “How can I help?”

“Another Cuban would hasten matters.”

Sometime later, after Vecto's report, Ordog sat alone, transfixed by the improbability of Birdshot's proximity. *Here at Earth in an orbiting space station.* That was perfect. Escape was not an option. These Earthlings had playschool space vehicles.

Time for action. Ordog called down to his engineering chief and commanded, "Take us up to this planet's largest orbital space platform. Some place called the International Space Station. And we'll need some fancy docking collar. Check Earth's online reference library for the specs."

He loved telling other people how to do their jobs.

A few minutes later Ordog's spherical spacecraft lifted noiselessly from the tip of the Washington Monument towards a two hundred fifty mile altitude. As the ISS was moving at seventeen thousand miles per hour in orbit, they also headed east downrange to match velocities.

Orbital mechanics obey simple rules. To mate with another mass in orbit, you must be traveling at the same speed. If you approach at a higher speed, you will assume a higher orbit unless you also apply a downward force. Such things were prophesied by Sir Isaac Newton in 1687.

Ordog's ship employed GraviMetric propulsion and could do just about anything it pleased but generally had to obey Newton. Sadly, his flight engineers were accustomed to landing on planets, not deftly connecting to swiftly moving objects. This would be like a carrier landing—it took skill.

Seated in his favorite command chair, a fresh drink at his elbow, he watched the approach on the study's wall screen. The ISS first appeared as a single point of light beneath them, Ordog's pilot favoring a high-speed parabolic overflight followed by a swooping join-up.

It sounded good but was actually very tricky. Given that GraviMetric drives could add or subtract from Earth's normal force of gravity, they should have been able to "land" at the ISS with pinpoint accuracy.

But that wasn't meant to be.

Earth's first orbital mating, Apollo-Soyuz, was as much about superpower prowess as position, as in missionary. The earliest designs were humorously non-androgynous, that is, Spaceship A had one type of coupling mechanism custom designed to mate only with Spaceship B's completely different complement.

Happily, like single bars, most of the tricky stuff happened in the dark far from prying eyes. The media was simply told one country had an engaging component, the other a receiver.

A more versatile design employing a common docking mechanism was suggested by the engineers, only to be rejected in both Politburos over homophobic sensibilities. Both parties envisioned an international spotlight on powerful pelvic control.

Eventually a "third party" interconnector was devised to join the spacecraft like a fanciful sex toy, relieving stiff ignominy. Such is the sordid history of engineering, hobbled from straight and narrow advance by governing ignorance.

Onboard Ordog's ship, ignorance was also alive and well, the chief pilot of the one hundred foot diameter spacecraft arrogantly certain he could "kiss land" his hyper-massive ship gently against an ISS airlock.

Counter to such laissez faire stood Newtonian reality, no relevant skill and the practical matter of station ingress.

Ordog slammed his drink down violently as he barked aloud, "Reverse!!!"

The ISS was huge in Ordog's wall screen, its mammoth three hundred fifty feet length dominating his view. A second later they struck, the ISS's million pound mass a welter-weight against a ship that parlayed mass

to move. Ordog's ship was a super-heavyweight by any measure.

The pilot had aimed at the main backbone truss hoping to match velocities over the structure. Instead the spherical spacecraft sheared through the very spine of the ISS, bisecting the station, and instantly exposing its occupants to the freeze-dried vacuum of space.

Sissy and Desi, her new Birdshot-controlled man, were sleeping together in a cocoon bag when every alarm in their world went off. In space, life support is everything. Myriad machines measured atmospheric pressure and content, sensitive to the slightest variance. The second the International Space Station tore in half, the Titanic was sinking.

Desi mobilized, grabbing an oxygen mask, taking a quick pull and clasp it over Sissy's face. He needed her and this body; he wasn't going back, ever again, to waiting for another host.

She looked at him with terror in her eyes. Through the mask he heard, "We were hit. Asteroid?"

The tender Desi vanished, Birdshot surfacing in survival mode. He shook his head, responding, "I'm guessing incompetence. You stay here."

He grabbed a nearby portable oxygen system and sailed off, now all the more difficult as the station had added multi-axis delta V. Ordog's ship had imparted enormous force according Sir Isaac's First Law of Motion: *Every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.*

Being slammed by a body out-massing you a million-to-one qualifies. They were now in a tumbling orbit, certain to collide with the lethal 10,000-strong carapace of Earth-orbiting satellites.

Birdshot knew what it felt like to crash a spacecraft into another. He'd once been in command under those circumstances. That suppressed memory could wait. His current consideration was far more pressing—ensure the station's atmosphere didn't all bleed off to space.

Judging from their motion and orientation to the collision, he went to the nearest hatch in that direction to confirm it was tightly sealed. The ISS was a series of tubular sections, each separated by hatches that were always closed to limit the loss of breathable, warm air. The section he and Sissy occupied was secure.

A few minutes later he swam back to Sissy. “We’re safe as far as life support. Our risk now is striking some other body like a satellite. We’re certainly on a new trajectory.”

Sissy trusted Birdshot. He was a clever, and when necessary, cunning alien. She asked, “You said incompetence earlier. Were we struck by another manmade object?”

Birdshot moved up close to look Sissy in the eyes. “No human is this stupid. This has Ordog’s signature written all over it. Let’s find an observation port.”

He tugged her hand and they made their way to a nearby fishbowl window that took in half the sky. Shit was flying everywhere, station fragments bounding off the truss and shredding the solar arrays. Then they saw the ship, hanging ignominiously at some distance as if waiting for a claims adjuster.

Birdshot remarked, “I know that clown doesn’t carry liability let alone personal injury. NASA’s out some serious bucks.”

Sissy laughed gently, she had seen some astronomical nonsense in her year and a half with this creature. Truthfully, if Ordog had brought his enormous ship here that meant *her alien* still had juice. She asked, “Why is he here?”

Birdshot bruxed his nice new molars, ecstatic to be driving a fresh corporeal machine. Young, sinewy, sexually potent. Sissy’s love had reinforced an essential—he wasn’t ever going back to collecting dusk as a discarded, inanimate object. To his final day, he would hang on to life in a living, organic body.

Too bad for Ordog though. He couldn’t. Their joint communion in a single breathing body had been a powerful

alliance, but the outcome, the destruction of Greer, had scarred them both. More Ordog than he. *Ordog had always been weaker*, mused Birdshot.

And Ordog, thence consigned to a plastic body, robbed of organic subtlety, was surely still pissed. His fall had been great. *Too bad. Time to move on.* Birdshot smiled to Sissy and said, “Ordog is riled, but he needs me, just like before. He’s come fetch us.”

Forty One

Jeb awoke with a start; wherever they were going, they'd arrived. Almost immediately the door swung open and Gard stood there with one of the thugs. He threw a silver jacket to Jeb and said, "Put that on, this planet is cold."

Once outside his tiny cabin the other thug singled up behind him and they moved along a narrow metallic corridor. Jeb was more curious than alarmed. If they'd wanted him eliminated, space is a mammoth dumping ground.

Meanwhile, elsewhere on Earth, the shit was hitting the fan. Though the International Space Station was classified as "In Suspended Operation," it was carried on NASA's balance sheet as an active asset.

Mid-eleven digits worth.

Many amateur astronomers, fond of spotting the ISS, had seen Ordog's ship T-bone the station. Ten minutes later the internet shock wires were singing. Lowest among these was IMPACT, a zero budget, high sizzle self-aggrandizer.

After the celestial fender-bender, Ordog called Meisha and Vecto to his study. Standing off from the accident scene, they sat to watch the station. It had little propellant but Ordog wasn't sure it wouldn't blow.

Vecto beckoned for another Cuban and said, "The planet's online community is responding."

Ordog nodded. "Pipe the feed."

The wall screen displayed a collage of overlapping windows and Vecto voice-commanded the control software to launch a browser compatible with Earth's internet. Lighting one of Ordog's cigars, he said, "I like this site. Flamboyant."

The window expanded to show two seated newsreaders dressed in silly outfits. The guy, a twenty-something hipster wore a Jimmy Buffet parrot hat, a grinning stupid look, and a bright orange jail jumpsuit stenciled "Reject." Seated next to him was a standard-issue Southern California blonde sporting a huge fake rack, tight white bra-less t-shirt that said "Do Me" and a Groucho Marx nose and mustache.

They were both laughing hysterically. The guy said, "For those of you just joining us, we have a special theme tonight. We're calling it 'Alien Hit n' Runs'."

The gal chimed in, "Science long ago confirmed Apollo Thirteen was side-swiped by a drunk trash hauler from Uranus. Radar tracings obtained by our Freedom of Information hounds show that alien's ship wallowing away from Earth after the impact. He was rumored to have been snatching geosynchronous satellites at twenty-three Altarian dollars per pound.

"We understand from interdicted NSA transcripts this thief denied the collision, claiming Earth had no manned spacecraft. He eventually cut a plea bargain in an off-planet court to avoid any property damage settlement. NASA estimates the lost mission cost two point nine billion in adjusted dollars."

The guy picked up the thread. "Just goes to show, our celestial neighbors are no better than south of the border uninsured drivers. We all end up paying."

Ordog looked away; insurance was for bad drivers.

The babe in the XXS teeshirt continued. "And what about Roswell? Abandoned vehicles also cost us precious tax dollars. The US Army spent millions in nineteen fifties' dollars hauling that wreck off."

The guy added, "Not to mention the autopsy and storage tab at Wright-Patterson. Those three corpses have been chilling on our dime for sixty years!"

A cheesy background ditty started and two strings of Christmas lights flashed on and off. From off-camera a voice boomed, "Tonight's lead story. The International

Space Station has been center-punched by the very ship that just left the Washington Monument.”

The gal was ready with the zingers. “Is this no-fault? Are they insured?”

With a mock earnestness, her parrothead partner said, “We want to hear from you. Are you driving un-insured?”

Ordog grabbed the remote and switched off the sound. He asked aloud to no one in particular, “Who are those idiots?”

Meisha rolled her eyes. “Come on Ordog, it’s a comedy show. We’re the laughing stock of the outer worlds.”

Ordog’s hand twitched reaching for his drink. He said, “First thing, I’m dumping that pilot on this planet. He can stand trial or burn at the stake. Whatever they do on this rock.”

Vecto mumbled, “Maybe he can get on that show.”

Ordog shot him a cross look and said, “And maybe they’d like a washed-up cypher. Unless you want to join that pilot, tell me how to get my ex-partner off the station.”

It was the first Meisha and Vecto had heard the term “ex-partner” but they let it ride. Ordog had more baggage than a nine mile Pullman out’a Buffalo.

Vecto liked the smell of this place, especially with a Cuban burning in his hand. He didn’t want to go anywhere. “I can grab your ex-partner. Let me look up the docking mechanism and I’ll get one of our pilots to take me over in a transfer ship. I can do it right away.”

Ordog liked to make his underlings “snap to” every once in a while. It built esprit de corps, though mostly for him.

“Take the guy who slammed the station. You’re a smart guy, you can learn to fly on the way over. Don’t bring him back.”

Meisha, a cold bitch when she chose to be, smiled thinly thinking, *clean*.

Vecto stammered, “Right. I can fly the transfer ship back. I’m leaving now.”

Forty Two

Jeb stepped out onto Deccan, the air brisk. He was back on Earth, every sinew certain. Arguably the most powerful man on the planet, he spoke firmly, “Gard, this is my world. If I give the word, this place vanishes.”

Gard spun on Jeb and struck him to the ground savagely. He appeared elderly but creatures from other worlds can fool you. Jeb got up fast; he’d been in a few tussles and wanted to test his home court advantage. Both thugs rushed in, the larger one grabbing him in a fearsome bear hug.

Apparently it couldn’t talk but Gard had plenty to say. “I brought you here as insurance. We’re on this lousy planet to do business. You’re valuable only as something I can leverage. Try that tough act again and I’ll break you beyond local repair.”

Jeb relaxed his resistance. *There’d be another time.* To change the subject, he asked, “What kind of business?”

Gard motioned to the thug who pushed Jeb away hard like an untouchable. Racism is ubiquitous, all beings unconsciously slotting others in ad hoc caste systems.

“This way.”

Their scout ship had landed on a broad, hard surface surrounded by low metallic structures that appeared to Jeb to be storage tanks. Not far off were nine huge spherical spaceships arranged in a grid pattern.

He needed to get his bearings. If this was indeed Earth, it was winter or far latitudes. Zipping around the galaxy really messed with your time, so it could be years after he’d left but something told him no more than a few months had passed.

Above, the sky was the right color for sunset. In single file, they marched to a boxy windowless building with an oval door at one corner. It was no more than thirty feet high and made of seamless metal as if grown.

Jeb reminded himself once more that if he doubted himself at every encounter of new and baffling technology

he'd never make any progress. Willingness to learn was paramount with these guys. The balance common sense. He was from Tennessee, no worries there.

Once inside, they proceeded down a short corridor to an office. It could have been anywhere, twelve plush chairs around a conference table. On the sideboard, coffee, top brand Earthly liquors, baked goods, plus a few obligatory weird things. He knew to avoid those.

Gard said, "You act civilized and we'll keep it professional. Help yourself. Don't leave."

They left, their departing looks icily condescending. Travel is not for everyone.

Jeb wandered to the sideboard spying Jack Daniels. Recalling its supremacy over previous alien interludes, he poured two fingers into a short glass, raised the mother's milk of his homeland and whispered, "To Tennessee, my country and Earth."

It went down as it should—harsh and fine. *A part of him however far away.* Contemplating another, the door behind him opened and Gastro strode in, Napoleon at the swap meet.

Jeb picked up on it right away; this furry, short dude's ass would have got kicked at his favorite bar before the first keg bottomed. Body language alone begged a head-stomping.

This was the boss?

Gastro started, "I see you've found my liquor. Help yourself."

First impressions account for so much of successful negotiation and murder. The first words generally decide. Jeb needed just a few more.

Gastro continued, sailing a spinnaker of bullshit. "My name is Gastro. I'm in charge. You and I have something in common. You're elected to lead this world but it will soon be mine. Perhaps we can help each other?"

Jeb had used better lines on skanks at quitting time but this was basic wrangling and the best advice he had ever heard was "first guy who talks loses."

He poured himself another Jack, smiled, and sat down metaphorically at the head of the table. Gastro got the drift and selected his poison purposefully to show he couldn't be blustered. Equally armed, he took a seat at the opposite end in appreciation of a capable opponent.

In chess, white always starts. Jeb sipped slowly, skin color irrelevant but maybe not geography. Advantage always tipped local, and he wondered idly if far-distance travelers factored this.

They both stared at one another, Gastro excited to meet an alien with presence. The game was certainly afoot.

He began, "You must be impressed with our facility. Beats anything on this planet."

Jeb decided to have a little fun. Laughing openly, he replied, "I don't suppose you been as far out as the Magellan Clouds. *Those* people understand technology."

He had read about The Magellan Clouds, dwarf galaxies orbiting the Milky Way, in high school. What he remembered most was they were far, real far. About a hundred sixty thousand lightyears. Farther than he guessed this bozo had ever been.

When you're crossing foils with someone who has traveled a long way, it's always fun to suggest they haven't really been around.

Gastro frowned. Jeb kept it up. "That ship you brought me in is dog-ass slow. Took forever to get back to Earth. My last trip to Andromeda took twelve minutes."

Gastro bit, "In what? Nothing made on this primitive place."

At least he was home. "No. It is provided by one of my allies. I travel widely on intergalactic business."

This information didn't accord with what Gastro been told about Man and his machines. Admittedly, the pre-flight briefing had been high on sales expectation and nearly vacant of useful information. The Guild was results-oriented.

Jeb picked up on the consternation, leaned forward and asked sarcastically, “Have you ever even been out of the Milky Way?”

Gastro barked, “Enough. You’re here to help me. If you can’t, I’ll find someone else.”

“So you kidnap me and then expect me to sell out my home world? Did I get that right?”

Jeb indignation was genuine but anger never got you anywhere but beat. Time to switch on the manic good cop/bad cop schtick. He asked, “Alright, settle down. What is it you want?”

“I intend to dominate this market. We have a product to sell, a capable sales staff, and clear objectives. The best thing you can do is to help me meet those objectives.”

“What’s the product?”

“A premium beverage.”

Jeb stifled a smile. “You mean booze? That’s our largest industry. Viciously competitive. What’s your angle?”

Gastro shook his head. He said, “I said premium.”

Jeb replied, “That’s a bullshit description. What’s premium mean to you?”

“It means unobtainable on this world.”

“Ever had Jack?”

As if on queue, Gastro reached for the Jack Daniels and poured himself and Jeb a round to show he had an open mind. After a minute of staring silence, Jeb asked, “What’s the next step?”

Gastro nodded, glad to be moving on. “We start our promotion tomorrow. I’d be honored to have you watch and give suggestions to our sales staff during the first after-action meeting.”

“I can do that. I have two requests.”

“Name them.”

“First, I’d like to tell my people I’m spending a little time with you consulting. That’ll get their finger off the button.”

Gastro knew nuclear fallout was bad for business.

“And the other request?”

“Keep that asshole Gard away from me.”

Gastro nodded. “I agree to both. Now, let me show you our facility and then your quarters. I believe you’ll be impressed.”

Forty Three

Jeb was shown to a spartan suite complete with bedroom, office, small kitchen and living room. Not a plant or decoration in the entire place. It had one door that locked after Gastro left.

So that's how it is, he thought.

Jeb checked the fridge and was delighted to see a case of Budweiser chilling. He plucked one out and walked to the office. The corded phone looked like any he'd ever used and he decided these guys didn't suffer for resources or knowledge of Earth.

He dialed the Tennessee Governor's mansion. Even though he was the sitting President of the United States, Tennessee was his heart, hearth, and home and the certain location of the one person he needed right now—The Chief.

He dialed the direct line from memory hoping it wasn't too late. The boys could put it away some nights. The Chief picked up on the first ring. "Jeb, we're all here. Billie Sue too. You on Deccan?"

Jeb thought for a second, "Yip. Got me holed up in a padded prison. Not sure you can bust me out this time."

The Chief laughed cunningly. "I got the whole world's weaponry now. You want us to come git ya?"

"No, not that way. I've agreed to help them evaluate their selling efforts. Let the Joint Chiefs know I'm safe."

"Anything else?"

"Billie Sue. I'd like to hear her voice."

A second later she came on. "Jeb, you okay?"

He realized again he never wanted to lose this woman, or alien, or whatever she was. "Got a Bud in my hand and the place don't smell too bad. Wish you were here."

"I can be. Go find a closet, stand still in it for a ten seconds, then come back."

"Hold on."

He did as she said, returned, and picked up the phone. "Billie Sue?"

The Chief answered, “She’s gone, went running to the elevator. I thought she was gonna invite me but maybe she’s planning something special.”

Jeb smiled and then heard a familiar laugh from the hall. “Chief, I think she’s here. I’ll check back with you later.”

Forty Four

They tried out every room, kind of a “position of the month club” all in one night. Exhausted, Billie Sue and Jeb slept the sleep of the invaded. Waking momentarily in the middle of the night, Jeb realized that wherever Billie Sue was, that was home to him.

Languishing in bed before dawn, they discussed whether she should stay, or be prepared to return in strength. Jeb made the decision. “You go back to Tennessee and I’ll find their weakness. The biggest challenge I’ll have is picking the best one. These guys are paper tigers.”

He’d lifted the line from one of his hundred favorite movies and had been dying to use it. A little while later, after a parting quickie, Billie Sue stepped into the same closet and was gone.

Some time later he was collected and shown to a domed room above the main telemarketers bullpen. Below, through a one-way transparent floor, was the sales arena and a common area for eating.

Within the bullpen stood a humorless grid of one hundred cubicles, narrow pathways in between. It was like a hypertensive barrio, achievement the only way out.

Along two of the outer walls were private offices for the top producers—tellingly ten in all. *Hit your daily numbers and tomorrow you get a door and window. Yours to defend.*

Striding about was Gastro, staring down at Waterloo. The time was noon local, 8:00 a.m. on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

One hundred telemarketers sat at their desks, before each a fresh Yellow Pages from one of Earth’s cities. Otherwise the cubicles were barren save a smirking telephone, pad and pen, and two small buttons, one green the other red.

Gastro’s voice came loud through the public address system. “Men, we now embark on our journey towards great

accomplishment. Standing before you is the door to personal fulfillment and vast wealth. Let us pursue such opportunity.”

Jeb remembered selling knives door-to-door once, between paying jobs, and tasted bile in his throat. Gastro was a shameless loser, obviously way in over his head.

A bell signaled the start to their daily quota of one hundred cold calls. In an eight hour shift, that meant an unsolicited call to a stranger every five minutes. Hour after hour after hour.

From twenty feet away, Gastro directed Jeb’s attention down to Melton. “I have high hopes for that one.”

Jeb nodded. “A salesperson needs clear goals. What’s theirs?”

“Simple. One new distributor per day each.”

Jeb doubted that. A one percent success rate just *sounded* easy. He asked, “How do you deal with all our languages?”

Gastro answered flippantly, “Software translators. Trivial.”

Jeb knew online translation software, at least the text-based kind he had used, communicated essential meaning but shredded subtlety and inflection. And a selling voice, at the very least, had to convey abstractions like integrity and confidence.

No sense pissing on this mutant’s parade. Jeb sensed a few hours would do that.

He asked, “What’s the plan?”

“In honor of your guidance, we are starting with the United States. It is now eight in the morning on your east coast. The first shift of one hundred salespeople will work tirelessly westward throughout the day. Eight hours from now a second shift will come on and start where they left off.”

It was a mechanical approach, as uninspiring as everything about this sterile place.

Jeb asked, “Do you have a way for me to hear them?”

Gastro pulled a lightweight folding headset from his pocket. “Stand directly over any given salesperson and you will hear both sides of their call.”

Jeb accepted the headset from Gastro and walked away slowly as he fitted it over his ears. A second later it came alive with a click and he heard the beginning of a pitch.

This poor salesman had haplessly received the Yellow Pages for Newark, New Jersey, the epicenter of east coast asperity. Jeb heard the phone dialing and then, “Newark Bottling. Extension?”

The telemarketer replied, “Good morning, madam. I’d like” and the phone line went dead. The salesman immediately called back thinking the connection had failed, not realizing being polite in New Jersey was an act of hostility.

Again the call was answered flatly, “Newark Bottling. Extension?”

“Good morning, Ma”

“No solicitors!” The line went dead like a Bayonne double tap.

The salesman shook his head and pressed the red button. Jeb noticed a zero appear on a board at the end of the room, then realized there was a counter for each cubicle arranged like a cheerless scoreboard. A second later another zero appeared on the ten by ten grid and then another.

He moved over another salesman in time to hear, “Don’t call again.” Shooting a glance at the scoreboard he caught the expected zero.

After nearly four hours he witnessed two important things; no one was able to put anything but zeros on the board, and Gastro had vanished.

Jeb had been working his way thoughtfully from the edges towards the center and thought, *Time for the teacher’s pet*. Suspecting this might be the best of breed, Jeb stepped over Melton’s cubicle. Even if he was making average progress, this salesman should have contacted nearly thirty prospects by now.

Enough for some people to put a gun in their mouth.

Melton was thumbing through a thick Yellow Pages and Jeb strained to see the locale. For a second he caught a full page ad for Secaucus Bail Bonds and knew this boy had indeed drawn the dregs.

The name Secaucus is Algonquin Indian and means “place of snakes.” That may have been true, literally, when those native Americans found it, but in this day and age, it meant mob. Jeb thought, *I love my planet.*

Melton was clearly not working from the beginning but rather flipping through the thick book to find names that sounded promising. That may have worked on a planet you called home, but how could an alien know one company from another?

The phone dialed and Jeb heard, “GameWorld. We’re your universe of fun. How can we help you?”

Melton answered, “Sir, your business depends on happy customers. When I take my children out for games, I want fun too. I’m calling to offer you a way to attract more adult customers. They’re the ones who decide where to take everyone else.”

Jeb smiled. It was original, if not a long road. Maybe Melton could connect to a franchise for volume.

The GameWorld representative hadn’t hung up, score one for Melton. He said, “Let me get the owner.”

A few seconds later an older voice came on the line. “My employee tells me you have an idea to bring in more adults. What are you selling?”

“A premium product made for the sophisticated buyer.”

“It’s not strippers is it? We tried that. The missus nearly sent me packing.”

Melton had a live one, keep the line taut. “No sir, we’re offering a single source premium beverage guaranteed to connect your clientele to unique adventures.”

“Hmmm. Is it from Colorado?”

Jeb got the subtext, wacky weed beer infusion, but couldn’t imagine Melton putting it together. “No sir, it’s imported.”

Melton was quick.

“Well, we need something. Can you bring a sample by?”

“Yes sir. Would tomorrow at nine be too soon?”

“See ya then.”

“Yes sir.” Melton disconnected like a true salesman, following the Old Testament of Selling: *When the sale is made, get the hell out of the room.*

Melton hit the green button resoundingly and a klaxon sounded, everyone craning their necks to see who had actually put one on the board.

Jeb laughed out loud. Melton may have only conned a lonely entrepreneur to try a free sample, but it was a beginning. *Good for him!*

This union’s rules guaranteed an exiguous twenty minute bio-break after four hours. Melton got up, stretched expansively to let every watching eye know he deserved it, and strode out to the lunchroom.

Jeb admitted to himself that Melton had the moxie to succeed. The question was this—Would Gastro wait long enough for the rest of these order-takers to get the ball down the field.

He thought, *No, but my people could.*

And that will make all the difference.

Forty Five

All the telemarketers got up to take their midday break while Jeb waited for Gastro. With Gard walking around, he didn't want a chance encounter resulting in Murder One.

Jeb couldn't put his finger on it, but his animus towards Gard had little to do with getting roughed up a bit. Maybe it was the way these Moonshine Guild guys just came to his planet and took over, sovereignty be damned. And Gard, if Jeb knew anything, had to be the senior alien here.

Peering down through the one-way floor, Jeb saw Gastro enter the lunchroom and walk over to Melton. Nearly four hundred alien-hours has been expended trying to reach US distributors and Melton had made the only sale, if that's what you wanted to call it.

Jeb suddenly thought, *I'll bet Gastro didn't factor face-to-face outbound sales calls. This is a sweatshop, the breakeven based on telephone-only contact.*

He watched them share an animated exchange that he couldn't hear and then Gastro departed, his alien body language unfriendly. A minute later he came into the domed room and walked right up to Jeb, asking, "What do you think of our first sales session?"

There's no polite way to tell someone they're stupid. Jeb replied, "The United States is likely to be your easiest market. You've all learned english which is still Earth's principal language of business. And the business of America is business."

Gastro was grinding his molars. "Explain."

"Look Gastro, I won't sugar-coat your challenge. You've come to a world with hundreds of vastly different cultures trying to outsell family-named beverages. You may have the best product since sliced bread but without indigenous representation, you cannot succeed."

"I had hoped you could be objective."

Jeb wanted to laugh. He asked, "Are you satisfied with this morning's results?"

“No. And if you were listening to the only sale we made, you might anticipate I didn’t plan on any of these salespeople leaving here. I can’t run that kind of organization with my budget. Hell, apart from the bulk carriers I don’t even have vehicles for traveling salesmen.”

Gastro was really opening up, Jeb thought. He remarked, “Gastro, I know people who can help.”

Gastro visibly tensed realizing Jeb’s frank manner had encouraged him to be over-honest. He almost sneered, “I don’t need any help. You’re here simply to advise. Do you have anything constructive to say?”

“Yes. Melton made that sale because he tried an unconventional approach. That kind of thinking will get you sales but one at a time. For rapid, large quantity distribution, you’ll need more men, and they’ll need to visit each prospect individually. There’s no shortcut.”

Gastro shook his furry head. “I’m not prepared to accept that. Let’s see how the afternoon goes.” He then realized Jeb might be hungry and said, “I’ll have you escorted back to your room. When you want to return, let your guard know.”

With that icy statement, he strode off.

Back in his apartment, Jeb found his refrigerator stocked with all the fixings for sandwiches. He carefully built a superb Dagwood multi-decker and repaired to the small office. Eating at his desk, he called Billie Sue at the Tennessee mansion.

“Hey buttercup, you miss me?” Billie Sue purred down the line. “Of course. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Is this my Vice Alien asking?”

“Well, somebody has to run the country.”

Jeb was okay with that. “Well, I watched a hundred telemarketers try to sell their so-called premium beverage to east coast bottlers and distributors this morning. Total flop. The only sale at all was to a pool hall owner who’s probably on the ropes. And he wanted a sample first.”

“What’s wrong with samples?”

“They have no outbound selling force. Gastro thought they could bump centuries of relationships with a few phone calls.”

“Jeb, don’t underestimate The Guild. Is Gastro a subcontractor or a Guild employee?”

“Billie Sue, the organizational chart is not posted. I’m pretty sure the clown who snatched me, Gard, is a Guild heavyweight. Gastro, the guy who’s running the telemarketers behaves like a hired gun. Only thing I’m certain about is nobody’s too friendly.”

“Jeb, you watch out for that Gard. Just be helpful, give yourself time to figure out how we can leverage our strengths.”

“Can you come see me tonight?”

“Yip. Let me know when the coast is clear.”

Jeb disconnected, content. Unless he was much mistaken, circumstances would conspire to his advantage soon enough. Until then, he was simply a stranger in a strange land.

And a spy.

Forty Six

Vecto and the luckless pilot approached the ISS with equal but different trepidations. One knew he'd be flying back unskilled, the other skillful but never to fly again.

With all the station's random multi-axis delta V, the maneuver proved tricky but eventually the transfer ship nestled in tight against one of the ISS's docking collars. The pilot turned to Vecto. "I'm home, right?"

It was the all-too-common euphemism under Ordog's employ; one slip-up and you were beached.

Vecto nodded and said, "Think of yourself as the lucky one. We, the remaining, will suffer on."

The pilot smiled lopsidedly and popped the hatch. Like most of the GraviMetric space-faring lifers, he had endured interminable trans-stellar journeys watching stolen media, much of it from Earth. He yelled, "Lucy, I'm home."

Birdshot wasn't into movies, but welcomed the house call. He needed to be back in the action and the first step was Ordog's ship. Nice of his old partner to accommodate.

The vanquished pilot swam into the ISS expecting to be killed for his sins. That's what usually happened when you got dumped somewhere. Instead he saw Sissy and Desi, Birdshot's current organic host, floating near the hatch with beaming smiles.

Desi asked, "You're here to take us back to Ordog's ship?"

The pilot groaned and said, "No, I'm being banished to this station, you're going back with Ordog's mathematician."

Birdshot got the subtext. "It was you?"

"I see you know Ordog."

Sometime later Sissy, Desi and Vecto stepped out on Ordog's hanger deck under the reassuring and artificial

influence of Earth-normal gravity. Vecto said, “Follow me, Ordog will receive you in his private study.”

They rode an elevator up and approached the heavy mahogany double doors. Vecto knocked, and they heard the imperious response, “Come.”

Birdshot, swaggering in his new Cuban body, especially as it exuded organic virility, pushed the door open and strode right into Ordog’s inner sanctum. The trappings were impressive but that only served to reassure Birdshot that his old partner was compensating.

Ordog stood dressed in a uniform that Birdshot could not immediately place. Then he got it—General Custard. That Birdshot had long ago been controlling the luckless general when a million arrows hit him was not lost on either of them; it was going to be that kind of night.

Birdshot spoke first, “Still locked in the past?”

Ordog smiled, turned to Meisha, and said, “You have Vecto to thank for a safe trip. Please let me introduce my other trusted colleague.”

Meisha came from around the bar and approached Desi, the Cuban stud. She was playful and knew Ordog needed a tune-up. Despite the tension of the room, she glided into Birdshot’s arms and gave him a wet, locking kiss on the mouth. Birdshot put the dots together and tucked into her game.

Vecto stood staring, realizing they weren’t hired help. In his own defense, Ordog didn’t engage above his class well, preferring situations that could be rigidly controlled against the backstop of personal harm. What he was now witnessing bespoke of peers.

To Sissy, who had been a PolySci major the year before, this was pre-Kissinger innocent. Then again, she thought, all the dudes in this room were aliens, and *I might write a book someday. Best to pay attention.*

She smiled to show her trans-species sophistication. But somewhere deeper, Sissy knew this was the new game for Earth—*Are you alien connected?*

The kiss pissed Ordog off but he stood strong, determined to gain ground lost to Birdshot during their last collaboration. Finally Meisha pulled away and Birdshot exclaimed warmly, “If I had any less control of this host we’d be off together.”

Sissy didn’t like the comment any more than Ordog. But aliens will be aliens, and everyone had a job to do. Right now, it was her job to keep these roosters on a narrow track. She was nursing a clear view of how this entire mess might play out, and her hot-blooded Cuban wasn’t going to screw it up.

Sissy spoke up. “Gentlemen, it’s an honor to be in the presence of such company. Collectively, you will guide mankind through the most important evolutionary step of a million years.”

Nobody in the room was a scholar, which was fortunate. A million years earlier, Man was chimping in the trees. Man might now possess a workable brain, but back a million years or so, many mammals extant had the rung up on the new biped in town. Sabertooths routinely dined on that long pig. His instincts were for shit.

Sissy wondered if such an evolutionary rift was active in this room, but knowing Birdshot, and now this clown robot dressed like the long-dead Custard, she doubted it. More likely, evolving species achieved threshold intelligence and bolted the visible realm, consigning the abandoned universe to an ever-tightening IQ spiral.

But those were big number problems; for the near term, these boys needed to get along. Happily, everyone likes to be flattered, especially ageless life forms with baggage. And after a few billions years, they all did.

Vecto crept over to Ordog’s chair under the cover of effusive approbation, the mathematician knowing this new chick had instantly hooked Ordog’s lip with her shiny lure. While everyone looked at Sissy, he vipped his arm down into the chair and snatched a primo smoke.

Birdshot needed to constantly sidestep his low self-esteem by asserting himself. He said, “Sissy is correct. We should . . .”

Ordog cut him off, barking, “Let her speak for herself?”

Sissy didn’t wait. “My planet has been invaded, but I’m sure we can all get something out of this situation. Until we figure out how, let’s suspend our feelings about past events. Can we agree to that?”

Ordog looked at Birdshot, their eyes met and neither said anything.

Sissy continued, “Okay. Let’s begin by sharing what we each know.”

Ordog turned to Vecto, frowned when he saw the other lighting up one of his best cigars, and said, “Vecto is my mathematician. He can quickly explain what The Guild is doing here.”

Vecto exhaled like a thief and started right in. “The Guild is building a regional production and distribution network for one or more of their moonshine products. This facility has sufficient capacity to meet the needs of hundreds of nearby worlds. The production facility is now operational and they’ve likely begun promotion.”

Ordog added, “The Guild is a galaxy-wide financial entity. They have a staggering reach into nearly every profitable industry known. Recreational products such as moonshine are a relatively new venture.”

Birdshot hated listening; it was always better when he was talking. He butt right in, “I’ve know The Guild and have confirmed they are using a subcontractor for initial promotion.”

Sissy decided to add a little background. “Last year The Guild sent two aliens named Shaklee and Amway to Earth to sell moonshine door-to-door. They ended up trying to take control of the President of the United States.”

Birdshot had been involved in that debacle, decided now was not the time to bring that up. Ordog asked, “They

must have something much more ambitious planned this time around. What is it?"

Sissy and Birdshot shook their heads to indicate they did not know. Sissy said, "I can find out."

Ordog perked up. A plan was forming in his plastic head, one that featured him becoming the licensee and promoter for all said production. If he could corner this new market, he'd be on the gravy train for life.

He asked, "How will you find out?"

Sissy was digging this. Hanging with beings from other worlds, deciding the fates of billions. She replied, "I used to work at the Tennessee Governor's mansion. That Governor became the President of the United States. He's now the most powerful man on this planet. If anyone knows who's running the show on that new continent, it's him."

Ordog liked the sound of that. All he needed was to hook up with this President guy and force an overthrow of the current production facility's leader. That sounded easy.

He asked, "Where is this President now?"

Sissy had her own plans and this fit right in. "I can arrange a meeting. We just need to fly down to the Governor's mansion. I'll take care of the rest."

Birdshot might have been a trillion trillion years old and God-like in some insignificant ways, but he knew when to lay low. His head bobbed up and down in agreement and Ordog concluded the meeting by saying, "That's our next step. For now, let us relax, have a few libations, and toast to our common victory."

It was low-bred plan conspired to by agents on separate radiations of self-serving glory, but most good causes begin so. And whatever the outcome, like all campaigns, it would begin in solidarity and end with the persecution of the innocent.

Forty Seven

Day two for Gastro's first shift started poorly. The eight-to-four telemarketers had gotten well "into the bag" after their initial eye-opening day of action and were greeting the morning with sub-optimal enthusiasm.

Sales is ninety percent mental. If your cortical cogs are gunked, so too your results.

Looking down on the sales arena, Jeb held darkly optimistic thoughts for the day. He had smuggled Billie Sue in for a marathon night of romance, and as she kissed him early that morning before warping out, he remarked, "I'm looking forward to today. It's great seeing aliens get their ass kicked."

Billie Sue smiled, her man such a galactic child. She simply replied, "Keep looking for how we can add value. The Guild is not going to walk away from this investment."

He had only watched the first shift the day before but much could be inferred from studying one hundred individuals for eight hours. Melton was by far the most productive, his score of one sale unchallenged in a full day's twenty four hundred man-hours.

Apart from such poor achievement, Jeb wondered how Gastro was going to handle Melton's face-to-face sample delivery. Maybe he would be-knight this super achiever the company's only outbound salesman. Surely he could scare up a small transport for a hop to Jersey.

It was a pretty little problem.

With Billie Sue's suggestion to find Man's value-add proposition in mind, he paced quickly over the telemarketers, listening for clues as to how his fellow man could make this huge undertaking succeed.

Spying one telemarketer who was standing and apparently screaming, he half-ran to catch the exchange. Sliding over the cubicle, he was in time to hear, "You don't want our shit, I don't care, Earthling. You're all inbred anyway."

A second later the zero hit the scoreboard. Jeb moved deliberately over the top of cube after cube, wondering if a snappy pitch would make a difference. For the most part, all the telemarketers were sticking with the canned spiel Gastro had provided.

It started something like this: *Good morning sir. If I could introduce you to a product that would guarantee superior profit for you and your company, would that hold your interest?*

Not that many got the chance. To reach someone who could actually make a purchasing decision, or even request a sample, they first had to navigate past tortuous phone systems or gatekeeper phone attendants. Trying to reach genuine buyers without an extension or killer exclusive was a long, painful slog.

Plus it paid commission-only. As they say, *Selling is the highest paid hard work, and lowest paid easy work in the world.*

Only this wasn't even easy. By the second day's lunch break, Jeb could feel the anger red-shifting through the floor.

When the crew had shuffled off to eat, Jeb wasn't surprised to see Gastro enter the observation room and walk right up to him. The alien was in a foul mood. He blustered, "What is it with this planet of yours? Don't they want a superior product?"

Jeb didn't really wish to be helpful, given that he was essentially a prisoner, but he remembered Billie Sue's encouragement to add value. *Especially one that Gastro would suffer to accomplish.*

He skipped the pleasantries. "So far, you've not had the chance to prove your product is superior. You have to get in front of your customer. When I ran my business, I always dealt face to face with buyers."

That Jeb had operated a one-man business pumping septic tanks and plunging clogged sewer lines didn't need to be revealed. *Business was business.*

“I’ve made it clear I haven’t the budget for that. This sales model is built on reaching the customer through telephone solicitation. The superiority of our product is our best salesperson.”

“At this rate, you’ll never get the chance to tell that story,” said Jeb.

Gastro needed some anger management training. That happens when you put it all on red. He remarked with hostility, “And if you’re so smart, Mister President, what would you do?”

“I’d build a planetary sales organization, perfect it, and use it as the working model for all your other worlds.”

Jeb was laying it on, but Hell, this was an alien. As P.T. Barnum once said, *There’s one born every picosecond.*

“That’s what I’m doing, human.”

“Tell that to Secaucus GameWorld. Your only customer is still waiting for their sample.”

The comment jacked Gastro up another level and he spat, “Come up with a strategy in three days or it’s Gard for you. He’ll willingly sacrifice your life and countrymen for results.” Threat delivered, he spun on his low heel and left the room.

Jeb smiled thinly, content that Gastro had to invoke the boogeyman Gard. True, that old alien had caught him off-guard, but next time, Jeb thought, *I’ll be ready.*

A plan was forming in Jeb’s mind. The Guild had made the real investment, Gastro’s penniless crew were simply here to pimp the product. Gard was an unknown, probably here at the behest of The Guild, watching Gastro’s progress.

If humanity could somehow step in, offer a means to move their moonshine, maybe his species could open a direct link to this faraway power and at the same time, usher mankind towards an evolutionary step outward.

The spheres would have to align, and Gard would need to be dispatched, but Jeb smiled again, the promise of both a fitting goal for his young Presidency.

Forty Eight

As the end of another unsatisfying sales day at Deccan Liquor Sales was winding down, Ordog's ship hovered into position five inches above the front lawn of the Tennessee Governor's mansion.

The boys inside had cracked the second keg early, and Stempy, Rastus, The Chief and the mansion's security staff were whooping it up. Billie Sue had gone to her room, asking to be called "when needed."

The Chief had gotten to know her the last year, decoding her statement to mean "be ready for more alien high jinx." Accordingly, the early tap.

Karina sat next to The Chief, the two bonding like diatomic oxygen. She was pulling one-for-one with him, the beer going down easy and fine. Might a'been, he was falling in love.

Up in Billie's Sue suite, she was yaking to Jeb on the phone. She heard, "That's right, another thirty thousand calls. They have three shifts of one hundred phone guys, each with a daily quota of a hundred calls."

Billie Sue asked, "They must be calling all over the planet with three shifts. How's their translation software working?"

Jeb replied, "Nothing but zeros on the scoreboard. I'd say it ain't for shit."

"But Jeb, there's nothing on the news about sixty thousand calls. Somebody should have put this together."

"Not really. The business world doesn't use the phone like that anymore. It's unlisted cell phones now, office lines all have sophisticated blocks to keep solicitors away. Gastro is using an obsolete sales approach. These order-takers are hitting their call quotas stuffing voicemail systems. None of them know how to sell shit."

Billie Sue was silent for a while. "What's next?"

"Gastro threatened me today, gave me three days to come up with a good idea."

"And if you don't?"

“Then he lets Gard have a whack at me. He wanted me to believe he’s been holding that old fart off. Made it sound like Gard would snuff me to drive production.”

“And you believe Gard is from The Guild?”

“That’s the vibe I get. He’s a no-nonsense type, has two tough guys with him. Gastro certainly hasn’t much control over anything.”

“Then I’ll just come git you. We’ll hunker down here. They can’t take on the United States military without total destruction of their facility.”

Jeb smiled down the phone. “No, Billie Sue. Not yet. I need a better understanding. Why don’t you hop over here for a little sack time?”

Billie Sue laughed deliciously. “I’ll get back to you on that. I have reason to believe your old buddies Birdshot and Sissy just landed out front in that fixer Ordog’s ship. We may find a use for them.”

“I trust you. Call me with an update. Love you.”

“Will do, Mister President. Love ya.”

The Chief was just pulling a fresh mug of beer for Karina when a mansion intern rushed in breathlessly. He might have been twenty, learning the ropes about how big government worked. Taking in the drunken scene, he knew he’d picked the right profession.

“Some kind a big ball out front. Might be a spaceship.”

Rastus observed, “They land here all the time, son. Have a beer.”

The Chief got up and said, “We’ll get Billie Sue. Meet ya there.”

He and Karina rode the elevator up to the fifth floor suite and knocked on her door. It opened as if she were waiting and Billie Sue said, “My cosmic sense tells me the implant who once controlled the old Governor and that sidekick Poly-Sci intern are out front in a spaceship?”

The Chief nodded. "What do they want?"

"The guy running that spaceship is a fixer. He wants a piece of the action, and it so happens we can use him to get what we want. If we play this right, almost everyone wins."

They both gave her an appraising look. "Almost everyone."

Billie Sue smiled devilishly. "Come on, this will be fun."

As they descended in the elevator together, the pilots were refueling their beer mugs. When Rastus stepped out of the mansion saloon, he grabbed the handle of a four cubic foot case on roller-wheels.

Ordog's spherical ship hung above the ground, its sufficiently developed technology indistinguishable from magic. As they approached, a hatch slid open, Vecto standing just inside. He yelled, "I'm the brains of this outfit. Get in. We're going for a ride."

Rastus didn't need to be asked twice. Lugging the Samsonite-sized wooden traveling bar he walked right up to the space craft and said, "Got two more coming. You wanna nip of our latest batch?"

It was the neighborly thing to do, Vecto being from out of town and all. Vecto replied, "I'm game. You make the stuff yourself?" Stempy came up behind his distilling partner. "Yip. Good Tennessee makings, complex and earthy."

Rastus folded down the bar's legs and opened the beautifully lacquered rock maple top. Stempy selected a fine eight ounce tumbler, decanted four fingers of the dark amber mixture and passed it up to Vecto.

As Vecto sized it up, the boys poured a generous dram for themselves and motioned a toast. The hatch opening was about five feet off the ground but Vecto flipped an unseen switch and a holographic ramp angled down to them. He said, "It's GraviMetric. It's not physically there but you can walk on it. Come on up."

Rastus and Stempy had put back three long beers in the last hour, they were ready to believe anything.

As Rastus came up the shimmering ramp, he gave Vecto a smile and said, "It's our mother's milk." Then, considering the possible import of this First Contact, he added, "She'll kick a bit, but it's worth it."

Interstellar advice thus dispensed, Rastus thought briefly that his utterance might someday find its way into far-flung scholarly works, he being the Marconi of Man's Coming-out Party.

He was just being cross-species sensitive. Their moonshine should kick, born of Tennessee roots, and more than likely *made* of Tennessee tree roots.

Vecto nodded solemnly, then cracked an impish smile and said, "Got any cigars?"

Old Tobacco had this boy, and Ordog had caught onto the work produced per cigar math. Not a calculus to Vecto's liking.

Just then The Chief, Karina and Billie Sue came striding out, and The Chief yelled, "I got your back on that stogie."

Vecto liked this guy right away. He was sick of the bending and scrapping under Ordog's quantifiable benevolence. A new source, free of any equation would be positive.

Then he got a look at Billie Sue. She was one of those smart aliens, a Mentat thinker. Good bell curve placement on standardized measurement, third deviation or better.

Trouble.

She was pulling on a beer and looking for all the world like a party girl going for a joyride. But to Vecto, she was way beyond hot, exuding fertility and wanton desire. AKA, a manipulator.

Not that his boss, Ordog, wasn't. Guess that was the real math of the universe—weirdness is okay if profitable.

All five stepped up into Ordog's ship, entering a general purpose airlock. It measured about twenty feet deep and ten wide. Along both sides ran low benches for donning and doffing space suits, and in the walls above were lockers containing exploration gear.

The Chief studied the volume closely, resetting again to “We’re in harm’s way” mode. He was ex-Afghanistan, like the pilots. That instinct, once honed, never disembarks.

He gently stepped in front of Karina and Billie Sue.

Vecto walked up to The Chief and stuck out his hand. He’d read that this gesture was very important here, frequently used as a rapid measure of the other by physical contact and competitive muscle actuation.

Personally, his robot body possessed a four thousand foot-pound grip; force sufficient to crush an aluminum extrusion.

The Chief looked him in the eye and said, “There’s something in this for everyone.”

Vecto nodded.

“And if this works out, I’ll personally find a perfect place for you.”

Nobody had ever promised that to Vecto.

He wouldn’t mind a cushy job in academia and this planet looked nice. He asked softly, “Like a professorship at MIT?”

The Chief nodded, saying, “They need good theoretical physicists at CERN too. Working on that God particle.” He had read about that in the basement john. You never knew what you’d learn in Playboy.

Wrapping it up, The Chief pulled out a fresh Dominican rubusto, passed it discreetly to the mathematician, and closed with, “And you can count on a steady supply of Earth’s finest smokes.”

The alliance thus sealed, Vecto motioned for the party to follow. Billie Sue slid by The Chief and gave his upper arm a hearty squeeze. *Glad she’s on our team*, he thought.

The elevator doors opened to a long hall, reminding Rastus of the *The Wizard of Oz*. He turned to Stempy and whispered, “Ignore the man behind the curtain.”

It was a motley crew, but from whence else could evolution spring? Deliberate, logical progress is a vacant myth. It’s the weird ones who wind the universes’ springs.

Only to snap back, like a puppy, wanting more.

The Chief put his arm around Karina to bring her close and restrained Billie Sue with a gentle hand as the others moved ahead. He asked softly, “You armed?”

She nodded once, sufficient confirmation.

They watched as Rastus, Stempy, and Vecto knocked and entered through the double doors ahead. He said, “Be ready.”

The Chief reached around to feel the Glock 22 pushed against the small of his back. Fifteen forty cal rounds, just in case. Billie Sue tracked the motion quietly.

She turned to him and bumped her shoulder hard against his, *Semper Fi*.

The three stepped into Ordog’s study, taking in the rich woods, stonework, fireplace, and faces within. Ordog walked up to The Chief and stuck out his hand. He too had a crusher handshake but when The Chief took his hand, he thought, *Plastic. That’s gotta suck.*

Eye to eye, robot and human, they sized each other up as everyone watched. After almost ten seconds, The Chief remarked, “Good grip. You’re the commander?”

Ordog loved that word, in his parlance, fittest to lead. He responded, “Welcome to my ship. We’ll take a tour later. For now, allow me to make the introductions.”

He was running the Ambassador v1.2 software, same version he’d used at Greer just before they vaporized the planet. “You’ve all met my mathematician Vecto and this is our navigator Meisha.”

Rastus and Stempy were digging her, a stunning redhead who looked like she might party hearty. Ordog continued, “And please meet my honored guest Desi and his partner Sissy. He and I have participated in many past campaigns.”

The Chief grasped the un-whole truth but let it go. He responded, “This lovely lady is the Vice President of the United States. Please call her Billie Sue.” Then he swiveled Karina gently around his body and said, “And I’m pleased to introduce my new friend Karina.”

Billie Sue walked up to Ordog and gave him a hug. Then she turned to Sissy and said, “Your man Desi has a new face. You both gave us some grief last time around. Let’s hope those ambitions are aligned with ours this time.”

The Chief continued, “And these two gentlemen are everyone’s favorite Presidential pilots Rastus and Stempy.”

Ordog took over. “Welcome everyone. Let us get to know one another over drinks. Vecto, please make sure our guests have whatever they want.” It was just the sort of condescension the mathematician hated as he moved behind Ordog’s first class hardwood bar. He announced, “The drinking lamp is lit.”

As they mingled, the spherical spacecraft rose quietly through Earth’s atmosphere towards her satellite, Luna. Ordog hoped to find a middle ground from which he could make his pitch to Mankind, everyone else in the room angling their chess pieces according to an inner drummer, however measured or far away.

Forty Nine

Day three on Deccan was downright dreary, the eight to four shift breaking for lunch in murderous spirits. Save Melton's sample request, the approximately seventy five thousand calls made to date had produced not a single bonafide order. Like most sales campaigns, there'd been a ton of lookers, but lookers don't keep the lights on.

They just waste your time until those same lights go out. For good.

The lunch period came and ended without the traditional back-to-work siren. Soon the one hundred telemarketers knew something was up; in the last two and a half days Gastro had run them like machines. Now, here they were, idling.

Jeb had't heard the siren either and popped a beer to wait it out in his apartment. He thought, *Gastro's getting reamed by The Guild*. Being an ex-sanitation engineer, his visual for that procedure was particularly graphic.

In Gastro's office, things were decidedly hostile. Gard was seated behind Gastro's desk as he lectured. "Do you have any idea what this facility cost to build?"

Gastro was smart enough to let the wind bleed from Gard's sails. After ten seconds, Gard stood up and said, "The Guild won't let this project fail. If you can't reverse this situation today, you'll either be dumped on this planet or just eliminated. None of this should be a surprise to you."

Gastro had borrowed money for the "at signing" lease costs on the nine space ships. He was tapped out. And working within the The Guild's constraints to use Amalgamated Promoters and Montebanks union labor, his options were few.

Withering under Gard's hateful glare, he brought himself up to his full five foot three height and said, "Give me until midnight to night."

Gard replied coldly, "Midnight. I kept my end of the bargain grabbing that President. Do yours."

Fifty

Gastro left his own office, despondent and not a little pissed. The Guild had served up an impossible situation mated to an impossible timeframe. Instead of rallying the sales troops to make more fruitless calls, he sought out the only person who could possibly save his ass.

Jeb met him at his door and they sat down in the living room. He asked Gastro, “Need a beer?”

“Jack Daniels. I stocked the place, you’ve got it.”

Jeb chuckled, grabbed a bottle of Jack and poured two tumblers. They clinked and Jeb asked, “Gastro, what do you know about my last run-in with The Guild’s moonshine?”

The other took a good gulp of bourbon and replied, “Just what you said before. Something about two clueless entrepreneurs sent here on a solo mission by The Guild to sell this planet through local bars.”

“Right. But the thing I’m asking is this—those goofball aliens were pitching moonshine that opened up a portal to far-away minds. One sip and you were an unwitting host to creatures who would crowd into your head and have a holiday with your life. Is that what we’re talking about?”

Gastro shook his head. “I’ve heard of such stuff. We’re not making that. The Guild’s owns recipes for many narrow market specialty products.”

Jeb leaned back to let an important puzzle piece settle into place. He asked, “So what is it, exactly, you’re selling?”

Gastro smiled the smile of the conspirator. “It’s not much different than what we’re drinking right now. Maybe a little easier on the palette though this stuff could grow on you.”

“Okay, I’m cool with that. I’m guessing Gard and The Guild are not pleased with the sales achievement thus far?”

“I’m looking at moving to Cleveland. Does that answer your question?”

“The ‘Mistake on the Lake’?”

Gastro looked down into his drink. “Frankly, they’ll probably just kill me. Cheaper, and it makes a nice statement to whoever they find to replace me.”

“Won’t be me.”

“Don’t be too sure,” said Gastro. “Gard has decided he needs a few failures so he can pound on The Guild for a realistic budget. Also, because you’re a powerful man on Earth, eliminating you brings him closer to planetary rule.”

Jeb uncorked the Jack and poured each of them another bracing snootful. Suddenly he really didn’t like this guy Gard. And as Commander in Chief of the largest military on the planet, he felt pretty sure he could do something about that. Black bag guys with silenced weapons in the dead of night kind of somethings.

Jeb knew this was one of those kinds of meetings where he was being asked to flex his authority and reach. Remembering how much he respected Churchill’s immediacy, and warmed by the Jack, he asked, “What can I do for you right now?”

Gastro stood up and walked to the window. It looked out on the barren landscape crowded with low silver structures to the horizon. Not turning around, he answered, “I believe The Guild knew this initial approach could not work. Not recognizing the personal peril is my fault. Greed blinds.”

Jeb kept silent, though not a Catholic, he got what confession was all about. Release.

“When I was told I must use union labor, right after I signed the agreement, I knew the odds had suddenly moved against me. The APM has never been about breaking into new markets. At best, they maintain relationships for products that sell themselves.”

Jeb wanted to understand the business a little better. He asked, “If you could reach distributors here on Earth and the surrounding planetary systems with local sales reps, could you be price competitive?”

“Oh hell yes. Have you seen this facility from the air? It’s the largest distillery in a cubic parsec. At the right volumes, no one could undercut our per unit cost basis.”

He’d said that last sentence with a swell of pride, clearly still sold on the soundness of the financial argument.

Jeb probed. “Let’s look at Earth first. It’s a matter of reaching thousands of small liquor distributors. If you attract the interest of decision makers, do you believe you have a good case for mutual profitability?”

“Absolutely.”

Jeb got up and joined Gastro at the window. “It’s simple to me. Somebody has to go to The Guild and persuade them to let us sell your product to our own people. Nothing else will work.”

Gastro heard the “us.”

They both stood looking out at nothing, inner landscapes host to possibilities not singly theirs but all of Earth and worlds beyond.

After a while, Jeb said softly, “Let me make some calls and we’ll get back together after the shift change for drinks.”

Gastro nodded, his fate on hold.

As he headed for the door, Jeb added, “And bring some of your Deccan hooch.”

Fifty One

Ordog's ship was hovering above the Sea of Tranquility when the call came through. They were all sightseeing the relics of 1969 in lightweight spacesuits, romping around the Apollo 11 landing site, hamming it up for Sissy's FaceBook page.

Ordog's voice came over everyone's helmet sound system. "Attention. Billie Sue, the President of the United States just called your cell phone. We must go back and see what he wants. This could be our break."

Ordog's hope always sprang eternal but occasionally he was right. In his study an hour later, the voicemail was piped through.

Billie Sue. I miss you. Just met with Gastro. He admits he needs us, is ready to deal. Call m y apartment.

Vecto stepped behind Ordog's bar and said, "No Deccan booze sold here. Everything else is on the house."

With drinks in hand, everyone crowded around Billie Sue as she stepped up to the telecommunication console and dialed Jeb's phone. It rang a few times and Jeb answered.

"Billie Sue, where are you?"

"Hey, Mister Prez, I was just walking around on your moon. Now we're hanging out in Ordog's ship next to the Apollo 11 lunar lander. Good to hear your voice."

"You mean that sphere hanging over the Washington Monument?"

"The same. I'm with my friend Karina, The Chief, Rastus, Stempy, Sissy, and the old Governor who's got a new body. A couple of Ordog's crew are here too." The Chief yelled out a welcome, and Rastus shouted, "Shit, Jeb, I was on the friggin' moon."

It was a childish comment but Rastus was in love with life, more so now that he'd actually walked amongst the footsteps of Man's greatest hero, Neil Armstrong.

Everyone present shared the enthusiasm, without which nothing worthwhile ever gets done. Jeb asked, “Rastus, I wish I could have joined you. That’s every young adventurer’s dream.”

Billie Sue wanted to keep it on track. “Jeb, it sounds like the almighty Guild gave Gastro a rope just long enough for a noose.”

Jeb acknowledged, “He wants me to come to the rescue in a few hours. I told him the only way to sell their product here is with local sales reps. He’ll accept that to save his neck.”

Ordog butt in, “I know The Guild. I have a plan he’ll be able to sell them. We can come there. I’m ready now.”

Birdshot was listening carefully, every campaign he’d worked on with Ordog started out strong and swiftly went to absolute shit. His ex-partner was a level five hurricane on intention and a squirrel’s fart at execution.

Birdshot liked the Cuban’s body, it projected youthful vigor matched to an “I Love Lucy” magnetism. That was useful in negotiation. Always angling for the shortest route anywhere, regardless of blowback, he remarked, “Gastro is a puppet. We go right to The Guild, offer to hit whatever sales targets they have for forty percent.”

The Chief laughed quietly, not wanting to intrude on alien hubris yet. During the recent presidential election that put Jeb in office, he had seen this same creature operating as the Tennessee Governor. By his measure, this reincarnated Cuban was ruthless, clueless, and despite it all, funny as hell. He liked him.

Jeb appreciated the broad spectrum of ideas. He remembered Sissy had been the old Governor’s concubine and confidante and was sure she still had her hooks deep. He asked lightly, “Sissy, how do you like your new man?”

Everyone in Ordog’s study turned to her, even Ordog with his plastic heart. As an aside, his favorite movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, after a thousand viewings, was still unwatchable when the Wizard handed out the cherry red ticker.

He wasn't the only one present with mounds of baggage. Sissy had really wanted to go into drama before picking PolySci but at her first real world political exposure, a meat packer's strike vote, she'd watched the local pols working the crowd. At that moment, she knew politics could deliver both.

She answered, "Mr. President, this is your moment. Washington, Lincoln, Nixon, all faced ultimate challenges and left lasting legacies."

Jeb flashed through the presidential panorama thinking, *I am not a crook*. He responded, "Yeah, someone saying I served well would be good. Answer my question."

He liked being the bad guy now and then, knowing his boys had nukes, maybe a shitload of 'em, and that felt good. Gave a man a little backbone. But best of all—when you asked a direct question, people had to answer. *That was power*.

Vecto moved behind the bar, ready to play medic for incoming psychological casualties. Sissy snapped, "Desi's responsible for your position. But just so you know, I believe you will serve Man well. No bullshit."

Vecto started the blender, just chewing ice for the white noise. He loved organic life forms, they were always short circuiting.

Everyone waited. Finally Sissy added, "We're sorry we tried to take your mind. I'm sure Desi would like to speak for himself."

Vecto was considering concocting a special drink to capture the moment but needed a bit more input. Desi stepped up to the phone's microphone. "I've been alive longer than this universe. I apologize for my desire to advance your species."

Into Vecto's synthetic brain flashed the perfect name for his new libation—*Bullshit*. Immediately he began pulling from the lowest shelf, the stuff Ordog got on one of the Walmart worlds.

The drink would be volcanic, but what the hell, they were looking to take over a volcanic island. Logical. A

minute later, the blender going like a GE turbofan, he yelled, “New libation coming up.”

Jeb responded, “You’re out for yourself Desi, or whatever you’re calling yourself now. You cross me again, I’ll kill you.”

Billie Sue had never seen this side of Jeb but understood his anger. This alien implant, in another body, had tried to steal Jeb’s mind using another Guild moonshine. Jeb had foiled their plans by guzzling Jack Daniels, its honest Tennessee formula erecting an impenetrable chemical moat.

She spoke up, “There’s a lot of talent here. In the time we have, let’s answer one question—what exactly do we propose to Gastro?”

Jeb spoke above the clatter of voices all answering at once. “Hey, shut up! Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll need everyone’s help. I’m going to tell Gastro I can put together a sales staff made from local people. If he can’t sell that to Gard, you aliens need to put me in touch directly with The Guild.”

Billie Sue asked, “Does Gard control the security forces?”

Jeb thought a moment. “I don’t know. I somehow got the impression Gastro was running all the sales and security guys. I could be completely wrong on the security.”

The Chief asked, “How many security guys are there?”

“There’s maybe a dozen walking around but I’ve only seen a small piece of this entire complex. It stretches as far as I can see.”

“You’ve got to find out. When you meet Gastro to lay out your plan, ask him,” suggested The Chief.

Jeb recognized he might be signaling a planned assault but if he ended up dealing with Gard, it would matter.

Jeb asked, “Sissy, ask your new man and Ordog how fast The Guild could get here if they decided to defend Deccan.”

He heard her ask and a discussion ensued. The Chief summarized, “The Guild is in this to make money. They

won't risk destruction of this facility and a promising market like Earth. Everyone here feels that if we present them with a working plan that's profitable, they'll listen."

Jeb processed that and said, "Okay, I'll meet with Gastro at the end of the next shift change and tell him we can handpick an army of local salespeople from the entire world to meet any reasonable goal."

Rastus piped up, "Tell em we need thirty five percent and a spaceship. I'll make the deliveries."

Everyone laughed but Billie Sue cut right through, adding, "Whenever a less developed civilization offers entry to their own market, they always demand a technology transfer. Ask for access to their delivery ships. That'll move Mankind's technology ahead hundreds of years."

It was an outlandish package but Jeb felt good about his prospects. He thought to himself, *This will work. I don't know enough to out-smart myself.*

He brought the meeting to a close. "Thanks everyone. I'll call you after the pitch."

Everyone on Ordog's study heard the connection drop and Ordog said, "We must prepare for resistance. This Gard character may receive our offer as a threat."

The Chief asked, "Can you help us with that?"

Ordog smiled devilishly. Let's have another round, and I'll take you down to my zoo. I have an operative you must meet. He lives for neutralizing intractable obstacles."

Billie Sue had a pretty good idea what that meant and wasn't upset in the least. Nobody was going to hurt her man and his world.

Fifty Two

Jeb waited; power's privilege. About twenty minutes after the third shift started working the phones, he heard a knock at his door.

He showed Gastro in, poured a generous Jack Daniels for each of them, and they took their seats.

Gastro started right in. "Gard has given me until midnight to formulate a plan to hit The Guild's sales targets. With the crew I was forced to hire, we both know that's impossible. Can you help me?"

Jeb decided to be direct. "I can. I've spoken to my advisors, some on Earth, and some in the heavens, and we can hit your goals."

When dealing with someone from a foreign land, especially lightyears away, it never hurts to invoke an unknowable belief system as an ineffable ally.

Gastro nodded to acknowledge the wisdom of an untold higher power, and took a hard pull on his Jack. Clearly, needing a miracle, he was open to mystical delivery.

During the afternoon, Jeb thought about the legacy comment Sissy made earlier. She was right but for the wrong reasons.

He began, "Gastro, our people spring from separate continents and developed vastly different cultures. No single world I have visited has such a rich tapestry of languages and customs. Earth is a place of a thousand peoples."

Gastro nodded, the Jack Daniels softening his angst. Though his employer had reared up a continent on this planet, he was now sitting with a genuine and powerful being from this world.

Jeb continued, "All cultures struggle with 'us and them' issues, preferring to deal locally with others they know or better yet, look like. Anyone outside the perimeter of familiarity is viewed with suspicion."

Jeb took a sip of his drink, again feeling the vibe of leadership as well as something else. Maybe duty.

“As we Earthlings are not yet spacefaring, with a few exceptions, creatures from space are beyond acceptance for most of our folk. That makes the already difficult task of cold calling impossible.”

He pushed back a little, time to let Gastro say a few things. As his mama had always said, “You never learn anything when you’re talking.”

Gastro was ready to accept whatever deal Jeb offered. Also, he’d left money on the table by taking The Guild’s first offer but knew Jeb and his race might improve his cut.

Gastro said, “I made a mistake. The sales representatives they forced on me are not hunters. I believe your people should sell to your people but that will cost more. In other words, you want me to convince The Guild to give away more margin. How do I do that?”

Jeb was prepared for this question. “Most sales programs reward higher revenue achievement. What cost would The Guild accept for their highest tier of product sold?”

“The Guild likes to set a high cost and allow a small percentage for selling. In other words, they get fat first.”

Jeb chuckled. “Not my deal. We’ll guaranteed a very high volume in exchange for the rock bottom cost of goods.”

Gastro licked his lips. “They might offer some accelerators for high performance. Maybe twenty five percent off a price they name for selling everything this facility can make.”

Jeb shook his head. “We’re prepared for an all-out sales blitz but we’ll need *new market* cost of a buck a gallon and complete control of distribution.”

“You mean the ships?”

“Yip. We got drivers for those. Take that deal to Gard or whoever. Let me know by midnight.”

Gastro stood. He said, “If I don’t return by one o’clock, expect an unpleasant visit. Gard may have plans of his own.”

Fifty Three

Gard was not surprised when Gastro came to his office a few hours before midnight. Some might infer good things from earliness. Not Gard. He had one purpose before ever setting foot on Deccan—planetary rule.

This planet was primitive, its defenses uncoordinated, and with its highest leader his prisoner, he was a simple substitution away.

Stashed in his small courier ship was a mutable robot shaped on the journey here to Jeb's likeness. With a few sessions of personality transference, if he limited actual personal contact, Gard was sure he could fool just about anyone. Certainly these earthlings would never suspect.

But first, he thought, I will take control of The Guild's project to solidify my position.

He motioned to Gastro to take a seat and said nothing, passive aggressive techniques immensely popular all over the universe.

Gastro said, "I have a plan to achieve The Guild's sales objectives. As you report directly to them, I felt we should discuss how best to present it."

The fiat accompli approach worked well among organizational peers but Gard said nothing. In truth, he was also just a contract employee, another set of eyes—merely a production consultant with no authority to take action.

His decision to abduct Jeb was entirely his own. Gastro had assumed that bold stroke proceeded from The Guild, but brazen acts are often confused with official dictum. As the philosopher said, *The world makes way for a man who knows where he's going.*

Gard also knew that as Gastro's performance fell ever farther behind, his trepidation to contact The Guild grew exponentially. Though little more than a hired stooge himself, his bearing and projected authority had worked.

In negotiation, the first one to speak after the offer generally loses. Gard kept quiet.

After more than a minute of awkward silence, Gastro continued. “The United States President will assemble a worldwide sales force. He pledges to hit The Guild’s highest revenue target in exchange for a new market cost of one United States dollar per gallon. He also insists on controlling distribution with the ships I have leased.”

A door behind Gastro opened but he kept his eyes on Gard. He knew it was “put up or shut up time.” He sensed a couple of people had entered and as he was about to turn for a look, he saw Gard nod crisply and everything went black.

Gard stood up to address his two henchmen. “Push him into one of the sour mash grinders. Then, in the dead of night, go get that human politician.”

Fifty Four

Ordog had intended to “have one more round and then take them to his zoo.” Hours later, after a sumptuous meal and more frivolity, he persuaded Billie Sue, Karina and The Chief to accompany him and they rode down in the elevator.

The so-called zoo was on the lowest level, and when the double set of environmental doors slid open, an assaulting wave of ripe animal odor reminded Billie Sue of a distant memory.

Many of the cages contained flat-out odd looking creatures Ordog had collected from the far corners of the galaxy. Waxing scientific, he described re-population studies for some of the remotest planets and all nodded in simple disbelief.

At the end of a long corridor stood a door marked “SCREECH—LETHAL HAZARD.” Ordog brought them to the door and said, “I’d like you to meet my most valuable associate.”

He fit an old-fashioned key to the lock and he pushed open the door. Just inside was a normal looking studio apartment with kitchen, well-made bed and a work area complete with bench and tools. The Chief was prepared for anything but a second later realized everything was three quarters scale.

Before he could ask a question, a large chimpanzee scampered into the room from some private cranny. He jumped up on the bench and howled at Ordog. Around his waist he wore a small workman’s tool belt festooned with odd implements.

By one o’clock, Jeb knew Gastro had failed and, ipso facto, he was in harm’s way. He picked up the phone and called Billie Sue. A moment later she answered, “Hey, Prez. What’s up?”

In the background he heard a loud animal sound.
“What the Hell is that?”

“Karina, The Chief and I are in Ordog’s zoo checking out a rare creature. Looks like a chimpanzee dressed as a carpenter.”

Ordog was quick to correct her. He said, “Assassin. Screech is my simian button man.”

“I stand corrected. The chimp is called Screech and works for Ordog as an assassin. That might come in handy.”

Jeb laughed without humor. “Damn right. Gastro didn’t show. Something tells me he’s met a bad end and I’ll be next.”

“Should I come get you?” asked Billie Sue with sudden alarm.

“Yes. Tell Ordog to bring his ship right to Deccan. *Now*. And if he can contact The Guild directly, tell him to set up a meeting. I want to settle everything at once.”

Billie Sue relayed the request to Ordog and The Chief. Ordog said, “En route time less than ten minutes. Where?”

“Jeb, we’ll be there in about ten minutes. What’s your exact location?”

He thought for a second. “Gastro landed several ships. I’ll be near them.”

The Chief beckoned for the phone. Jeb heard, “You get out there and hide. I’ll come find you as soon as we land. I’m packing. Hey, did you find out how many troops they have?”

“Twelve plus Gard’s two henchmen.”

“Good.”

Billie Sue came back on and said, “See you soon. Keep your head down.”

“Okay buttercup.”

Fifty Five

Ordog's ship lifted off the Moon as they made their way back up to his study. Once there, he went right to Birdshot and said, "Who do you know at The Guild?"

Sissy and Birdshot were seated at Ordog's bar, well down on a bottle of fine single malt. He smiled back at Ordog in a stuporous gaze. His laid back Cuban manner would have amused Ordog under other circumstances but right now he wanted answers. He shook Birdshot gruffly. "Time for you to produce something. The Guild. Who do you know?"

"I know some guys. Let me think."

Ordog pointed to his communications rig. "Good. Get someone who can cut deals on the hook. Tell them the King of Earth wants to place a huge moonshine order."

Sissy and Birdshot grabbed their glasses, stumbled over and starting fumbling with the equipment.

Ordog motioned to Billie Sue and The Chief. They took seats at the bar and he said, "You said they have a dozen or so troops. We have several times that but if we decapitate their leadership, we won't have to fight."

The Chief clarified, "So we find Gard and eliminate him?"

Billie Sue remarked, "An old man with bodyguards. He shouldn't be hard to corner unless he takes off in his ship."

"We'll have surprise. I intend to land, flood the immediate area with my troops, find Jeb, and capture or kill Gard. Then we can make our deal with The Guild."

A few minutes later Vecto came up to them. "We're entering the atmosphere above Deccan."

Jeb slipped out of his apartment and made his way outside. There were no lights on anywhere and he

moved quietly through the darkness. Clinging close to the structures, he eventually found Gastro's grid of nine ships. Jeb suddenly felt it buzz silently in his pocket. He answered without reluctance.

"Hey Prez. We're descending, about a minute out. Ordog turned on a cellular transmitter for communication. We've identified the nine ships. You there?"

"Yip. Right under the center ship. Why not land between the ships and the central complex?"

"Right. See ya soon."

Birdshot and Sissy tried a bunch of old numbers, his contacts a bit rusty. After hearing "That department was closed in the re-organization" half a dozen times, he was finally routed to a cultural affairs officer to make his drunken pitch.

"Cultural attache to the outer realm. How may we help you?"

Birdshot slurred, "We landed at your new attraction on the planet Earth. Everyone here is excited by your facility."

The staffer asked, "We've just had another re-org. Lot of chaos here right now. Where is that?"

Birdshot pressed a button on the communications console to transmit the exact location in Galactic coordinates. After a few moments the officer responded, "Oh, way out there."

A few seconds later, he continued, "Right, one of the new outposts. You're not even in our system yet. No one has been assigned to that sector. What do you need?"

"We wish to purchase all of your new facility's product. Are you the person to speak to about that?"

"Sure, why not. What's your offer?"

Vecto walked up to the console and said loudly, "We'll buy everything for nine billion Ferengies per Gorn orbit. All new costs are ours."

The staffer thought that sounded good, any money from that far away was “found money first counted here.”

“Sure. I can authorize a standard hundred orbit deal. Anything above that will have to wait until we staff up again. That could be a while.”

Sissy butt in, “We’ll take the hundred orbit deal. Can you send a signed contract.”

“No problem.”

After the call terminated, The Chief laughed. “Vecto, what the Hell is nine billion Ferengies per Gorn orbit?”

Vecto smiled, “About a buck a gallon.”

Though the apparent evolutionary step directly succeeding upright locomotion, bureaucracy is the bane of creature-kind. From conception, it becomes dysfunctional in any group exceeding three; for organizations attempting to knit cohesion among the stars, utterly laughable.

Jeb stepped out from beneath the center ship in time to see Ordog’s ship glide silently to rest just above the ground a thousand feet away.

Vecto fiddled with his handheld computer and turned to Ordog. “I found that clown Gard you wanted. He’s in one of the galaxy’s FlimFlam databases. Here’s his bio and some images.”

Vecto handed the device to Ordog who flipped through the pages. He said aloud, “Got a few pictures of Gard here.”

Everyone take a good look. Before we disembark, I'll update Screech."

As Jeb watched Ordog's ship for signs of an impending attack, a small hatch at the very bottom sprung open and something bounded out. Its motion was a blur in the dim light but Jeb thought to himself, *Was that a monkey?*

Gard was seated in Gastro's office when his henchmen rushed in. One of them stammered, "We went to get that earthling, he's gone."

Gard jumped up, his agility at odds with the elderly appearance. "Call Gastro's security staff. They need to protect the ships. You two go watch my ship."

"That earthling can't fly your ship," said the other henchman. Gard stared back at him, the tone way too sarcastic for Gard's tastes. He replied, "That doesn't mean he can't disable it. Why weren't you guarding him?"

Before they could answer, the phone on Gastro's desk rang. Gard snapped it up and barked, "What?"

"This is security. A huge spherical ship just landed near the main facility. What do we do?"

Gard knew Gastro had hired the meager security force to protect him from his own employees. They were Grade C rent-a-cops.

"Secure all entrances to this building. We may be under attack from off-worlders. This planet has no such spacecraft."

The guard stammered, "Ah, we weren't really hired for any combat . . ."

Gard hung up and waved his hands at the henchmen. “Go secure my ship. We might need it.” The “we might need it” got the thugs in motion and they swiftly left.

In the next minute, Gard realized that he had underestimated the human, a cunning creature who had been playing along and somehow gotten in communication with his off-world supporters.

That changed everything.

And now those supporters had come in force.

Fifty Six

At the edge of the large open space where Gastro's nine ships sat, Ordog's ship hovered quietly as if defying gravity.

Which of course it was.

Off a ways sat one more space vessel, Gard's small courier ship. Some motion caught Jeb's eye and he saw the two henchmen running with weapons drawn. Clearly they were heading for that ship, likely to effect Gard's getaway.

Jeb wasn't going to let that happen, he had a score to settle with that ancient alien. He reached for his phone and called Billie Sue. She answered immediately. "Please put The Chief on, Billie Sue. I have a special project."

The Chief asked, "Jeb, where are you?"

"I haven't moved. Gard's bodyguards are heading over to the small ship that's sitting by itself. Bring me a gun and we'll go pay them a visit. Gard is fixing to git."

"Be there in five."

Gard didn't indulge self-doubt. At least not until he heard a wild, banshee shriek somewhere not far off and realized he'd sent his only real protection away. *What could that be?*

Gastro's office door stood open and as he approached to leave he heard the sound again, a crazed yelp, this time much closer. Suddenly the hair on the back of his neck went up, his own primal response; something was approaching fast.

Out of nowhere a shape silhouetted the door opening, emitted a loud shriek, and came directly at him. It was tiny figure, hairy, moving with impossible speed, and, unbelievably, wearing a small tool belt.

Gard saw the creature, some kind of ape, pull a diminutive silver hammer from the belt and leap. He felt

the negligible body impact and then a flash of pain as the assailant struck him fiercely in the left eye. His world exploded and he was struck again, and again as the creature belled an urgent war cry.

Another blow bashed several teeth into his mouth, and then he heard a high pitched drill spooling up as he was pummeled to the ground.

Flat on his back, his last sensation was a thick drill bit burrowing deep into the bridge of his nose.

The Chief and Jeb moved slowly away from the grid of Gastro's nine ships towards Gard's little cruiser. Still a ways off the Chief put up his hand to stop and whispered, "Look at the landing gear."

Jeb nodded, seeing also an outline of two crouching shapes.

At the same time, Birdshot and Sissy were creeping slowly towards the same objective, Birdshot thinking of no one but himself. Earth was not going to work for him right now, but with a ship, there were millions of other worlds to conquer.

Jeb was the first to see them. "Look."

The Chief said, "I see them. It's Sissy and that Cuban alien."

"Cuban?"

"Don't ask," replied The Chief as they both laid down flat to watch. A second later a bright flash lit up the area around Gard's ship and then two more quick bursts. Both men had handguns but they were no match for ray guns or whatever they'd seen.

Jeb's phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out. It was Billie Sue. She said, "We're watching you from Ordog's ship. That was a plasma weapon."

Jeb looked at The Chief and said, "Yeah, we got that. We'll stay down."

“Jeb, just come back to Ordog’s ship. You’re outgunned.”

“We’re safe laying here. If we get up they might see us. I’ll call you in a few minutes.”

He clicked off and they waited in silence.

Finally The Chief said, “My eyes are still dazed from that light. I can’t see anyone around the ship.”

Suddenly Gard’s ship seemed to shudder and then shot straight up, its tiny form instantly gone in the night.

Jeb exhaled. “I hope Gard wasn’t in that. I wanted the last word.”

Fifty Seven

Some time later Ordog, Vecto, Meisha, Rastus, Stempy and Billie Sue caught up with Jeb and The Chief and Karina in Gastro's office. They all stared down at the remains of Gard who looked like a high school shop project gone horribly wrong.

Ordog observed, "Screech loves his work. Bolting the telephone receiver to his head was a nice touch."

There wasn't much to say to that. After a while they found themselves back in Ordog's study to relax and make sense of what had happened.

Karina and The Chief slipped behind the bar to take orders while Vecto and Billie Sue brought everyone up to speed on the one hundred year deal, no one surprised The Guild was just as dysfunctional as any small town DMV.

After several toasts and much heartfelt laughter, Billie Sue said, "Well, Jeb, you've done it. Mankind now has its own fleet of ships and an interstellar mission. Your race has officially joined the Galactic Country Club. You got your New New Deal."

Ordog still wanted a piece of that action. He said, "I'll be there to help you make your first off-world sales."

Jeb nodded, "You're hired. You can have any territory you want."

That brought more laughter as Rastus and Stempy stole away. On the way down in Ordog's elevator, Rastus said, "You think Jeb'll let us have one of those ships?"

Stempy smiled at his moonshining and flying partner. "I like the gold one. Let's go see what she's made of."

Postscript

Taken together, *It Takes a Village Idiot*, *Moonshine Talking*, and *Deccan* tell the story of Man's first contact with extraterrestrial life and his emergence into the larger society of galactic beings.

From the first moment Billie Sue met Jeb, she knew this simple man could be the one to lead mankind out.

If our species does one day connect with another culture from the stars, I hope it is with as much humor, good-will, and shenanigans as these characters evoke.

The End
May 5, 2013

