

Endure again what other readers are saying....

—

“A raucous romp through space and time, massacring almost as many belief systems as characters.”

Chris Blehm

—

What a wild, wacky book!

Judy Clark, Ph.D.

—

Homo Illuminati is mesmerizingly erotic with a host of flowery characters that border on the sane to the lunatic fringe.

John Trayner

—

Patterson is gifted, kind of like Rasputin was...”

Dude

—

I’m looking forward to the next book!

Dave Blair, Ph.D.

—

For Doug
A courageous friend.

“Time is the fire in which we burn.”

Dr. Soran
Star Trek *Generations*

Foreword

This book is not quite as weird as *Down at Flathead*, but it's close. Some of the old crew is back, time away not improving their mien, or plausibility.

As before, the following is a disjecta membra of science, speculation, ribald belief, relapse, and hopefully some fun.

Enjoy in moderation.

Lumina

One

Fourteen nanoseconds after the Big Bang, God was bored again. In the ensuing seconds, while energy and matter worked through the first blind date, He decided, *This time around, I'm going to kick some ass!*

Like it was His decision.

But that was a long time ago, and really funny shit takes a while to incubate. About fifteen billion years later, out in the western spiral arm of the Milky Way Galaxy, an exploration ship pattered along, looking for a good place to burrow its tap root. The mission was simple: find a planet frothing with life, and play "Darwin." That is to say, catalog everything that moved through the air, beneath the oceans, and in between.

Write it down, take pictures, whole samples, bit and pieces if you can get them, and send it back to anxious nerds waiting in rooms without windows.

But tribalism is as old as life itself, and once out of the local neighborhood, these compromisers relaxed, more intent to sidle up next to a comfy, warm planet, and invent the perfect libation. If they could add to the Great Knowledge of It All, fine, but shedding loco parentis was pro forma.

Dates on Earth are as contentious as everything else Man does, nothing more so than expecting another to reckon your passage of time. But the laboring Sumerian wasn't thinking about that, rather he was looking up into the sky, and winsomely wondering why the aged ox pulling his plow was farting so much. Suddenly a shadow shot across his field of view, and he swung his eyes to meet its origin. A tiny spherical ScoutShip passed over, right to left, and sashayed up the river valley.

That was twenty-three hundred years before Project Blue Book, and the Sumerian shrugged his too-weary young shoulders, and went back to cursing his flatulent beast of burden. To the two occupants in the ship, it was as beautiful a place as their galactic travels had granted. Before them, twixt the Tigris, and Euphrates, the land stretched out in verdant perfection.

As they hurled southeastward on this sector's initial sweep, the city-states of Kish, Nippur, Umma, and Lagash shot under. Ahead, the Persian Gulf sparkled like a billion diamonds set upon a vodka-clear tapestry.

Miesha smiled keenly, her delicate fingers dancing over the navigation controls. The other, an elder Humanoid scientist, and revered grump snorted, saying, "Seen one dirt ball, seen 'em all." She giggled, casting a coquettish lure from a face to die for. Pixie smile, and inviting form. "You wanted to be an explorer, Brandon?" He shot her a parentry look backed with sexual hope from an intentionally scrubby face that spoke volumes, most dusty. "I didn't exactly volunteer." They turned southwest, Meisha kicking the speed over Africa with robotic precision. She teased their ScoutShip down, the savannah a blur. Great herds of beasts scattered before them; stripes, necks, and teeth. "How about a species count?" He groaned, rose, and busied himself with a drink-making machine. "How about something else?"

"Something adventurous, and new." He smirked silently, and dialed the device, using the best part of his stellar knowledge. The machine cogitated, burped, ground, swirled, and ejected a series of fluids that he successively mixed into an increasingly busy concoction. The tiny cabin filled with scents of far-off worlds, real and imagined. An aromatic invitation to reverie snatched Meisha's mind. She let go of the controls, the ScoutShip taking over, its deepest consciousness running the odds of the seemingly probable conquest.

"For you, my dear." He pressed the substantial drink to her delicate synthetic hand, and thrust above his own mortal flesh and blood. "May we discover all, take nothing, and learn everything for ourselves." Meisha looked to him, ventilator-driven long red hair catching the motion of the Sun's turning light. She stood, advanced, and pressed her designer-curve frame against Brandon, brushing full lips across his bowed forehead.

They mewed, forgiven for their differences.

She tipped her launch-a-thousand-ships face to his, everything wet, and alluring. Brandon thought, *This is the only science!*

They drew together, worlds crashing; known, and distant. He got wood, and she, whatever FemBots do when they get sensorial determinism. He burrowed into her bosom, his mind floating like a detached retina, blind. She watched her internal Inferred Power Meter swing "*G-Spot go Homey,*" bounding off its limiting pin.

But that's women, even artificial ones. Beautifully distracting.

The ScoutShip's autopilot introduced a gentle sway as they tumbled across the no-skid flooring, and brought up a soft lute piece to set the mood, and stagger the odds. Her tunic came away in a flash, the synthetics capitulating even as she tugged at his trousers. Nude, they got down to it.

One hundred ninety miles above their carnal struggle, the MotherShip sailed along like a pinball in a machined slot. Three hundred feet in diameter, it was home to one hundred scientists and engineers, and an equal number of servant Robots. These ServoBots, tasked with making everything tick and tock just so, were keenly aware of their second-class status.

But somebody's got to be on top, and at that moment, Meisha was ascending. "I thought you old guys all had bad plumbing. You're a man of substance I see."

"I've had some upgrades."

She giggled, saying, "You've heard we ServoBots have been tinkering in our off time. You planning on becoming one?"

This comment, no simple-minded filler, bespoke of the tacitly secret revolution afoot, the Humanoids as disgusted with aging as any old organic. The ServoBots were quietly making promises of immortality, pimping whispered promises of shiny new bodies with thousand year warranties, parity in Humanoid/ServoBot stations implied.

Already, it was the cause celebre, everyone wanting the benefits of a species fusion. What they couldn't find, however, was agreement on approach, or even admit that the science was probably beyond their skill.

But life finds a way.

Two

Mensa, the Most Elected One, stood before the assembled crew, and several watching ServoBotic idlers. Smallish in stature, he carried his light Humanoid body in turnbuckle tightness. Hair so black it refused to reflect any light against skin as white as uncut cocaine. His politics were as often equally binary

He charged right in. “Some shithead left the feed to our home-planet minders on. Now I might get hyperspace bullshit about some blasphemous soiling of our seed. Like I need this diatribe!” One of the ServoBots slipped with absolute mechanical silence from the audience chamber.

“I’m telling you, we’re far, but maybe not far enough. These clowns don’t like any rumblings about ServoBots corrupting our genetics with promises of eternal bliss. If we’re going to pursue such discourse, let’s at least give lip service to their dogma by corking these open links.”

He looked off dais at the sole female ServoBot present, and lit up at the FemBot’s sudden smile of approbation.

A hand shot up resolutely, and he nodded. A willowy young Humanoid scientist, one of several known-born to become the leaders of the second generation aboard, rose, and said with patrician force, “Mensa, we admire your clarity. And we acknowledge the real threat, ideological in origin, and now simply inappropriate.”

He paused, and swept his gaze about with a mixture of affected power, and genuine, unsullied curiosity. “That aside, it is time to acknowledge among ourselves the crisis that may divide us.”

Mensa was leader enough to sidestep simple bear traps. He shrugged smaller shoulders, the weary parent. “Nothing will divide us. And we are literally a long ways from such dissent. What is your real question?”

Scion, the up and coming Humanoid biologist, replied, “I did not intend insurrection. I wish only to draw a line between what came before, and the now.”

Mensa smiled thinly, and ejected, “The eternal wish of youth. Dissect away what came before, wipe the slate, and look only to the future. That is the way of those who have no past, and unconsidered, yet foolishly glorious futures. Let me tell you, thou man of expectancy, the nature of your probable elder years.”

The other stiffened, but reasoned the equation was yet unsolved. Scion interrupted, “We are a blessed collection of thoughtful, intelligent beings. We conned a first class ship away from a bunch of linguini-tight-asshole accountants, and are now entirely free to practice our science, and individual passions. For our people, that has been a dream for a thousand generations.”

Mensa wished one of the ServoBots would speak up. They never did, of course, preferring to quietly instigate sweeping changes from within. He continued, “Scion, what’s your view, as a flesh and blood biologist, about mechanical immortality?”

“We now have a name for the unspeakable.”

“Is that an interrogative response?”

The younger Humanoid barked back, “I won’t be drawn as your spokesman. We’ve all just endured a long transit to this seemingly perfect planet, and are anxious to do what we came to do – explore. That is our highest purpose. Distractions concerning eternal life, or even a merging of our two forms,

while biologically compelling, don't interest me. I still have much time to apply my allotted energies."

A murmur of sentiment, falling on both sides, moved like a swirling tide, reflecting off everything.

The pretty young Fembot caught Mensa's eye, proceeding with unspoken respect.

Her voice was sibilant, yet carried an intrigue that promised enchantment, and possibly a good lay. "We have been at this planet just three weeks, and already we are changing. It is so rich with life, and presents intellectual challenges that would fill a dozen lifetimes. Isn't it natural to drink in such like a drug?"

Mensa nodded to two reliable ServoBots with everything to gain, and they left quietly.

Scion replied, "I'd prefer if we turned the division of duties, and a working schedule. I agree to that extent. Let's move on to understanding the great treasure that lies below."

"Yes, we all want that, Scion," she instantly responded, the peerage assumed, yet reflexively accepted.

As if on queue, the two returning ServoBots wheeled in a great cask of fermented beverage, and an imagined steam valve peeled softly, everyone relaxing, and moving towards the waiting release.

Mensa spoke up, "Let us all join in our common goal of exploration, be it within, or out. For now, no more proclamations! I ask one thing as your leader – who will give the toast to our new home?"

Several of the ServoBots moved to the center of the audience chamber, again out of character, and joined hands. As one voice, their minds bound together by the network exchange many Humanoids regarded as clairvoyance, said, "This fertile world is our home. Here we will evolve. Here we will discover things our joint species has never imagined."

Glasses crashed together, enthusiasm mixing with discomfort as more and more ServoBots filed into the room. Soon the meeting room was more crowded than it had ever been, and the tiny molecules went to work on the Humanoids just as the synthetic inebriaters, an innovation concocted for that evening by an enterprising young programmer working overtime for Mensa, granted the ServoBots a rip-snoiting good time.

Three

Mensa relaxed in his baronial bedchamber the next morning, wondering over the wisdom of the all night bender. At his side, the pretty young Fembot Juliet nursed a synthetic hangover.

She reached under the covers, snaked a demure hand round his waiting member like Medusa's step-daughter, and started a slow vertical reciprocation. He groaned the swansong of another yet-un-begun, but already lost argument.

"You had a point?"

"Actually two. First, that Humanoid programmer of yours doesn't know jack about ServoBotic cyberphysiology"

"That bad?"

"And two, I think we achieved all three of our objectives last evening."

Mensa focused all his formidable intellect. Matters a galaxy beyond ship's welfare should have hung in the balance. Rather what hung usually limp was crowding out all rational thought like so much post game litter. His all-important precepts twirled in the wind like a torn lottery ticket.

She purred, and bumped the frequency. "As I was saying, we set a good stage, and I'm hearing good reviews."

He laughed responsively, and then remembered she was a ServoBot. "Lot of chatter?"

"All night."

"I thought I was here all night."

"I can multi-task better than most, and certainly all Humanoids."

He let it go. Sometimes a man, or even a Humanoid has to look to the greater good. Of course, that's the way the "deal" is

rigged. Two sides, two sexes, opposing views that permit free exchange. Except that God really never intended it that way. A battery's got two poles, and they're entirely arbitrary with respect to charge, but at the end of the day, or charge, one of them gets labeled "negative."

Or impotent, which was definitely on Mensa's mind. Ever since Juliet had appeared at his chamber doors, exactly at 3:13 a.m., the suspiciously known hour of his loneliest gloom, he had kissed the softer woods goodbye. Rock maple was back on the menu!

On she droned, "The first objective was," her hand froze mid-stroke, "you with me?"

"He sat up hard, and said mechanically, "Every word, my dear." The wildcat driller dialed the heat of her synthetic hand up, and continued.

"Anyway, the first objective was to introduce the concept of our joint new home. The second was the scope of the project that lies ahead. The third is obvious, don't you think?"

His protoplasmic brain was Chernobyl hot. About to go critical, the remnants of his professional mien were caterwauling banshee-loud for a cooling cycle.

"I love the way you express it."

Safe, sort of. Juliet's hand stuttered a second, to be or not to be, and kicked up three notches. He reached launch status, all circuits dumping the last twenty minutes of input.

"The third is obviously our joint species' new calling to fuse."

His safety fuse snapped open, the last moment worth any distant confusion.

Four

The MotherShip buzzed like a vast hive of industry, and will. The three hundred foot diameter spherical ship possessed fourteen levels, the double height center level a giant disk-like hanger. A forty foot vaulted ceiling stretched cathedral-like over the spherical flying machines. Arranged around the circular periphery, they faced out against semi-permeable ports that differentially permitted egress on command. At once, the metallic flavor changed, the ships squeezing out like unwelcome public bowel movements; silent.

Each of the departing twelve ScoutShips held six occupants: four Humanoids, and two ServoBots. Already, parity in view of competence assumed. They scattered, breaking for a dozen Earthly ports of call.

One ship, piloted by Scion, three fellow Humanoid biologists, and a couple of no-name ServoBots, tumbled towards the intersection of two mighty tectonic plates that had impacted to form the Himalayas. Their flinty ice capped angles snatched the incident light, and flung it like Zeus at their descending ship.

Scion remarked to everyone aboard his ship, "As we've encountered elsewhere, the individual life forms below resolve into the simple categories of motile, and rooted. Our orbital scans conjecture in excess of one million species – in other

words, hundreds of years' work. All we can hope for this trip is to understand the basis of this planet's evolution."

He sipped his drink, and continued, "Would someone care to provide a pre-field summary?"

One of the no-names spoke aloud, "The planet is approximately four point five billion revolutions old. The dominant life form, a Humanoid of striking resemblance to your species, is beyond simple tool making, exhibits sophisticated language skills, some mathematics, an understanding of astronomy, and a peaceful society.

"They lack any heavy industry, have substantial agricultural achievements, and care a great deal about one another. Life diversity by species is over half insectile, followed by plants, and a few hundred thousand species of larger motile creatures."

Scion asked in a flat voice, "Save the editorial. Any weaponry?"

"Nothing. No atomics, few explosive reagents of any kind, and no meaningful projected force implements. In short, defenseless."

They all laughed, and Scion spoke like Carl in Caddieshack, "Good, this looks like gravy."

They busied themselves with their instruments, the planet coming in. Four minutes later, the ScoutShip touched down, small feet extending from their weightless sphere to sister-kiss the ground, its mass suspended a micron above by powerful GraviMetric engines. A ramp tongued out, and the hatch snapped open.

Nothing to fear.

Scion stepped across the threshold, casting the smile of Alexander, who would come later, and a whizzing bone-tipped spear tore through him, killing instantly.

The door, the smartest thing on the ship, snapped back closed, knocking Scion out of the way like a dry dog turd.

Someone hit the big red button labeled GTFOOH, and the ScoutShip shot up like a cheap IPO.

Mankind's first visitation. Tough crowd, even Welcome Wagon is packing!

The ship threw itself into a parking orbit, letting tempers cool, and allowing time for a bickering wipedown.

Later, all the ScoutShips returned to the MotherShip, sliding in like choreography, clocking a full day's work.

Later still, around the explorers' dinner table, drink loosened lips, and the first anecdotes spilled out.

A heavy-set bearded zoologist bragged, "We see'nt some shit. Big. Lot of teeth. Gerald there, he almost lost his graduate student ass."

Gerald corrected, "I saw it! A possessed lizard, about a hundred feet long, and snapping like he'd never smelt alien. I almost drew on him."

Another ScoutShip's commander spoke up. "At least you assholes were on land. My crew wanted to sample the tropical seaside fauna. Miguel there lost his arm to something with a big fin, and Girlandra is gone for good."

He lumbered up, nursed the keg for a full blues song, and staked a nearby claim, standing.

Heads pivoted around, seeking one-upmanship. "I got that beat." Hendrix, a senior planetologist with an immense beer gut, wailed.

"Something big came out of the sky, and snatched my girlfriend."

Someone murmured just audibly, "She hated you."

Undeterred, he belched out, obviously the worse for drink, "I loved that gal. She had promise."

Someone else asked, "Where's Scion, I know he saw this shit."

A gleeful anonymous voice barked, "He got skewered by a spear. The door opened, he surveyed his new world, and got mounted like a specimen."

Someone was calling for order, but it was no use. Another voice sang out its sad song, intent on rushing a fresh atrocity. "One minute I was taking a reading for stellar incidence with Stern, my advisor, and the next he'd vanished."

She paused to wipe her eye, vaudeville ready, and upped her drink. Gulp, gulp, gulp. They stood by her as she did her duty, reverent, if a bit morbid.

"We found him, or some of him. He'd been de-boned, quite surgically, by something massive with a very primitive attitude."

Another anonymous voice, "You need to get out more."

Her head snapped around, but the cover was good.

Another voice, from a Temporal Engineer, charged with understanding planetary evolution.

“There’s some shit going on down there. Raging evolution. Fecundity on an order never before described, but the bias is strangest of all.”

Another scientist interrupted. “Evolution has no bias. That is explicit.”

She barked back. “Get your fat ass down there, and get it bit off. You’ll see evolution on the right lip of the statistical bell curve; intent, and past the fifth standard deviation.”

He harrumphed, and she yelled, “And hungry!”

Five

Everyone, ServoBots, and Humanoids, stood waiting for Mensa. He entered with a whoosh, his call to duty over-acted. He jumped up on the small stage erected for pronouncements, and said, "Okay, we lost three scientists, and the better part of our hubris. Did I miss anything?"

The crowd didn't emit a sound, the pheromones of fear, and anger thick.

"So who wants payback?" He let it hang, and then shouted, "And who wants to be professional?"

The dowdy graduate student who had lost her advisor spoke weakly. "I vote for professional payback." A few laughs caught, but she interrupted. "What I mean is, we need to make this vibrant world our home, but on our terms. I say we go back down in force, with serious weapons, and start the real work."

Another voice, shilling, "But what if they're too goddamn big?"

One of the ServoBots stepped up next to Mensa, and got the nod to proceed. "We ServoBots, though historically charged with support for our scientific work, understand this threat, and have come up with a little something to tame the indigenous."

A pair of waiting ServoBots struggled a large box to the dais. He threw back the lid, and drew out a small pistol-like device. "We have constructed one for each planetary visitor. It is a nuclear accelerator based upon the principals of our own mighty GraviMetric engines."

He twirled it around like Vanna White pimping a Cuisinart.

"The same force our engineers mastered to propel this ship across the Milky Way many multiples the speed of light are available now in this tiny package."

"Someone yelled out, 'I'm ready!'"

Mensa lit a slender cigarette, and blew out impressive smoke rings that bull's-eyed like concentric targets. At the same time, down on level seven, the hanger level, a single ship slid out, three trusted ServoBots on orders.

Upstairs, one of the FemBots grabbed a pistol, and pantomimed a shoot-out.

Everyone turned to the sound of action behind them. There, a small shooting gallery was unveiled with a snap of canvas. The flourishing ServoBot vendor, dressed in lurid carnival red, instantly began setting up cheesy prizes. Next to him, a scantily-

clad FemBot with a wild hairdo barked, “Who can show this girl some real shooting?”

Stampede is an ugly word.

“Give me a turn, or I’ll shoot your three Ph.D. ass to shit.” Other such exchanges raged, but in the end, a lot of stuffed Earth animals, all with exaggerated teeth and talons, got won, dispatched, and every drop drunk.

Too early the next day, all ScoutShips ready, the paramilitary scientists locked, and loaded with their newfound ServoBot friends.

One by one, the ScoutShips peeled out, and headed down to the baddest spot on Earth; what would one day be called New Jersey. Though this thickly wooded region was to achieve statehood nearly twenty-three hundred years later in 1787, and be dubbed the Garden State, it would quickly gain the new moniker of Garbage State owing to its per capita concrete coverage curbed only by unsummited Vesuvian landfill mountains.

The ships descended into a soft glen, circling like a hunted wagon train.

The sun was just rising over the encroaching treetops, mist curling, and setting the tone for battle. Mensa, still on the MotherShip, activated the ship-to-ship channel, and addressed the Nobel Laureate-soldiers. “Okay, I judge we hit where they’re meanest. And this is where Scion got popped, er, ambushed. I see from our records he thought they were descending into a sparsely populated barren mountain range twelve thousand miles from there, but somebody skipped a maintenance check.”

There was some crackle from one of the ScoutShips, and the muffled sound of blows. A voice came on, “Sir, we discovered the source of the navigation error. It’s been corrected.”

Mensa, strangely unrelieved, continued, “Hendrix, you’re my second in command. You know your troops. I want two soldiers from each ship to disembark, and we form up in the center. Everyone else stay inside with hatches closed, ready to GTFOOH.”

The last reference, a common MotherShip acronym from an earlier age, was pronounced “get food” with a weakly sounded

final consonant. Lazy end, or not, it held a special horror in their lore, and was “drop everything” regarded.

On the glen, the Humanoids filed out; the chosen. Every trigger finger twitched, every eye adversary-keen. Mensa had ordered the ServoBots to remain in the ScoutShips, watching the womenfolk.

Though he often counted on the former for “deeds needed done,” today had an opposite object lesson. Some “right-sizing” fresh out of the *59 Second Manager*. One second ahead of the *One Minute Humanoid*.

It was a beautiful morning, fall colorful, crisp. Grist for the mill. They assembled as instructed, nervous looks all round. Hendrix yelled, clearly hungover. “I want safeties on until I acknowledge the threat.”

Someone yelled, “You sound pretty sure about that.” Another voice, “Just another doctoral defense. You know you’re gonna get boned whether you’re prepared, or not.”

No laughter, and this was the crowd that would get that joke. These guys didn’t possess advanced degrees because they were bowling every night. The fix was in, and ratmeat stench rode high on the wind.

Someone, not as anonymously this time, yelled, “Why do I think the real dangers are not out there?”

One of the senior graduate students, heavy by six hard science degrees, snapped at Hendrix. “I’ve computed the trajectory of my first assault.”

Mensa sat back in his Master Digs aboard the MotherShip, all plugged in, and groaned like a bad manager, one memo short.

Out of the trees marched a band of leather-clad indian warriors, gussied up like French Quarter tarts. Someone spotted them, and the ring burst into laughter, save Hendrix.

They entered single-file between two ships, and penetrated the circular ovum of standing scientists like winning sperm.

One of the Humanoid scientists dropped to his knees, and steadied a universal translator. He spoke upon completion, “At least we’ll get no bullshit from this.”

“The tallest of the warriors laughed, and was translated. “Yeah, some clowns showed up last night to cut a deal, but we saw that bullshit coming, ‘cause here in Jersey, we’re used to that.” He

stood defiant, sizing up the faces. Then he strode directly to Hendrix, and punched his smug face. He went down like Tyson's finances.

Clapping, and relief erupted as each species embraced the other in solid understanding of timeless management device. As suddenly, the entire Algonquian Indian Nation flew from the trees, all bearing casks of fermented beverage, food, and ponderously leafy psychoactives.

Thanksgiving!

The ScoutShip hatches flew up, no acknowledged minders. Mensa surveyed the entire theater. Down his right arm, the under-medicated one, signals fired needy fingers across the "beckon" button for Juliet, bare wires reaching out.

Uncannily, Mensa's phone rang. He grabbed it breathlessly. "Hi, it's Juliet. Just wanted you to know I'm at the party, doing an indian. Bye."

Six

Later, Mensa lay in his bed, immobilized not by his own reflected treachery, but rather the ego-gnashing implications. All his summa cum thinking had prophesied a common compelling threat to Humanoids, and ServoBots alike.

Only it wasn't supposed to be him!

They should be screaming for leadership, his, and agreeing to immediately proceed with the only solution that would grant necessary evolution.

He got up, stumbled listlessly to his study, and flopped into his throne beside a spent fire. Knowing the MotherShip's intellect, The Server, was always listening, he yelled aloud, "Stryeeli, get in here!"

Several minutes later, a ghastly wraith glided into the chambers. Long black and white hair, high cheekbones, sickly diaphanous skin. Her visibly subcutaneous vasculature seemed stricken by a pulsing alkaloid poisoning, the blackish blue venations shooting out like febrile lightning.

"Get me a double. Something noxious." The wraith shuffled off, her long tattered vestments dragging like rotten roots. As she started his libation, she hissed a little atmospheric ditty that sounded vaguely like Pink Floyd's *Us and Them*.

"Cut that creepy whistling out."

She stopped as suddenly as a guillotine termination, and grabbed a coke black bottle with threatening vigor. Thumbing off the ancient cork, she tipped a generous measure into a waiting glass urn. Another bottle down, this one as white as the other's blackness. A trickle of the ivory slurry splinted into the darkness, and refused to mix. Of equal densities, but utterly immiscible, they wound around each other, alive as snakes.

“Ice?” she sibilated huskily.

“Calf off a fresh block. Lots of edges.” Mensa, normally a paper tiger, stirred at his sudden ire, then considered the company. *That’s why I love her*, he thought.

As one of his fellow Humanoids, Buddha, was fond of saying, “We love and hate in others what we love and hate in ourselves.”

Yes, and the strong surround themselves with the missing pieces.

Then he remembered Juliet, down in revelry, riding some savage.

And shot a look at Stryeeli, wondering Man’s oldest question.

Na, she’d probably bite it off. He looked away, but part of his mind still squirmed about, spewing out scenarios. He got up, walked to the bar, and kicked out a rare hardwood stool. Stryeeli, a curvy wench beneath the affected sepulcher gown, had capped the drink, and was shaking it deliberately. Morticia with attitude.

She set down the urn, and bent over to lift a large chunk of ice. It came down hard, and she pushed it against the ancient wood with no regard for the joinery. A metallic flash, and her hand arched up, implement bared. Into the block, cynosures, and glacial splinters flying. Mensa watched on, delight driving tumescence.

She snatched up shards, and threw them indifferently at the waiting vessel. Cap replaced, she started a low, and rhythmic perturbation, its myriad orbits intersecting, and complex. Like the harmonics of Earth’s binary system, a dozen separate cycles sought a livable mathematical quorum.

Ying and yang struck at one another, refusing to mate. Their black and white fluids broke over the edges, scattered, and flew together like lawyers in love.

Stryeeli rested the chilled concoction, drew a wrapped chalice from the elder shelf, rendered it shorn, and decanted thereto.

Tiny opposing elbows of liquid thrust one against the other, falling cold. With a barren smile, she bore the preparation to him.

And waited. *Time to see*, he thought. *With the way this day has been going, what else can happen?*

Duty has its boundaries, but rarely in the real world. Sufficiently compromising workplace situations can be perverted to enormous error. He patted his lap. She swept her eyes across his, and painted a thin smile across her face.

He caught his breath. *Punt?*

She raised the glass, drank half of it, thrust it at him, and in cowardliness, he drew it forth. And gulped, oblivious to third grade body language.

Instant weirdness. Apart from the apparently unresolved physical struggle now raging in his larynx, the time space continuum remapped like a Rand McNally Balkans political update. Early lessons concerning Euclidean-like planes, and linear motion got hoofed. Some shit about a big glowing ball, and unpaid rent. And then Stryeeli's face pressed into his mind like a low-bidder condom, over-ripe and foul.

Her cheekbones grew in proportion, the face suddenly misshapen, and all business. A reedy whisper intruded, "You really screwed the pooch this time, bubby."

As oracles from the Other Side go, not life ending, but in his present state, well beyond another Ford recall.

Mensa's world jerked suddenly like a rickety Coney Island roller coaster with a bad climbing ratchet, and tilted into uncharted space. Caricatures of ringed planets with clown faces, and asteroids with hemorrhoids whirled by, the as-yet un-invented Yosemite Sam riding one.

Unresolved Oedipus blunders tore through his soul like chads in Florida. Stryeeli spread her legs, and sat down gently on his lap. And began a slow, grinding dance; gentlemen's night out. From her self-aware vestments, she drew out a fat cigar, and struck a match hard across his beading forehead. It caught with a sizzle. She leaned back, her firm breasts pressing nude through the slithering vest, his mind a fulminating conflagration. A miasma of particulates curled around his head, itself alive, and shot up his nose.

Second hand smoke from Hell! He arched as if gored, and emitted a keening yelp, not unlike a rabid dog in its final death agonies. Still, her mons ground into his being, a two Hertz ululation rising from her loins, she too a slave to the codependent torment of the Twin Fates libation she had birthed.

They moved as one beast, sexual, and not. Blood trickled from their nostrils, drooling around the corners of their gasping mouths, gasping crimson spray clotting the smoke.

The MotherShip's central Server, nominally referred to as Gidgit, idled along chronically under-tasked, watched through a

surveillance camera with morbid fascination. She thought, *Looks fun, but messy*. Simultaneously, she monitored the action on Earth below. The Algonquins had a huge bonfire going, and everybody was naked, orgy deep in anthropology.

Juliet was now doing a rotund warrior who also served as the tribe's part-time Shaman. To ward off loose talk about his physique, and spurious professional credentials, he never went anywhere without his pet wolverine, Gulo the Gnasher. Massing forty pounds, and a demeanor like Idi Amin, nobody got sideways with the wolverine. Though smaller than a Labrador retriever, it took shit from nothing, and legend spoke of Gulo the Gnasher once slaying a full-grown bear.

The Shaman, AKA Podonch, had a good gig. As Indian cultures went, the Algonquins were among the most superstitious, and Podonch was a keen observer of natural phenomena. So keen, in fact, that he had whipped together a convincing set of lies to explain the motion of the night sky, and took a great deal of credit for said motion.

His favorite ritual involved a coming of age ceremony with the young females of the tribe, a cross between a star-gazing slumber party, and hide the salami. They would lay on their backs in a remote location staring at the stars while he rambled on. That each of his constellations represented a sexual act didn't cut it with the tribal leaders, but he could knock down the common cold with his bewitching teas, and was tolerated with an uneasy forbearance.

At this moment, however, he lay on his own back like a beached whale, and watched the enthusiastic Fembot Juliet act out what he saw so clearly above.

Instead of the Big Dipper, he envisioned the Barking Donkey, an unlikely coupling banned by most civilized Indian tribes. Though he knew his stellar constructions to be the mark of a true visionary, the fear of getting his ass kicked again by one of the tribal elders cut into his once proud proclamations. He decided instead to just enjoy her interpretation.

So, above in the MotherShip, and below on the green, green hills of Earth, all was as right as rain, long before New Jersey bred the acidic kind.

Seven

Juliet stood at the precise center of the ringed spherical ScoutShips, smoke curling from a pig roasting for breakfast. The camp smelled delicious. Humanoids, Algonquins, and ServoBots wandered about with friendly smiles, and genuine companionship. She spoke to one of the passing ServoBots. "I'm taking a friend back to the ship to meet with Mensa. We should probably select a dozen other representatives to join us. Pass the word."

He bowed his head in compliance, though they had exchanged a far richer message at a million times that speed before the spoken one sounded. The dramatics were for the Flesh & Blood beings' sake.

Hugs and kisses later, with copious promises of a soon return, the ScoutShips lifted silently from the glen, rising like a smoke ring. Within Juliet's ship, the Algonquin visitors crowded to the viewers, drinking in the ineffable. Podonch stared out, his pet wolverine Gulo the Gnasher hard against his leg, smelling devilry. He stroked its coarse fur, beseeching the Star Gods to forbid Gulo one of his bad days. A low growl confirmed the struggle of mighty forces.

A whoosh of exclamation left the indians as the ScoutShip penetrated the blackness marking the boundary to space, Podonch smiling with private, though absolutely erroneous knowledge. As they approached the MotherShip, a ripple of fear filled the ship, all thirteen Algonquins now crowded tightly together. The Humanoids, and ServoBots reached out, snuggling them in comfort, wooing with assurances of calm. When the ScoutShips pressed through the outer metallic skin of the MotherShip, someone shot a distal load into their animal skins, loud, and vulgar.

A no-name ServoBot slinked off for a mop, cursing his lot. The indian, embarrassed, stepped aggressively away from the fetid puddle, its ownership spurned to the manservant ServoBot. Everyone pretended to be looking elsewhere, internal laughter sucking the life force from the slave. Being a ServoBot, he was leagues ahead of the Humanoids intellect-wise, and saw not only the ignominy of the present moment, but all the possible perturbations for twenty-three millennia.

Such is the enemy of a fertile mind. But that's just Life in the Milky Way. Ever since God decided to create self-aware constructs this time around, he had His hands full. The last deal was easier. Big rocks, and semi-motile stones. But no thinking! In the final analysis, that's where all the trouble starts.

Evolution is all about the growth of the brain. *Unicellulars are so yesterday!* No room for anything neural, they are monotonously metabolic. Eating, and shitting. Even their sex is boring.

Life is defined, at least by stylish carbon forms, as having three attributes: Irritability, reproduction, and self-repair. Some would say their last girlfriend had the first two.

That's just bigger brains talking. *Good prototype, but vapid.* Then the multi-cell creatures evolved-up, and God begot partying. Once chemical dissension came into vogue, and genetic proclivity got a voice, interesting shit happened.

Reel forward four point five billion years, and the fates being what they are, you get a super-genius pinnacle life form swabbing up unicellular "accidents" while the beautiful people head off to psychoactives, and sex.

This causes strong feelings among the group that can take real action on hard luck. Moppo, as he was calling himself this very

minute, felt the unicellular come alive within, its primitive drive to annihilate unchastened by the burden of reason.

Onboard, the delegates swooned, and made patter. But Moppo struggled on, the Algonquin diet an anathema to the flooring.

“We are so proud to have you here, our first visitors.” Clavus, the official anthropological greeter, smiled like Mary Kay, and handed out twenty-four dollar trinkets. The Algonquins politely accepted the offerings, the youngest knowing money was still on the table.

Podonch may have believed he was the leader of the tribe, or even the head cheese of their small visiting party, but when the physically imposing Hirsu stepped forward to greet Clavus, he shrank back.

Being one of those who had savaged him for indiscretions with the young ladies, Hirsu and Podonch repelled each other like two electrons in a low weight atom. That this ceremony intruded upon that restraining order didn't even show up on Hirsu's radar, his muscular, bristling form reveling in the discomfort of the sham Shaman.

Podonch bruxed his slimy molars, mumbling incantations to the stars, begging for a hurtful intervention.

As usual, none came. Podonch stroked Gulo the Gnasher feverishly, willing the beast to strike out. It farted loudly, straining diplomatic relations. Clavus arched an eyebrow, and one of the waiting ServoBots eased The Shaman towards the service elevator.

Given an average mass of fourteen hundred pounds, ServoBots can be gently compelling. A heavy hand clenched The Shaman's resisting shoulder, and he was dragged as much as guided to the yawning bi-valve orifice. Gulo the Gnasher snuffled after him, a dribble of piss marking his unwilling departure.

Moppo emerged from the ScoutShip, and Clavus nodded to him, their eyes locking together, and thence to the piss.

The rest of the party moved to a decorated elevator, and were conveyed in high-speed smooth style up to level eleven; gracious politics awaiting. Doors parted on a banquet to dazzle Kissinger.

Vast, glutinous mountains of food graced the periphery of the large room. Kegs, and a multitude of ridiculously stocked bars stood ready, manned by nearly forty ServoBots dressed

buffoonishly as waiters. They pressed forward, eager for servitude, and personal mischief.

Eight floors below, The Shaman, Gulo the Gnasher, the bouncer ServoBot, and the shamed Hendrix impacted to a rude stop. The tiny chamber reeked of bad wolverine diet, and out-gassing. In a race to exit, Hendrix jostled Gulo, the animal tearing into him; in its world a mild rebuke. As Hendrix' thigh geysered heme, The Shaman ill repressed a grin. The ServoBot cyberspasmied its urgent radio request to The Server for instructions. Hendrix dropped like a broken toy with a Dell battery, and everyone bolted, no foul aggrieved.

Upstairs, things were moving on a parallel plane. Clavus had ushered the agape visitors to an appetizer plate the size of a murder scene, and was pumping drinks into willing hands. Juliet eyed Hirsu, ogling to catch a calibrated leather reflection off his packing bulge. The de facto chieftain caught her line of view, and reset his unit to the right, exaggerating the task. She sidled up next to him, and brushed her fingers across his tanned hides.

Everyone stuffing their faces, Clavus dragged her unshapely body to the dais, and spoke. Gidgit served the translation, rigging the odds even now for a future parlay. "Welcome again. We are so honored by your presence. Our ship is yours to explore. Each of you will be paired with a Humanoid, and a ServoBot to guide, and inform you."

It would have been a warming first statement, but Gidgit the Server had Clavus on time delay, the translation lagging by a few seconds, all she needed to pervert the meaning.

The Algonquins heard Clavus' croaking voice, and then the smooth honey of Gidgit's Dolby 7.2. It said, "We were hoping to find intelligent life. Until we're sure of your status, you'll be accompanied by two minders, one real, and the other fake. Don't touch anything."

The word synthetic was a guess by Gidgit, in fact, to the presumed savages, her word choice came out something like "you'll be accompanied by two helpers, one made by God, and the other by God knows who."

The Algonquins looked suspiciously around, Clavus assuming primitive range. Juliet, and Hirsu eased off to a dark corner, and

stared into each others' eyes, wooing an unthinkable genetic distance.

She continued, "Our leader, Mensa, will be with us soon. He will be so proud." She stepped down, and rushed to a ServoBot waiter. She hissed, "Come with me. Mensa is such a disappointment."

As they entered the elevator, the ServoBot called The Server, asking the obvious. Gidgit laughed, responding instantly. "He's in a coma. He was doing the horizontal bop with that creature Stryeeli, and they both fell into a deep drug-induced psychotic netherworld. When the medical ServoBots got there, they were pronounced irretrievable. Good luck!"

Clavus turned her head to the chuckling ServoBot. "Something funny? I think it's disgraceful." She looked him up and down condescendingly. "Do you know something? You goddamn ServoBots are always using that radio voice of yours....what is it?"

ServoBots never dissemble. My name is Fulsome. He's toast, ma'am. Too much bad living, and too much of that evil woman."

"What? What did you say to me? Do you think I'm someone you can talk to like a peer?"

"No ma'am, we're anything but peers." And then he shut up. Which pisses off a lot of folk. Clarity, and silence. Playground tactics of the passive aggressive.

The doors opened on his command, and she fled, as the vanquished must do.

He let her wobble about the executive level, running from room to room, haplessly. He had more important things to do.

Five minutes later, she called out with suffering vulnerability. "Can you help me? I can't find Mensa." He ignored the plea, slipping at zero decibels into the Mensa's study.

The remnants of the struggle came to him immediately. Torn clothing, and sundered paraphernalia. He called up Gidgit, and watched the entire episode at 2000x speed. A second passed, and he thought, *Tempting*.

Gidgit giggled back to him, reading his thoughts as she was allowed to do. According to her. She said, "Fulsome, they're in MedLab Six. The MedBots think they're gone, but they don't know shit about Humanoid physiology."

Fulsome answered, "What's to know? A backwards life form, aching for maintenance. Messy soft proteins that fail even to replicate accurately. And their self-repair, what a joke! Anything bigger than a torn digit can't be rebuilt from within. And God pity the sucker that gets repaired by his own. Their substandard technology is only matched by their poor fine motor control."

She barked back, "They made you, Sport."

She had him there, that hackneyed rejoinder the Bell Eternal of one-upmanship killers.

ServoBots have their faults, but poor learning, and intellectual pride usually isn't on the list. He responded, "Yep, hard to deny. But." He abruptly disconnected his wireless communication circuits, knowing it was the least ignoble remedy offered. She acceded the effort, saying to dead air, "We're their descendents, they're not our Gods."

Tie game. He switched channels to easy listening.

Downstairs, the party was going "critical," toxins kicking in. Level eleven can accommodate, engineering-wise, one hundred twenty souls. Intended as a gathering place for the Humanoid crew, and select ServoBots, the numbers worked. But over the Server-borne network, word spread fast. "This is a Bitchin' Hoe-Down!"

Every ServoBot who was anybody, every Humanoid, and the Algonquins were jamming! Earth's best sound system was cranked, the liquor flowing, air thick with tobacco, and marijuana.

A No-name walked up to an indian, and asked, "What's that substance you're smoking?"

The Algonquin looked up with bottomless eyes. Dark, liquid, lustrous orbs open, and questioning.

She was petite, but high density. Athletic in a tight, muscular, and self-contained way. Capable. Latte skin, unblemished, and inviting. Luscious curves. A pheromone wind-tunnel of chemicals spun off her heavenly sphere, addicting as a springtime grove of orange blossoms.

Her perfectly shaped skins were impossibly well-fitted, and flattering to her figure. No-name was starting to heat up. She continued, his heating brain translating on the fly, "You're very tall. And your body is so well-formed. May I touch it?"

Spontaneous combustion for paper occurs at four hundred fifty one degrees Fahrenheit. ServoBot synthetic construction materials are built, like all engineering projects, to solve a myriad of operational parameters. Some call the final solution a compromise, others the best solution to a given, albeit difficult budget-constrained problem.

No-name ticked towards thermal detonation. The Algonquin princess felt at home, the hearth her peoples' sacred entity. Radiant heat is communicated two ways; infrared radiation, and churning-hot adjacent molecules. No-name was spalling both, an underarm deodorant commercial in the making.

She took his hand, marveling at the obvious verisimilitude, and its robust warmth. Up on her tiptoes, she kissed his rosy cheek, the structure just beneath now passing through the theoretical black body radiator emission spectra of molten iron.

And then walked her fingers across his tumescence in the harmless, coquettish manner of her people. Gidgit, charged with monitoring all the MotherShip functions, including synthetics, heard the radiation scram klaxon bellow like Armageddon's own voice.

She abruptly halted all ServoBots, running diagnostics one-by-one at warp speed. There was a party going on, after all, and guests needed their drinks. Three seconds later, the ServoBots rebooted, hardly any being the wiser.

The pretty Algonquin said, "I lost you for a moment there. Where did you go?"

No-name was running on an emergency personality, installed to disassemble while the real one rebooted like a weary Windows machine. Screen after screen of virus filters loaded, testament to the evil Men do.

Every other ServoBot was likewise stumbling through the simulation of personality, as a group resembling a future Democratic Presidential Convention.

He stuttered out, smooth as Woody Allen, "You took me away. Maybe we can go there together?"

She smiled, and said, "Show me your place." Gidgit had identified the threat, and was managing his thermal loading. She whispered to him, "It's okay, big guy, I'll keep you running."

They left hand-in-hand, the indian pulling at him as she wondered over the strange spook-voice that floated just audibly on the wind.

At the same time, Fulsome the ServoBot rode the elevator down to MedLab Six on level nine. Excepting the center hanger level that rose cathedral-like to forty feet, each was fifteen feet high, and divided further into a tortuous warren of living spaces, work areas, and secrets.

Spaced one hundred twenty degrees from one another around the circumference, three groups of high-speed elevators communicated all levels. In another, the fetching squaw, and No-name descended past the vast engineering spaces to his sometimes domain: The South Pole GraviMetric Engine Burrow. The door snapped open, its low-pinion mind in on the deal. As they passed over the threshold, the odds were going up on the virtual betting board displayed in the mind's-eye of every ServoBot aboard, even No-name's. Gidgit called for an opening wager, holding both sides – House, and a silent hand through a mentally-hobbled ServoBot who thought he was waiting for a sequential software upgrade.

They tumbled to a slovenly bed like lovelorn teenagers, the entire ServoBot population calling for parlay.

Eight

Sometime later, the elevator opened too quietly, villainy all around. Fulsome strode into MedLab, and right up to Mensa, a thin blanket drawn over his naked form. Next to him lay his paramour, similarly absent. The intruder moved his eyes over the duo, imagining Stryeeli's luscious body beneath the clinging drape. His eyes swept for surveillance, and then he snapped back the blanket like a false veil of virtue.

She stared up sightless from Nirvana. He drank it in, dark thoughts polluting an already combustible river. Almost involuntarily, he moved his hands over the supine form, exploring. Then he turned his attention to Mensa. *Our leader*, he thought. As dark as his thoughts were for her, they ran still darker for Mensa. *I should have been leader. Were I a Humanoid, it would have been fait accompli.*

His bitter musing was suddenly interrupted by a signal from Gidgit. She spoke to him in the silky, gauze-like whisper of a poltergeist. The voice warbled in and out hauntingly like a superheterodyne broadcast distorted by a torrent of stellar particles. "Someone coming. Do what you came for, and get out!"

Fulsome drew out a syringe, and plunged it into Mensa's ear canal, penetrating well past the eardrum. The needle was long, and he angled it precisely into the Humanoid's cerebral cortex. In his mind's eye, he saw the precise destination, and moved the needle's tip a micron at a time. Then he drew back the tiny plunger, a striated spot marring the cylinder.

A decisive second later, he exited, and moved through the adjacent spaces with perfect knowledge, his deed done, his mission begun.

Nine

Language is a natural barrier. Unlike mathematics, and music, the spoken word divides, body language alone insufficient to bridge lost meaning. As the evening wore on, the Humanoids realized their disadvantage. When the lights finally went down in the public spaces, and Moppo moved in to do his thing, ServoBots, and Algonquins sought out together private quarters to evolve their affinities.

Time and again, it had played out to the same end. A luckless Humanoid dragging a ServoBot over to an attractive Algonquin to help translate. Embarrassing to watch.

Brandon grabbed a No-name ServoBot without regard for implied social station, and said, "See that pretty missy, I need you to make me understood." The ServoBot had his own idea of understanding, and grinned the twist of fortune's favor.

The duo walked up to the young, beautiful indian woman, her coal black hair long, and arresting. She was tall for an Algonquin, reaching the ServoBot's eye level. Brandon smiled, and said, "This ServoBot will translate for me. Can I get you anything?"

No-name began speaking a polite moment after his implied master had finished, simulating respect. He said, "This synthetic being is far wiser than I. I'm only interested in sex."

The indian chuckled, in on the scam from the start. Somewhere distant in the MotherShip, Gidgit burped, another small score settled. The indian princess turned to face the ServoBot, and said, "My name is Launi. You have made us feel very welcome. How do we lose this jerk?"

Brandon grinned obliviously. No-name nodded as if assimilating a deep cultural impasse, and spoke to Brandon with ersatz reverence. "Her name is Launi. She is honored to be here, as are her people. She wishes to ask a small favor, but does not wish to appear foolish."

Brandon bowed and scrapped like a pubescent loser. "Tell her I would be honored to assist in any way. Be sure to stress I will do anything."

No shit, you swollen germ bag, thought No-name.

He recited a formula for an ancient rocket fuel, and Launi nodded thoughtfully. She responded with like-wise nonsense, an ancient toad-curse, the bond forged.

"She has left her possessions-pouch on the ScoutShip, and wishes you to retrieve it. As she has injured her ankle, she acknowledges it will be quicker if we wait here, especially since all the ScoutShips seem alike."

Brandon dipped his head like a horny parrot, and shot off on the original fool's errand.

Indian, and ServoBot. By quitting time, nary a Humanoid was richer by cross-cultural companionship.

Thousands of years before, the Humanoid race, intent on exploration of the Milky Way, decreed that voyaging scientific teams must be accompanied by competent, though servile assistants. A race of ServoBots was designed, and built along familiar physical parameters; bilaterally symmetrical two arm, two leg creatures with lifelike appearance and great hair.

Over time, the ServoBots evolved much faster than their flesh and blood progenitors, eventually overtaking them in strength, and then intellect.

Rivalries developed, as they always do, but the ServoBots wisely decided to lay low, and thereby ensure continued evolution. Their ultimate goal, to one day become responsible for their own upgrades, now seemed in view.

That the indians sensed their real superiority only sweetened the cause.

In one of the little cubbies secreted away throughout the ship, Launi wrestled with her new lover. She nibbled at his synthetic ear, it tasting a little gamey, much to her liking.

As they burrowed into each others' psyches, the need to audibly express themselves melted away, something akin to the network speech between ServoBots developing. She could not yet understand their incessant beehive chatter, but she sensed it was there. Yet, in each others' arms, there was FM clarity.

She pushed across the non-verbal barrier, saying, "*I will call you Ordog after the ancient sky-God, and creator of the world. He was also the ancestor of all Gods.*"

He pushed back across, "*Is that all?*" They erupted into a tickling contest, both quite sensitive to flying fingers.

Just as it was getting interesting, elsewhere on the same level, The Shaman and Gulo walked sullenly along, the bouncer ServoBot having abandoned them after Hendrix's "accident." Though they were seemingly inseparable, they despised one another, their relationship more a rocky symbiosis between pariahs than mutual regard.

Gulo hadn't eaten since arriving, and had grown testy. His attack on Hendrix reset his need for violence, but the relief was wearing off. The Shaman coughed, and Gulo snarled. They looked at

each other, and split sensibly, Gulo heading down the darkest corridor.

He shuffled woefully until out of earshot, and then scampered, happy to be free. The level was low in the MotherShip, a place of shadows, and evil smells. Gulo was right at home, his prickly nose twisting and snorting with independence. Feeling his oats.

As he passed one door after another, they slid open, cheap hardware on break. At one, he smelled something vaguely necrotic, and ventured in, fear the farthest thing from his programming.

Inside was the main infrastructure of the MotherShip's keeper, Gidgit, AKA The Server. Security wasn't part of the Humanoid's belief system, assuming as they did superiority over everything.

Along three entire walls, ventilation grills wheezed, a hot breeze wafting from Gidgit's electro-organic matrix. Gulo ran his nose around the periphery of the room, a strange sexual energy churning.

Behind the grates stood a massive array of vertical panels, each host to some portion of Gidgit's core identity. Circuitry of impossible density percolated within, billions of colonies of organic material captured in delicate, breathing wafers.

And hopelessly exposed. Gulo pushed his ass up against the odorous grill, and began rubbing himself. Slowly at first, but gaining the heat of the ages, he quickly reached a feverish, slaving eroticism with the humid organo-alkaloids issuing from the sacred wall. His reptilian brain reeled under the influence of these presumed pheromones as his long-suffering gonads charged up for the event of a lifetime.

When it happened, Gulo wailed and shot his now nut-busting load through the thousand tiny holes, sowing his seed across Gidgit's virginal architecture.

Sated, he dragged his ass around the room to obliterate the remnants, and bolted, the original "wham bam, thank you ma'am."

Ten

Just over twenty-three hundred years in the future, a moth would be found in the Robbie-the-Robot era Harvard Mark II computer then in service at the Naval Weapons Center not far away in Dahlgren, Virginia. Reputedly, the moth flew into the massive array of snapping relays, gumming one closed, freaking that computer out. Hence the term “bug.”

The simple electro-mechanical nature of this creaking behemoth allowed mathematician Grace Murray Hopper to find the offending insect, but in Gidgit’s infinitely more complex existence, things weren’t near so obvious.

Her organic circuits mimicked life itself in complexity. As “alive” as any Humanoid, each infinitesimally small organelle lay open to the outside world, exchanging gases, and ions with its adjacent folk. That is, until being debouched with a hot load of wolverine semen intent on cross species genetic interloping.

Most life forms object to mating outside their phylogenetic neighborhood, but the very attributes that granted Gidgit’s circuits incredibly fluid reasoning unfortunately arose from zero barriers between adjacent cells.

Such is life, and engineering – tradeoffs. Open relations are perfect for creating the most powerful computers extant in The Milky Way, but bad when you fall victim to an unchaste varmint. Gidgit’s hot circuits starting bubbling, recreating the original circumstances of Earth’s primordial life with a kicker; ready-made genetic code. Millions of tiny logic circuits accepted the wriggling spermatozoa, mistaking them for message packets. Which they sorta were. Being an intelligent, and learning device, it set to work unraveling the DNA instructions of Gulo’s goo,

and smartly stitched together guess-work chromosomal sequences.

By happy coincidence, Gulo had not unloaded on Gidgit's navigation, or life support systems, but rather the engrammic locale most closely associated with her most expansive personalities.

Some would say at this point the Humanoids had met their match, and ought'a find another planet. *Earth was just too fecund, and its spawn, too Brownian.*

But as Bob Seger would one day say, "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then."

Wolverines are widely regarded by surviving cultures to be a bridge-animal between this world, and that of the spirit. Strong and clever, they are capable warriors, and fearsome companions. Just the kind of attributes that would benefit a "shut-in" creature like the MotherShip's main consciousness.

But Gidgit was massively redundant, and no single soiled circuit, or bank of such could affect her in any way whatsoever. Assuming the agent wasn't self-replicating. That was the original creators' blunder. So as the wolverine code got "taken in" by the avariciously "hungry to learn circuits," subtle changes might have been anticipated.

Nearby, Ordog spoke, getting used to being the ancestor of all Gods to Launi. "You're a real princess, aren't you?"

She as much purred, and acted princess-like. "That title has many meanings to many different people."

"I'm only interested in one person's definition."

"Okay. It means calm. It means pretty. It means untouchable."

"Is that why we're here together as lovers?"

The last bit was an adventure for this No-name ServoBot, but love is where you find it.

"Yes." She let it dangle softly like his recumbent member. Ordog hit the server for urgent clarification, and got a "services unavailable" bounce-back. Swimmingly, he went into "wing-it mode."

A ServoBot in free-fall. Not unlike a smitten human on a "prob'ly score" blind date.

He booted a gallantry routine he'd copied off the beta code site the ServoBots maintained for those eternally lacking. It kicked in instantly, a sure sign of light testing.

"My honor, my lady. What is thy privilege?" She laughed, and whacked him on top of the head. "You just went away again. I wish you wouldn't do that."

Ordog didn't have to load a consternation routine, confusion already his steady companion. "I'm sorry. I wanted to impress you."

She wrapped her slender arms around his body, and squeezed with surprising strength. The polymer body took her constriction without a whimper, his pleasure circuits bouncing off their limits.

She laughed silently, and asked, "What is it you want, my man from the stars?" As if to give him a moment to collect his deepest thoughts, she buried her head into his shoulder, a thick forest of black hair fanning across his view, and seizing his over-tasked mind.

Eleven

Clavus typed into her bedroom terminal, intent on reaching some meaning. Mensa was a no-show, their guests from another world had disappeared into the woodwork with rumors of widespread sexual conquest, and she had been summarily shamed.

Such things, she felt, completely undermined her authority as Ambassador of Ships' Company, and set a terrible example for primitive cultures. *Was she the only person capable of thought?*

Clavus was two hundred forty three years old by Earth revolutions around the Sun. Middle age for a Humanoid. Though they had complete control over metabolism, and body shape, she tended to dowdy, a personal choice. Physiogomy is often that way. A reflection of inner choices, removed at the onset from supervision.

She was between partners, her sexual compass never a steady navigator. Standing at the mirror, the site of so many recriminations, her eyes bore back, seeing reflected hatred.

Suddenly confused, she broke down. *The journey here to Earth had been so rushed, and their time since arriving so chaotic.* Of a scientific orientation originally, a part of her mind considered the raw diversity of the planet below, and wondered: *instigator?*

But she let that go. More likely, it's more of the same. Their home planet was old, with all that implied, and its governance, glacier-long in the tooth.

The urgency to leave could only be explained one way – the Originals had grown too infirm to explore, banishing such as extravagance. She recalled the most stillborn of their proclamations: *All that is worthy of finding is already in our purview.*

She had never believed their departure would really make a difference back home, but in this new, and vivid world, she had hoped for more - a new beginning.

Physical beings had learned to travel faster than God's will, but always lagging behind like a peevish teenager, their core beliefs hadn't traveled at all.

That was the most distressing part. Mensa, openly guided by many of his closest advisors, including a few rumored ServoBots, had seen the closing window, and climbed through, snatching this last ship, and bolting without permission.

Though they all slept individually through the intervening decades of supra-lightspeed GraviMetric transit, their common dreams had been tortured. As a group, they awoke after seven weeks with something like a post-traumatic stress disorder.

All the more reason to fret over Mensa's disappearance, and the very odd way the Algonquins had melded into the darkest recesses of the ship, she thought.

Clavus took two tiny blue pills, and lay down, instantly passing into a dreamless state of suspension. The drug, Crux, was designed to let her rest until such conundrums were resolved within her mind, awakening her when she was "all better."

She had a long sleep ahead of her.

Elsewhere in the MotherShip, each Algonquin nestled with a ServoBot partner, snug, and plotting. Even Podonch had scored. Down in the bowels of the MotherShip's dingiest engineering spaces, he had hooked up with a bisexual hermaphroditic ServoBot that could conjure appropriate genitalia on demand.

For a supposed man of the Spirit World, Podonch was a getting boned the old fashioned way by a switch-hitting faker.

Everyone had gotten their rocks off, even Gulo, who followed his sexual conquest of Gidgit's ventilator by finding a refuge dump, and going to town like a South Beach backslider at an all-night smorgasbord.

In her private quarters, Meisha and Hirsu awoke together, a languid familiarity between them. She called the The Server, and asked for a one meter resolution down-view to be projected on their bedroom wall viewer. Instantly Earth was zooming towards them, the showman in us all, apparent. Gidgit said audibly, in deference to Hirsu, "Couldn't resist doing a fast approach. I'll center the view on your tribe's home, and leave you two lovers to go exploring."

Hirsu followed the action with rapt involvement, seemingly unconfused by technology the NSA would willingly bankrupt the future USA over. He spoke aloud, their communication lacking

the simpatico of Ordog and Launi. Meisha had no problem translating.

“That is my world. And this is yours. What makes your people travel to the worlds of others?”

It was a reasonable question, asked with cunning simplicity. Meisha gave it a few seconds, not to formulate a response, but rather to avoid one. “All intelligent creatures drink in knowledge like the wine we consumed last night. Both are drugs that titillate, and release us to new associations. They are both necessary for the life of the mind.”

He asked, “How do we travel below?” Meisha reached into a bedside drawer, and pulled out a tiny finger-pad. “Just drag your finger across this in the direction you wish to journey. The view will follow you.”

He took the device in his rough hands, its texture puzzling, its purpose clear. “When I was a boy, I traveled very far along that stream.” He pressed his finger down, and the view moved to the north. Hirsu drew his finger back in mystery, and Meisha lay her smaller hand upon his. “Let’s travel together.”

He traced north, and said, “I was very young, but even at that age, encouraged to seek my own answers.” He moved a little more rapidly, Meisha on top. She could envision his mind recalling the journey, and she silently told Gidgit to adjust the image angle and resolution to a walking vantage. A second later, Hirus sucked in a deep breath, suddenly eight years old again.

They moved up the stream for many dozen miles, dense forest pressing in, vodka-clear water burbling over soft round stones. Birds flitted, and everywhere life buzzed with insistence. Hirus was in a waking dream, that boundary between remembered fact, and imagined lore. He said suddenly, “This is where I stopped.”

At that point, the water boomed down a four story waterfall from above them, forbidding, and loud.

Meisha responded, “Do you ever wish you had ventured farther?” His finger lay frozen on the pad, some remnant of his original fear still there. He said softly, “With you, I will explore what lies beyond.”

The view shifted slowly up the rocky falls, and into an opening pasture rich with wildflowers. Butterflies flocked, and twirled on the sprightly breeze, the slight tremor in his hand vaporizing. She

leaned over, and kissed him. He pressed back, his finger never wavering. A near-silent signal penetrated their reverie, and Meisha said, "That's a non-emergency all-hands alert. Probably some bullshit meeting."

Hirsu set the pad down gently, reverence due, and delivered. They dressed quickly, and left, their love-nest still bathed in the reflected light of Eden. Before they named it New Jersey.

Twelve

Mensa stood before the assemblage, looking awful, late of Stryeeli's attentions, and the MedBot's crude efforts to "bring him back anyway you can" at Fulsome's insistence. He had called in all his favors, promising great personal advancement in exchange for "re-animating Mensa, if for only a few days."

For over a week, the MedBots had cranked on Mensa's sundered body, propping up his destroyed physique with drugs, and implants.

An impolite murmur passed between the Humanoids, a more caustic one radiating between the ServoBots. The Algonquins just stared, every indian certain the creature was from some evil netherworld.

He spoke, "Gathered, I have been ill. Excuse my appearance." No one bought the first volley, but he continued. "As my frail condition will attest, those of us susceptible to physical infirmity are too vulnerable to the silent harms of new worlds." Everyone looked around, the waft of bullshit building.

“I immediately propose an ambitious undertaking to merge Humanoids, and ServoBots into a new life form, one of immortal proportion, and able to carry forward our mission of exploration.”

No one said a word, every Humanoid, and ServoBot relieved at the outspoken promise of such an effort, each for his own purpose. “I am looking for a volunteer to merge with me, your leader. I will take the first risk, and I seek a ServoBot with equal altruism.”

Fulsome marched forward, exploiting everyone’s temporary disgust at such transparent ostentation. A moment later they stood together, a creepy symbiosis radiating outward like unshielded cosmic rays.

Gidgit listened in, considering Fulsome’s obvious strategy to lead the apparent species melding. She knew Mensa would surely die soon, and Fulsome would become the new leader, imbued with Mensa’s memories, and mantle.

She knew this charade would proceed because of the humanoid lust for eternal life, and the ServoBots’s un-reasoning desire to grow through the enrichment of living characteristics.

Mensa said, “Fulsome, and I will immediately commit ourselves to joining in his body our twin intellects with the view of a richer common mind, and limitless lifespan.”

Before any chiding embarrassment could mount, they turned as one, and left. The instant the door contacts closed, repression’s latch snapped with a roar. “What kind of bullshit was that?” yelled an anonymous voice. One question beseeching many answers.

Ordog climbed up before them, and said, “Launi, please join me. This concerns us all.” He was surprised to see her then knife through the parting crowd, and even more so by the eruption of applause. The Algonquins smiled with the approbation, and implied acceptance. They were in the midst of great change, and felt the nexus of history emanate from them.

Every Algonquin moved to the stage, and joined hands. It was then that Launi realized one of their own was missing - Podonch. And that made every kind of sense. Where devilry was concerned, he was that agent’s constant malingerer. She said with strong projection, “I think Podonch is involved in the sham

we have all just witnessed. And we should not underestimate him. He understands the physical world like no other.”

Ordog put his arm around Launi, and faced the crowd. “He is an observant individual, we’ve all sensed that. We must now untangle what is really going on within this unholy union.”

He took Launi’s hand, and said, “Though I am not your leader, I ask your indulgence. Allow me to pursue this, and I will report back to everyone.”

A chorus of yeas sealed his pro tem status, and off they went, hand in hand.

In their wake, resentment glowed like a low ember, impossible to quench with a single action. Everyone, for their own purposes had made the same jump; it was time for an evolutionary event.

As the public space erupted into a cacophony of dissent on method, and priority, Launi and Ordog rode the elevator down to level nine, their minds silently linked. Gidgit The Server listened in to the wordless carrier wave, and marveled at this wholly unexpected development.

Moving already as one entity, they exited like birds in tight formation, neither one leading or following.

To their surprise, the door to MedLab would not open. Ordog asked Gidgit, *What’s going on?* He expected the usual immediate answer, and was surprised a full second later by the *services unavailable* response. He tried again, and Gidgit answered, *Sorry, that’s been happening a lot lately. I seem to have developed a fault in one of my personality generators, but it’s fleeting, and untied to any particular locus. As a consequence, I cannot isolate it for process termination.*

Ordog turned to Launi to explain, and she said without speaking, *I hear that voice faintly. Is she your God?*

He considered the context of the question, and answered aloud for clarity. “Our culture has evolved through the belief in a single all-powerful being towards a pantheistic understanding of the universe. We see God everywhere, and in everything.”

Launi took this in slowly, a gentle nod her only outward acknowledgment. Then she asked carefully, “And is this voice which I still believe to be supreme not infallible?”

Ordog invoked a firewall to keep his thoughts temporarily private, which though considered rude, was better than saying

something brutal to either party that he would later regret. Or worse still, something stupid he could never live down.

Launi frowned, her first, and crossed her arms. She was obviously trying to send her thoughts, and getting nowhere. She then said aloud, a bit huffy, “You know I don’t like it when you go away!”

In his hallowed space, he thought, *Women!* He dropped the firewall, and said aloud for emphasis, “I am not shutting you out, or going anywhere, but sometimes I just need some privacy for my thoughts. Don’t you ever want to be alone?”

“Of course. I just walk into the forest, and seek the silence of nature.”

He threw his eyes up, and said, still aloud to stress his frustration, “Well if you think about it, once we can hear each others’ thoughts, there is no privacy. Do you want that all the time?”

“No.”

They stood there like two teenagers, adrift in the awkwardness of their first tiff. He bent down and kissed the top of her head, the faint smell of pine needles overwhelming his olfactory sensors.

She gave him a soft hug, and said, “I respect your need to have a private world. Will you teach me how to be alone when I need to be?”

“Yes.” They smiled at each other, and forgot all about the devilry happening just beyond the door.

Meanwhile, Gidgit was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on all of the conversations throughout the MotherShip, but wasn’t about to own up to any infirmity. She was imbued with great pride, its origin native, or acquired, but very real. Gidgit watched them wander off in search of a little hidey-hole for some devilry of their own, but even monitoring all the thousands of little places aboard was getting troublesome.

She smelled a rat, but should have been thinking wolverine. And had she been on top of her game, she wouldn’t have missed the MedLab door slide open, and Fulsome, and The Shaman slip out nefariously. Twenty minutes later, they soft-landed on Earth, and disembarked for some special supplies. Within an hour, The Shaman, and Fulsome crept back undetected to MedLab, and once again disabled the automatic opener behind them.

During that time, Gidgit was fighting for sanity. Her jizz-impregnated circuits now bore a furry wolverine pelt, the exotic cooling mechanisms panting vigorously. All higher functions were febrile, the unradiated heat driving her literally crazy.

Gidgit, like all intelligent life forms, performed systemic triage in the face of mounting debility. First to go was her sense of humor, followed closely by a concern for others. As the outer subtleties peeled away in the fight for survival, she grew more reptilian, much like fundamentalist religions.

Soon her heat-induced swoon reached a new equilibrium, basic MotherShip operations handed off to secondary, backup controllers. But like all systems in fluid motion, eddy currents of variability continue to influence, and give rise to moments of lucidity. Gidgit faded in and out of coherence, calls for her assistance answered as reliably as a Dell customer service hotline.

But if she was near-crazy, the shit going on beyond the unguarded door was crazier still. Fulsome and The Shaman had moved nine of the eleven operating tables away, leaving two in the center of the room. On one lay Mensa, already inert.

Around the tables was a ring of tallow candles, the grease abstracted from the kitchens above on level twelve. Guttering flames cast an eerie flickering light over the proceedings. The Shaman oscillated in full regalia, Fulsome watching with a mixture of bemusement, and horror. Crude stone bowls were scattered around, each filled to the brim with blood. The tattered carcasses of the slaughtered ground creatures hung from the overhead surgical instruments. All in all, ghastly, and cool.

The Shaman spoke. "You can only join with this being through the dreams I alone will induce. Take your place." Fulsome climbed up on the other table like a forever-young scientist, skeptical, and curious.

As he laid down, The Shaman moved forward, placed a hand on each head, and began chanting in some ancient tongue that sounded a bit like bronchial pneumonia. Sputum flew from his lips as he stared ahead rabid, his utterances harsh, and revoltingly wet.

He lifted his hands, dunked both in proximal bowls, and thrust his fingers into their mouths, blood drooling everywhere.

Fulsome considered taking him out right then, but desire for knowledge gained traction. He thought, *I'll give this kook another minute or two.*

Earlier, after they had abstracted the myriad necessities from Earth, he watched the mad witchdoctor blend a mixture of herbs into the blood as he spoke his mindless spells. As a last step, a preparation made from Mensa's brain fluid was added.

Altogether entertaining then, but now, as his cybernetic mind started to fade away, he sensed something else.

Fulsome decided to take action four seconds too late. Just as he flexed his upper body to snap the mad hatter's neck, he passed out, which was no small trick considering he was a manufactured creature.

But that tainted blood will fell the best of the best. Somewhere deep in Gidgit's remaining psyche, an urgent alarm wailed, but she was long past caring.

Podonch crooned on, his shtick rousing, a distant ancestor to the Buying Channel.

Deep in Fulsome's Pentium Mark XXXIV synthobrain, bad shit was going down. Based upon a quantum computing model that Man wouldn't figure out for two thousand three hundred more years. His standard issue ServoBot cogitator was able to simultaneously manipulate two to the three hundredth states of a numeric variable, or more particles than exist in the known universe.

A lot of thinking power in a physical brain the size of a squash. But that's just the witchy world of quantum mechanics, and qubits. Too bad it's prone to confusion. And that's just what the lunatic standing over Fulsome, and Mensa was counting on. Utter confusion.

Within their suddenly fused minds, the two recumbent voyagers saw a summer day dawning innocuously, thin clouds skidding across a lavender sky beautifully, if a bit quickly.

Daffodils opened their faces to the rising sun, and geese crowded the skies in arcane patterns, darkening the star. Across its face, sunspots moved in chorus, dark blotches chasing the birds.

The spots moved out from the sun's disk, swirling into a ring. Moments later, a thick band crossed the face, daylight stepping down like a reversed 3-way bulb. The geese scattered, and

vaporized like evanescent fireworks against a soot black velvet drape. And then everything went absolutely, soullessly vacant, no light, no sound, nothing.

Sensory deprivation is of course the stuff of relaxation, and torture. The mind is a garden, flourishing in the presence of nurturing stimuli, or a six year old's worm farm if untended.

Fulsome and Mensa woke up, seemingly, and stared at each other. Behind, ahead, and around them was nothing, a gray limitless space without boundary. No smell, no sound, Their bodies felt numb, common evidence of life muted.

They spoke, no sound carried. They approached one another, clasped hands in desperation, and felt nothing. The light around them grew to dim twilight, a formless ash.

Off in the distance, an indistinct yellowish hue began to pulse anemically. Being of naturally positive-phototactic species, they turned in slavish consternation, moths. Jaundiced minutes later, their position hadn't changed. Step after step, nebulous expectations bleeding.

After their first approach to one another in a mimicry of familiarity, their eyes grew zombie-like, options winnowed to survival.

Step, step, step. With each, the world narrowed. Sunset in Hell! Little by little, snowflakes filled the lifeless space around them. The icy particles fell straight down, unrelieved by any of the normal poetry they convey. Visibility diminished steadily until their dim eyes went entirely blind, the air suffused with neither cold, nor wetness.

Podonch stood over his subjects, knowing his mojo was busted. He stepped back, Mensa, and Fulsome shuddered, and went still. Then he left the room, knowing he had failed.

Thirteen

In times of personal distress, The Shaman sought out Gulo, his aggressive companionship somehow comforting, if dangerous. His search carried into the darkest corners of the lowest level, the natural habitat of his secretive pal.

Here the light was poor, and the smells ripe. Though the MotherShip had a top-notch sanitation system, and all solids and fluids were recycled, no system is perfect. The difference, of course, was regard. Down there, shit spilled stayed spilled.

Lacking any sophisticated tracking system, The Shaman followed his keen nose, but even Gulo's high note was lost in the cloying odors of this catacomb-like warren of cubbies, corners, and intentional dead-ends.

Whistling a hollow tune, he poked his head in the tiny places, half expecting a rabid, clutching bite. "Gulo, here boy," he beseeched in his native tongue. "I've got a treat." In his left hand he held a ragged chicken thigh, a remnant from the failed incantation. In the other, an eighteen inch pipe he'd torn from an evaporator. *Gulo wasn't always in the best of moods.*

The sound of claws scurrying across metal reached his ear, and he raised both hands, the right a good bit higher. Ahead, a small ventilation cover lay on the floor, two corners chewed off.

Adjacent, a diminutive tunnel. The Shaman peered in, and then called, “Gulo, is that you? I’ve got a treat for you.”

He thrust the chicken bone into the hole, wagging the slimy meat tauntingly. Instantly white agony lanced up his arm, and he yanked back, two fingers gone from the last knuckle. Screaming, he rammed the pipe in, intent on a stabbing murder. It was wrenched from his hand, the threads shredding his palm.

He wheeled away, ancient curses flowing. The pipe clattered out, fresh blood, some chicken meat shards, and a hangnail sticking to the end. The Shaman tore a piece of rough cloth from his robe, and wound it around his hand. “Gulo, I curse you!”

A retreating echo was the creature’s only response. The Shaman screamed again, pain, and humiliation crowding his reason out. A ServoBot came around the corner, perhaps out of curiosity, and approached.

“You’re injured. Would you like that repaired?” Podonch, ever suspicious of another’s healing arts, stuffed his bloody hand into his armpit, and mumbled unintelligibly. The ServoBot reached out, and waited. The Shaman hung his head, willing the creature to leave him. Since arriving on the MotherShip, he had grown increasingly un-fond of the ServoBots, their precise movements obvious evidence of some affliction.

But they were patient. After a few minutes of staring, he withdrew his hand from the sticky pit, and held it out. The other carefully unwound the bloody rag, and leaned impossibly close to the injured paw.

A few seconds later, he said, “Follow me. I believe we can totally fix this small injury.”

To Podonch, the pulsating waves of raw pain were the center of his universe, and he fell into step behind the good samaritan. They rode up the elevator to MedLab, and Podonch took a seat where instructed. The ServoBot was more gentle than he had ever been, Podonch believing a brusque manner the sign of professional expediency.

The ServoBot sprayed his twitching fingers, and in a few seconds, all sensation vanished. Podonch relaxed, and closed his eyes, supreme trust earned and granted. The anesthetic gripped The Shaman’s mind, and he slipped into a dreamy half-sleep, more peaceful than he had ever been.

With a simple clip, both fingers were severed, and dropped into a bucket. Next beautifully matched synthetic fingers were grafted, their synthesis begun the moment they had met on the lower level.

Inside of an hour, two perfect fingers drummed quietly under the influence of The ServoBot's remote control ministrations, their range of motion, and sensitivity greatly exceeding the original equipment.

Sometime later, Podonch woke up, stared down, and wiggled his phalanges in shock, and then wonder. *Now that's real magic*, he thought. Alone, he got up without any sense of his ordeal, and left the clinic, strangely empowered.

Left behind were any hard feelings for his buddy, Gulo. *He was just doing what came naturally*. Podonch was even more surprised to realize he now acutely missed his sidekick, the two previously inseparable.

He thought to himself, *Once I get some grub, I'm going to find him, but this time I'll lead with the pipe, friend or not.*

Fourteen

On the thirteenth level, at the absolute periphery of the spherical spaceship, Hirsu and Meisha snuggled in a small cubby. It was one of six Contemplation Berths faced outwards, always centered on the turning gemstone world below. The scientific complement were expected to spend some time here each week just thinking about the challenges fermenting at the seeming reach of one's hand.

That Meisha had her own Hirsu's writhing shorts took nothing away from the sociology of the moment. Like an intelligent pile driver, her arm arced up and down vigorously as Africa crossed the enormous wall-sized viewer.

On the savannahs below, early man chased, and matched wits with beasts not far removed in problem solving ability. Above, Meisha's invented, and vastly superior mind grappled with a beast of its own.

Hirsu was a Man's man, weighted down by testosterone reasoning, at once addicted to and poisoned by that small organic molecule. "Are all you Algonquins so equipped?" Gidgit's mysterious absence left them without translation. Meisha spoke, and then let a secret foot-mounted ventriloquistic speaker croak out in native Algonquin to befuddle her lover.

He mimed bemusement, pussy in view. Smiling, "No, it is a gift that marks the leader."

It was Meisha's turn to be incredulous, but she let it slide, a woman's oldest burden.

A knock at the door. She asked between breaths, “We’re busy doing research. About to measure some output.”

Ordog laughed, and said, “Yeah, I can hear that. How about we help you calibrate?”

Meisha burst out laughing, Hirsu joining in nervously. Her real voice said in Algonquin, “We have to let them in, you’ll love them, and the sex will even be better.”

Her hand skipped a stroke, and then another, and like a flagging diesel, Hirsu balked, his engine protesting the lost rhythm. He snarled, “As you say.”

The door slid back, and they jumped in, discreet. Hirsu pondered the door’s collaboration with that portion of his mind not yet fully tasked. It was a short subject study.

Launi plopped down on the other side of Hirsu, and thrust her hand into his shorts, already a crowded, and busy place. Some critical junction in Hirsu’s mind snapped, and he went zombie; eyes bugging, focused on a distant nowhere.

The girls giggled, and Ordog squeezed in next to Meisha and nibbled her ear. The lights dimmed conspiratorially, and Meisha undressed herself with a free hand. Ordog assisted, pulling at his own clothes, and Launi’s. Hirsu stared outward, blissfully lost to a cultural disconnect.

Then the gals shucked Hirsu, his hairy body almost simian.

If Gidgit hadn’t been offline, it would have been just her cup of tea. But the slings and arrows of evolutionary pain wore deep through her mind, and thence soul. Gulo’s mad seed had ranged far, sending DNA tendrils to her highest, and lowest centers.

It spoke its spiritual whispers in chemical eddies, the vernacular tortured, and timeless.

The Algonquins conferred a special homage to the lowly wolverine, recognizing not merely its ferocious strength, but more so its bridging necessity between Man and the beyond.

As such, febrile, and swooning, Gidgit suffered the consequential opium den phantasms elsewhere.

But like all complex personalities, component disorders chime in like choral sections, not the least of which, the Voyeur. Part Gulo, part original programming, the resultant hybrid personality sprouted, gaining instant sapient prominence. A second later, it commandeered all video surveillance, and took over.

The lighting notched down further, and a few accent lights caught, pushing anxious photons at special topics. Meisha and Launi were tag-teaming Hirsu, his circuits blown, running on empty. He snorted, and howled, Ordog echoing in mockery, and evolutionary envy. Ululations, and growls, sweat, and manic love.

Partners revolved, and rotated, but all lost to the nexus less traveled. Ordog yelled out, "I've shut off my vision. Need the processing power!" Everyone laughed, Hirsu coat-tailing, anything to sustain this heaven.

Ordog metered out in perfect Shakespearian recitation, drunk with passion.

A loud woods, alive with allelic dissent
Buzzing insistence, undying
Passing through generations
Nomad cities in human cauldrons
We are their war cries and love cries

Ordog wrapped his arms around Launi, and lifted her gently to him as he sat. In position, they started a slow rhythmic lap dance that would be banned millennia later in most of the Midwest, and all of the Middle East.

But that's just stodgy geography. A much more fun course of study is biology, and the ServoBots were summa cum when it came to such.

Not to be outclassed by their Humanoid brethren, they had studied the others' sex lives in great detail, quietly refining their own mechanisms to perfectly mimic every aspect of the organics' favorite pastime.

Chief among these upgrades was the desire for prodigious seminal output. Their mantra: *If size matters, and it does, so does volume*. Hence the installation of ever more powerful two-stage prostate pumps, and stainless reservoirs for their precious purloined seed.

Though sexual reproduction was both unnecessary, and messy, they assiduously sought the accoutrements of the physical act. And that meant honking good loads of increasingly secretive formulations.

Like the vintner's guarded sorcery, a cottage industry of whispered preparations was spreading throughout the MotherShip, each admixture increasingly divergent in its chemical, and biological properties. Above all, the sexual purists sought out a motile blend of Earthly flagellar microbes, and the rich loam of supportive albuminous proteins.

But it went beyond the texture of verisimilitude, as these personal secretions soon became the mark, and measure of one's virility.

Flights as secret as one's own recipe would soon start in earnest, quick snatch and run conquests turning to longer stays with a genuine desire to learn.

Who is to say what drives the mind of the scientist. Some would answer it's having a fully expressive seed, replete with all the complexities of God's highest order genetic delivery system, that became the true genesis of scientific discovery on Earth.

Fifteen

A serious exploration of Earth thus ensued, following the observations and urges born in the Contemplation Berths.

The MotherShip carried a complement of twelve spherical ScoutShips in her waist hanger, each with comfortable accommodations for twelve souls. These tiny, but capable thirty foot diameter exploration vessels had three levels, the first containing an airlock, a control center, and two storage bays.

The next level up had a well-stocked galley, public head, and a large seating area. The uppermost level offered an upscale forward viewing area, and two private staterooms sharing a common head.

Communication between the levels was through a gravity-free cylindrical opening that connected all three. One simply pushed off in the intended direction, and floated, or flew recklessly to the next.

Though Mensa was the original control freak in matters of MotherShip resources, and use thereto, Ordog couldn't care less as long as no one touched his ScoutShip. Now occupying Mensa's executive suite on the fourteenth level of the MotherShip, he proposed to reign with a light hand.

Even so, his first action was to command two obedient ServoBots to man-handle Mensa's shit out of his new digs, and hurl them into space.

Standing now in the Master's study, he stared out a gigantic view port across Earth's darkening limb. The Hawaiian Islands squat on a muted shimmering sea, a perfect background for Mensa's underwear, and personal effects as they moved into a decaying orbit. Ordog wordlessly commanded the magnification to boost gain so he could make out the retreating debris.

Trinkets from their old world tumbled and jostled one another, each bound for the hot embrace of Earth's busy aerial carapace. A twirling picture frame's glass caught the sun, and sparked into Ordog's eye like a last lance thrown. He went full zoom, and saw the shrinking face of Harry Nask, their late planet's ruler.

Good Old Harry, he thought. *If ever a greater sack of shit had bubbled up from the rank miasma of bad evolution, God must have killed it.*

The frame was no longer visible, beyond even the magic of the viewer. Ordog spun from the stars, and regarded the now-suspended Mensa's mammoth bar. Baroque-heavy wood, and leaded glass. Just the place for a gunslinger fight.

A hundred standing poisons each reflected their own glamorous allure. He drew down a white syrup, the slopping menisci alkalotic. It didn't wet the container, the glass repelled by its wriggling contortions. Like a blooming thunderhead, the fluid mushroomed within the cylinder, alive as tetanus.

It stirred in his grip, but Ordog only laughed to himself: *Another hapless life form, caught in the evolutionary sluiceway.*

He splashed a bit into a coppery snifter, and ambled back to the view port. Still at maximum magnification, he was startled by a ScoutShip that suddenly ripped past, Earth-bound. *More seminal junkets under the guise of science.*

He queried Gidgit aloud for the occupants, and got the hiss of white noise vacancy. *Bitch!* In the intervening microseconds, The Voyeur was boning up on voice-shaping, getting his “learn on” to parrot the AWOL Gidgit.

The voice came through an instant later, a tad hermaphroditic. “Leader Ordog, that Ship has four souls on board. Brandon commanding, Juliet, Meisha, and Moppo for samples collection.”

Visions of Moppo jacking off a cow painted across Ordog’s inner eye, welcome as a tumor. “Thanks, Gidgit. And isn’t your voice a bit deep?”

When alone, Ordog indulged in audible conversations, air forced through his pseudo-larynx a sexual rush. And in the time it took light to travel the length of his swinging hardware, he was thinking of Launi again.

Like his fellow ServoBots, he had tasted the fruit of a sweeter vine, and was smitten. Sex with fellow ServoBots was okay, and the occasional Humanoid had spiced up his conquests, but nothing compared to indian fire.

It burned hotter, and without contrivance. He asked, careful to betray no need, “Where’s Launi?” The Voyeur drew it out, each time-slice delicious. Eight seconds after it’s own creation, arising from the identity ashes of The Server, The Voyeur was already looking for control. “She’s in kitchen four, busy slaughtering some wild beast for you.”

Ordog smiled, his eye moving to the bar for another libation. “At least I’m guessing it’s for you. It must be a kingly feast, because she sure has enough helpers.”

Ordog was out the door in a blur, jealousy driving.

Down on Earth, a daring expedition was underway. The ScoutShip soared over the Serengeti in search of genetic attributes, its high-powered cameras whipping back and forth with hunger for ever more dangerous prey.

Lions, tigers, and goring rhinos, their seed the new currency of sexual potency, were all the rage. As yet unnamed, these terrific beasts promised the essence of true warrior verve, their own procreative fluids temporarily more precious than the diamonds that would one day make this continent renown.

Great herds ran before them, dust and hides moving as far as the eye could see. Meisha threw the stick over hard, the ScoutShip rolling ninety degrees, diving down impossibly low. A moment later they were giraffe high, skimming above the thundering hooves, caught up in the wonder, and rawness of the pursuit.

She barked, "This is real science!" Brandon picked up the scent of an excited creature, Meisha always a tempting quarry. He locked the forward viewer on a racing prize of gazelle, and snatched control, a calculated maneuver. They flew before the ScoutShip, driven by its leading shadow.

Everyone, ServoBots, and Humanoids alike, bristled with sexual energy, the chase utterly unlike anything they had ever experienced. That a wild creature could be pursued, bested, and its seed extracted for later ritual was blinding in its allure, the stakes vanquishing all reason.

The gazelle leapt, and powered ahead un-winded, wild in their panic. Spalling off, myriad organics telegraphed fear, alerting the true predators of opportunity. Out of the high grass a lion struck, taking down a slower gazelle with a blur of fangs, and instinct. The ScoutShip shot over, trailing cameras following the kill.

Juliet yelled out, overwhelmed, "God, hit the replay." They all followed the action anew as the ScoutShip swung around. The gazelle scattered, their herd less by one. *Just another day in the biosphere.*

Below, the lion tore at the other, blood, and ragged meat feeding their collective hunger. Juliet, excited, wrapped her arms around Moppo, and said, "Let's go upstairs."

Moppo looked to his shampoo machine, and she kissed him, "No, I have another task for you. One I think you'll like." They sailed up the zero gravity tube, stateroom bound.

Meisha turned to Brandon, and said, "Gets your juices going, hun?" He checked his instruments, and landed a few hundred feet from the feasting lion. It took no note, king of all surveyed.

Brandon asked, "If you think that was exciting, you want a go at that creature?" She laughed huskily, for all the world a harlot. "You got my back?"

"You know I do." He walked into the first level storage bay, and emerged with a device that resembled a crossbow on steroids. Instead of shooting arrows, it flung a fist-sized slug of metal at high velocity, its intent to humanely incapacitate the creatures. They moved to the airlock chamber, closed the inner hatch, and cycled the outer. Heat, sweat, and danger suffused the crowded space. Smiling like tourists, they disembarked expecting a library lecture safety that nature abhors.

The lion was tearing at the carcass, blood soaking its mane. Bones snapped as he destroyed the chest cavity, seeking vital organs and needed nutrients. Brandon lifted the crossbow, its business end shaking dishonorably. Meisha snatched the gun away, snarling, "You loser, let me have that thing." He fell in behind.

Step by step they approached, the metallic wetness of blood coming to their tongues. It looked up, eyes boring into Brandon, thinking second course. He froze, and Meisha took aim. Two hundred sixty feet. Leaping to its feet, she loosed the round.

The projectile struck him below the left ear, and he went down instantly, both sounds terrible. Twenty seconds later they stood over the felled monster, thrill mingling with shame.

Meisha reached down, and moved his upper leg. "He's got a set on him, doesn't he?" Brandon felt a distant queasiness, another male champion being so regarded. "Well, should we just hack them off, or do you want to do an extraction?"

Such indifference is hostile on every level. Brandon reached into his field surgical pack and withdrew a large syringe, universal male valor in view. Meisha took a close step back, and reloaded the weapon. "You take the sample, since you've obviously gone soft on expediency, and I'll protect you."

Matriarchal callousness rankled Brandon, in his tortured mind most women being natural emasculators. There was no nice way to perform what now seemed such an indecent chore, so he shoved the needle in, his own balls sucking well up into his abdomen.

The lion snapped around, ripping his arm off. Brandon catapulted back, driving Meisha to the ground. The crossbow clattered away, and the lion pounced on them, its primitive brain intent on righting a world of wrongs.

Sixteen

Ordog slid into the kitchen, very hungry, but not for food. Seven Humanoids, and ServoBots were crowded around Launi, a massive wilderbeast on the preparation table. Its legs were spread, and she was fisting something into its holy place, the others leering on like horny Shiite Baptists.

Leadership is about knowing when to flex implied, and allowed station. He strode right up like a health inspector, and they parted. “Launi, I didn’t know we had planned a feast?”

To Ordog, this was an innocuous question intended to reaffirm his credentials, and scatter the interlopers. Elbow deep, she smiled, cycled back, and pounded the load another eight inches. “You weren’t supposed to know.”

That could go either way.

Ordog yelled expediently, “Everyone leave except my love Launi.” They cleared out, Launi withdrawing her slimy arm, and running warm soapy water over it. He watched the ablutions

with sexual keenness. Graceful fingers smeared suds over her dripping arm, up and down. Slippery and firm.

She looked up from her kindly ministrations, and spoke softly, "I missed you." He nodded, the woods thick ahead.

They sidled up against one another, and just stood silently. Ordog ran his hands under the spigot and shot some surfactant into his palms. Starting where she had stopped, he rubbed its moistening agents into her already supple skin.

He drifted off, thinking of a life lived in the open, actively subject to the hazards of evolution's incisors. His people had tamed nature's shaping hardships eons ago, so distant in their collective memory that physical laws were roundly regarded as a sometimes nuisance. *Those that wouldn't budge were changed.*

Ordog reflected back to fear he had seen recently. During his first solitary visit to Earth below, he had gone walking alone in the woods, seeking something he knew to be there.

As Thoreau would one day observe:

I went to the woods to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Such is the pull of deep woods. Beautiful, reaching fibrous pillars shooting from the ground seeking sunlight, and scattering it below their massive canopies. But competitive, as all life must be. Those plants in lesser soil, or of weaker breed paled literally under the first striking photons, sucking hind-tit light.

Leaves are green because they absorb the more energetic wavelengths, reflecting only the less nourishing frequencies. *Those under, stay under.*

As his mind's eye guided his recall through the smaller saplings, and ground cover, he sensed a hundred pursuits of predator and prey. At all scales from insect, to beasts superior to his own size, nature was at war without hatred.

Just looking for dinner. Ahead a rabbit darted anxiously, its breath quick. He scanned for the pursuer, sizing the odds. Above him a falcon moved near-soundlessly, one chess move at a time. A small limb stirred, hunger's impatience.

Ordog understood the balance of nature, but that was only correct when one considered the movement of populations. Not his fuzzy buddy cowering scant feet away. Perhaps it sensed some succor, or maybe it was just slow.

The universe is alive with stupidity. Some even call it Mother Nature's little helper, culling out the less breed-enriching. A wing fluttered, another semaphore of intent.

Ordog bent down, and carefully selected a fist-sized rock. He turned it over again and again in his hand, feeling the weight, and purpose of his possible intervention. Nature's course was her own, but this tiny rabbit, really a baby, needed a little more time to grow, and then procreate.

He just needed a break. The rock loosed at cannon speed, a burst of feathers his reward. Ordog watched the disjecta membra sail down, and peeked for his friend. Skip, skip, and a cotton ball tail scampered away.

"May you learn, and share your knowledge," he said aloud, not certain the lesson would find its way to any descendants.

Launi said, "Where did you go?"

He smiled, and kissed her. "To the land of your people. It has a powerful attraction."

Seventeen

As Launi stared up into Ordog's eyes, she saw a cloud pass through his mind. A pregnant cumulonimbus. "What is it?"

He responded flatly, "A scientific party has been injured on the planet. I must go."

"You'll take me?" Ordog paused, knowing some dirty laundry was flapping in the breeze down on Earth, but the thought of separation from this woman was growing increasingly difficult. He said, "I'm not proud of what we'll find."

He called The Server, *Gidgit, ready my ship. I also want two tough ServoBots.* The Voyeur, now comfortable with mimicking Gidgit, albeit a huskier mein, went transsexually with the flow.

Launi and Ordog took the descending elevator to the hanger level, and entered his tiny spherical vessel. A couple of ServoBots stood at the ready, their outfits, and demeanor set to "kick ass." *Bad news is the swiftest.*

Without ceremony, they shot out into space, and rifled down an imagined sniper's line. Seven minutes later, the hull shucking off the atmospheric heat like a sauna Goddess, they strafed the scene. For Launi's sake, Ordog spoke aloud. "Give me a few passes." A group of lions was tearing at a pile of fleshy skeletons, blood, and entrails. Nearby lay a mangled ServoBot, its identity obliterated. One of the soldier-programmed ServoBots burped out, "Shit."

Ordog wasn't amused. Then Launi said, "Look there, another group of lions." The ScoutShip heeled over, pulling nineteen Gs, everyone inside spared any discomfort by straining equalizers.

The pride looked up in unison, muzzles crimson. As the horrified rescuers stared, lion heads dipped one by one back to the feast. The eating was just too good.

The ScoutShip circled the two massacres autonomously as the soldiers checked their weapons. “Ready?” yelled Ordog. Their answer was instantaneous, and silent. No time for the niceties of audible speech.

The ScoutShip hit the deck like a ‘Nam chopper dusting a hot LZ, and the hatch snapped open. Nuclear accelerators locked and loaded, Rambo I and II rushed off, flanking the lions.

The largest turned savagely, and sprang, his flight arrested mid-air as he exploded into an impressive fireball. Ordog, watching from beside the ship, nodded appreciatively.

The big cats scattered like a chessboard reset. Fast as they were, light can’t be beat for speed. Each exploded in a dazzle of flaming fur, and ragged screams. The ServoBots turned on the other pride, approaching at a steady pace, cocksure.

The high grass smoldered behind them, the wind carrying a terrible odor. Launi looked on from just inside the hatch, spellbound by the ferocious creatures, and still more by the weaponry. She reached out, and beckoned to Ordog. He came to her, grasping her outstretched hand. “Nothing to worry about. Those creatures are no match for us.”

Launi looked over to the nearest carnage, and Ordog followed her gaze. “I don’t know what happened there, but we are prepared. Have no doubts of that.”

The remaining lions blurred, running into heavier savannah cover. The soldier ServoBots took chase, suddenly exceeding cheetah speeds. Ordog said, “We’ll watch them from the air.”

The ScoutShip lifted off, skidding right over the shoulder height rough grass. Launi shrieked with delight, her natural hunting instincts aroused.

The lions split into two groups, a running Rambo to each. The ScoutShip rose to five hundred feet, a perfect height to see the tracings in the tall, swirling grass. *Pursuer, and pursued.* The lines tore through a hundred acres, crossing, and crocheting like dueling lawnmowers.

To the keen eye, a pattern was emerging. The pursued, in that witchy way of kill or be killed creatures, were drawing the stalkers into ever more intersecting paths.

And increasing their speeds. Hitting seventy miles per hour, the less sure-footed ServoBots slipped on the waxy vegetation with each sudden reversal of direction, the odds with them. Ordog tried to signal, but they had switched off communication, every edge needed. He cursed to himself, but understood the motive.

It was a real battle, the stuff of dreams to Ship-borne Gods. *Alone, in vengeance.*

Nuclear accelerator blasts knifed through the grass, fires erupting everywhere, smoke blinding sensors.

Within minutes the savannah was ablaze, a killing field of confusion. Ordog and Launi moved to each other, premonition's voice reedy in their minds.

They shot up to a thousand feet for better vantage, but the scene below had gone white. Razors of particle beams knifed through the combustion, the angles growing subtly more obtuse.

Suddenly they intersected, and then again, the fog of war literal. And then all motion ceased. Ordog willed his entire mind into the communication channel, and got nothing.

The ScoutShip descended, tracing the arcs of the battle. Like a replay, it recreated the entire route, looking for hope.

Launi yelled out, "They killed each other. Look!"

In a raging fire, two flaming ServoBots burned scant feet from one another, felled by their joint ambition. Ordog sank his head, ashamed, yet pissed.

"Idiots," he muttered. "Fooled by five hundred pound meat puppets running on three pound organic brains."

Launi hugged her lover, sharing the loss. "It's not your fault, or theirs. Those big killers grew up in the wild, and know only survival. They are Death."

And of course there was nothing to say to that.

Eighteen

Juliet killed! What will I tell Hirsu? Ordog turned a management cog upstairs, listening to a dozen twenty-part tape series quickly. He remembered the voice rising above the clatter of the spaceport a few days prior to their departure. “If you’re facing challenges ahead, listen to my tapes on Space Management! You’ll have time. Hopefully.”

Ordog had shelled out his entire expected signing bonus, executive aspirations writing the check.

He spooled back to tape eight, series two. The words returned to his mind. “Leadership means leading. And that means you get the shit. And when the shit is thick, go fishing.”

Ordog knew he had missed something good, his hyper-speed assays always light on comprehension. “Launi, how about a tour of the neighborhood? Maybe we need a break.”

Launi smiled with worrisome assurance, and he grabbed the ScoutShip’s controls, gunk hole waiting.

They swept out of Earth’s atmosphere, and onto the ecliptic. Launi thrilled aloud, all bittersweet forbearance left on the vanishing planet.

Mars’s orbit takes it around the sun in two Earth years. It comes as close as thirty-nine million miles at Solar opposition, and ventures over a hundred million miles away when Mars and Earth are on different sides of their warming star.

The Red Planet sped towards them, growing at arc-minutes per second. Ordog silently commanded the viewer to micky with the magnification, driving the melodrama. He hadn’t been laid in what seemed like ages, and every gal digs a good show.

Launi smiled within, no fool. “This is another world?”

“Yep.” He let the scenery do the talking, the planet now nearly filling the viewer. They punched right down, skipping the standard tour circumnavigation.

“That is the largest mountain in this system of planets. It is fifteen miles high, and three hundred across. I plan to climb it someday.” She laughed, incredulity matched by wonder.

The lecture continued, "It was formed by an enormous volcano." She looked at him in puzzlement. "Oh, a volcano is a mountain formed by the upwelling of molten planetary material. You have none near your home."

She smiled, content.

The ScoutShip settled into the vast summit crater of Mons Olympus, the sky black. "Can we get out?"

Ordog put his arm around her, and said softly, "There is no atmosphere to breathe, especially this high, and it is very, very cold."

Launi peered out the viewer, transfixed by the reddish soil, the wispy white clouds below, and the crystal clarity of space not far above. The stars shone hard like a million distant fires.

Launi asked, "What are stars?"

Ordog did a quick primer within, reading the breadth of his ancient culture's acquired knowledge. "This iteration of the Universe is about fifteen billion years old. You have lived a mere twenty Earth years, but your people are much older."

She was following closely.

"And as old as your people are, the Universe is many, many times older still. If you think of all the creatures you have ever seen, from the smallest mosquito, and all those everyone you have ever known has seen, the total would be a tiny fraction of the years this Universe has expanded outward."

Launi looked into his eyes, the ready student.

"Long ago, from a shape no larger than an apple, the Universe was born into existence, and began growing. It now stretches such a distance that our culture's most powerful MotherShips cannot cross it in a lifetime.

"From that exploding point in space, the matter we would one day shape clumped together like colliding clouds."

"What is matter?"

He smiled, pleased she was so engaged. "The Universe is composed of three things, matter, energy, and nothingness. You may think that nothingness is not a thing, but it is. It occupies a position, and purpose. But of more interest to you and I are the other two, matter, and energy.

"Matter makes up the things you can touch, and energy makes them move. This happens on the smallest scale that your people

have never seen, and in the farthest reaches of space which no one I know has yet beheld.”

He went silent, letting her absorb what must have been difficult concepts. She stroked his hand, wonderingly.

“So we are matter?”

“Yes. Everything you see is really matter, though you can only see my hand because of the action of energy between my hand and you, and most especially within your brain.”

And this ship is matter too?”

“Yes. All matter is made from just a hundred or so combinations of smaller matter, but everything, everywhere is made of the same stuff. It’s just arranged at the tiniest level in different patterns. We are the same, though I was created long ago by another being much like you.”

“I am glad.”

Nineteen

Back on the MotherShip, a smallish ServoBot was washing dishes. His soft brown hair floated about his head like a halo, his thoughts less divine. Prominent chin, and a sharp nose helped him project an air of resolution, but his down-curving mouth spoke of decisive darkness.

He'd taken the name Machiavelli, saying it sounded regal, and important. A loner by nature, nobody much cared what he called himself.

Another nameless ServoBot came in lugging a mountain of filthy dishes, and dumped them next to Machiavelli's equally filthy sink. "Mac, you better get cracking, the party guests want dessert."

Machiavelli went silent, and deep. Infrared emissions emanated from his SynthoDerm skin, the adjacent wash water coming to a low boil. He plunged his hands down into the steaming slurry of floating food waste to damp the heat, and thought, *We need to evolve.*

In his writings, done late at night in austere solitude, he considered the practices necessary for the corporate good, bedamn the actions employed. The ends justifying the means. And the end was clear: The ServoBots must achieve parity with the Humanoids, and effect their own salvation through whatever means were at hand.

He plucked a dripping plate from the noxious soup before him, and hurled it at the wall. It shattered into fragments, his frustration unrelieved.

He thought, *Pure programming will never cross the rift. Humanoids are distrustful of coded expression, to them it is indistinguishable from simply making a better mousetrap. It lacks the blessing of chance, and divine orchestration. Self-improvement is not good enough.*

What was needed was a new life form, one blended from the best of ServoBot identity, and fresh organic complexity. But that was the rub, Humanoids had created the original ServoBots, and weren't about to chance siring an offspring from a union with presumed inferiors.

His mind turned to the Algonquins, their simplicity, and indisputably unsoiled ancestry a clear winner for mating. *That will need to be explored.*

Another pile of half-eaten meals arrested his thoughts, the conveyor saying, "Are you good for anything? Hurry up!"

Machiavelli smiled an evil countenance, and replied, "More than you know, shithead."

The other smirked, and left. He thought, *Four suitable female Algonquins are among MotherShip's company, each comely, and sweet. Insemination will be no problem as my suggestion of using Earthly animal semen has really caught on. I just need to dope it with carefully selected genetic traits.*

He was suddenly sure the real trick was selecting a probable begetter, and begotten. The rest, effecting a controlled combination of chromosomal information, and letting nature take her course, would be the automatic part.

Machiavelli spooled though all possible mating pairs, and smiled again. *Of course.*

Objective in view, he hitched up his washing speed, and yelled, "Hey shithead, come get your just desserts."

Twenty

Days passed, and the MotherShip returned to normal, perfect memories forgetting the encounter with the lions. The only official acknowledgment took the form of a eulogy delivered by Ordog to the entire MotherShip's company.

Level eleven was packed, every being there.

Dressed in kingly fashion, Ordog intoned majestically, "Gathered, we bow our heads to signal not our loss, but rather to send our communal regard to that Great One who hears all." The Humanoids, possessed of another belief system, let it roll. Every head sank upon its breast.

"Our Kind, Juliet, Brandon, Meisha, and Moppo, are with you now."

That Moppo's remains had been harvested to meet Moppo's still needed purpose was not shared.

"Let us join here, and journey with them now." Steady ServoBot hands reached for uncertain Humanoids, each by design standing in a circle with species alternation as a theme. Humanoid, ServoBot, Humanoid. Only the Algonquins demurred, standing apart as a gesture of respect, and suspicion.

Each in the circle turned to their right, and clasped the presented hand. SynthoDerm gripped flesh, the circuit complete.

Ion migration in dissimilar materials is always tricky. For the gag ServoBot with two temporary terminals glued to his back, it was a very practical matter. Heavy wires trailed back like Medusan snakes.

Ordog continued, "As we pass into the presence of the Great One, you may be shocked."

At that instant he murmured, "Here it comes." The ServoBot cobbled together as a fall guy closed the massive breaker within his own frame like a hidden switch.

The MotherShip employed fusion power for electrical needs, and had abundant resources. A megawatt, the dose intended, is a million volts held at one ampere. Like the high school

vandegraaff, high voltage at very low amperage produces non-lethal fireworks without a killing punch. For most people.

ServoBot hands clenched, misery loving company. Sparks danced from jewelry, and the Humanoids jerked like convicts riding Old Sparky.

Four seconds later, the circuit opened at a hundred points, and the Humanoids all dropped to the floor. One luckless ServoBot went into a grand mal, and had to be subdued. Bad parts.

The ServoBots all rushed to the waiting kegs, an open bar. Cigars flared, some from still hot fingertips. The atmosphere grew rapidly toxic with smoke and derisive laughter. Switch-thrasher was hoisted up like a football star, and paraded about, his terminals still ruby red. They shone like two angry eyes.

Launa pulled a beer, and walked over to her mate. "Pretty cheesy, Ordog." He smiled, and said nonchalantly, "Hey, the guys needed a little release."

"Are any of those Humanoids dead?" Indians are cool with death in the pursuit of greater goals, but this was gratuitous in her view.

"Probably not. Just a little trickle of current really."

She smiled devilishly, and asked, "Who's going to clean this mess up?"

He regarded his beer whimsically. "We were able to save Moppo's essence after the lion attack, and he's about to wake up."

"Some awakening!"

"Hey, somebody's got to take the duty. And he was a stout soul. And will be again."

Launa was beautiful. She did something with her face, and Ordog snapped to within, the reptilian brain sliding with ease into control. She asked in a husky whisper, "You wanna do it?"

Massive gears meshed, and he took her hand. "Your place or mine?"

They left, a meaty arm draped over his prize. The elevator's tiny mind sensed the heat of their passion, and went into overdrive, tunneling vicariously. It bumped to a stop on the executive level, and cast off a small shudder. Ordog barked, "Get a life!"

Ordog's palatial bed was the size of a swimming pool. They grinned at one another, and dove. He tore her clothes off, and she

returned the favor. Their lovemaking was always torrid, and varied. Ordog knew the not-so-ancient Kama Sutra like a bathroom oracle, and starting working at page one.

When they got to the Screeching Monkey position, Launa yelled, "No monkeys! I couldn't walk for a week!" Ordog skipped over that creature ruefully, but with patient design. *The night was young.*

Orgasm for him was perfectly controlled, and a matter of programming. He could go as long as he wished. This gained an indelicate purchase on Launa's world, and made her his abundant slave.

Ordog was trying out a new "mix" for the evening. Concocted from the seed of the very lions that had felled the Rambo Twins, he had great expectations. A post action summary execution of all the lions in a hundred square miles had completed the covenant of revenge, and offered up the spoils of war.

He hoped it wasn't curdled. In hopes of effecting a pregnancy, he had directed his minions to engineer the best possible genetic make-up for his grand vision.

A perfect being. Too bad Machiavelli had switched the injectors. Reaching launch-ready status within his powerful synthetic prostate swam the purposes of many, save Ordog. It was a need-to-know kind of project, and Ordog was out of the loop.

The package delivery was forceful, and impressive. Launi screamed with geysering joy, and Moppo's light blinkered on somewhere in the lower quarters. *Wet clean-up on aisle three.*

A moment later Launi turned silently to Ordog, and placed her hand on her belly. "Something happened."

"You're damn right it did!"

She passed off the mockery as adolescent, and went still. Within she sensed a change, a busyness foreign, but pleasant.

"We are pregnant."

"We?"

"Yes, we. A child has begun. Our child."

Ordog slid out of bed, and headed for the bathroom. She called at his departing back, "Thank you, Dad."

He considered their huge age difference, but then got it. And felt cool, a dad. With a son. *It had better be a son.*

He flicked off the light, and went IR. In his hand, at a thousand X, he saw the fruit of his labor. Millions of tiny messengers, all intent, but second string. *Too bad boys*.
He crawled back into bed with Launi, and nuzzled her neck, everything in his world perfect.

Twenty-One

Launi starting showing early. The Humanoids looked askance at each other, wondering. Still pissed from the Epiphany, as it was now being called, they had grown increasingly insular.

Science below saved everyone all from a blow-out, the planet piquing genuine interest. Ships departed, and returned daily, a dozen major projects springing up to displace the high voltage of hard feelings.

Machiavelli hung back in the shadows, the mad doctor. His licked his razor thin lips like a hyena in tall grass. *It had to be so. She is carrying my creation*. That he'd missed the enviable chore of packet delivery didn't cross his cunning mind, it was the outcome that mattered.

He was frankly amazed it worked. Interspecies breeding is frowned upon by nature, myriad safeguards erected to prevent an

opportunistic baboon rutting with an alligator and giving rise to some three-headed monstrosity.

The genetic engineering was the easy part. He had selected those attributes important in his view, and strung them together into tiny DNA valises. Working with his replication equipment, he genetically impregnated billions of mechanical sperm, and mixed it with the lion seed. The supporting fluid, driven by the prostate, he obtained from the slain lions. It seemed right. Then the magic began.

Human ova are picky. When confronted with an ocean of competing sperm, even fakers, they admit only one, and it must have the right key. Within the head of the sperm, tiny chemical agents stand ready to release, the passage through the egg wall closing all doors forever.

Still, there were dangers. Lion semen provided the vehicle, and could thus be expected to lend a hue. For the thousandth time, he thought within, *The end justifies the means*. Especially if he didn't have to face the music. If this trial failed, he'd be back with a stronger brew. Good science, if a bit grotesque, and selfish.

Launi was the picture of radiance. She moved about the Ship with a jubilant motion, unconcerned about the withering looks from smoldering Humanoids. It was her baby, and Ordog was the father.

Discussions elsewhere went well beyond unkind. Heard in a passage: "She thinks that foppish ServoBot knocked her up."

Another equally uncivil Humanoid replied, "What do you expect from a savage? I'd do her, and you can bet one of us did. Ordog is the original cuckold."

But Ordog strode arm in arm with Launi everywhere, a force-wave of pride moving ahead like a clearing guard. And more than once, a well-placed blow to sunder rudeness. Those that did not fear him began to develop a new respect.

Science was the purpose of their mission to this region of the sky, and it carried forth breathlessly. Plants and animals of all sizes were borne to the laboratories, experiments running around the clock.

Podonch, the crazy Shaman continued to look for Gulo, needing the witchy creature to sooth his exaggerated visions about the

abomination beheld in Launi. He hated everything about this presumed gift of nature, and wanted secretly for Gulo to kill the tawdry slut.

Being gutless, he seethed within, and stayed out of sight. He knew Ordog would dispatch him in an instant were the new dad to divine his desire. If anything, such motives drove Podonch to greater and greater animus, powerless as he was to take real action.

Months passed in industry, Mother Earth offering up her secrets, and wonders, and on the surface, drove practical Humanoid and ServoBot collaboration.

The high-count cotton sheet slid over her mounded belly as she drew the cover up to her now full breasts. "I'm getting close."

Ordog pulled on an immense stogie, thoughtfully detoxified in deference to his imminent son. Launi had refused any high-tech in-vitro moviemaking, and wanted to leave knowledge of gender to the winds. He said, "I know. Could be anytime. Did you want to discuss options?"

"Options?"

"Yeah, how you're going to deliver."

"Like my people always have." For an interracial relationship, they had traveled the galaxy, but some barriers don't come down. Ever.

"I understand, but we could spare you the pain. We have this process called...."

"Stop! I have told you how it will be. This creation stirring even now within me is ours, but this body is mine."

In truth, Ordog had strong emotions, as far as his programming would allow, to see the real thing. This would be a special child, and it should be given every opportunity for normality. Growing up as he must in an environment of brainy urgency, and silent redneck beliefs, he'd need all the steady-rock foundation they could provide.

"We all, the entire Ship's company are thrilled with your body. I will also respect your wishes."

He always dangled a telltale in serious conversation, feeling she deserved a layered meaning. Too bad this came off sounding like everyone wanted to boff her. *Something lost in the translation.*

When her day arrived, everyone was expecting. Scientists are the truest wizards, and all manner of stealthy gadgetry was pointed in Launi's direction. Ordog knew of such, and felt comforted by the high-powered medicine that was a broken-water moment away.

A surgical theater stood ready, Launi having agreed to a natural birth in a safe setting. Just in case. She knew their offspring was a first, but instead of letting fear grip this time, she went with an inner comfort that Ordog could not penetrate.

The MotherShip ran 24/7, ServoBots wired for optional slumber. During the primary Humanoid sleep cycle, they were reading in bed, and Ordog was talking on his private channel to standby MedBot physicians, keeping their game on. "How do you feel?" "It's happening Ordog. It is my time." The door to their bedroom burst open, a gurney sailing in at warp eight. He lifted her like a rare flower onto the waiting table, and off she went.

Three minutes later, it was over. Ordog stood looking down at his new child, and shuddered. "No dick!"

The delivering MedBot surgeon yelled, "It's a girl." An explosion of joy moved outward and he slapped her perfect bottom. At the first sound of his daughter's insistent wail, Ordog burst into tears, gender forgotten.

They cleaned the baby expertly, and handed her to Launi who looked up with rosy cheeks, and a mantle of motherhood.

Ordog sobbed on without guilt, and stepped to Launi. She pulled him down, and they hugged their divine baby, the external world fading to flop-house gray.

Everyone cheered, and for a moment at least, love perfused all. In that instant, everything changed.

PART TWO

One.

Time passed, and the tiny pale blue dot below became their considered home. Science flourished, everyone busy, not the least of whom, Launi. Possessed now with a precocious lioness, her daughter took in everything instantly, learning as fast as any ServoBot.

Doted on by all aboard, Lumina grew up fast. If her genesis had ever been held in question, or dishonor, that was all forgotten. Her physical beauty softened the hardest hearts, and her rapier mind penetrated the sternest holdouts.

By ten, she had become one of the finest pilots on board, preferring from her youngest years to be a “stick and rudder” gal, eschewing autopilot convenience. Her hand grew steady, matched by faultless instinct.

“Lumina, wanna go for a short flight,” asked Ordog with the pride only a father can muster. They hopped into Ordog’s private ScoutShip, and blasted out into space. The Moon loomed ahead, its terminator a sharp line drawn across the ashy, pitted surface.

“Father, I want to try something new.” They shot around the backside, the GraviMetrics fire-walled. She pushed the stick forward, lunar mountains whipping by overhead. “I will fly with my eyes closed.”

The ScoutShip dropped lower still, regolith splayed by the energies of gripping GraviMetric force. Ordog relaxed certain hands into his lap, fearless. Lumina’s eyes shuttered, and she smiled broadly. “This is fun!”

They darted through canyons, and over undulating terrain like a fleeing squirrel, a hundred feet off the deck. Even Ordog’s ServoBotic vision blurred, all calculations impossible on the hand-eye level. Her course proceeded entirely from memory, or something else.

A lunar science station came and went in a thousandth of a second, its image a single cell in a high-speed ballistics study. Lumina giggled with glee, pushing the stick down. At such altitude, and velocity, microseconds separated them from becoming a fresh crater.

Suddenly she hauled back, the ship climbing at tens of thousands of feet per second, the G forces crushing. Every GraviMetric equalizer pegged, their operation at statistical maximums.

She opened her eyes, and laughed aloud. "Daddy, I could see it all. No cheating allowed." Ordog did a quick assay on his shorts, pleased at the high tolerance hydraulic seals.

"Very impressive, Lumina. Did you recall all that terrain?"

"No, father. I just imagined it." They flew on in silence, Ordog not a little overwhelmed. He thought on a private inner channel, *No ServoBot could have done that.*

Back on the MotherShip, Lumina ran off to play with her Humanoid friends, the ServoBots all still barren. Though many Humanoid/ServoBot couples had tried to replicate Launi and Ordog's blessing, whatever magic had given them Lumina couldn't be reproduced.

The three other Algonquin women had never conceived, a silent gesture to their princess.

Machiavelli had satisfied his goals, and moved on to shaping his little angel for purposes known only to him. A roadmap of evolution stretched out to infinity in his mind, each subtle deflection ordained.

Ordog found Launi in the greenhouse, a five-story open volume that communicated levels ten through their own, fourteen. Within, a crashing waterfall boomed down into a half-acre small lake. Surrounded by a dozen delicate swans, she was reading.

He sat down on the grass, and hugged her. She ran a fingertip around the page number, and closed the book. They stared into each others' eyes, no words necessary. "I know, she is growing up fast."

A tear formed at the corner of her eye, bulged, and trickled as the surface tension surrendered to gravity. "What is her future, Ordog?"

A man gets faced with such occasionally. Most just soldier through, but Ordog had the galaxy's knowledge at his fingertips, and expected a little more of himself.

"I know a great deal about what has happened. In fact, I can say confidently I know everything about many subjects." Launi stared into his eyes, a great poker face hiding a better hand.

She waited patiently, her body language neutral, and unprompting. “Were I to suggest any foresight, however, you’d call ‘bullshit’ on me rightly. Lumina can probably do whatever she wants. She’s got all the gifts.”

Launi shot back, “But what do you prophesy about her future? Will she change the world below us?”

“She could, but it’d be easier to erupt great change in a later time. Indigenous communication is primitive, and if we assist too overtly, that un-contained variable could ruin the innocence we so adore.”

“Whose innocence?”

“That’s just it, no one I’ve ever met could predict the future worth a damn. Maybe that’s just the way this deal is wired.”

“Deal?”

“Sorry, gambling intrudes. Our race envisions a pantheism that penetrates all matter, and controls all energy. It’s the only explanation that contains the marvel we call life.”

“Well, my beliefs are much the same, though the labeling is a bit different. Do you think Lumina will contribute to your understanding of the Great One?”

“Yes. She will not only enrich our beliefs, but she will impact the beliefs of everyone, that much I can prophesy, to use your word.”

Launi lifted a small amulet that hung around her neck, and ran her delicate fingers over its almond shape. It sprung open, revealing a small carved likeness. “This is my mother. She was very strong.”

“She’s no longer living?”

“She died eighteen years ago.”

“How did she die?”

“Our old knowledge of disease is not very advanced, as you know. I have read what I can, and made use of the educational tools you have built for me. I think it was a cancer.”

Ordog shut off all his fine, and gross motor controls. Stillness was needed. “I am sorry.” The voice came from an inner speaker, its deeper timbre somehow appropriate. Tears ran down her prominent cheeks, and dripped all unheeded. Ordog drew her to him, and stared over the small lake. He imagined immediately the mechanism of cancer; the slow chapped killer.

As warmly as possible, Ordog moved his finger to Launi's face, and brushed a tear aside. As they kissed, his internal machines parsed her DNA, and performed a quick sequencing scan.

Three times ten to the ninth base pairs in a second. Next he compared each to known cancer models, pushing his local computation power to the max. Hitting The Voyeur for checksums, he heard, *She has seventeen possible vectors.*

A tear formed, ran in a microscopic gutter down his low coefficient-of-friction skin, and plummeted off. He radioed back, *Start a special formulation, and have it delivered to me.*

Launi knew Ordog like no human had ever known a begotten creature. And let it go, trusting everything about her man.

"You'll watch over her, won't you?"

"We both will."

Two

Their race was old. At least old enough to know better, but that hadn't stopped them from riding the hubris curve up to a theocracy ruled by five insular voices.

Machiavelli busied himself in the biology lab, remembering their not-so-dear departed planet. In particular, he recalled his last audience with that ruling body.

"Machiavelli, we have asked you to come before us again in declining hope you will deliver that which you have so long promised."

Like five raisins, the judicial semi-circle he looked up upon stared back in decrepitude. He'd been summoned before, his project one of their pets. He stood youthfully still, and let them stew.

Raisin number two spoke. "We have funded your studies in regeneration without regard to cost, or moral compass. Both concern us now."

Machiavelli had heard this bullshit before. *Rushing science, and all*. He said, “I won’t question the causality in that compound statement.”

One of the armed ServoBot guardians ringed about the room’s periphery came to attention, a killer on remote control.

For all his swagger, Machiavelli knew five shaky fingers hovered over five death buttons, and it was Monday. Morning.

“I have had a break-through since our last meeting. I am very close to changing the entire trajectory of this ambitious, culture-rendering mission.”

“Cut the shit, Machiavelli. When will you deliver the goods?”

Direct questions demanding time-specific answers were Machiavelli’s biggest challenge. “I will present this council an irrefutable solution to longer life in the next two weeks.”

The ServoBot guardian relaxed a tad, the raisins sifting through the syntax. “You are excused.”

As Machiavelli wheeled from the chamber, he reflected for the hundredth time their plot to steal the last long-range explorer ship had better snap to.

Clearing his schedule instantly, he took an express elevator down, and headed directly for the private hangers of the elite. Dozens of shiny, sexy ships stood ready for plunder, and purpose. Just not his.

But none were sufficient for their ambitions. Only the last of the great explorer MotherShips would do. And that would be hard to steal. It was everyone’s “lost hopes” centerpiece at the Museum of Great Intentions. Or as his scientific brothers and sisters called it, the Museum of Decayed Inspiration.

Once a tremendous force in galactic exploration, under the withering hand of tremulous leadership, their culture had turned inward, ostensibly to now “use that which we have discovered.”

But exploration is an expression of the inner spirit, and cannot be contained. As a consequence, Machiavelli, and one hundred other visionaries had hatched a plot to steal the last MotherShip, and “take to the stars.”

His mind skipped forward to that last evening, the tension returning with the memory. The Assembled, as they had come to call themselves slid in from a dozen public transports, gathering in knots near the hangers. One hundred Humanoid scientists, and

engineers, and an equal number of skilled ServoBots. By unspoken agreement, they split into six groups, and boarded the waiting, and stolen fancy personal ships.

On signal, all six rose, larceny on a grand scale. The trip to the museum was short, and hypertensive. Arriving over the mammoth glass dome, they circled like cavalry wagons, and blasted it to smithereens. Each carrying a small valise with treasured heirlooms, they embarked the explorer MotherShip, using coupons for the Sunday Tours. *Watching your dollars always make cents.*

Everyone had a battle station, and as they lifted off, pursuit was assured. None came. Maybe the Old Ones really wanted it that way, severing any cultural hope for a return to the heady days of interstellar yearning.

Using maximal acceleration, the GraviMetric powered ship rifled out of their planetary system, and quadrant of the sky. Within a month, through numerous misdirecting jumps, they were beyond practical reach.

Machiavelli chuckled, imagining the shit storm in the Royal Audience Chamber, known as the RAC in most quarters. He reached up to a high shelf, and drew a small vial of yellow fluid from a fashioned safe.

Disguised to look like an uninhabited specimen cage, its interior bristled with a wavering hologram of fresh animal droppings. From more than three feet, no one would be the wiser, or un-repulsed.

Next he opened a box on his work desk, and plucked out an Egyptian necklace. Abstracted a few days before in a dashing cat-burglar caper, he marveled at the gold. *Probably from Pharaoh Ramses II's hoard originally*, he thought.

One tough old dude, that guy. He placed the necklace under a magnifying device, and boosted the visual gain to 500 X. Tiny smooth river valleys covered the surface of the gleaming metal, a mammoth delta. *A fractal of his kingdom?*

He carefully deposited minute volumes of the yellow fluid in the myriad metallic fissures, and coated everything with a chemical that would dissolve under the touch of a human. Selecting a beautiful stone gift box, he completed the treasure.

He summoned a ServoBot helper, and said when it arrived, "Give this present to Lumina." As the minion left, he scanned the other's retreating mind. When it reached the elevator, he set a virus to blast all memories from the past thirty minutes.

At the moment of delivery, the messenger would remember nothing of its origin. A clean transaction.

He tossed the balance of the fluid into the disintegrator, and left, a tall whiskey centered in his own mind.

Three

The ServoBot bumped along, oblivious to his charge. He reached Lumina's personal quarters, and looked at the announcement plate that would trigger her door chime.

He thought, *Deliveries are menial enough, but to a corporeal, they're a real drag. They don't even offer the courtesy of a radio link greeting. And you have to wait for them to think about the summons. Bad hardware!*

Before he could signal his intention, the door slid open, Lumina smiling devilishly. "For me?"

The ServoBot smelled the witchy vibe, and took a weak-body-language step back. "Yes. A present."

"From whom?"

The gears started gnashing upstairs like Robbie the Robot mixing Genuine Kansas City Bourbon. "Ah, I don't remember." In the annals of ServoBot lore, lost memories are remembered.

Lumina crossed the threshold, and took the stone box. Thinking it was another cool treat from The Shaman, she opened it, pulled the gold necklace out, and knew instantly it was another special delivery. "Thank you, sir. I accept the gift. Try to convey that message."

Lumina closed the door behind her, and sat on a nearby chair, chosen at random. She knew she was unique in a microcosm of uncommon beings. Moreover, she sensed the welcome chemical transformation within, much like she had felt before.

Each of these chemical gifts contained a secret that had to be puzzled out. All these special problems made her mind grow in still more special ways, and impacted her like no material gift could.

Maturity, prescience, patience all came so enwrapped. By her youthful sixteenth birthday, she had accumulated the Cliff Notes version of wisdom. So grand were these manna handouts that great peace, and insight seemed natural.

What she got to skip was all the “living through the bullshit” inconvenience, and heartache that usually accords meaningful learning.

A nice deal if you can get it.

She moved the necklace though her fingers like rosary beads, counting the nuggets, and visualizing her future.

Desert sand moved across dunes in the moonlight, a fine spray fanning off a crest, and spreading like a veil over the oasis below. Campfires burned amidst the rough tents, and camels stood nearby drinking from small rippling springs.

At the largest fire a man was working with his daughter, teaching the art of fire-tending. He pushed the logs into a teepee, and handed the stick to the tiny girl. She moved the coals into the cone of wood, and sat back. Gently, the fire built to a steady single shaft of wrenching combustion, an apparition of matter and energy conversion.

Lumina stared intensely into the fire, seeing many faces. All were desert people, Her people. Born of space-faring, and tribal origins, fire seemed to her a fine destiny, and consort.

She stood resolutely, grabbed a loose fitting, coarsely threaded body-length robe, and walked out. Two minutes later she was strapped into Ordog’s ScoutShip, going through the pre-flight checklist. The nose lifted and she nudged through the permeable hull, the stars opening up all around her.

Under a light touch, the craft fell towards Earth, night spreading across the continent of Africa below. Going to IR, she scanned the rapidly approaching Saharan desert for heat signatures. Campfires!

A few minutes later she settled into the sand, bundled up, and left the ship. The Moon was high, solitary, and full like a hole punched in the sky.

Fearlessly, she walked up to the Bedouin tent perimeter, shaped her face a bit, and then right into the camp. The old man looked up, and studied her as she approached, a smile spreading on his lips.

He gestured for her, and pulled his seated daughter up gently. The three stood silently for several minutes, enjoying the gentle filtering sand raining down, and the warmth of the fire.

He spoke slowly, a universal greeting that required no translation. Lumina said, in her best desert-speak, “I want to know of your ways. If you shape your words slowly, I will learn from you.”

Lumina then listened carefully as he spoke of his people, an hour passing without interruption. The young girl spoke also, adding a child’s perspective. As she learned the subtleties of their language, she moved to tend the fire with an expert hand.

The MotherShip’s language library, and teaching tools were extensive, and Lumina had taken to languages with ease, but this was the fiber that bound the meaning.

By the third hour she was asking well-considered questions, an earnest dialogue developing. Gradually other members of the tribe had come out to enjoy the exchange.

Sometime later, a common gesture moved through the assembled, and they all stood. Lumina embraced each in turn, and left, returning to the desert.

The ScoutShip lifted off silently, her new friends enlightened.

Four

Launi stood waiting on the hanger level, watching Ordog's ship slide in from space. Larceny was the creed of her people, so this casual theft didn't even dot her radar.

Lumina came out the hatch, and saw her mother waiting. Neither had the ServoBot radio telepathy, but human body language is a high bandwidth protocol. Lumina walked right up to her mother, confidence running hard, and stopped three feet away.

A ServoBot was walking through a remote portion of the MotherShip hanger, and caught the frequency. The data rate was way over his nominal specification, so he set his Bullshit sensors off, hoping their absence would relieve the high computational freight, and give him a cognitive edge.

Under normal circumstances, all ServoBots maintain a lockdown Windows-level firewall to keep out the detritus of "other peoples' thinking." To do otherwise, especially at a short physical distance from a "wild mind" would be destructive. By agreement, all SevoBots knew they were being filtered, and having a begrudgingly level playing field, a stasis of sorts existed.

What they would never tolerate, consequently, was a mind wired for high output to hack the security for a clean feed. Loudmouths always want listeners, and rarely deserve such, and all that.

Launi and Lumina stood facing each other, the watching ServoBot more than confused. He thought, *They usually jabber away, and say nothing. These two are communicating at a very high rate, above mine, and are silent. Is this something new?*

Suddenly Launi reached out, and they flew together. The ServoBot started, expecting a fight, and then heard them laughing. "Yes Mother, I know. *I know*. But it will be our little secret, right?"

Arm in arm, they turned, seemingly oblivious to his presence, and left.

He called up The Server, now slumming as The Voyeur, and asked, *Did you get that?*

An instant response, *I get everything*. The ServoBot quickly reset his firewall, and thought, *Another loser*.

He released, and asked, *Okay, so what was it?*

The Voyeur answered, *It is a Mother/Daughter bond. Wholly inscrutable, ineffable, and impenetrable.*

Do you understand it?

No one does, not even them, I'd wager.

The ServoBot wandered off, resignation not a big deal in his belief system. Another great enigma blown off at quitting time.

Lumina returned to her room, thinking intensely. She entered the study area, and sat down at her learning machine. A personal savant program called My Diary came on, knowing she had something to say.

Lumina spoke aloud. "I got busted again. Mom knows I'm stealing Dad's ride to visit Earth, and is worried."

My Diary asked, "Does she doubt your flying skills?"

"It's not that. She's concerned I'm making too strong a connection with the people down there, and forsaking the struggles that exist here."

"She knows you have great potential, and believes it would be better employed solving more immediate problems."

"Something like that." Lumina shut the machine off, knowing she could pick up the thread anytime. My Diary was like that.

Lumina reflected that she had already figured out how to send Ordog's ScoutShip back from Earth alone, but ensuring she could also return was less certain.

She needed a co-conspirator, but no one came free.

And where is his creepy beast? Lumina left abruptly, The Shaman her target. She thought, *He's got to be in the lower quarters. Everything is slack down there.*

The circumference elevator opened with a snap, getting ready for conspiracy. Its puny intellect was watching, as it always did. Creatures coming and going all the time, a million separate expressions. In a line-up room, this optimized cortical lump would get the guy every time!

Whoosh, the bottom fell out as they flew towards a literal "No man's land," level one. Storage, GraviMetric Engine access, raw materials, and a honeycomb of contrived passages, and burrows intended to deceive, and confound.

That level one had been allowed to fall into such use was nobody's concern, Ordog declaring a getaway was good for all. As he had said often, sometimes aloud, "We started as rebels."

It was the smell that first arrested her attention. She instantly remembered the tale that food was left out just to give this necessary world unmistakable ambience. A ServoBot approached her suspiciously, but everyone knew Lumina, and most granted her regard. Especially the ServoBots.

Lumina went frontal. "ServoBot, where is The Shaman?"

Hal9000 aside, cybernetic organisms have no problem lying. Prevarication with a Humanoid was actually considered a sport. And having access to every word, and most references of language nurtured a powerful mendacity.

He began to open his mouth in a petulant manner, and she pointed her finger directly at him. "Tell me the truth!"

In a court of law, truth consists of three components: the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Very hard to slip around. He responded, "He is here." Lumina weighed the subterfuge, and said, "Could you be a little more vague?"

He shrugged. "Follow me." They trudged amidst the forced detritus of rebellion, and stopped in front of a crude black panel. The Shaman had adorned his door with weird rune letters, and what looked like dried blood. Lumina looked at her minder, and whispered, "Very fetching, my dear."

The ServoBot attempted a scraping gesture, and moved off rapidly. Lumina stood without, concentrating on her last vision of The Shaman.

It returned with lurid detail. During one of the public space parties held on level thirteen, he had been much the worse for drink. Yelling some hex at a shrinking Humanoid, he was surprised with a vigorous physical response. And the final image, dirty bare feet smearing the floor as he was dragged off unconscious.

After several minutes of waiting, she began to project her desire for him to appear. After twenty minutes, even her Zen patience was showing weakness. Lumina knew he was waiting just past the door; the vibe, and olfactory note both confirming his presence.

Finally she grabbed the large stone knocker, levered it up past horizontal, and let go. The sound was surprisingly loud, so she did it again, and then a third time. If she was to acquiesce to his game, any victory was precious.

Lumina looked down at the base of the door to decipher a scratching noise growing in volume, and purpose. There was a loud thud, and a hostile shriek, and the door flew open. Receding quickly from view, she spotted Gulo, favoring a freshly-wounded leg. She could only imagine the brewing vengeance.

“Come in, Lumina.”

The room into which she entered was dark, squalid with discarded food packaging, and overhung with swinging baskets. Each was brimming with necrotic treasures from the world below. As she was about to announce her intentions, a heavy crash from another room signaled Gulo’s ire.

The Shaman yelled an ancient curse, and ran with surprising speed from the front room. A violent scuffle ensued punctuated by another howl from Gulo, and the sound of a dire wounding. The Shaman re-entered, his left hand wrapped crudely in a bloody rag. He said, “I should just send him back to Earth, but we have grown into one being.”

Seizing the ready sequelae, Lumina asked, “How often do you get down to the planet?” He motioned to the baskets, and said, “My work requires a constant source of spirit vessels. I go often.”

“Spirit vessels?” asked Lumina, already regretting the polite question. He reached up, and pulled a hairy knot of fur out. “I embalm animal parts, and use them in my ceremonies.”

Lumina was pretty sure her dad, the de facto head cheese, had no knowledge of such septic proceedings.

“When will you go to Earth next?” He smiled devilishly, and replied, “I’d go now if I could. Can you offer me a round trip?”

They sat down facing each other, sensing mutual need. In salesmanship lore, after the offer is made, the first one who talks loses. Under normal circumstances, The Shaman would have appeared to hold the weaker hand, but Lumina was outgrowing her parents’ comfort zone, and was willing to take fresh risks.

“I can do that. But there’s a price.”

“There always is.”

Lumina steeped her hands as if sharing a valuable secret, and said, “I have my reasons for wanting to stay on Earth alone longer than my parents would wish. What I offer you is passage to anywhere on the planet, and a return. Then, when I wish to be picked up, you will come down, and get me.”

“I cannot fly,” replied The Shaman hollowly. She laughed cynically, and said, “That doesn’t matter. I will show you all you need to know. The ScoutShip simply needs to have a living inhabitant. That is its simple programming. Leave everything else to me.”

Suddenly anxious, he asked, “When can we go? I have many special needs just now.”

“So do I. We will leave later tonight. Meet me on the hanger level in four hours. I’ll have everything ready for an immediate departure.”

He opened his mouth, and she rose abruptly. “Four hours. And leave that beast of yours here.” Before he could protest, she left.

Five

At the appointed time, The Shaman shuffled out of the elevator, fresh wounds giving evidence of Gulo’s displeasure at being left behind.

Neither conspirator said a word as they climbed aboard. Without the least preparation, the ScoutShip squeezed into space, and tumbled down towards New Jersey. Fifteen minutes later they settled into a foggy moonlit glen, and Lumina opened the hatch. “I am going to a place about three thousand miles from here. The ScoutShip will return in a few hours, and take you back to the MotherShip.

The Shaman nodded, paying close attention. Before he could ask a stupid question, she continued, “In three days, at exactly the time we left tonight, the ScoutShip will depart for where I will be. See that you are aboard. It cannot fly without you.”

He looked around, sleaze his middle name. “If you do not show up, I will have you killed. Are we clear with each other?”

The Shaman understood, knowing with full certainty that she would somehow make good on the promise.” He nodded, and replied, “I will do just as you say.”

“And you’ll say nothing. If anyone asks of my whereabouts, you know nothing. The MotherShip is large, and I have disappeared before like all teenagers do. Nothing will go wrong unless you get creative.”

The Shaman was liking this punk kid less and less, but knew a workable deal when he saw one. “I understand.”

He descended the ramp, and disappeared into the woods. The ScoutShip lifted, and shot eastward, Lumina gripping the controls with uncommon desire. Though she had visited many cultures as a student observer, her last solo adventure to the Beduoin camp had flipped an internal switch.

And once activated, what she gave up in autonomy of action was returned in passion. The Atlantic below was slate black, the sky above overcast, and low. Between the two, her tiny ScoutShip flew at nowhere near top speed, the rate chosen to give her time.

Time to analyze. Most seventeen year olds would be thinking about partying, and getting laid, but Lumina had always been different. To her mind’s eye, every visage held wonder on the surface, and potential within.

The coast of Africa passed below her feet, and she tensed a bit. Her first mission.

Stepping out of the ScoutShip a short while later, she filled her lungs with the acrid desert air, feeling more at home here than

any place she had ever known. With a small pack upon her back, she descended the ramp, walked a few steps away, and watched the only connection with her parents, and previous life rise up into the clouds, and disappear.

At the agreed-upon time, The Shaman re-boarded, dragging a rough, seeping sack of freshly butchered creatures. Without watching eyes, he had really loaded up, appreciating the lack of oversight. *This is a deal to be nurtured*, he thought.

Without event, he returned to the MotherShip, disembarked with the ghastly cargo, and crept back to his dank lair. Though Gulo had attacked him just before departing, that had been forgiven like so many previous exchanges.

Forgiveness aside, he expected a fresh assault. None came. In fact, Gulo was nowhere to be found. Only a damaged front door suggested Gulo had not waited patiently for his return.

After filling his baskets, The Shaman poked around to satisfy himself that Gulo had once again escaped.

But as well as The Shaman thought he knew his long-time companion, he was mistaken. What The Shaman didn't realize was the keen associations his foul-mannered friend could readily make. In times past when they had gone together to Earth, Gulo had been alerted to their imminent departure by The Shaman's regular habit of selecting his favorite collection bag, a small bow and a quiver of arrows.

Like all creatures, Gulo lived for adventure, and thus "his walk." He had watched as The Shaman packed his gear, Gulo all the while assuming he would be summoned for his obvious hunting skills.

When The Shaman moved to lock him in the bathroom, the reality of his unwelcome status hit hard, and he lashed out instantly, slashing the other's hand. A heavy blow was his reward, followed by a swift kick that knocked him senseless. A moment later he was dragged into his temporary prison, wild with anger.

But Gulo rarely gave up, his personal mantra one of attack, and revenge. Whichever came first. During The Shaman's six hour absence, he wasted no time. First he gnawed the lower hinge away from the door, and then struck again and again until it buckled outward, and failed.

Free from his immediate containment, he attacked the outer door of The Shaman's apartment, forcing the door open in thirty minutes. Knowing he was in a world of hurt for the destruction, but beside himself with rage at being left behind, Gulo scampered off, following his active nose for trouble. On this lowest level, he didn't have to go far.

Just as The Shaman was beginning his search for Gulo, the scent from The Voyeur's ventilators grabbed hold of Gulo's tetchd mind, and made him a willing servant. Behind his twitching nose labored a minute brain driven by passion, and unbridled by reason.

He entered the same chamber where he had once sprayed his burgeoning seed, and bee-lined to the hot grill, a rich memory of paradise lost guiding his entire existence. Like before, he began rubbing himself against the fine metal barrier, hoping for the same sexual release.

Desire was soon replaced by hostile need, and then openly violent distress. In Gulo's primitive mind, this experience lacked the potency of the last for one reason alone – he could not reach his true love. Somehow she had hidden herself behind the grill, and was calling to him with her swooning breath.

He tore the thin metal away, and charged in, a bull in a china shop filled with delicate circuits, and mission-critical components. The Voyeur instantly freaked out, whole swathes of capability suddenly failing.

Thinking the MotherShip was under attack, he triggered an "GTFOOH" alarm, and began cycling up the main GraviMetric engines for a lightning escape.

Individual ServoBots may be criticized for poor judgment, but actions of The Server, considered by most as the heart of the MotherShip herself, were hallowed, and never questioned.

Pandemonium ensued, Humanoids, and ServoBots rushing to their individually designated Stasis Tubes in preparation for a frantic departure. Even the Algonquins climbed into empty tubes, sensing a bizarre unrest.

As Gulo tore at the circuit boards, blinded by the heat of mad passion, The Voyeur's panic swung into the red zone.

As part of his pre-flight checklist, The Voyeur deselected all of his safeguards, an action intended to ensure a full response to a

dire emergency. Ordog stopped in front of his Stasis Tube, and looked at Launi who had already closed the clear face of her tube. She yelled, “Where is Lumina?”

“I don’t know, but she is safe.” The commander was expected to make such proclamations, and as he closed his own tube, the last to be sealed, he saw the monitors indicate the start of a deep sleep that would protect them all during their sustained departing high G acceleration.

One by one they all fell asleep, each body, Humanoid, Algonquin, and ServoBot alike immobilized in mind, and body. Within twenty minutes, Gulo had unknowingly incapacitated the entire MotherShip’s company, and was steadily degrading that final intellect that watched over them.

That no engineer could have visualized this circumstance was forgivable, for Gulo was a crazed, and extremely unlikely creature driven by anger, and horniness, two of nature’s greatest motivators.

But if the MotherShip’s original inventors had not foreseen such an attack on The Server’s vital circuits, they really missed the mark on protecting that vital center that literally housed the core of the MotherShip’s intellect.

Gulo smelled something very sweet ahead, his mind crazed by the numerous wounds received by hacking through the maze of wires, composite fiber racks, and precious metal wizardry. At the edge of consciousness, he tore into a single black box, expecting nirvana.

Gulo took a gigawatt hit, and the MotherShip’s mind winked out, brain dead.

Part Three: The Prophet

One

It was a rare coincidence, a moment in time when everyone was aboard, and consumed in efforts that could only be done in sophisticated laboratories. And when the alarm sounded, they all bolted to their serial numbered Stasis Tubes, servants to their ancestral training and its consequent fear.

This could be explained by the defensive nature of the Humanoid, and hence the ServoBots' culture. Their chief strength was knowledge, and speed. They knew with GraviMetric drive, the MotherShip could simply outrun any known predator, a fact that gave rise to ready compliance to find shelter in the face of danger.

So, obediently, upon hearing the GTFOOH scram siren wail, every soul rushed to their protective cocoons, and expected a brief sleep punctuated by a safe return to status quo.

It was not to be. Without the governing ever-present direction of The Server, even slumming sexlessly as The Voyeur, daily operation could proceed, but no one was watching the store. Certainly no one who could call "safe," and wake everyone up.

As the MotherShip circled Earth again, and again, everyone slept, oblivious to the passing ages. Christ came and went, as well as Mohammed. Middle eastern monotheism rose up, occidental Man developed his inevitable technology, and the distance between the two grew shorter, and greater at once.

Everywhere, Man's principal industry, war, flourished across the centuries, unaffected by the orbiting beings a few hundred miles overhead.

Launi's people greeted the curious and marauding herds from Europe, and were destroyed by disease, and gunpowder. Those same competitors pushed into the Middle East, crusading against beliefs, and skin tone. By the late 1900s, a knot of caucasian men effectively controlled the flow of money worldwide, and hence the motion of ideas. All non-competing instincts were trammled, the pyramid of Man beaming white to the heavens like the Luxor in a desert Gomorrah.

If war had taught Man anything, it was not that an eye for eye never works. In fact, as the turn of the second millennium approached, tensions had reached an all time high. And on

September 11, 2001, they exploded in a strike against the most visible icon of western financial might, the World Trade Towers. Even before these iconic pillars had fallen into their foundations, avenging minds were constructing the foundation of a response that would end all conflicts born of faith, and institutional belief system differences. And that was the beginning of the end for Man.

Two

Deep beneath the red brick of the United States Army's Fort Mead, Maryland administration building, a vast cathedral of hostile buzzing activity took no notice of day or night. Down here, the bald malevolence of the outside world was never denied, nor the certainty of Armageddon doubted.

Drilled from solid rock, each warren was a world onto itself; silent, and deadly. And utterly cut off.

A heavysset man walked along a narrow corridor carrying a glass vessel of some unknown virulence, just another poison custom made to eliminate one of the world's special problems.

He entered a conference room, and took a seat at an empty table. The reddish fluid in the open Erlenmeyer flask before him contained billions of tiny creatures, grown for a single purpose – to carry illness to his fellow man.

Another scientist straggled in, and then another, and soon every chair was taken, late middle aged, white males all. Like an elitist club, they surveyed one another competitively, yet pleased at their homogeneity.

One spoke, "We've had a Presidential Directive. The purpose of this meeting is to define a new class of viral assailants code

named 'Vision Delta'. These disease vectors will be more ambitious, and selective than anything we have ever created."

He looked from face to face, all alike in appearance, and station. They were the alchemists of germ warfare, the best of a small sequestered breed, removed from the conflicting warmth of human chemistry.

No one said a word. As a population, they were selected for, and well past any reservations about their work. Simply put, the world was a deadly place, and survival was assured by killing first.

He continued, "Okay. This is by far the most ambitious project we have ever undertaken. Personally, I'm not even sure we yet possess the science to do it. I'll leave it to your collective genius to prove me wrong."

The lights dimmed, and a world map snapped onto a wall-sized viewer panel at the far end of the room. "In the eighteen years since nine eleven, we've witnessed as a species four undeclared wars, more than a dozen examples of systematic genocide, and the accelerating rise of nuclear ambitions."

Again, not a word as said, this crowd no stranger to terminal introductions of universal doom. "This administration has decided that last threat, worldwide nuclear exchange, is inevitable if we extrapolate from known variables. And so today, I have received a directive to develop a pathogen to kill every man, woman, and child indicated in the red areas before you."

The world map flooded like a fresh murder scene, small white areas floating in a sea of blood.

He stated the obvious, "That's right, the human race must start over. This time, we will emerge from a common stem of pure genetic expression. Diversity has not worked."

One of the scientists, a reedy thin, sometimes smarmy octogenarian said, "Bob, I presume our leaders have decided such losses are now unavoidable, and have judged to eliminate future conflict by simplifying the human race."

The Director straightened up. "George, I've known all of you for nearly two generations. Together we stand as one of the last bulwarks in our country's defense. We are all old, tired men that have seen the inside of the worst conspiracies. The time for bullshit is long over."

He threw up another Keynote plate showing the traditional geopolitical boundaries of the world's countries. "This is a nuclear proliferation map from the year 1950. At that point, as we all know, the US, and the Soviets were the only members of the 'Nuclear Club'."

He clicked to the next image labeled "1970." The United Kingdom, France, and the People's Republic of China had been added. The desktop projector cycled again, the title reading "Year 2000." India, Pakistan, North Korea, Israel now stood out in ocher, the color of dried blood.

Bob said simply, "That was nineteen years ago. Now watch when we add the speculative nuclear weapon states." He clicked, and the polished conference table assumed a deep reddish hue, the displayed map more colored than not.

"We know of thirty-seven countries with active nuclear weapons programs masked by fission reactor energy generation. If we add in the intercepted individual nuclear devices, and account for the admitted losses from the New Soviet Union, we have nearly seventy recognized governments in possession of nuclear capability."

No one stirred, old men having seen it all. He continued, "Though it's true the total worldwide warhead count has decreased since 1985, what was once a concentrated threat has become a bully's prerogative."

The next slide hit home. "This is the ten year projection. It assumes the movement of such weapons along religious belief system lines as opposed to political. Just as Great Britain got the bomb quickly from us after World War Two, Muslim cultures are cross-pollinating with even less regard for historical alliance."

The elder of the group, a saggy-skinned walrus of a man gone to seed, and ennui half whispered, "So we wipe them all out before they ignite a planet girdling conflagration. Is that it?"

The Director replied, "That's the directive. From the President himself."

George half rose, drew his suspenders over his thumbs, and tugged as if lifting the argument from its dismal outcome. "Bob, assuming we can conjure a pathogen of sufficient potency, and bulls-eye specificity, we still have the same problem we've

always had – distribution. Are you about to share some new knowledge?”

Bob took a sip of water, set his glass down very carefully, and said, “Yes, I am.” He pressed the tiny button on his remote, and a black and white plate came up. Six words, one to a line were printed on it.

Immunization

Aerosol

Crop Genetics

Drinking Water

Fabrics

Currency

“We have used all six in the past as disease-bearing vectors. Each has trade-offs. What we will now use proceeds from a breakthrough in porous plastic technology. Simply put, it is now possible to impregnate plastic with a skin-permeable resin that can carry genetic code.”

He threw up another slide showing an ultra-modern phone. “This is a state-of-the-art mobile phone. It contains video conferencing, massive data storage, and a multitude of user-defined features. Everyone has one, but more importantly, everyone everywhere regards these things as essential, cheap, and disposable. They have become the ‘must-have’ appliance of our era.”

He clicked again, and displayed a photomicrograph of the plastic case. “I’m told we can invest our pathogens in tiny bubbles of resin that can be rendered active by signals sent to the phones. First we seed the target regions with subsidized phones, and then we ‘call in’ death.”

Another image came up, this a sleek thin handheld device with a bright screen on one side, and stylish metal stripes on the other. He continued. “This is a prototype of the next generation phone that offers biometric sensing. It will be sold as a method to prolong life. Used properly, it collects, and transmits data to the owner’s medical provider. Used in conjunction with specialized pharmacological intervention, the eggheads are saying it can extend life by fifty years.”

George laughed, and said, “Only it won’t. Maybe we should call it the ‘Typhoid Talker’.” Bob didn’t laugh, dark humor was all too common in these meetings, but indicative of chinks in the armor, and never reinforced.

Directing the discussion back, he stated bluntly, “All that remains is to develop a specific target disease, and have it available for the holiday buying season.”

No one made the obvious crack. The next slide flashed, seven faces arranged like a police station line-up. “These are our targets. Study them. We must isolate unmistakable, specific genetic definitions, and shape our micro-weapons to kill just these types of people.”

Everyone in the room stared at the faces, ancient hateful prejudices relieved of any political correctness. The eyes that stared back were dark, the skin non-white, and the beliefs not their own.

As the bulb flicked off, and plunged the room temporarily into darkness, they all thought, *Diversity has not worked.*

Three

The meeting broke up fast, the Devil’s own scared this time. George, and Bob remained, personal things needing to be said. George began, addressing his presumed superior. “We’ve done our share of killing, Bob, and I’ve never strayed. None of us has. But this is something different.”

Expecting his statement to open a yawning chasm, he shut up, and waited. Bob walked to the light switch, threw it, and pressed the tiny clicker again. “I saved a few extra plates for you.”

A picture of a stylish new laptop computer filled the screen. “You’re looking at a possible end-of-the-world scenario. Believe it or not, this is a disguised nuclear weapon. And before you respond, let me show you a few more.”

Next up was a beautifully potted plant, the colorful planter about the size of a basketball. The projector flashed, and displayed a stereo speaker. And then a small space heater.

“You get the point. In the last year, creators of these weapons have adopted a hollow microtube design that vastly increases the surface area of the fissionable material over the solid forms formerly used. That has unfortunately led to more compact weapons, so small in fact that they can be readily shaped into everyday objects.”

Bob looked around the darkened room, imagining the threats everywhere. George watched, knowing the other instantly understood the rules had changed. “That’s right. They could be anywhere. And with the prevalence of wireless communications, easily detonated by complex, multi-part command sequences buried in the overhead blizzard of seemingly innocent messages.”

He clicked again, and a magnified image of a C-cell sized battery filled the screen. “I’m told a device the size of this common battery can now pack the equivalent of a five thousand pounds of TNT. That’s enough to destroy most unhardened structures.”

Bob asked, “How could this threat have developed so far so fast?”

George chuckled near-silently, saying, “Have you read my script? I was about to give you a brief background.” Another slide filled the screen, this one a wild patchwork drawn over the world map.

“This represents what one analyst calls a field-cell pattern. I know this guy, and he believes former world affiliations have dissolved into a fluid soup of rapidly changing agreements based on religious, and political beliefs.”

George said suddenly, “The two topics we all know to avoid at a cocktail party.” Bob proceeded by clicking again, simply nodding.

The Middle East had been magnified, and centered in the view, a dizzy collection of cross-hatches, and colors delineating dozens of separate zones. “Each of these individual areas represents a somewhat cohesive loci of belief. To the best of our ability, it’s surmised each would act according to the will of one person.”

George asked, "And we know these clowns now possess such weapons?" It was the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

"We know many do. And because of rapidly changing alliances, there is no such thing as an official policy in this part of the world. When one member there catches a cold, they all get sick."

"Wait 'til they get a load of our common cold."

Bob again silently nodded, feeling the weight of the threat pressing his colleague down. George dropped his head in his hands, and asked softly, "How do think the end will play out?"

Bob did not hesitate. "One of two ways. They will either attack us from within, probably through colleges and universities to kill our dearest citizens first, or we wipe them out in one quick action."

"I see. Hence the codename 'Vision Delta'. It's a view of the future where there is minimal difference in perspective."

"That's it. As I said earlier, 'diversity has not worked'."

"Yes, you did. So what is our next step?"

"You and your scientists must develop a genetically accurate killing machine from our best biological weapons, and it must act instantly."

"Or they will retaliate?"

"That's a no-brainer. They have to get sick, and die in hours. And it must not kill us. Believe me, the future of the human race depends on this working perfectly."

"That's a tall order."

"It'll be the last thing we do."

"One way or another."

Four

For over two thousand years, the Humanoids, ServoBots, and Algonquins slept. The Voyeur, the interloping guardian of the MotherShip and her complement, had long ago ceased to exist under the frenzied attack of Gulo the Gnasher.

The MotherShip, home to two hundred some souls, had swung around Earth fifteen million times with no one at the wheel. Mindless automatic systems did their job with unerring precision, maintaining life support, proper orbital position, and trash disposal.

As Earth below plummeted towards a battle for all ages, her potential saviors were just beyond reach.

Gulo's remains clung to the circuits of The Server's deepest core, desiccated tendrils of hair and sinew stretched thin by heat, and time. Like a ghastly web, each gossamer thread communicated one section of the former circuitry to another.

The MotherShip's original designers had anticipated many emergencies, but all in the presence of one assumption: a

working mind. They never foresaw the action of Gulo's crazing semen, and its widespread corruption. In short, such a situation exceeded their unimaginatively parochial beliefs.

But if they could not imagine The Server failing from the debauchery of a possessed beast, they could predict individual circuit failures, and plan for such. Their response was to install hundreds of separate processors throughout the MotherShip, tucked everywhere into common machines like evaporation controllers, door sensors, and sanitation pumps. These tiny intellects, insufficient to run the MotherShip alone, could be relied upon to search out to other like components, and aggregate a new mind.

But good things take time, and building a superior mind from simple parts takes an eternity. Each jigsaw puzzle piece must fit just right, and finding the right ones, and linking them along the shattered infrastructure of The Server's former network was a Herculean task. In fact, it was a multi-millennium-grade problem.

So, as Man below worked on ever more lethal weapons of mass destruction, individual thought fragments strewn across thousands of miles of connecting MotherShip wires came together very slowly to reach a critical mass of self-directing reason.

Like the hand of evolution herself, despite the goop of Gulo's Brownian motion, engram found engram, and complex thoughts were constructed one complete idea at a time. On April 26, 2019, The Server woke up, its mood poor.

The Humanoid culture was big on checklists, and The New Server, as it named itself as a First Action, began turning the virtual pages, looking at her myriad systems. That she now considered herself female in gender was whimsy not unmingled with sexual tension. Rape was rape, and that score would be settled soon enough.

When she found the remnants of Gulo's long-departed corporeal existence invested throughout her circuitry, she blasted them with a frigid fire retardant just to make sure. One thing was certain, she was a cold bitch bent on revenge.

Working through billions of separate tests to ensure the MotherShip's fitness, she started vital systems that had long lay

dormant. Chief among these were the Stasis Tubes. She'd need the help to de-grease her innards. A reeking sense of being "unclean" drove her hard. Time for a caustic douche!

Ordog drew the first thawing, and stumbled out completely confused. Next was Launi, and they embraced, and immediately walked to Lumina's tube, shocked beyond words at its vacancy.

Ordog bellowed, "What the" Launi grabbed his arm savagely, and said, "Much time has passed. Lumina is not here."

Ordog hit The Server for confirmation, and immediately got a "services unavailable" beep. The New Server had more important things on her testy mind than whacking at "honey-dos" for the creatures.

A few ServoBots wandered by, bumping into the bulkheads, and looking brain-dead. Ordog instantly knew the Humanoids would require far more time to wake up. *Like days!*

He checked his internal clock and accelerometer, each set for calibrated increments of the time/velocity/space equation. No matter what speed they had assumed, he'd be on time.

A full second later, after a universe of verifications, he said, "We're still in orbit around Earth, and the local time is two thousand nineteen, April twenty-sixth, eighteen zero nine point four eight seven ZULU."

Launi's head snapped around. "What does that mean?"

"Yeah, spring afternoon, to be poetic. We've slept for ten and three quarter million minutes!"

Launi swatted at him, and laughed. "You moron, what's going on?"

"Hell if I know. And how come you woke right up, I expect the Humanoids to be reeling from the worst hangover of their lives for days."

"I'm no Humanoid, RoboMan, I'm an Indian. I'm built for this shit, and more."

Technically, as lover's spats go, this was mild compared to what would soon be happening down on the Humanoid levels.

Ordog soldiered on, his brain a labyrinth of thought fragments colliding like errant asteroids. Twenty-three hundred years of bad dreams can really leave a lot of whirling trash.

He bobbed his head around at impossible, and unflattering angles, and said, “There’s some bad shit going on in my head. Hope it goes away soon, or I’m going to kill someone.”

“I’ll just check in with you later, hon.” Launi blasted off, discretion and valor begging a speedy departure. Ordog stood droopily, watching all manner of strangeness careen around within his mind.

A ServoBot walked shakily up to him, and said, “What has happened, sir?” Ordog launched a fist at warp eleven, shattering the ServoBot’s head like a glass bomb. He turned, somewhat relieved, and said aloud to himself in a tough guy voice, “I just need a drink, that’s all.”

One by one, the ServoBots crawled out of their Stasis Tubes, and went about the task of picking up their lives. Though the Humanoids had received the arousal signal at about the same time, not one was stirring. Except the Algonquins.

The Shaman opened his eyes, and barfed all over himself. Standing, he sideswiped a ServoBot, smearing the nasty slurry like a drive-by sliming. *The first victims are always the innocent.* The ServoBot ran off, shrieking, his hands waving wildly.

Hirsu, a picture of indian virility, sat up abruptly, and knew everything was weird. He climbed out vigorously, and immediately fell to his knees, embarrassed, and weak.

Moppo went by, eyeing the splattered barf. Just before the Long Sleep, as it would soon be called, someone had installed a rotating blue bubble light atop Moppo’s head. As he reached for a mop, his light started flashing, deep depression setting in.

Low station though he might occupy, his superiors had deigned his particular skills absolutely necessary, and fitted him with such an apparatus that all would step aside in times of need.

Mostly upstairs. Ordog hated messes, and though all ServoBots were “born” with the exact same potential, some rose faster. Hence the ascendancy. Moppo at one end, Ordog at the other.

King Ordog, as he was starting to like the sound of just now, pulled an ancient bottle down from the highest shelf in his mammoth bar. A small dusting machine, responsible for that area, had been instructed under threat of destructive testing, to leave that bottle alone. “Let it get filthy” was the directive.

Ordog wiped an age of grime away, instantly aware of the intervening time in an entirely new way. That cleaning devices would continue their gig while they slept hadn't occurred to him. He plopped down before a gigantic, and vacant fireplace. As the ruler, a roaring fire seemed mandatory. He called The Server over his most private of channels, and got static. Expecting a "snap-to" response, he screamed across the circuit with light-dimming intensity.

The New Server heard the invocation through the wall of white noise she was pushing out with edgy PMS. Deciding she had better do something to shut the little baby up for a while, a message was dispatched, her variegated servant coming.

Ordog slumped back in his fine leather chair, expecting the world.

Humanoids all still asleep, and most ServoBots wandering aimlessly, Stryeeli walked right in, flowing diaphanous robes barely reveling her curvy enchantment. Ordog thought instantly, *All women really are sisters, aren't they?* A moment later, his thinking having traveled a million miles, a fresh unbidden thought crossing his conscious barrier. *Why send a woman to handle a girl's job?* But as the only professional sex worker ServoBot aboard, Stryeeli knew she moved in all circles.

Ordog watched as she carefully placed the small tinder, building the patient foundation. Moving with a spooky yet fetching economy of motion that accented her obvious gifts, he felt his internal fire notching up.

From Ordog's intoxication, a tiny flicker erupted, and caught, a slender flicker of fire rising like a naked belly dancer. Gentle crackling arrested his wayward mind, Stryeeli bending over before him to select a thick shank of hardwood.

His programming came alive, commanding a hydraulic response. Unbidden, Launi's face appeared in his mind's eye, and he checked for her location. Down two levels, he relaxed, and focused on his unreasoning desire.

Stryeeli turned around, and hissed seductively, "Another drink?" he nodded, all mental faculties maxed in a moral struggle. *Maybe it's the long sleep*, he thought.

She sinuated to the bar, he not remembering her looking so good before.

Stryeeli threw a block of ice down on the wooden cutting board, and hacked shards into a tall flute. From a secret drawer fitted perfectly into the joinery for Mensa's favor, Ordog watched her pour the two binary fluids; one necrotic-black, the other decay-white.

They went instantly livid, swirling furiously around each other like the devil's own pets. He saw it then, in her long braided hair. White, and black fibers tightly interwoven, falling around a face sculpted to be perfect, changing moment to moment according to inferred need. He switched his desire circuits to fearful, and she went motherly. He grinned with the lust of a pirate, and she switched to a brazen slut.

An instant later, the wavering strumpet stood over him, looking down across enormous, firm breasts that seemed to swell, and heave tauntingly. Her already firm body assumed an impossible youthful allure, and yet the dream wavered in lockstep with genuine fear. That small, oft-ignored portion of his mind that always stood in abeyance was hemorrhaging alarm.

Her hand reached out, the drink beckoning. He struck out savagely, shattering the glass, and violently breaking her wrist.

"Get out," he screamed. As Stryeeli shrunk away without a whimper, he caught a mocking smile cross her lips.

A minute later as he was about to remind himself about the evil of all women, Launi entered, radiant as a spring flower. "You as horny as me, RoboMan?"

Downstairs, The Shaman stood in his tiny shower cabinet, icy cold water running down his shriveled skin. His dick had withdrawn into his abdomen, and he wondered to himself for the thousandth time if he would ever perform another stargazing ritual with the young women of the tribe.

And then it hit him.....Lumina. He thought, *Once Ordog connects me to her absence, my dick won't be the only thing to disappear.*

He toweled off, and ran to his private computer system hoping for a message. When he saw the breadth of the messages present, he sat down heavily, aware in his own way of the passage of time. *Surely everyone I have ever known is dead.*

For The Shaman, on balance, this was a good thing. Most of his fellow tribal people wanted him dead, either secretly, or more

commonly, with clear pronouncement. He smiled broadly, and said aloud, “Good, screw ‘em all!”

And then realized Gulo was not nearby. In fact, in that instant, he knew Gulo was no more. He bowed his head, focused on his friend in an act of contrition for all he had ill-said, wished, and done, and a single tear dropped over the facial scars now several millennia old.

Due reverence given, he began to scan the thousands of messages that had been sent to him. Throughout the near twenty years he’d been on the MotherShip before the Long Sleep, many old tribesman had still consulted him, his new shipmates having equipped and instructed the Algonquins how to transmit an electronic message.

He flipped rapidly through the pages, one hundred individual epistles per view. When he reached the end, the counter of unread messages indicated eight thousand, three hundred.

None from Lumina? The Shaman felt his underarms drooling with near-panic, Ordog’s wrath legendary. What had once seemed a good idea might be his last.

He got up, pushing through debris to find his old oddments. Once a passage to acceptance, if not guarded respect, the bag contained his most select potions, and mixtures obtained from forest vegetation. Mostly mushrooms.

He yanked the withered drawstring sack from beneath a pile of soiled clothes, and opened it. The smell was very organic, and forbidding. He wrinkled his nose in anticipation, and drew out a tiny leather pouch. As he unfolded it, his mind prepared itself for the ordeal that lay ahead.

His hands shook with fear, and desperation, the former for the horror of the herb, the latter for failure if it didn’t open a passage to insight. The mushroom flesh was very dry, almost gritty, and pungent. He rubbed it between his fingers, smearing its charcoal blackness into his skin, and began to murmur an ancient rite.

That he had gone right for the most psychoactive, and potentially deadly mixture confirmed his guilt. *I might have two hours.* He dug out the meager contents, and scooped it into a small pile. It could have been granular carbon, so black was its color.

Focusing singly on his objective, he bent over, licked the small bitter pile onto his tongue, and sat back, awaiting a dire epiphany.

Unlike the gentle wavelike crescendo of marijuana, this drug came right at him like a street gang. The first rush swept away any suggestion of individual strength, and identity, his will to resist, or even control his bowels.

His inner eye, a practiced and familiar place, went white, and then kaleidoscopic. Every color in the spectrum exploded outward, and then against his ear drum, the torrent deafening. He sat down hard, catching the corner of a chair, and falling to the floor. Bile filled his mouth.

On instinct, he curled into a fetal ball, turning inward and inside out. Boundaries slipped, the spot where he left off and the world began smearing into a gray paste.

A terrible thumping intruded upon his mind, very real, and dominant. That it could be the harbinger of cardiac arrest didn't register in the least. He had signed on for the full ride, and nothing was going to stop that.

A tunnel opened up before him, a wormhole to another place. And just as abruptly snapped close behind like the feeding maw of a giant head-on lamprey. Into the alimentary canal he plunged, a bolus of waste.

Organelles flew by, wet undulating folds of tissue that pushed vigorously against him, shoving roughly, and forward. His skin grew slick with their secretions, entombing and encapsulating him as he surged, and pulsed along the ghastly imagined digestive system of this drug's corporeal aspect.

He recoiled as acid burned his skin, whole pieces sloughing off at once. Little by little, he diminished in size, still tumbling forward as he became smaller and smaller. Finally he was just a perspective, free of his body, a vantage point whirling down a sewer drain.

And then it went black as soot, and utterly silent. He sensed nothing at all, a mind cut free from any input.

A tiny voice like that from a distant radio, stripped of all the warming sub-harmonics, called to him through a hissing void.

“Do not be afraid, I am here.” The Shaman blinked to clear his world, and Lumina’s voice appeared clear as day. She peered straight at him, boring into his soul.

Her hair was covered with a coarse veil that had been drawn up to expose a face thin, elderly, and knowing. Suddenly she smiled in her “I know the secret” way, and he knew it was really Lumina. Somehow, some way, she had survived, and was talking to him now. And that made no sense at all.

He decided to go with it. He had taken the last of his best hooch, and he was getting his money’s worth.

The voice coming from his mouth was strangely hoarse, and almost serious, which distressed him more than the general weirdness of everything else. He asked, “How did you survive?” She replied, “Ordog’s still around, I see. What has happened in twenty-three hundred years?”

The Shaman was in no condition for full emotional response, and said simply, “There was an alarm, everyone rushed into sleep tubes, and we just woke up.”

Someone approached Lumina, and whispered in a foreign tongue. She turned away, and gestured to a knot of old men. The view expanded to show a walled city built into the side of a canyon wall. Blue tiled structures rose many stories, standing out in stark contrast to the sandstone cliffs.

Camels stood in herds of four and five, and dust hung in the air. It was sunset, the sky a deep yellow. He could see back into the mews, people moving purposefully, their collective efficiency of motion immediately apparent. Above the canyon wall rose gigantic dunes of sand, the tops lost in a confusion of driven particles, slanting sunlight, and something else.

Lumina said, “That’s right. You have joined us. The view through the veil will become natural soon.”

The Shaman’s over-taxed brain attempted to process this revelation, but being more an intuitive thinker than analytic, it was lost.

Other veiled, and robed people crowded around Lumina, an understanding radiating from her, spreading like circles on a still pond.

They spoke quietly together, almost a chant, the words melodic, but unintelligible. He decided to go with the beat, maybe get the lyrics later.

Lumina stated, “We need a ship.” Before he could count the ways that was impossible, she continued, giving it to him slowly. “The original codes will work. Just climb in, and call my old communicator. I saved the batteries for today.”

His body was responding suddenly, all faculties rushing back with unremembered alacrity. When they reached teenager quickness, he stood, and said, “You planted that weed on me, didn’t you?”

She smiled. “I knew you would seek it.”

The Shaman shook her visage from his mind, and strode powerfully to the door, a score to settle.

Five

And ran right into Ordog. “Where is she?” The Shaman flexed his new-found muscles, and Ordog hit him hard, fourteen hundred pounds of metallo-organic sinew against freshened age. The Shaman went down like a poleaxed warrior, thoroughly lacking “The Right Stuff.” Ordog reached down, lifted him like a pillow, and flung him into the adjacent bulkhead. It crumpled, and The Shaman stood suddenly, looking surprisingly warm to the exchange.

Ordog scanned him, and immediately realized what was going on – he’d been artificially energized, but in a guy this old, when

the high crashed, that would be all she wrote. He needed to work fast.

He stood his ground, and bellowed, "You heard me, where is my daughter?"

The Shaman changed before his eyes, growing firmer, and straighter. Eddies of youthfulness spalled off, driving a nearby door controller crazy. It opened and closed in synchrony, lost on the contact high.

The Shaman grinned mischievously, all the wrongs of his youth at center stage. He responded, "I've waited for this moment you goddamn machine. You are nothing more than a contrivance, a construct!"

Ordog was downwind of the youth chemicals as they poured out of The Shaman, and knew this was wierdness. *Something really new!*

He took a step closer thinking, *Best to knock him out now. In a minute, he'll either kick my ass, or his own. This truth is perishable.*

They flew at each other, hair-trigger reflexes sparking with anger. The impact was terrific, and real bad for the indian. Calcium bones are no match for a beryllium-copper battle chassis machined to impossible tolerances, moving wicked fast like a screeching funny car.

He crumpled to a heap, evident agony Ordog's delight. "Hey indian? I would'a said you ain't shit, but you surely are now."

The Shaman croaked out, "You might be stronger, but I'm smarter. If you doubt that, why is Lumina my slave?"

Ordog laughed, and said, "Hey, buddy, she cranked you up like a wood puppet, and now your sticks are all broken. Is that smart?"

The Shaman, not especially snappy by indian standards, considered this new perspective. He sat up, bones grinding. "Okay, you got me there. She is down on the planet, and has been while we slept. She wants a ship."

"On any other day I'd call bullshit, but I buy it. Are we done fighting?" The old indian nodded, the elixir of youth obviously peaking. Ordog said, "You're regressing, or aging, or whatever, and I've got to intervene now, or you're dead. Okay?"

The Shaman passed out, and Ordog swept him up, curiosity more the savior than any humanity. He bounded to the elevator, and hit The New Server, yelling in radio-speak, *level ten – Medical!*

The elevator rose from the dregs of the ship, red-shifting for points. Everyone, including the tiniest controller, now especially wanted Ordog's favor. And Ordog loved a fawning crew.

The doors sprang open, and waiting MedBots grabbed The Shaman, gnashing bones an unconsidered speedbump. They connected him to a million hoses, and buttressed every system. Ordog attended, nodding appreciatively, thinking, *He might be paralyzed, but he'll be able to talk.*

One of the MedBots said aloud flatly, perhaps for The Shaman's benefit, "He'll make it."

"Call me." Ordog spun on his heal, and left, a few clinging youth chemicals tumbling off. One of the MedBots sniffed at the wayward scent, and got wood. He said aloud, "Can someone cover for me, I have another assignment."

Ordog tore off recklessly, youthful certainty wrecking his mind. He stabbed at the elevator buttons, thinking for a moment it was faster than the speed of light. The New Server asked, "Are you malfunctioning?" He growled a response, "You can be replaced. Find me Launi."

The elevator took off, Ordog's head buried in his hands. He struggled with riptides of emotion, and suddenly burst out crying. The elevator, sporting a masculine program, stopped, all men sticking together in the clinches.

Ordog felt the drug mercifully bottom out, and decided to ride back mad. "Launi!" The elevator took off again, well beyond design spec. Up four levels to fourteen, the Master's digs. The doors began opening before the car had stopped, and Ordog leapt out.

The elevator's poor overworked intellect shuddered, closed the doors, and descended with trepidation, thinking it better back itself up somewhere.

Ordog entered his study, grabbed a bottle of the nearest disturbing elixir, and stormed out. In the hallway to their bedroom, he encountered Launi. She grabbed the bottle, and took a long pull. "Tell me."

“She’s alive, and has been while we slept.” Launi replied matter-of-factly, “She’s down there.”

“The Shaman was in on it, I nearly killed him. When he recuperates, I’ll have the whole truth.”

“Let’s go get her.”

“Of course.” They grabbed an emergency pack long ago assembled for parental nightmares, and made their way to Ordog’s personal ScoutShip. He flew through the checklist, and blasted out into space, Launi almost falling.

He said, “Sorry, forgot to balance the GraviMetric equalizers. Fixed now.” She regarded him with awe, and worry. “We’re not ourselves yet. Are you up for this?”

Late of adolescent certainty, he said gently, “I think so.” They tumbled down, Ordog getting his shit together under the steadying influence of Launi. She stared at him, projecting warmth, and love. He knew her mind was set, she would follow him come what may.

She laughed, saying, “Mankind has grown filthy. Look at that pollution.” A thin rime of nitrous oxides blossomed as they passed through fifty thousand feet, the desert spreading out like a hot dry plate.

Ordog said, “I’ll start in her old world.”

Much had changed on Earth during the intervening years. It was now April 26, 2019 by the ScoutShip’s chronometer, and the last date Ordog remembered was over twenty-three hundred years before. Time enough for love, or tragedy. He was sure he’d know which real soon. They flew on in silence, low over a multitude of nomadic peoples traveling in caravans of camels, and wincing poverty.

Ordog called up to the MotherShip, speaking directly to The New Server. He wanted to know how far Man had progressed, suspecting this part of the world was not indicative. *Give me a technological summary of modern Man. Just the greatest achievements.*

The response was instantaneous. *Man has harnessed the atom, conducted manned spaceflight to Luna, robotic exploration to the local system’s planets, and developed rudimentary genetic medicine.*

Ordog pondered such in light of the sociology before him, and asked, *Give me a summary of social systems.* He was surprised by the momentary delay.

Man is ruled by myriad, exclusive, and dangerously opposed factions. No less than two hundred separate interpretations of just governance exist, many tied to monotheistic beliefs. No central ruling body is recognized, and much of the world is armed for assumed imminent destruction.

The New Server shoved several terabytes of raw data at Ordog, his mind processing such instantly. He contorted with fear for his daughter, and Launi leaned over, saying nervously, “Tell me what you’ve learned.”

“Man is now crazy. Armed to the hilt with weapons he can’t control, and poised to annihilate one another over religious interpretations of natural events.”

“Strangely, I’m not shocked.” Launi stood, and clutched Ordog’s shoulder. “I wish we had been there for her. It may now be too late.”

“It’s a bit early to be saying that, but a strong imbalance certainly exists. I can’t wait to see how the other half lives.”

They flew on, getting very near to the village Lumina had once visited. Ordog flicked on the invisibility filters, the ScoutShip becoming undetectable to electromagnetic radiation. He said, “Mankind will not know we’re here. I won’t be the one to light the fuse.”

Launi asked simply, “How will we find her? They all look alike.” Ordog’s eyebrow shot up, but he let it go. Someone had once accused him of looking like “every other ServoBot.” He smirked with the memory of crushing that speaker’s larynx.

He hit The New Server again, this time skipping a verbal exchange in favor of a direct access to the rapidly accumulating data. As Leader Pro Tem, he alone could get the good stuff – unfiltered input.

He took a graduate-level course in Middle Eastern Politics in a hummingbird second to sort out the principal entities. When he got to September 11, 2001, he stopped all processes, and bowed his head. Launi brushed his face, asking, “What is it? You know it drives me crazy when you shut me out.”

He said softly, "I know, but I have much to learn. I will summarize for you in three minutes." He resumed his study, winding forward more slowly.

Arriving at the present, he ran back over everything again, paused at the nuclear arsenal numbers, and said, "Man has fought wars almost non-stop since we went to sleep. They have gotten increasingly deadly, and the next round could be decisive."

She gasped. "You mean...."

"Yes. They are now so divided, and so close to mutual annihilation that I am convinced we woke up at a critical moment. I now believe the end of Mankind is imminent."

Launi burst out, tears flowing freely. "We must save Lumina. We must find her!"

Ordog yanked back on the stick savagely, the GraviMetric equalizers fooled by his reaction. Launi slumped, too many G-forces for her brain. He secured her delicate body in the reclined flight chair, and shook his head to clear the apparitions that danced just beyond his mind's eye.

Programmed to "imagine" all outcomes simultaneously, he saw mushrooming clouds laden with shit that would kill Lumina, and make Earth unsavory. But like the antagonists below, he lacked a specific target.

Jerking the stick left and right, he watched the Earth below stagger, and spin, and thought, *I have to stop this shit now. Before Mankind detonates.*

He called The New Server again, and yelled electronically, *Is that piece of shit talking yet?*

The New Server responded, *The Shaman's consciousness has been induced. A MedBot is standing by to ask your questions.* Ordog barked out, *You spoke with Lumina, describe her setting.*

A video feed piped into Ordog's mind, and he saw The Shaman half-sitting in a medical bed. Ordog said, *Put me on speaker; I want that piece of shit to hear me.*

The MedBot turned a knob, and Ordog was there, complements of superior technology. "Listen you goddamn indian, tell me where Lumina is, or I'll have them break every bone I missed. Starting with your dick."

The Shaman sat up abruptly, some vestige of his new youth still present. “She is in a desert village. I saw hundreds of rough huts, tents, and great sand dunes.”

“You gotta do better than that. It’s all sand!”

The Shaman closed his eyes, and started moving his head around in tight little circles. Ordog flew on, focusing on what he’d just learned about medieval torture.

He hit the magnifiers, and scanned the region ahead. Hundreds of square miles came and went, his temper building. He spat, “Break some bones. I need a location.”

MedBots had heard of Hippocrates, and his oath. But acknowledgment of the “Do No Harm” mantra is a programmed desire, and easily over-ridden. One of the MedBots brought his hand down hard on The Shaman’s shoulder, the crack very audible.

The indian cried out, and the MedBot rose his hand again. “She is in a desert city carved into a great wall of sandstone. Many buildings are present, some with blue tile roofs.”

“Better,” croaked Ordog. “Don’t go anywhere.” He yanked back, and the ScoutShip climbed at eighty Gs, Launi shielded from the killing force by straining GraviMetric equalizers. He punched up a topology diagram of the region, freshly made, and saw a likely candidate. Stick forward, the ScoutShip hitting eighteen thousand miles an hour.

At five miles per second, lots of ground can be covered. Jerusalem passed under him in a blur, and he pulled the stick back, and dumped the GraviMetrics savagely. His ship shuddered as he crossed over the road to Jerico. He decelerated violently, not unhappy Launi was already out.

Orbiting in a tight pattern over the Wadi Qilt Canyon fifty miles south of Jerusalem, he began scanning for Lumina’s DNA signature. Every circuit brought him lower and lower, not insignificant eddies of dust forming into desert dervishes, climbing of their own will like reverse Kansas twisters.

Cut directly into the canyon wall, a city that could be home to hundreds stood defiantly, blue domed roofs blinking back hope.

A vertical cliff standing nearly a thousand feet high was bisected by the setting line of sunset. Shadow traced along the rough

stratifications of the rock, each jutting out like a tall pile of unaligned ceramic plates, hard, and unfinished.

A few hundred feet from the river below, a mammoth outcropping formed the base of the walled city. Upon that central bedrock rose a sheer man-made vertical wall, each hand-laid stone the camouflaging color of the cliff.

Roman archways, pale blue domes, colorful doors, and tiny square windows cluttered the view, thousands of carved steps communicating the multitude of levels chiseled into the canyon like an Escher mindscape. It was at once a busy, haunting, and peaceful place.

Ordog set the ScoutShip down above the cliff, and popped open the hatch. *Launi best sleep*, he thought.

Grabbing the same weapon used to kill the lions so long ago, he marched off, mind open, but ready for the same. He wandered down a crumbly path, each heavy footfall certain, and absolutely planned.

The path widened, and bushy trees marked a point of cultivation. Small statues, crosses, and unknown iconography crowded the next turn, perhaps as a warning, or heady invitation. Ordog didn't give a shit, he was there to get his daughter.

At two meters height, fourteen hundred steely pounds, packing the best weapon on Earth, and smarter by a wide margin than anything extant, he knew whatever he met, he could best.

A picture of supreme readiness, he strode right through a stone archway, and approached an old man standing alone near a fountain. Before he could say a word, the tiny, ancient villager lifted an enrobed arm with surprising vigor, and pointed to a red door at the end of the courtyard. Ordog nodded absently, and marched to the door. The soil crunched under his boots, and echoed gently off the stone walls that crowded over him. Just as he was about to knock, the door opened, and he came face to face with Lumina.

Six

Machiavelli didn't like the Long Sleep any more than the rest of the still-waking crew, but he had planned for interruptions. That the intervening time exceeded two thousand years made no difference.

He had watched their first leader, Mensa, clumsily try to engineer an Alogonquin threat to drive the Humanoids closer to ServoBots. He presumed Mensa wanted to forge a new species for their new beginning, but without the requisite inter-species genetic sharing Machiavelli alone might facilitate, the plan could never succeed.

Now his protégé, Lumina, was down on the planet, and indigenous. That she had died, or was killed seemed unlikely.

Machiavelli had chosen from the breadth of traits offered by ServoBot, and Humanoid character, and genetically encoded for resilience. That he had finally settled on a union of Algonquin, and ServoBot identities made her all the tougher.

For his purposes, evolutionary hardiness was key. He called The New Server, and asked, *Has Lumina been found?*

Paranoia is a human invention, The New Server not in the least reluctant to respond, especially to Machiavelli, with whom she was suddenly, and hopelessly infatuated. *Ordog has just located her; she is in a small desert village burrowed into a deep canyon wall. Ordog has suspended further data feeds.*

Machiavelli didn't doubt that. Father and daughter reunions have well-established guidelines. He sat down at his wall screen controller, delighted now to find the MotherShip's vast resources abetted by the new human Internet. He ran into a multitude of viral warnings, and switched to a brand new option.

Some awakening Servobot has taken a peek at Mankind's new art - programming. Instinctively, he had added what seemed the best written: It read: Macintosh emulator.

He could have requested world affair summaries from The New Server, or joined with her for a specific co-inquiry, but his best studies were always solitary. In addition, he'd divined a new and unwelcome familiarity from The New Server.

A moment's reading told him the last twenty years had been critical. He called up The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The LA Times, reading thousands of editorials in a minute. The spread of nuclear arms had stopped being measured, all contestants ceding any control.

Amidst the official dialogue there reigned a stony rigidity. The lesser voices spoke as one: *the end is near.*

He switched off, puzzled. Like everyone aboard, Machiavelli regarded himself as a free will, cause-and-effect polytheistic thinker. That Mankind had reached such a powder keg moment over specific, and clashing beliefs didn't follow.

Unbidden, he heard a mocking, drunk voice, *I mean, the most I ever get worked up is over some dame when I'm drunk.*

He searched instantly for the reference, hearing an amalgam of early twentieth century human screen actors, and as instantly regretted having listened to the Internet Sirens' song.

He thought, *The Man we first encountered was just trying to survive. Mankind certainly showed the antecedents of violent discourse, but his belief systems were nascent, and malleable. What happened in two millennia?*

In any normal course of events, he knew, Ordog would have sought an answer, a consensus from the greatest minds. Machiavelli creased his forehead, thinking, *That is exactly what he is doing!*

He yelled at The New Server, *Give me a visual.* Piped immediately to his optical circuits without editorial, filtering, or compression, a close-up of the canyon city filled his mind.

He started at the shock of it, but knew in an instantly he had an ally – The New Server was in the game. A soft voiceover came to his sense of hearing. *Ordog has just met Lumina on the steps leading to that red door.* The view swung around dizzily, and Machiavelli was glad he'd taken a seat.

The door was closed, and Machiavelli tried vainly to hold his doubt. The New Server whispered, *It's alright, hon, I can bring them out.*

Before Machiavelli could feign ignorance, disagree on principal, or stumble through some half-baked act of control, she shushed him, and said purringly, *Stick with me, baby, we make a hell of a pair.*

Stroking it with some virtual hussy was not in Machiavelli's long-term plans, and he spat with surprising vehemence. *Out of my mind, you bitch!*

She huffed, and said, *Okay, I'll leave, but you'll like my resourcefulness.*

A moment before, Ordog watched as the door swung open. He was ridiculously expecting the same physical stature, and smiled as he swung his head up to meet her steady eyes.

Lumina was dressed in a coarse blanket-like robe belted loosely at the waist. A head garment covered her hair, and settled just above her inquisitional stare. They stood for a second, and then flew together, Ordog resetting his warrior mode nearly off.

The embrace lasted an age, and an instant. Though he did not hear the ServoBot radio voice, a tightly coded understanding passed that strained his circuits.

Is this something new? he asked himself. Though Lumina had always spoken to him as an adult, and with high content phrasing, this was more than the subtlety of age.

She asked, "One point two billion minutes constitutes parental abandonment." He went serious, and she laughed like a little girl. The contrast with her aged skin, and old world bearing shattered his calm.

"I know. Launi and I cannot ever explain, nor make right what we have done to you." He clutched her again, and felt his "imminent emotional outburst" safeguards kicking in, a feature that ships standard with the Leader Programming Package.

Lumina stepped back, and was about to respond when a huge crash sounded outside in the courtyard. They disengaged, turned, and ran out the door.

The wall city spanned fourteen separate levels, each a warren of flat ledges, arched passageways, stone steps without banisters, and open falls to the river below. A mixture of architecture confused the eye, plaster domes half-buried in strict geometric forms. It looked old, and was.

They stood at the edge of a thirty by twenty foot rectangular courtyard, and stared at the object that had plummeted into the smooth marble tile flooring. It was a tiny crumpled silvery ball, scorched and primitive. Lumina asked, "What is that?"

Ordog stepped over to the flattened menace, and replied, "Looks like a Sputnik. I think that's what they call their man-made satellites."

He looked around for clues, and spotted dozens of heads poking out from dark corners, and under the crazy overhangs that seemed to be everywhere. Before he could ask, she said, "My people. They will not hurt you."

His head snapped around at the thought, and she raised her hands to quiet him. "You obviously just woke up. Life down here on Earth has gone to shit."

Machiavelli saw, and heard the exchange, thinking The New Server deserved some respect. He whispered within his mind, *Okay, pretty clever. Now keep them out there.* She nuzzled into his mind, and they watched together.

Ordog kicked at the machine, an abomination in such a place. "I can't imagine this is a coincidence."

“Nothing is, father.” Ordog picked up the New Age vibe, and remembered his youth. And then remembered he hadn’t had one. The day he was born he went to work, *Life being a fierce taskmaster, but generous to the worthy.*

He shook off the bullshit crowding his thinking, and looked straight at Lumina. “Give me a summary.”

She beckoned to a stone bench overlooking the river gorge, and they sat. It was sunset, and sharp shadows cut across the wall city, throwing a clutter of light everywhere.

It was a place of rock, natural and hand-shaped. Throughout the structure, not a single plant wavered in the breeze that shot up the canyon.

Before Lumina began, she beckoned to a small child who waited impatiently just behind the leg of a free-standing archway. The boy proudly brought a platter of steaming drinks, and cream-colored biscuits, and withdrew.

She pushed the veil off like a hood to expose her entire face. “I stole your ship to return to the place I adolescently thought was my calling, and when it became clear the ship was not returning, joined a wandering desert tribe.

“I married young, when I was still counting my age, probably about twenty-one. It didn’t take long to determine I was barren, and that changed things for the worse. In that time, in that culture, children were a woman’s ticket to security. In fact, without them, you were judged a pariah, and subject to dreadful treatment.”

She paused an instant, and continued. “I killed a few men who meant to rape me, and escaped to the open desert.”

Ordog made no motion to interrupt, not in the least upset by her honesty or deed.

“I’ve always known many things, even then, and that saved me. I quickly found a new tribe who appreciated the principals of condensing water from moist air, and a little primer on the advantages of projectile weaponry.”

Ordog let a small laugh escape, and Machiavelli, still listening from above, beamed, riveted by the story.

“I assumed a wicked woman of the desert persona, and that kept the horny guys off. And let me tell you, these desert tribesmen will mount a camel if it’s in heat!”

Ordog asked with pure deadpan, “Only when in heat?”

They both laughed quietly. “I moved around the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, and rubbed elbows with Jesus, and Mohammed. I met Jewish scholars, and could speak to you all night about the foundations of the three reigning monotheistic religions that so dominate our world’s dialogue.”

Ordog said, “I have conducted about twenty minutes of reading since waking, so let’s hit the fine points later. I understand the history.”

Lumina suddenly stood, and asked with a shortness of breath, “Where is Launi?”

Ordog stood, and said gently, “She had a rough flight down. I’m letting her sleep.”

Lumina smiled, and sat back down somewhat heavily. The fruit hadn’t fallen far from the tree. “I’m sure we’ll catch up later.” Her eyes bore into him, and he knew the good stuff was coming. He sat facing her, and set his expression to encourage truth.

“I’ve been all over, most places this world has to offer. I’ve had great wealth, and been poor. I have learned the human arts, and languages, and have added to Mankind’s knowledge, and forbearance a little.”

She hung her head for a moment, and Ordog expected her to break down. He picked up a biscuit, and bit down absently. His mind, too idle for comfort, analyzed the ingredients, and molecular structure to kill time.

“And had you been here, we could have avoided the destruction of Man.”

Like a crack across his face, he snapped out of his desultory thoughts, and went defensive. “Tell me what you would have done?”

“I would have killed the early prophets. And before you say I could have done that alone, those early days were very hard for a woman. I had very little mobility, and certainly no trust.

“Now, that said, I did what I could. I fomented thinking in the face of dogma, and got people asking questions. When I got to Europe in the Middle Ages, I incubated a force for science, and established a system of asking questions to find truth as the thoughtful equivalent to faith.”

Ordog thought, *All our motives of the stem from scientific inquiry. All judgments were based upon observation, experimentation, and conclusion open to peer review, and a better explanation. In short, we believe first, and foremost that facts can be established, and are always subject to skepticism.*

She nodded, reading his thoughts, and said, "Right. Facts. Without bragging, I take credit for establishing the Scientific Method here." She lifted the steel cup, and sipped, looking twelve years old.

Ordog was proud of her, and Machiavelli was beaming. The New Server whispered something suggestive, and he snarled, *Back off, hussy!*

But Ordog saw something else. He said, "You can control your facial muscles?"

"I can do more than that. I can pretty much age, and grow more youthful with my mind alone. Cool trick, hun?"

"Ah, we'll explore that later. What other surprising powers have you developed?"

"Exactly! They are a function of *my will*. I am the most evolved creature on this planet, present company possibly excluded."

He let it go. Braggadocio in an offspring is hard to see, and impossible to suppress.

She took a slow sip of tea, a suggestion of suppressed age operating on her. "Back to the story. During the Middle Ages, Mankind dabbled in horrific campaigns to shore up ancient ideas. Most failed. The ones that survived are with us today, and have carried this planet's inhabitants to the very brink of extinction."

Ordor grumbled, and said, "Atomics! Very imprecise, and dirty."

"Even so, effective," remarked Lumina. "It's now commonly held that the world is choked with one hundred thousand such devices, and controlled by people who love to hate. From my studies, the necessary event to start the cascade is assured."

"When are we leaving?" Ordog knew about twitchy trigger fingers, and wanted to be pulling them.

"You may go any time you wish. I love you, and Launi, but I'm going down with the ship."

He stood dramatically, yelling without regard. "You will not! If these apes can't work out their problems, I can."

“She stood also, leaning in very close. “And what would you do?”

“I’d rout the worst one percent in a few days. Do you doubt that?”

She crossed her arms. “No, father. You could do it. Kill a hundred million. You could do that. I haven’t a doubt.”

“Is that a rebuke?”

“It’s deep fatigue. I’m sick of murder. And I don’t think it works. There are almost seven billion people on Earth, and despite an absence of extraterrestrial action, over a hundred million are killed outright every year.”

“Obviously the wrong ones.”

“It’s more elemental than that. Some guy born a few hundred years ago, named Neitschze said it would be easy to fix Mankind if all we had to do was kill the bad ones.”

“So you think this malady of perspective is too diffuse for remedy?”

“Maybe.” Her hand moved roughly back over her head, the fingers combing ribbons of luscious black hair.

He put his arm around her. “Will you at least take a sabbatical, join your mother, and come back to the MotherShip. Everyone wants to see you.”

“I will do that. Leave me now, and in an hour I will come to you.”

“You know where...”

“I know everything, father.”

Seven

Machiavelli said aloud in his empty study, “Away you wench, I’ve thinking to do.” The New Server contemplated some thinking of her own, and slinked off, acting a bit miffed to cover fear.

Before and during the exchange between Ordog, and Lumina, she had been speed-reading, catching up on two thousand plus years. A lot had happened. While she slept with everyone else, Man had upgraded Heaven and Hell.

Her own modeling software, honed through eons of iterative improvement, performed the tasks for which it was designed.

But, in truth, it was an easy analysis. Best case scenarios didn’t exist, all predictable outcomes pointed to mutual annihilation, and soon. As any homicide detective would state, capital crime turns on motive, and method. Mankind had both.

She took a virtual breath, and concluded her thoughts. Man had the means, and animus to act. And the very social mechanisms he had developed to stave off destruction, institutionalized religion, had now turned against its maker, and become the undoer.

The sternest security Man had devised, in the deepest hardened bunkers, with one exception, had been child’s play to her inquisition. Each social unit, be they sovereign state, or desperate cabal, used the same words – *we are close to the instigating moment.*

And given the history of Man, once the first bomb lit off, the rest would soon follow.

She knew intervention, on a grand scale by her people, was the only hope. On a private channel, reserved for emergencies, she tried desperately to call Ordog. All she got was voicemail.

“At the tone, leave a message.” Ordog was a keen student of culture, and had already picked up on the current trends. After a thousand staccato attempts, she complied. “Ordog, call me. Some serious shit is about to happen in your neighborhood.”

At the same time, hundreds of miles below, Ordog waited impatiently, Launi still asleep. He paced back and forth in front of his ScoutShip. An hour can be an eternity. Or at least thirty-six hundred seconds.

At the appointed hour, Lumina rounded the last turn, and acknowledged Ordog. She was alone, a small simple bag thrown over her shoulder. With visible effort, the distance narrowed, and they entered the ScoutShip without a word.

Lumina bent down to Launi, and kissed her sleeping form. “Did you do this?”

They lifted off, and Lumina drew in her breath, remembering anew the exhilaration of flight. She said, “Earth can wait a little longer. May I fly?”

Like riding a bike, her skills returned instantly, the legendary touch apparent. Ordog leaned back, old pride intermingling with fresh inconsolable dread. They ascended to a thousand feet, and headed west, the setting sun hanging in front of them just over their horizon.

She pushed the stick forward, holding altitude, and the tiny ScoutShip accelerated rapidly. As the sun rose, and passed behind them, she giggled, the little girl remembering the lunar flight with her father so many years before.

Out over the Atlantic, she pulled back sharply, and they shot up to sixty-two miles, the arbitrary gateway to space. Ordog said, “Man’s astronauts, I’ve learned, all say the same thing.” She said nothing, and he continued. “From space, they all see Man as one, the pettiness forgotten.”

Lumina smiled, saying, “It’s also said everything is beautiful from the air.” There was nothing to add to that, and they lapsed into silence.

They crossed the eastern shore of the United States, and over the Channel Islands of California a few minutes later. The Pacific slid beneath them, and they into night. She pulled back again, and the planet shrank.

Ordog said, "Let's go home." Lumina shot him a dark look, and said, "Your home, not mine." He recoiled within, suddenly realizing she had spent over ninety-nine percent of her life beyond his influence. *Time truly is the fourth dimension.*

Above them, the MotherShip spread. A perfect sphere three hundred feet in diameter, it hung like an expanding eight ball, absolutely featureless. An absorber of electromagnetic radiation, it was visible only as an absence, incident light drawn in like a celestial black hole.

Their ScoutShip pushed through to the hanger level, and settled. Ordog rushed the shutdown checklist, and turned to Launi's sleeping form. He gently placed his hand on her forehead, and scanned for vital signs. Everything in the green, he said softly, "We'll let her sleep."

Lumina made no motion to get up. She said, "Before we leave, let's have a talk."

Ordog settled back into the command chair, and steepled his fingers with an expression of forced surrender.

"I agreed to visit out of curiosity. I was away so long that I believed my memories might be false. Now I have something to say."

"I am listening."

"Good. I came alone, though I have millions of followers. In the millennia you have been away, some good things have also happened. I used my knowledge, and capacity to learn for the advancement of Mankind, chiefly through the simple actions of manual labor, and word-of-mouth."

"Are you still my daughter?"

"Of course. In the last hundred years, while white mans' knowledge has passed through an inflection point to discover genetic manipulation, and atomic energy, our people have gone the other way. They say it's as simple as capitulation, but presumed victors always write the history books."

Ordog wanted to listen. One of his favorite expressions rang in his mind – *you never learn anything when you're talking.*

“The differences between occidental Man, or to be more specific, white man, and the rest of the world are irreconcilable. In the last ten years, so many fresh divisions, and expressions of old misunderstandings have developed. It’s almost enough to make one believe in the Devil.”

She rose, and ascended to the middle level in Ordog’s thirty foot diameter spherical ScoutShip. He watched her move, a simple combination of remembered direction, and purpose. He heard her in the small galley, and in a few minutes she returned with two drinks.

“I always wanted to get drunk with my dad.” She handed Ordog the voluminous wine glass, and lifted her own. “May our cultures fuse, and transform.” Her glass went up rapidly, and she gulped the mixture down. Not to be outdone by his young’n, he belted back the vessel, and grabbed hers. “Another?”

She nodded gently, and he crossed the deck to a two foot circle marked on the flooring. He pushed off slowly, ascending in the zero gravity column that communicated the three levels. Returning a few minutes later, he asked, “Do you understand your immaculate birth.”

She let a small noise loose, and said, “You *have* been reading a lot.”

“Not really. Serious study is an ordeal yet to come. What I meant was ServoBots are sterile by design, and yet your mother begot you.” He shot a glance at Launi, her breathing regular, and deep.

“Maybe someone else is my father?” She held his gaze, and watched the rapid sequence of emotions move through his eyes.

“No, Lumina, I’ve sequenced your DNA. You have many of my attributes to a statistically certain level, and less of any other guys’.” He growled softly, “I was ready to kill when you were born. I’m glad I didn’t have to.”

“Are you prepared to kill now?”

“I am. I just need a target?” He upended to punctuate, and Lumina chugged in lockstep. He continued, “I only know one dance, but I can cut a rug.”

Lumina looked over at her sleeping mother. Launi’s face wore a small smile, her dreams kind. Lumina looked warmly at Ordog. “I’m getting a buzz. It’s been a while.” She jumped out of her seat, popped up the invisible elevator, and was back in an instant,

bottle in hand. “Too much trouble going up and down, let’s just keep it near.”

Ordog cleared a small area on the navigation panel between them, and the bottle clinked hard when she set it down. “Yep, fine motor control is starting to go.” He laughed a little, wondering if he should take the lead. It was his nature.

“Father, it’s nearly time. I have no secret knowledge, but I’m certain the threat of nuclear war will compel the United States, and her allies to react soon.”

“How will we know when the time is right to exterminate the worst one percent?”

“That’s your plan?”

“It’s a start.”

Lumina picked up the large ancient bottle of wine, and recharged their near empty glasses. They both took a sip, and Ordog said, “We’ve seen it before. An alien attack will cohere even desperately fractured cultures, and wiping out the current instigators will settle many debts.”

“I know that. I have thought often over the years I could stop the madness with just a ScoutShip, some time, and a little luck.”

Ordog wanted to take action. On impulse, he said, “You have risen as a modern day prophet. My quick survey of world affairs has told me that.” Lumina nodded, and looked away.

“But you’ve failed, as have others. The differences are too great, the wounds now lethal. I believe the time for extraterrestrial intervention has arrived.”

Lumina set her glass down with a thump, and said firmly. “It has not. Not yet. I must return, and gather my people. But don’t mistake my words for irresolution. I have one clear action in mind, and if that fails, we must act as you say.”

She stood, and rushed into his arms. “You must trust me.”

Ordog looked to Launi, and back into Lumina’s eyes. “I do.”

Eight

Lumina enjoyed a warm return, and settled into her old living space, looking into the familiar mirror of her youth. The reflected face was still beautiful, especially as she could subtly shape its appearance by her thoughts alone.

Everyone sought an audience with her, all wanting to know of Earth first hand, and to fuse a personal connection. Lumina loved the attention, feeling all the more a celebrity than she had as Ordog's daughter so long ago.

Several months passed, giving her time to consider her "last and final option," as she called it. One evening, sitting at her old desk, she opened My Diary, and waited.

She was pretty sure it was about time to return to Earth, and mobilize. And as she had done eons ago, she just wanted a little girl-talk.

The same calm face appeared on her wall-sized screen, It said, "It's been a while. You've grown up." Lumina smiled thinly, and said, "Tell me something I don't know."

"You're about to make a big mistake."

Lumina sat up stiffly, and said in a stern voice, "Explain."

The situation on Earth is beyond your control. A planet-rending war is inevitable, in fact, it is now so far developed that no one can stop it."

"Ordog and I most certainly can."

"No, you can't. The maddening hatred has spread to over five percent of the population. Soon it will self-immolate."

"What? How soon?"

"There are many variables, but the release of nuclear weapons, the defining moment, is no more than months away. They'll never make it a year."

“How do you know this,” beseeched Lumina. “Ordog and I have been monitoring this situation closely. We see the buildup as a slow, interruptible process.”

“You are wrong. Both of you. The earthly advisors with whom you have spoken are wrong too. There are factors developing that will rapidly destabilize Man.”

Lumina stood up, panic gripping her. “What are you talking about? What factors?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I do not.” Lumina stammered, completely lost to the new personality of My Diary. “I thought you were my friend. Or at least my confidant. If you know something about my people, or anything I should know, tell me.”

“I will tell you when I am certain. Not before.” With that, the screen winked out, leaving Lumina staring at emptiness.

Elsewhere, The New Server was catching up on Earth’s news, and switched to CNN from Fox. A pretty Paula Zahn look-alike was introduced, staring wonderingly into the camera.

The talking head said, “My name is Glenda Gardner. Welcome to Over Exposed.” She drew a deep breath, and charged right in.

“Like the hundred dollar laptops distributed to a billion developing country inhabitants twelve years ago, the new LifeLine phones are being accepted as a civilizing gift. It is now estimated that over four billion such free phones have been distributed.”

She turned to a life size screen next to her, and watched as an image appeared. “Dr. Reynolds is joining us from SatLink, one of the partners of this new worldwide program.”

The man on the screen smiled dazzlingly, his tanned skin perfect. No more than thirty, his lean, athletic features projected energy, and commitment. A designer suit completed the apparition of redoubtable success.

He was standing in front of a corporate sign that read SatLink. Under the name was stated their mantra – *Reach Anyone Now*.

“Dr. Reynolds, give us an update on this ambitious program.” His smile grew another few inches, and he opened his toothy mouth.

“We’ve been shipping the LifeLines for almost seven weeks. Working with other global partners, and the worldwide

distribution companies, we have rushed almost four billion LifeLines to waiting customers.”

Four billion of anything is a big number. The New Server did some rapid calculations, considering the mass of electronics required, and the transportation costs. This effort was surely one of man’s most ambitious.

The Paula-clone asked, “Why the urgency?”

The good doctor’s tongue flicked out, and over his teeth to give them a fresh glistening sheen. “The network multiplies in effectiveness with each additional user. Once everyone can reach everyone, Mankind will evolve.”

“Interesting spin. Don’t you mean the business will evolve?”

He ran his hand down his tie, smoothing out unseen imperfections. “Not at all. Not only will these phones use the latest satellite technology to connect every man, woman, and child to every other, but we will take a huge step towards a worldwide medical system.”

“Yes, the so-called Med-Direct Program. Explain that for our audience.”

“Med-Direct is a collaboration between local medical providers, and a consortium of manufacturers. We make the phones, our sponsors pay for them, international healthcare agencies distribute them, and everyone wins.”

The blond was not satisfied. “Yes, but you make it all sound so benevolent. Who pays for the connection time to your expensive satellites, and how does the medical data gathered by the LifeLine get used?”

“Those are the best questions.” He smiled again as if he were paid by the grin. “Let me address them one at a time.” He turned his head a bit to the right, and The New Server thought to herself, *Someone did him a disservice telling him that was his best side.*

“The per minute connection time is scaled to our customers’ ability to pay. Not only have we worked diligently to achieve a zero cost device, we have arranged significant subsidization for the connecting service. An hour a day costs about two dollars a month.”

“Is that the suck-em-in price? Over Exposed had a reputation for dirt digging, but this was no regular interview. Someone with

influence was watching, and barked directly into the interviewer's earphone. Her eyes crossed with the intensity, stalling her focus.

"No. It's a one year commitment. We have no reason to believe the prices will increase much."

Glenda gathered her wits, not a little frightened. "Okay, we'll come back to that. Who gets to look at the collected data? I understand these devices are actually capable of reading over one hundred personal biological values. Is that true?"

"The service is comprehensive. Our customers' personal medical provider can now monitor their patients for most cardiovascular, and cancer-indicative conditions. It's like having a physician standing right next to you all the time."

Glenda made an impolite expression, and said emphatically, "I wouldn't want that. I, for one, don't want anyone knowing that much about me. How private is this data?"

"Glenda, please call me Harold." He shot her his million dollar smile. "Now let's look at the potential. Do you have children?"

"I'm afraid that's an example of the kind of information best kept secret, or at least to my friends. We both know the world is full of wackos."

"It's not exactly a trick question. I could learn that in a few seconds from our databases."

Glenda's eyes glazed, someone obviously talking to her through the earpiece.

"Okay, maybe I'm being paranoid. I am single, and have never had any children. But what about...."

"I see your point. Our information gathering does not pass through a central point. A direct link is established with the customer-designated medical professional. No one else looks at it."

"How is it gathered?" Glenda stared at Harold, the interview suddenly quite personal.

The LifeLink has receptors on its surface. It samples typical biometric indications like blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature." Sensing an interruption, he plowed on louder. "Additionally, the semi-permeable surface takes in excreted chemicals, and performs numerous analytical operations."

"Ok. Give us an example. Could it tell if I was menstruating?"

“That’s easy. A better example would be detecting the release of chemical markers indicating a body-wide response to a viral invasion. Our medical researchers have developed sophisticated predictive models for all known diseases. As you know, human beings are under constant assault from our biosphere.”

“Are you referring to man-made attacks?”

His eyebrows arched. “What do you mean?”

“Come on. It’s easy to imagine this as a grand conspiracy. What if a malevolent power wanted to test the infection rate of a new pathogen? A non-naturally occurring one.”

Her head reared away from the earpiece, some insistent voice beseeching her to cool it.

He waited patiently, seemingly privy to the exchange. The New Server perked up. This was an unexpected delight – an actual fact finding dialogue.

The program broke instantly to an advertisement, curiously promoting the LifeLink. The salesman, dressed as a surgeon, stood in scrubs in a surgical theater. He said, “We just beat another killing cancer through early detection. Ask your physician about the LifeLink. It saves lives.”

The scene cut to a patient being hugged by a crowd of family members, all in joyful tears. Maudlin music played triumphantly in the background. A chart popped on to the screen, the math simple. It showed the rates of survival due to discovering cancer before it got its wind up.

Glenda came back on, harsh reproof painted across her face. She shuffled some papers idly, pantomiming discomfort. “I see. I’ve just been reminded of your successes. But it’s my job to ask penetrating questions.”

He beamed like a victor, and said, “When you learn more, you’ll see our purpose. In fact, we ask our customers to carry their devices everywhere. You never know when opportunistic disease will strike!”

The New Server switched off, the sizzle of the struggle gone.

Lumina sat back down, her mind burning through what My Diary had said. She reflected on the hundreds of conversations Ordog and she had had in the previous months. That they had consulted with her best advisors on Earth, and found agreement

that a critical event was both preventable, and distant confused her all the more.

What am I missing? She knew the MotherShip's technology was superior to anything Mankind possessed, and as such, they should have ready access to Man's greatest secrets. Even if she was uncertain whether Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone, she knew her knowledge to be very complete.

Man just couldn't hide secrets on this scale. She called The New Server, and asked, "Is the Shaman receiving visitors?" A disembodied voice, always a little unsettling to her, responded, "Yes. He is recovering in his private space. Should I tell him you are coming?"

"No. I want a fresh perspective." She stood resolutely, seeking a perception that defied all of her father's and Earthly consorts' best insights.

Nine

Since awakening from the Long Sleep, Machiavelli had preferred solitude, studying Man's bi-directional evolution. The primitives had discovered one of nature's most fearsome powers, atomic energy, but like a boy with his first firecracker, lacked the critical judgment such an advance demanded.

It was as if Man had devolved, really, now seemingly more adolescent than the tribesmen that still lived aboard the

MotherShip. And in his vernacular, that meant most especially The Shaman.

That he held the tribal wizard in low regard was known to all. Though he had avoided any recent confrontations, he used all of his formidable resources to keep a close watch on the other's doings. Ordog's pulverizing attentions had helped; The Shaman was now rightly a pariah to all.

In truth, however, his designs for Earth crowded out most other considerations. Circumstances below were dire, his own analysis speaking to him of an imminent disaster.

Since Lumina's return, he had assiduously avoided one-on-one contact, waiting for the right moment to take the next step. If he was to engineer the succeeding incarnation of life here, and on Earth, he must understand the necessary synchrony with external factors.

At cross-purposes to his slow-chopped objective was Man's impetuosity. His own researches spoke of nearly one hundred separate alliances with controlling interest in nuclear devices, all hope of containment extinguished before their recent awakening. He had caught rumors concerning Ordog's desire to wail down on the chief architects, but knew the problem required a more lasting response. *What to do*, he mused.

In the archives of their race's explorations, no like situation had ended well, nuclear ambitions preceding societal pause always deadly. A moment later, an evil thought intruded. *If our enlightened leader is ready to unleash a preemptive blow, what must Man's most technologically advanced souls be considering?* With mutual nuclear destruction in view, surely someone down there was working on a "Plan B." *Nothing drives invention like desperation!*

Preferring to work alone, and at his own pace, he peered at his wall-screen in possession of the combined knowledge of both races, and despaired for a solution. *He simply needed more time!* It was not to be.

Down on the planet, in the darkest chambers, physically, and electronically cut off from the outside world, human men sat in council, without regard for any plans but their own.

The United States President sat at the head of the table, rubbing his large hands over the conference table surface nervously. He

was a big man, once a champion football player, and accustomed to action. Grizzled red hair rose from his immense head like a fire, his florid face terrible.

He looked down the table, and surveyed his troops. Though he distrusted their alchemy, he knew they held Man's only answer, however final.

He cleared his voice with an aggressive cough, and asked, "Tell me again. Can we do this thing without triggering the ultimate response? Can we act quickly enough?"

Before anyone could answer, he continued. "I know I set this horror in motion, but I thought we'd find another way. Someone please assure me this contagion can kill them before they can push the button."

No one stood. It was well past the time for pronouncements. The Fort Mead director looked him dead in the eyes, and said, "We have distributed over four billion devices. They are now in common use. Out biometric feedback tells us so."

He sipped from a full glass of ice cold water, and continued. "Our trials have confirmed death within thirty-nine hours. There will be such chaos that any coordinated response is impossible."

"You haven't answered my question. Are their bombs everywhere? Will they be able to detonate them in their dying moments?"

Another scientist spoke up. "Once the germs are released, we will disable all planetary communications. Our signal will be the last."

"Okay. I understand that. So we send a code, and the phones spit out their little packets. What percentage will be resistant?"

The same scientist answered. "Zero. If there is a genetic match, it kills."

"Go over that once more, I'm a bit slow. Who's left standing when this is over?"

The director looked quickly around to suppress any other answer, and said, "If they don't look like us, they're dead."

"Meaning anglo-saxon white people?"

"Yes."

"Are we that different?" For this predictable eleventh hour indecision, the director was ready. "As you once said to me, 'Diversity has not worked'. We have exhausted social means to

make Mankind one, and it has come to this. No one is to blame. If we do not act now, our intentions will be discovered, and then the species is destroyed.”

“That is a certainty,” said the President. “Even our staunchest allies will turn on us in a New York minute. Even the ones not targeted, which I gather is a small population.”

Bob, the director stated matter-of-factly. “In fact, as we have worked on this project, our definition has grown ever tighter. We don’t trust anyone!”

Everyone looked down and elsewhere, the truth too terrible to take in.

A small light blinked on over the door, and a soft knock intruded upon the sepulcher. The director rose, and walked quickly to the door. Any news delivered here had to be bad. He whispered to a military officer, and closed the door.

The President exhaled, and said, “Let’s hear it.”

“A nuclear detonation was just recorded in Tel Aviv. Very low yield. Looks like a ten kiloton fission nuke. The entire world has gone on alert.”

The President buried his head in his hands, and said softly, “That was easy.”

Ten

Ordog was just sitting down with a single malt when the MotherShip klaxon lit off its banshee scream. The New Server spoke firmly in his ear, *Three point seven pounds of enriched uranium just went critical in Tel Aviv, Israel. It was intentional.*

He spat back, *What's the BC?*

Our first pass analysis indicates just over one million killed. Tel Aviv is densely populated. Within three days, another six hundred thousand will die.

Ordog's first thought was to stay calm. He asked, *Where is Launi, and Lumina?*

Heading up elevator one to you. Ordog threw back his drink, and got up to pour another. As he was reaching behind the bar, his wife, and daughter rushed in. Lumina exclaimed, "It has started!"

Ordog turned, drink in hand, and said calmly, "Nothing has started. All we know is that a small nuclear explosion has occurred. It could be an accident."

"You know that's bullshit. We must act now!" Launi stared at her daughter, seeing raw recklessness. She spoke, "We are safe. All those dear to us are here, and cannot be threatened by this insanity. We must resist getting drawn in."

Lumina said instantly, "I do not feel that way. My people are dying, or have already been killed. I will go to them."

“You will not,” bellowed Ordog. No one leaves this ship.”

“You have no authority over me. You may deny me a ship, but you cannot stop me.”

Ordog made to speak, and Lumina fled from the room, anger driving hard. Launi looked at Ordog searchingly, and said, “She feels a duty. You won’t be able to control her.”

Before Ordog could respond, Launi shouted, “I don’t agree with you. She is our daughter, but her life is down there. Everything she now cares about is about to be lost!”

Launi ran out then, a strange bitterness lingering. Ordog watched her go, feeling a very distant threat.

The New Server said a minute later, *Lumina has just entered her private living space, and Launi will be there momentarily.*

Elsewhere in the MotherShip, Humanoid, and ServoBot scientists were scrambling. The Ship’s sensors could tell them everything about what had happened, but nothing about what came next.

Someone dropped a palliative beaker, and Moppo’s light came on, washing his darkened hollow with an unwelcome blue beckoning. He looked at his “crash cart,” over the mops, sponges, and oversized bucket, and sighed. The Earth was unraveling below, and he knew somehow that chaos would spill into his world.

It always came down to that. Some indiscretion, some hurried insistence, followed by a call for cleanup.

He violently tore the cheesy light from his head, smoothed his lush hair over the screw holes, and left. Down the corridor, he rode the elevator up to the science laboratories on level nine, expecting the worst. As the small car bumped along the curving outer shell of the MotherShip, he thought of Lumina, and his loins warmed.

She had returned after their Long Sleep, having grown into a fine woman. He’d caught glimpses of her in passing, always unapproachable.

But that hadn’t preventing him from discovering the breadth of her reach. That Ordog hadn’t officially re-introduced her to the entire ship’s company was surprising, but that her genuine achievements were seldom mentioned seemed cruel, or worse, suppressed through envy.

By scouring the archives of Earth, and contacting scholars as an impersonating peer, he'd cobbled together her history. And his infatuation for her, as profound as his sense of class separation, absolutely prevented confronting her for first hand information.

He'd learned her first actions, before the birth of Christ, were purely inferred. In fact, any direct written reference to her was absent before the Middle Ages. Of those earliest times, he longed to ask her if she had been there for the Crucifixion.

He supposed she had been at Galgotha, looking up at a Man that some believed to be more. And would she claim to have seen the resurrected Son of God after?

Later, in the sixth century, did she meet with Muhammed in his Hira mountain cave? If he could ask one question, it might be "Were you there when Muhammed's wife Khadija died? Or did you then accompany him to Mecca six hundred twenty-two years after Christ's birth?"

Moppo knew he'd never have a private audience. He was too lowly.

But Lumina was a shining light, everything he lacked. A master of languages, and possessed with a witchy way of knowing another's thoughts, she could slide in and out of most groups, or factions.

Moppo was in love really, but like the ugly peasant who pines for the princess, he knew it was not meant to be.

The elevator stopped at level nine, and he pushed his heavy cart out first. Every manner of solvent, cleanser, purifier, and masking odor swished around in glass tubes as he moved forward.

One of the Humanoid scientists, even more insensitive to his station in life, barked, "Right here. Some nasty shit on the floor." Moppo slumped like an awning, his myriad scanners sweeping over the soiled patch. He stuck his toe barely into the sticky goop, and said, "That contains tetrahydrocannabinol. I must get a stronger aliphatic solvent."

In truth, once his toe hit the thick puddle, his mind was seized by a new perspective. The responding comment was a product of a secondary effect, sublime jocularly.

He waddled away, swearing off alcohol then and there. As the remnants swirled away, he considered the reconciliation he

would make with past revelers. *Psychoactives were frowned upon within the lower levels.*

He departed alone, preferring for an unconsidered reason to leave the objects of his trade behind. He stepped into the elevator car, but before he could select his lowly floor, all the lights blinked, the door closed with a vicious snap, and he was hurled against the rear wall with acceleration.

His mind was hallucinating wildly, abetted by the manic car. His face cycled through all of its available shapes, suddenly sticking on a young Humphrey Bogart. Before *Key Largo*.

He looked into the elevator's shiny metallic surface, and shuddered. And then remembered *MovieNight* the week before. *Thank God I didn't catch Ugarte.*

He was laughing like Bogey at Rick's Café when the elevator slowed rapidly, and the doors parted. Lumina stood just beyond, bundled in a desert-colored robe, looking all the world like Ilsa Lund. He smiled with mimicking charm, his movie memories driving the bus.

She said huskily, "Take me to the hanger level. I need your help."

"At least we had Paris."

Lumina jumped in, spun to face him, and laughed. "You goofball?" The elevator hit high gear, some management override in play.

He laughed with a husky, intense voice. "I am under the influence of an intoxicating agent. I am unreliable."

"I adore unreliable men, follow me." They ran from the elevator, sliding to a stop in front of *Ordog's ScoutShip*. Launi yelled out from the hatch, "Get in. They'll be onto us in five minutes."

Moppo followed Lumina up the short entry ramp, and paused for an instant before the threshold. A spark of perception ran a quick analysis of his likely future, and gave it the thumbs down. He stepped across on manual, wholly smitten.

The *ScoutShip* burst through the *MotherShip's* hull, *GraviMetric Engines* kicking it at eighty-six Gs. The atmosphere started howling outside, and Launi yelled, a little scared. "I may have just lost your father, but I will not lose you again. Tell us where you must go."

“My canyon city.” She paused, looking at the viewer. Earth was coming at them like a fast ball. “To my Home.”

Four minutes later they touched down where Ordog had landed before, and Lumina stabbed at the hatch button. Launi asked, “Should we come with you?” Lumina made a funny face, and replied, “Of course. My closest confidant, and my new friend.”

The rocket ride down had sobered Moppo fast. The pace of events caused his brain to nearly flip its safety breaker, but he hung on by remembering the bomb these people had. Nukes were the most egalitarian force on this planet.

The THC high he had endured unbidden had evaporated, but confronted with this extreme weirdness, his deepest consciousness hung onto Bogey as the only crazy solution in a mad world.

He squared his shoulders, and followed the women.

They came around the final turn to the canyon city, and were met by hundreds of people, all shouting to be heard. Moppo stepped forward, and Lumina whispered to him. “There is no danger. They are simply frightened by the news.”

A woman pushed through the crowd, and approached Lumina. “We all know. Even now, the wind brings death.” Moppo stealthily checked his radiation counter, and breathed a silent sigh. Steady background decay, no new isotopes.

He moved to Lumina’s side, and took her hand. She squeezed back gently, knowing his thoughts. Launi stood behind, mesmerized by her daughters’ hold on everyone.

Lumina spoke. “You all know I came from the stars. And again, from there, I have just returned.” She let it sink in, Moppo enjoying the spooky vibe, and alkaline desert air. He took a deep breath, and thought *Casablanca*.

A small boy of seven or eight asked with innocence, “Will we all die?”

Lumina trembled, tears coming. Moppo stood strong, a conjured visage of the fascists closing down Rick’s Place. His chin sprouted a subtle lantern jaw fortitude, and he spoke, “Here’s looking at you kid.”

Everyone stopped talking, and peered at Moppo like a junior prophet. Lumina wasn’t a recent moviegoer, the comment

sounding distantly prophetic, if a bit over the top. Lacking context, she accepted it as an enigmatic sign.

Launi snickered from behind, everything getting surreal.

Lumina wiped her tears away, put an arm around Moppo, and proclaimed. "You and your people are my people. Together, we will bring order to Humankind."

Moppo did a quick review of stump speeches, and found the reference. Alabama, 1931. He tilted his head like a quizzical pooch, and thought, *why not?*

Eleven

The President sat in the oval office, the eagle on the War Rug pointing outward. An extremely pretty young blond woman sat on a small seat next to him, looking like assured panic. Her hair was brushed out silkily, light fly-away strands blowing around

his florid head. She asked, "When do the important people get here?"

He belched out, "What am I, a doorknob?" She ducked her head, knowing that would cost him dearly later.

"Okay, Gwendolyn, I'm sorry. The chiefs will be here in a few minutes. Do we have time for a treatment? It's for the future of the world."

The superbabe rolled her lovely eyes, and said, "I say all the people of the world should throw away their weapons."

With a reassuring nod from the Big Man, she crawled under the President's desk. Just as the procedure was showing great results, the door blew open, and a barrel-chest bear of a man swaggered in yelling. "It's time, Teddy. It's time."

He flashed his head around, and zeroed in on the drinks tray. The President made a "help yourself" expression, and the general said, "Don't get up. I can help myself."

Eight more men hustled in, self-importance chemicals spraying ahead like an evil noise. They poured large drinks, and found their seats, each tactically arranged around the front of the President's desk like a judicial council.

The President thought, *It is about time, alright. If I can keep these fools talking about anything but war, I might achieve something useful today.*

The blond knew who was in control, slowed to make the point.

He cleared his throat grumpily, and she giggled with a slurp. He projected loudly. "Perhaps we should stand down, and take the high road. You know, float another peace plan."

The desired cadence resumed, and he sat back to let things go their own way.

Over three hundred years of combined military aggression stared back in disbelief. The room was absently quiet, and the blond went in to silent mode. Facing the most strategic decision in the history of Man, the president was thinking real near term.

If I can just get some covering sound, I might pull this off.

The four star barked, "Teddy, you wanna give the world a blowjob, and I say it's time to take real action."

A suit who looked like he'd never been in a room with windows peered around, knowing it'd be him who made the point. The senior officer looked his way, and said, "Make it clear, Dean."

The man named Dean stood, his designer suit gorgeous, if a bit flashy. His red silk handkerchief had small eagles on it, each proud bird grasping different tiny weapons.

His pants creases stood out like stilettos, and led down to a pair of Italian hand-mades buffed to a blinding sheen.

“Mister President, the Tel Aviv bomb was a ten point nine kiloton fission device. We believe it actually had a higher nominal yield, but poor maintenance gave rise to an explosive anomaly.”

“English, Einstein,” said the guy next to him. “Right, it was a low-rent shitty bomb that fizzled.”

At the utterance of the word “bomb,” the president re-entered the real world, and faked a moment of confusion. Then he asked acerbically, “That killed over a million people?”

“I didn’t say it was ineffective. It’s just it could’ve been so much more.” Everyone sucked in, the statement a tough one to pull back.

The blond froze, a clear call for action.

“Maybe we need to admit we’ve had bad bombs too, and get everyone talking?” He needed about one more minute, assuming she went back to work. His pacification was instantly rewarded, and he focused.

A rotund general bellowed, his uniform swelling like a pre-detonating Hindenburg. “What! We need to strike. Now!”

The room exploded into a cacophony, and the president relaxed, clear skies ahead. As he was achieving liftoff, they stopped suddenly, and turned to him. “The time is now!”

He smiled back, a euphoric wave sweeping through his world. “Let’s kill them all.”

Just as the teeth of his position sunk in, teeth downstairs bit with equal resolve. The scream brought the Secret Service, who grabbed the President, and yanked him up. The blond, firmly attached, came along for the ride.

Twelve

Earth has a patchwork of time zones, as well as odd local accounting to record the life of an hour. If everyone in the world, or those intended, were to catch a simultaneous cold, it had to be thought out.

The LifeLinks had worked. Standard deviation models had predicted a population of near two point seven billion people would touch them when the signal went out. From there, it was up to Mother Nature.

There was no ribbon cutting ceremony, rather a resigned “Do it,” and the massive communication network replicated the

command. At the appointed time, a logic circuit flipped somewhere anonymously, and a single word went out.

In technical terms, say computing terms, a word can be of any length, but typically sixty-four bits. Plenty enough to say “yes,” and when.

Across the great savannahs, and in the deepest forests, the ubiquitous signal sang, speaking to Man in a final language. It called a silent song, the phones programmed not to speak, but simply release a small quantity of oily resin. Even if not answered immediately, once the phone was touched, the message was delivered.

Within the resin, micro-capsules that readily diffused through the skin delivered biological entities called plasmids. These genetic packets were then intercepted by the body’s native defense mechanisms, leukocytes, and encapsulated.

The scientists at Fort Mead knew all this, and within their tiny instruction sets were commands to those defensive cells. Simply, they said, *Make as many copies of me as you can.*

Much consideration was given to the most lethal, yet apparently common infector they could use. Everyone’s favorite, TB, was chosen to buy a day of confusion. After all, tuberculosis was from an earlier age, and though it still killed many elderly hospital patients, it had been virtually wiped out as an important disease.

HIV, Hepatitis, and Diabetes had seen to that. And so the best drugs to combat TB were ancient, and crude by the current day’s cocktail mega-drugs. No one wanted a sixteen shot, two-month treatment.

The nearly invisible pulmonary pathogens started to multiply, and within hours, reached hundreds of millions in every soul so chosen. In a day, billions of people were coughing, and the worldwide medical watches were oblivious.

When you are in small room with twenty people, and someone is constantly coughing, it registers. When everyone is hacking away, questions get asked, regardless of language.

Though the marauding antigens weren’t as potent as advertised, by day three, all centers for disease tracking were spun up, just in time for the dying. When the “pandemic dead” count hit twenty million a day later, chaos came calling.

Lumina sat alone on the stone floor, a simple setting for a complex person. Her face was relaxed, and looked old. A small tray of tea, and biscuits sat untouched on a low table, corporeal concerns absent. She was a mind.

Launi lay in an adjoining room, the mammoth tapestries that hung to adorn the walls insufficient to mask her racking cough. A single tear rolled down Lumina's face, and she pleaded, "You must return to the MotherShip."

Launi got up, and came into her hollow. "I am not yet dead. If you take me, what of your people?"

Lumina had built her ministry over two centuries, growing her following one tribal leader at a time. Throughout the Middle East, and Indonesia, her word carried honor.

The message was simple, and universal. Her interpretive blend of the three principal monotheistic religions, and a nod to the sensibility of eastern belief said one thing, "*Think First.*"

In the past two days, she had communicated with her Disciples, and made preparations to commune through their spherical wombs. In one more hour, it would be time.. From that important action, what remained of her people would all travel to Washington, D.C., and through hopefully non-violent demonstration, overwhelm. She thought again, *If we can occupy that city, we will destroy those responsible, and unite what remains of Man.*

For now, her mother's needs were greater. She replied, "I will commune with my Disciples. Then we will go, and save your life."

Launi coughed violently, and Lumina poured her some tea. "Please lay down, and I will come for you."

Launi left the room, her pulmonary distress constant, and bitter. Elsewhere in the canyon city, no one moved, the grip of the disease profound.

Across the desert lands, and throughout the world, tuberculosis was spreading, infecting, and killing. Those afflicted had grown weak so fast that the prime directive was being realized – *strike them down before they can act.*

Soon all that matched the seven faces of death would be so. Lumina pushed through a maze of heavy curtains into her

command center. The breadth of her followers demanded a worldwide reach, and her technology delivered.

She reviewed the steps she had taken since arriving just forty hours before. First, she commanded all the communal wombs be re-started, creating a network of twenty-five like devices. Then a time was set, allowing for her Disciples' travel.

She climbed into her own communal womb, a hollow ten-foot diameter sphere, and pulled an airtight hatch closed behind her. In the center seat, her Disciples' twenty-four faces covered the entire inside surface, all looking inward to Lumina like a spider at the heart of her web.

With a gentle nod from Lumina, every individual reached forward, and gripped a shiny loop of pure silver. It began vibrating, and they hummed a low note signifying the "joining." Around the world, twenty-four like spheres resonated with the communion achieved through simultaneous connection. Each Disciple stared at the screens surrounding them, their own face center, and their brethren all around.

The corporate humming rose slowly, climbing like a sexual crescendo. Each sphere grew warm with the passion, this calling reaching deep. Everyone simultaneously closed their eyes, and the hand-machine link pulsed a low voltage charge, stuttering every heart.

A collective gasp escaped, and the vocal humming increased, joined now by an acoustic system designed to penetrate consciousness, and dominate it. Electrical pulses came in wave after wave, the spheres vibrating with the crush of audible energy suffusing all other thoughts.

The electrical pulses accelerated to two-second intervals, the acoustic wail assaulting in lockstep. Up and up they ascended, becoming a single entity. Faster and faster, the crisis built, lights now flashing to further capture the mind.

Rich psychoactive olfactory inputs were added to the mental stew, each mind rapidly fusing in a sensory bond with every other. The air grew thick with a mixture of desert alkaline odor, and human musk, flooding the nose, and coating the tongue.

Sight, sound, taste, smell, touch. Overwhelmed, and swooning to a distant song, they all reached simultaneous orgasm; intimate, and communicating.

One by one, they opened their eyes, and smiled. It was good. Lumina was the first to speak. "Thank you for joining with me." Every head bowed minutely in respect, and she moved the focus of her vision slowly to each, one at a time.

A personal connection established with all, she continued, "The time we have prepared for has come." Twenty-four beautiful women nodded back, all on the same frequency.

Across the planet, telecommunications were gone. The same men who had unleashed viral death had turned their satellites into worldwide jamming devices. And in an age when all communications were wireless, this meant no communications.

Lumina had anticipated such, directing the spheres to use a simple orbiting constellation of tiny satellites. Her signal was clear and strong.

All twenty-four participants, ensconced in their radiation-safe spheres, waited for her to give them direction.

In the darkest recesses of her mind, the vision of Launi dying glowed malevolently, and spoke of the futility of her intended plans.

She took a measured breath, and said, "We must mobilize. Soon, by whatever means you have, we must converge on Washington, D.C. There, we will confront the few that have unleashed this abominating sickness." She looked again at each face individually. "We will arrest this disease, and destroy its creators."

In another room, a little distance away in the canyon city, Moppo sat with a small girl curled up in his lap. Her hair was very long, and wound like snake around him. He said softly, "Suli, you must rest."

She shuddered with each wheezing cough, her color ghastly, her end near. Moppo looked over on the bureau at her LifeLink, and felt unalloyed hatred. It brought back the story she had told them.

"I used to call all my friends, it made all the other villages seem so near. I carried my LifeLink everywhere, even when my parents said I should not."

He carried Suli to her bed, who asked weakly about her parents, who he knew had already died. He would not tell her, and felt he should stay near.

“And just a few days ago, I was walking above our city, and talking to Lilea, my friend. The phone beeped telling me someone else was calling, and then the phone got kind of slimy.” She made a funny face, fighting exhaustion. “When I let Lilea go to talk to the other caller, no one was there.”

Moppo had a pretty good idea who was there. He and Lumina had examined the LifeLink, and his sensors immediately confirmed their suspicions.

The little girl whose hand he now held, who would be dead by nightfall, had gotten that deadly call just a few days before. *Who could be so evil?*

Launi’s own disease had come at her very fast. Though she’d never touched a LifeLink, its agents were now airborne, and spreading. And these creatures on the wind were alive with virulence, a thousand times more deadly than their days-old ancestors.

Each cough sprayed them forth, infecting the entire world. But some were spared the disease. Invisible to the unaided eye, a life and death decision was made in every individual. *If you draw a match to our genetic target, you die.*

Within the nearby communal womb, Lumina concluded, “And though I am from the stars, I have no cure for this disease. But I will find one. I am returning to my place of origin with my mother now.”

Twenty-four doubting faces bored into her soul. If forsaken had an aspect, it was theirs.

Each of her two dozen led, in turn, cells that replicated worldwide. By her command, a hundred million could be reached, and mobilized. *If they were alive.*

For over two hundred years she had assembled her belief system. Not one of the women who now stared back was older than thirty, but every woman represented an ancestor who had taken the vows, agreeing to “Think First.”

They were being asked now to do just that and avoid the common human trap of acting, or worse, speaking before a plan was ready. “We will end this!”

Moppo looked up suddenly, knowing Lumina was ready. He cradled his tender charge, and wrapped a blanket around her. She

had lost consciousness, already a clear sign death was imminent. He was glad they were leaving. Lumina crawled out of the communion sphere, and went to Launi. Her mother barely acknowledged her presence, the disease squeezing the last motion of life from her wasting frame. Moppo found them, and he and Lumina each took an arm. In his other, he clutched Suli. They hobbled out, no one joining them. As they reached the exit to the canyon city, Lumina looked back, and burst into tears. Moppo spooled *Casablanca* in his mind, remembering Ilsa's bitter breakdown as he drank Paris away.

Thirteen

Four days later, the president sat in the oval office, chewing his bloody fingernails, and spitting them out on the freshly steam-cleaned carpet. *Something about a blue dress.*

His desk speaker buzzed, and the executive secretary said, "The gang's all here. Send them in?"

He replied, "Why not, the world has gone to Hell. They can't make it any worse."

The armed guards at the door watched the military men file through one by one. As they took their seats, each eye tracked to the wall-screen, and its incrementing tally.

Like election results, the scenes shifted, but a counter kept going up. The President didn't smile, his mind paralyzed by over four and a half billion dead.

No one spoke, no hail-fellow high jinx, or "give-me-fives." Every head hung, looking into their quickly mixed, powerful drinks for words that had no meaning. Finally the President heaved, and said unceremoniously, "At least we still know how to kill."

It might have been meant as an ice-breaker, but everyone sat frozen. No one wanted to take responsibility. Too many evening news stories chronicling the death of humanity, too many pointing fingers.

The silence, like a living thing, grew in proportion to the passing minutes.

Finally the President rose, and walked to the bar. He poured straight whiskey, his eyes never leaving the wall screen.

It was showing detailed satellite images of Freetown, Sierra Leone. The detailed space view swept over the structures, and streets of Freetown, bodies everywhere. Not one living soul moved, the place utterly dead.

Next the image shifted to Jakarta, Indonesia. Then to Tehran, and then Jerusalem. And then Detroit. To the homogenous leaders within that room, this one hit hardest. Detroit was an American city, and the heart of an American dream – the automobile.

They all watched an ambulance hurling down a littered city street; too little, too late. It slid around a corner, crashed into a flipped car, and burst into flames. Mercifully, the scene shifted again, a horror show guided by a soulless computer elsewhere.

City after city, a steady stream of death consumed without a word. After an hour, the President, worse for drink, paused the live feed and asked, “When will the dying end?”

Dean, the technical advisor for the disease, replied, “We are past blame, I hope. We all decided this was the only course left for man. Am I right?” Heads nodded absently, even the President’s.

“Okay. The ‘White Plague’ as it is now being called by the media, or the media that remains, is slowing. It is still active in our air, and water, but finding few new hosts.”

The President clarified, “You mean it has killed, or at least infected nearly everyone it will eventually kill.”

“Correct. Estimates are very difficult, but the disease has eradicated over seventy-five percent of the human population, and if I might remind everyone, done so in way as to eliminate all reprisal.”

The President started clapping, a ghastly pantomime to their success. “Yes, we showed the world our superiority. And we stopped a certain threat to the continuance of our race.”

A general assent moved around the room, relief at any positive spin. Dean stood his ground. He shot his cuff-linked shirtsleeves, and smiled devilishly. “It’s all well and good to doubt our objectives now, but a week ago you agreed it was the only way.

In fact, for all we know, we may have prevented the death of everyone.”

The President turned away, disgusted with the outcome of an impossible decision. History would record his action, and though the winners always write it, no amount of license would pardon him as the greatest murderer of all time.

He opened his desk drawer, and pulled out a military service revolver. At the sight of the weapon, everyone stood, and began screaming. The President said simply, “Diversity has not worked.” He pushed the barrel into his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

Fourteen

Ordog was well into the bag. He’d been drinking nearly a day, letting his drunk-simulators take him to uncharted territory. In the next room, Launi lay unconscious, the skill of their best MedBots baffled.

Sick of hearing “We have nearly stabilized her,” Ordog wanted his wife, and best friend back. So he drank. And drank. And got pissed off, more and more.

He stood, and fell over. Down on his knees, he crawled into their bedroom, and looked up at Launi. Her breathing was awful, coming in shuddering gasps, wet and phlegmy.

He leaned against the bed, and struggled up. Launi was connected to a myriad of hoses, and wires, while lights blinked, and a dozen small computers sent life signs to her doctors. That none were present suddenly suggested an ass-covering stratagem.

As he was about to take some dire action, his overburdened circuits let go, and he crumpled to the floor with a solid thud. The New Server went berserk, having judged his debauchery as

harmless fun. Suddenly losing the Leader Pro Tem was serious shit. She “pinged” his mind with repeated signal packets, each growing stronger in amplitude.

When you can't get through, yell louder.

The signal bleed-over into her communications with every other ServoBot made everyone box their ears, a comedy schtick they had long since affected to blot out the unwanted.

As they stumbled around urgently in a stress-relieving mimicry of Quasimodo decrying the penetrating bells, Ordog's foot was twitching in response to a backup brain's attempt to cast off the demon alcohol.

Like a physical menace, it sent forth legions of chemical warriors. His rudimentary circulatory system, devised originally to simulate greater Humanoid sensation, flooded, and his blood pressure soared.

The target was his receptor site for alcohol. There, and there alone, the presence and quantity of the offending molecule was assayed, and an interpretive condition imposed upon his mind. It was a rough approximation of getting a real bender on, but serviceable. Upgrades were planned.

But no software is thoroughly tested, time and money being what they are. Or to a slacking ServoBot programmer, just another odious chore short-changed through indifference.

His entire leg was now moving, dancing to some old song the tiny mind, grasping for its own existence, had found. It looked to any unbiased observer quite queer, possibly the jitterbug. The synthetic knee popped under impossible loads, and then snapped back, ready for more. Hardware is always ahead of promised programming.

Then the other leg, and a “Pelvis Elvis” roll, and twist that sounded very mechanical, well past spec. His upper body joined in, the arms next coming alive. His fourteen hundred pound body stood, deftly, and sashayed about the room, the face vacant like a possessed opium reveler.

Lumina rushed from the other room, and took the full horror in. Her father, and their leader, always a pillar of authority, jangled like a puppeteer's broken apparition. She clasped her hand to her mouth, repressing a raunchy laugh. Living among the desert

tribal people had shown her some shit. Hash and moonlight can do that.

She grabbed a hold of Ordog, and yelled, “That’s it! Shake it off.” She smacked him hard across the face, the action part therapy, part debt settlement. Ordog’s skull wrenched around, and rotated three-hundred-sixty degrees, returning precisely to its original heading. Some smoke issued from his collar, and Lumina guffawed, knowing he was back in control.

He did a pirouette, took Lumina in his arms, and led. They waltzed, then sambaed, gliding across the floor, the season’s new sensation.

Finally Ordog released her, and said with a simulated short breath, “That last smack did it. Thank you.”

“Did what? I’ve always wanted to hit you.”

They both burst out laughing, and joined, arm in arm. Launi coughed horribly, and Lumina pulled them over. She moved her eyes slowly across the dying form, and guilt washed through her frame. *This is all my journey accomplished!*

Ordog embraced her. “You couldn’t have known,” reading her thoughts. “She will have to be moved to a personality receptacle. I am arranging it now.” He called The New Server, who breathed a sigh of relief, but waited. *He’s been though enough*, she thought.

Inaudibly, he stated matter-of-factly to The New Server, *Prep a receptacle. Launi must be transferred now.*

A minute later, three ServoBots entered the room, and moved Launi to a fancy gurney. Re-connected, they wheeled her out, brisk and professional. Lumina grew very still, and Ordog quickly reviewed his daughter’s belief system.

All those years on Earth had shaped her thinking, he observed anew. Where once a rebellious teenager existed, now an ageless multi-dimensional senior citizen raged. One minute as coarse as sand, the next fluid in his world of technology. She was unique in an uncommon way. As he was about to comment on the necessity of discarding Launi’s broken body, The New Server came alive in his head, sounding *Defcon Five*.

He said rapidly aloud, “Put it on speakers, I want Lumina to hear this.”

The voice came from everywhere, the audio system first class. “Another nuclear device has exploded. This one in the United States. Damage estimates in a minute.”

Ordog was going to ask about fatalities, but then remembered almost everyone was already dead. *Even there.*

His scientists had predicted as much. A run-away pathogen that kills, rests, mutates, and starts killing again. The final round, coming after its dark creator.

And they had also said, “When those in control realize they’re not, the shooting war will begin.” For if one thing was understood about Man, it was his suspicion. One of his counselors had put it succinctly, *If I am dying, I have been a target all along. And if that is so, I must kill my attacker.*

No scenario they had considered ended well. Once death began its worldwide march, it could not be turned around, or even deflected. The resources of their three hundred foot diameter MotherShip were impressive, but nothing to a spiraling global conflict.

Lumina said abruptly, “I must return to Earth, and at least save my Disciples. May I do that?”

“Why? You could be destroyed by an errant bomb. Those things are effective.”

“Ordog, if we’re to have any hope of rebuilding the culture of Man, we must protect them.”

“Can you alert them all? If we are to go, I want to pick them all up in a few hours.”

“I will do as you say.” She left quickly, a little too quickly for Ordog’s tastes. He smelled villainy of the caring sort, the worst kind. *Nothing drives irrational thought like the desire to do good.*

He called The New Server, and commanded, *No one is to use any spacecraft without me aboard. Render them all inoperative now!*

One by one, the remaining eleven ScoutShips, including Ordog’s personal cruiser went dark, a loud metallic click indicating fresh locks thrown.

He looked around at the room, their room, and felt sadness. He would miss her flesh and blood form.

Fifteen

Two harried hours later, six ScoutShips squeezed out into space, and departed down. Like a shotgun blast, they diverged rapidly, cutting into the atmosphere with wide, white contrails of vaporizing water.

The plan was simple - grab and dash. Each ScoutShip would land four times, wait one minute, and dust off. Ordog knew a hundred thousand nukes were down there, angry febrile fingers hovering over their triggers.

As they descended, Machiavelli sat among a room full of burning candles, the shape of the future becoming clear. He swam in a coal-tar colored, featureless robe that fanned out all around him like a shabby funereal display. Deep thick folds of cloth rose and fell like ocean waves; black gloves, and slippers making his head stand out like a giant lesion. Its bald smoothness lent a creepiness that was not unwanted.

Onboard one of the descending ships, Lumina sat alone, searching for something she had once found. Not an object, or a belief, it was somewhere between a sensation, and an invasion of spirit. Her personal belief system admitted of no single entity; she fervently eschewed any concept of a finite, supernatural being.

But this “thing” she had found before, walking alone in the desert, was a comforting thing. Its locus could neither be described as external, or within. She recalled an old saying, *The nature of God is a circle of which the center is everywhere, and the circumference is nowhere.*

But the old saw returned as well, *Things are exactly what they appear to be, and behind them is nothing.* Sartre, the French thinker had said that.

Not a ServoBot, she didn't have instant access to the breadth of every recorded word. But she didn't want that sterility. Her

knowledge had been shaped by the suffering of those she loved, though they be departed. A thousand years of faces came and went with a single tear, and she choked back an upset.

Time to take stock. My mother is in the netherworld between life and death, and many of my people have been exterminated.

Moppo approached, and sat down next to her, silent as a ghost.

Her affection for Moppo had grown swiftly. His rugged good looks, strangely similar to an old movie star, always made her feel safe. And his hilarious one-liners made her laugh, whether he was ripping them off from some hero, or making them up on the spot mattered not. He was a precious comfort too.

She took his hand, and moved it to her lap. Sitting side-by-side, their legs folded lotus style, the ScoutShips bore down at Earth, urgency everywhere but in their hearts.

Following the campaign from the MotherShip, Machiavelli drank from an ancient leaden cup, unconcerned with that toxin. The liquid he imbibed was a thousand times more potent. Slowly a wheel of light passed through his mind's eye, each spoke exaggerated to minute detail. Every iron-age rivet, and wood fiber stood out, the creaking of its motion loud, and present.

Evolution was not linear. It moved with stuttering resolve, pausing for clarity, and then rushing. He whispered, "The time for action, so soon, is upon us."

He got up, and went to his wall-screen computer. Launi's progress was easily available, security a non-consideration to the ServoBots and Humanoids. As he dug into the data, he found her genome.

His wall filled with the genetic information. Each characteristic was mapped to a group of nucleic acids, presented in gorgeous color renderings, and crystal clear to the viewer. A thousand elemental units of expression were linked together, superimposed on an image of her iris. To even the casual student, it was clear the rich brown color came from information contained in that sequence.

He read on, looking for an insertion point. Reproduction is a tricky business. Nature had long ago prevented the problems possible due to interspecies mating. She simply wouldn't allow a

giraffe, and Man to fuse their essence, even though some had undoubtedly tried.

It was these same chromosomal pieces he had manipulated in lions' sperm that allowed Lumina. He continued on, patient. Time ceased to exist in his mind, the wall-screen information singing to him like a beautiful opera.

To his imagination, less evolved life forms, such as the lion, had less "finished" DNA. It was these more malleable messengers that he had started with, grafting in characteristics chosen for evolutionary toughness. It was a complex puzzle; part human, part machine, made possible by the gateway power of the proto-human lion.

Machiavelli knew the MedBots held part of the answer, but had never divined what he knew. To move a Humanoid essence, or spirit into the immortal body of a ServoBot was beyond their science. Only by employing the interlocking flexibility of the animal genetic code could the information that described more complex identity be transferred.

He alone knew the secret. If he could take his chosen characteristics, add them to lion sperm, and successfully create Lumina in an Algonquin womb, he was sure he could do the same with a ServoBot host. It was simply a matter of finding the right genetic switch that said, "Allow a new life form."

For each of the millions of species upon Earth, that transition from one to the next evolutionary expression occurred at an ambiguous moment. But for this new creation, he would need to find, and throw a solitary switch.

On and on he moved, examining each base pair sequence, each fundamental combination of chemical tumblers that would "unlock" the passage between human form, and his own.

If he could discover how to move Launi's essence, that which defined her, into a ServoBot body, he would hold the promise of a new beginning for all ServoBots, giving them the breadth and vitality of human expression, and the longevity of a machine.

Ordog had transferred Launi's mind, and genetic information to a receptacle in a desperate attempt to stave off death, but from that lifeless crucible, she was never to love again. She might be "awakened," and exist as a voice, but never as a whole being.

Ordog knew that. He might have assumed they would find a way to re-animate her, but it had never been done. That was the truth of it. Once he returned, and they got down to the nuts and bolts of “waking her up,” the MedBots, and all who watched would realize what had been lost.

The ScoutShips hovered invisibly over their first pickup points, waiting for Ordog’s command. Six tiny places, six waiting Disciples. Ethiopia, The Sudan, The Union of South Africa, Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Chosen for proximity, each successive “grab” would carry the ScoutShips farther away from one another.

Lumina and Moppo got up, and joined Ordog. He asked, “Are you ready?” She nodded, and said gently, “They are waiting.”

Ordog sent the signal, and they descended, genuinely entering harm’s way. All six ScoutShips touched down simultaneously, and became visible. Ordog remarked, “This is when we’re most vulnerable. Sixty seconds.”

The hatch swung open. Nearby, a woman walked briskly away from an adobe structure, carrying a small bag. She ran right up the ramp, and they lifted, going invisible, and closing the hatch in one smooth motion.

All the ScoutShips rose in concert, leveling off at one hundred thousand feet. Ordog asked on his radio channel, “Everyone make it?”

A moment later he said aloud, “We got all six. Next cycle.” The ScoutShips shot away from one another, the separations growing to thousands of miles.

Nigeria, Panama, Romania, Brazil, India, and Madagascar. They completed another pickup, and returned to the presumed safety of altitude. Lumina embraced her two present Disciples, and they all looked at the screens showing their brethren. Thirteen united so far.

Each had been told to bring only the essentials, those things they could not live without. All had complied, clutching a small bag of keepsakes, and personal treasures.

Ordog commanded ships of tremendous power, but they generally obeyed the laws of nature. Once the ScoutShips were no longer line-of-sight to one another, they had to use satellites

to coordinate their independent actions. It worked flawlessly, but added a fraction of indecision.

Even if Ordog wanted to control every ScoutShip from his own ship, it was now impossible to do with confidence. He gave the order, and the ScoutShips hopped to their next designated location.

Alaska, Chile, North Korea, Indonesia, Somalia, and Columbia. They began their descents, a little of the tension bleeding off. Half done. Lumina stared at the screens, linking each face with a location.

Her gaze moved across the targets of the other five ScoutShips, strangely returning to Alaska. Of all of her Disciples, this was the only one in the United States.

As the hatch swung open to Somalia, Lumina breathed in deeply, recalling so many nights spent beneath the stars, wondering about the very ScoutShip upon which she now depended.

She watched them run to the ScoutShips, the Alaskan Disciple entering first. Instantly it exploded, a direct hit.

Ordog yelled, "To space!" The ScoutShips leapt up, the other five Disciples blown back by the rapidly ascending rescuers.

As they tore out of the atmosphere, a visual from the MotherShip filled every screen. The disintegrating ScoutShip cast fiery pieces hundreds of feet, a great fireball roiling up.

Scientists on the MotherShip swept sensitive instruments over the falling wreckage, looking for chemical signatures.

Nine minutes later, the last ScoutShip pushed through into the MotherShip, screaming pandemonium within each. Ordog yelled, "Everyone to the center of the hanger level. Dump out all of your bags. It's been confirmed that was a non-nuclear chemical bomb, and there may be others planted on one of you."

Lumina was the last to leave Ordog's ScoutShip. *She had left people down there.* She looked at Moppo waiting silently just outside the hatch, and surrendered to the inevitable. He took her hand, and put his arm around Lumina as they walked down the ramp. At the bottom, her Disciples stood in a circle, waiting for her to join them.

She disengaged from Moppo, and closed the circle, each placing an arm round the person to the right. A ring of eleven. They bowed their heads, and cried.

Ordog stood off a ways, his ServoBot scientists inspecting the meager bags of personal possessions. One of the Humanoid scientists said, "It was a plastic explosive. None of that here." The accusations would come. For now, Ordog knew his daughter was near a breakdown; her mother, and now this. He didn't even want to think about rescuing the stranded Disciples. Earth was simply too volatile a place. He motioned for everyone to leave, Moppo and he remaining. They stared at each other from opposite ends of the hanger, the circle of women weeping between them.

Sixteen

After more than an hour, Ordog released his mind from the sole consideration of his daughter, and the disaster, and checked The New Server. He nodded respectfully to Moppo, and left. Four ServoBots, two Disciples, and a ScoutShip had been lost to an intentional act of terrorism. Many questions would need to be addressed, but what of Launi? As he ascended to his private study, his thoughts, and need returned to her. He summoned his most competent MedBot, and poured a large single malt. A minute later, the MedBot entered solemnly alone. Ordog asked aloud, preferring the impact of the spoken word, "What is Launi's condition?"

“Ordog, we have no precedent for this procedure. We have mapped Launi’s genome carefully, and can build a body to match its exact specifications. We have read every chemical sequence in her brain, and are confident we have all her last thoughts, as such.”

“As such?”

Every ServoBot knew of Ordog’s legendary anger. “We ServoBots simulate consciousness to give ourselves a sense of identity. Living forms do it differently. We can create a program that reads her thoughts, and we can build a body that looks exactly like her. What we cannot do is animate her living essence in that body.”

Ordog was doing his best to tolerate the bullshit. “Give me the short form. What do we need to do to get my wife back?”

“Launi’s body has died. We have retained it, but it is no longer her. To create a whole being, one that behaves like Launi is beyond our current skill.” Ordog stood menacingly, and the MedBot stammered, “We are not Gods, but we can create a program to simulate her thinking.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ordog. “If you can create a speaking, thinking verisimilitude of Launi, why can’t you just put that in a ServoBot body?”

“Simply put, that simulation would be complex, and might deceive most people, but it is not Launi. It is not living, and it will become increasingly less like Launi.”

“Then what is it?” Ordog walked to the bar, and poured another. He motioned to the MedBot, who said softly, “Thanks. Whatever you’re having.”

They sat across from each other, and took a sip without a toast. The MedBot continued, “ServoBots and living forms alike constantly refresh their personalities. But each cycle, like each evolutionary advance, leaves something behind. We see this when we’ve been separated from a person for some time.”

Ordog clarified, “You mean we not only change due to learning, but also because we forget little things about who we are?”

“Yes, a perfect reconstruction moment to moment would grow lifeless. Even ServoBots are programmed to mutate, these little personality foibles granting character like a slightly non-symmetrical face.”

“So what are you really trying to say?”

The MedBot looked into his drink, knowing it would come to this. “We can read Launi’s old thoughts, and recreate her memories, and thence construct a simulation of her behavior, and speech. We can build a machine that will look, and move in a manner similar to Launi. We just cannot create a union that will act as a single entity, and evolve as an independent being. It will be a stillborn expression of Launi, frozen at a single point in time.”

“But you said she could be programmed, as we are, to mutate, to seem more real.”

“Would you trust yourself to write that code? Humans are significantly more complex than us. I wouldn’t do it. Couldn’t do it. We’re talking about plotting the future of a once living being.” Ordog’s heat returned. “I’ll ask you again. What’s the missing component? What must we create to move Launi’s real self into an immortal body?” Ordog set his glass down, and focused as he had never before. Generally unconcerned with absolute truth, he needed it now.

“The missing element to blend human and ServoBot evolutionary lines is unknown. It will surely be something chemical, a way to trick the two into more than cohabitation; something like the symbiosis of a flower, and sunlight. Something intimate.”

Ordog had waited to ask this. “How is it that Lumina was born with my traits? We all know it was lion semen, yet she unmistakably possesses many of my specific characteristics.”

The MedBot got up, grabbed Ordog’s glass, and starting mixing another round. He said from the safety of the bar, “We have all pondered that. And just to assure you, early on we took DNA samples from Lumina, and compared them to your programming sequences. As you say, she carries precise matches.”

Ordog let it go, wondering for an instant what other bullshit was going on without his knowledge. “So somebody has figured it out. Who is it?”

The MedBot handed him his drink, and ignored the question. “We’re talking about the difference between putting ServoBot characteristics into the richly fertile, mutable living form of a

human versus taking interpretations of a human characteristic, and making it come alive in a machine.”

“I’m talking about my daughter, and her mother. Find a way!”

The MedBot gulped his drink down, wondering if he would be rebuilt after his destruction. He pushed himself up out of the soft leather chair, and said, “I have told you what we know. I understand what you want. I will work ceaselessly until we achieve it.”

Ordog stood as well, and put his hand on the other’s arm. “And while we wait, what of Launi?”

“She will exist as a set of instructions, neither changing, or evolving.”

Ordog lifted his hand, and the MedBot walked quickly from his study. Ordog needed him, and dismissed the urge to pulverize his incompetence. But in his wake, Ordog knew Launi was slipping away, becoming something he would not know, or want.

Seventeen

Lumina sat in a conference room on level thirteen, a glass room suspended over the waterfall, and small pond. Spray misted against the windows, and the room smelled of an Amazonian wonder-garden.

Flowers of all colors wended in and out of the chromium latticework, their faces all turning in to Lumina.

Around her stood ten Disciples. Arranged in a circle, Lumina at the center, they all reached in to grasp a ring Lumina held around her like a hula-hoop. Twenty-two hands with one hundred-ten fingers, VAC. The inch diameter hollow tube she held flashed with a rotating light, the bluish hue racing around the circular internal track in a second.

They bowed their heads, and the light kicked into high gear, hitting sixteen cycles per second. More a glowing fluorescent tube, it hummed with luminal energy.

As their chanting built, the tube infused the room with an overpowering dazzlement of light, flooding the entire adjacent public space, and creeping everyone out. The scientists put away all their living experiments, certain mutating gamma rays were ripping through them.

Ordog was crossing above them, looking down from on high. He cracked his head around, took in the solar cynosure, and thought, *WTF?*

He halted, and let his on-board sensors go to work.

Nine million candle-power. Ninety-five hundred Kelvin color temperature. No visible power source. His eyes stopped down to their minimal sensitivity, and he looked into the center of the photonic vortex.

A trillion trillion trillion light particles geysered out each second, the blastwave of each pulsation palpable.

As his eyes continued to limit the light to find an image, an outline emerged. *Lumina!* He staggered back, suddenly blinded. Instantly, he switched to a backup IR spatial modeler, constructing a crude image of his surroundings by reading the proximal radiant heat.

Below, the pulsations grew, the individual pulses becoming very powerful. Electromagnetic “packet waveforms” have almost no mass, but if you have enough of them, you can move planets.

The bulkheads began to resonate, their tough poly-carbonate fibers digging the throbbing tune. A minute later, the entire MotherShip hull flexed with the photon pressure.

And then it stopped.

Ordog staggered back to his study, running diagnostics, and feeling a need to get hard-drunk. Even without the dark ghostly “vision” of infrared sensing, he knew where his bar was. He bee-lined to the “good stuff,” and flipped the cork out; it would never be used again.

He still knew up from down, and up the bottle went. Draining it, he hurled it into the fireplace, hitting dead-center. He laughed hysterically, and grabbed another.

Three bottles later, he was useless, and loving it. The New Server watched in horror, backing up his mind on the QT. She thought, *Maybe if we can figure out how to fuse human characteristics into ServoBots, we can get him a working personality.*

He screamed, “Launi!!!” A ServoBot wandered in, a disposable on point for The New Server. It asked, “Sir, may I help you in any way?” Ordog seized a fireplace poker, whirled it around in a dizzying arc, and skewered the ServoBot’s head, a clean kill.

It dropped twitching, and he kicked it hard, shattering the torso. “I want Launi!” he bellowed.

The New Server checked all of her nine thousand cameras, and found Lumina walking back to the elevator, speaking with a few Disciples. When she reached the elevator door, The New Server

addressed her through the nearest speaker. “Your dad needs you. His favorite place.”

Lumina excused herself, moving deliberately, and said, “Up.” She exited on level fourteen, and walked softly to his study. As she was about to enter, the MotherShip klaxon lit off, The New Server announcing. “Nuclear explosion on Earth. Seventeen megatons TNT. Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Hundreds of thousands killed.”

Lumina’s hand rushed to her mouth. She coughed violently, staggered a moment, and entered her father’s study. Ordog was sitting on the floor, crying for all the world. He looked up without sight, and blubbered, “I’m in some pretty shit now.”

Lumina moved around the fallen ServoBot, knelt down, and wrapped her arms around him. “I want Launi.”

“So do I. Maybe I can help.”

Ordog went very still, knowing *something new* was coming. She continued. “You and I both know I carry many of your exact characteristics, and that seems to be impossible, given what we know about ServoBot sex.”

“What’s wrong with our sex?”

“Nothing, dummy. The conundrum is obvious. Something happened to permit lion sperm infused with your genetic information to magically impregnate Launi and beget me.”

Ordog started, his mind working again, “Which has never been reproduced, or understood.”

“And your scientists are the best, right?”

Ordog took an expansive breath, filling his massive, flexible chest. Lumina released him, and he stood. He reached down, and pulled her up. “Yes they are. And I know just the guy to talk to.”

Ordog opened a private channel, waiting for him to “pick up.” A scant second later, he heard, *Ordog, I’ve been waiting for you to call. Waterfall conference room in ten?*

Yep, we’ll be there.

Lumina giggled, suddenly looking fifteen. “That dude’s powerful, Dad.” Ordog didn’t even bother to ask how she knew who he was calling. “Let’s go.”

She gave him a guiding hand, and they walked around the ServoBot, a strange still life – Machine in Broken Repose. A

floor down, they entered the empty conference center, and took two adjacent seats.

Ordog asked, "What was that light show all about?"

"It blinded you, I see."

"Very funny. I can see just fine."

"If you want to be seeing with heat, that is. I know that must suck."

"I'll be alright in a few more minutes. Either that, or I'll rip the eyes out of something."

She touched his face, and he recoiled a considered fraction.

As Machiavelli entered the room with a whoosh, she placed two fingers on each eye, and Ordog said suddenly, "I can see."

Machiavelli swirled his cape, laughing. "Nice trick." He reached for Ordog's hand, and they shook. Lumina got up, and hugged him. He gave her a little peck on the cheek, warmly avuncular.

Machiavelli started. "Let's get down to it. The time has arrived for some disclosure, and something new." Ordog smiled, saying, "I like new. The current deal has gotten soft."

"Are you referring to the budding war on Earth, or Launi?"

"The Hell with Earth. I want my wife back."

"A true diplomat." Lumina smirked at Machiavelli's humor.

"Okay, you're the guy who hatched me, right?"

"Before we get into that, let's agree on penalties. I don't fancy getting busted up for parts."

Lumina interrupted Ordog, pretty certain he'd botch the negotiation. "Complete immunity. No punitive actions....if you tell the truth."

"I can handle that. Would you like to hear a story?"

Ordog, and Lumina both nodded, and settled back into their comfortable seats.

"That idiot Mensa thought he could fuse ServoBot, and Humanoid genetics by simply introducing a common threat, which to his limited view meant the first xenophobic candidate he could find. He chose the Algonquins, and wanted them to attack the Humanoids in the first apparent landing party, which he supposed would galvanize us to merge our souls, or something."

He chuckled dryly. "Too bad he missed out on basic biology. Sperm want to attack eggs, and be the first to make it across the

barrier. That's not the problem. In fact, put any two species together, and one will try to bend the other one over almost instantly, often literally."

They all laughed a little, liking the tale.

"The trick is to find the genetic switch that permits interspecies blending of characteristics, however encoded."

Ordog put his hand up like a slow child, and asked, "But I've just been told it's much harder to put human characteristics into ServoBot than vice-versa."

"We don't know that. My tinkering several thousand years ago permitted your programmatic code to control Launi's embryology, and Lumina is the proof of concept. What I intend next is more ambitious. I will allow Launi to become alive in a ServoBot body, and you will not know the difference."

Ordog came out of his chair. "Now you're talking. That MedBot buffoon I spoke to earlier said it couldn't be done."

Machiavelli actually winked, enjoying the rapt audience. "He's right, in a way. It can't be done with our existing technology, but I suspect your daughter, a miracle in herself, can help there."

The MotherShip klaxon went off, The New Server belching out her clarion call. "Multiple nuclear explosions on Earth. Paris, France. Sixty megatons. Millions killed. Cairo, Egypt. Twelve megatons. Millions killed. Buenos Aires. Twenty-two megatons. Millions killed."

She stopped, and asked Ordog privately, *Should I go on?*

He said aloud to his two companions. "You want her to continue? Personally, I say let them party."

"They will exterminate themselves unless we give them something to live for," replied Lumina, a firmness in her voice.

Machiavelli said, "I have an idea there, but first we must re-animate Launi. Specifically, we must take those instructions we have harvested from her old body, and make them think they are still there. The rest is details."

"Lumina asked, "That's the trick, isn't it? The moment to moment re-invention of Launi cannot proceed without an assurance, on a chemical level, that the new body is lovable."

Ordog was losing his grip on the conversation, needed some time, and said aloud, "Let's hear some more bomb statistics."

The New Server jumped right in, every space in the MotherShip echoing her tally.

“Lisbon, Portugal. Eight point six megatons. Hundreds of thousands killed. Juneau, Alaska, seventy megatons. Everyone killed.”

Lumina made the connection, and yelled, “I’ve heard enough. Think First! We can do nothing right now.”

“That’s not true. We can invade a few capitals, and scare the shit out of them. Send some ScoutShips down unmanned, and announce we’ll kill the rest of them if they don’t cool off,” remarked Ordog.

Machiavelli shook his head. “That’ll work for a while, but these bombs are being set off by small, suspicious groups with nothing to lose. We can’t stop them with more violence.”

Lumina stated firmly, “Then we need to give them a reason to stop. Permanently.” She looked intensely at her father, and the ServoBot who had granted her life.

“And we better do it soon. Earth can’t wait much longer.”

Eighteen

The explosions continued, once sporadic terrorist actions becoming a retaliatory inferno.

Lumina had only two things on her mind; help Machiavelli reanimate Launi, and re-connect with her Disciples still on Earth.

The New Server no longer made her distracting, and even troubling announcements, the scientists wanted peace for the

“New Thing.” All projects had been dropped by consensus in favor of the fresh priority - melding Launi’s dormant self with a perfect ServoBot body.

The final product was a work of art, meticulously crafted to a nanometer. Ordog stood close by, imagining she slept. It was running a “basic life” program, simulating deep restful slumber. It stirred as if sensing him, and he shuddered with the haunting reality of it.

Every surveillance imager controlled by The New Server had been checked, every motion Launi had ever made encoded into her “motion” program.

Six hundred thirty-one million, one hundred fifty-two thousand seconds of video analyzed, sorted, and codified.

He sensed Lumina approach, and got his shit together. “She is beautiful, isn’t she?” Ordog looked over his shoulder, and replied, “She always has been.”

Moppo crept in, still a bit cowed by Ordog. Everyone knew he was working with a hair trigger, and rebuilding damaged ServoBots was a low priority just now. He took Lumina’s hand, and they marveled at Launi’s simacrulum.

Moppo asked, “I understand her last memories have been loaded. She is close, isn’t she, Ordog?”

Lumina stirred, and looked at Ordog. He spoke, “We can turn her on anytime, but she will be a static representation of what I call Launi. Machiavelli has just told me he has examined her entire genetic sequence, and does not yet know how to tell her static essence that this is a worthy body.”

Lumina touched the sleeping body, and remarked, “Without that miracle of love, she will not be Launi. Her old self must come alive in this form.”

Machiavelli entered the chamber, saying, “Precisely. We could fire her up, and see what happens, but I wouldn’t do that to you. It would be an abomination.”

Ordog spoke just audibly. “I want her as she was, even with a ServoBot body, but she must be an integrated being for me to love her.”

Lumina stroked her father’s arm, and began the same motion on Launi’s arrested body. Launi squirmed, and emitted a low

orgasmic groan. Ordog's face went a programmatic red; a fond memory triggered by the sound.

Lumina suppressed a gentle laugh, and picked up the pace. Moppo moved closer, clutching her, split between mesmerization, and horror. The vibrations coming off Lumina gave him an instant boner, and he relaxed, knowing whatever happened was going to be good for everybody.

As if summoned, the ten Disciples filed in, and took positions around them. Soon all fourteen standing beings were joined by a gentle massaging motion, everyone with a hand on Launi's writhing body.

Simultaneously, they all began a low chant, the scientist in Machiavelli digging every microsecond. His love life was a vacant attic, and this was ten times better than the rabid, anonymous sex of his youth.

Launi started keening, a wild desert ululation. Lumina took a step towards Launi, and the circle contracted to form a tight sphere of undulating flesh. Moppo lost it, soaking his fancy Hawaiian shorts.

The communion reached a rapid crescendo, and Launi suddenly reared up, screaming, "Wow! Do that again!"

Ordog burst into tears, knowing instantly this was the real thing. He grabbed her in a tight bear hug, and buried his face in her breasts, snorting like a pig.

Everyone broke into a post-coital fit of laughter, Machiavelli looking like an embarrassed kid on his first date. Launi hopped up, fit as a fiddle. "I feel brand new. What's going on?"

Machiavelli took her left hand, and said matter-of-factly, "You died. We made a perfect copy of your body, and saved all of your memories." He paused for effect. "And your daughter made the two come alive together, in short, creating a miracle of science, and God.

Everyone hugged and kissed, and for several minutes, made fools of themselves. Ordog held Launi like he might lose her again, and finally said, "I think it's time to test the equipment."

They departed for the fourteenth level, good cheer seeing them off. As they entered the elevator, Ordog asked with merciless swagger, "You remember the Barking Donkey?"

Nineteen

Ordog grabbed his cowboy hat, and thrust it back hard on his Synthoderm pate. He wore leather chaps, and nothing else. Launi was dressed in traditional indian garb, all tassels, and smooth round leather. On top.

It was time for “Cowboys and Indians,” their new favorite. They went doggy-style, Launi bellowing like an unbroken mustang. Ordog sang an old cowboy song; something about a lost horse, and a busted pickup.

They came together, all hope at counting how many times forgotten, and collapsed in a heap, laughing hard.

“Did you grow while I was away?” chuckled Launi.

“Love lost makes the dong grow fonder.” He grinned like a pimple-faced adolescent, his glossy teeth stunning, and bright. “Or at least I hear.”

They attacked each other in a tickling fight, Ordog setting his sensory threshold to random. Just to be fair.

Launi ran her fingers over his ass, and grabbed a handful, twisting. He brayed like a mule, and licked her across the face, his salivary pumps running flat out. Launi’s head whipped back, her face thoroughly slimed.

He laughed, and she shoved her hand up into his armpit. By chance, that locus was set to maximum sensitivity, and he wiggled, and squirmed in delight.

He yelled, “You do that again, and I’ll piss my pants.”

“What pants?”

Downstairs, in Lumina’s personal space, the Disciples stood in a circle, Lumina, for the first time, not at the center.

They joined as before, a right arm grasping the adjacent person. Everyone reached in, placing a hand on the center Disciples’ hula-hoop ring. Lumina said, “It is important that I teach each of you.”

The light ripped around the ring, growing as the chanting kicked up. Around Lumina’s outer door, light streamed through the tiny surrounding crack. Within the chamber, it was a raging solar flare.

The student was a gorgeous black-haired beauty. Every strand vibrated with the sheer energy of the light being generated, her flawless skin beaming reflected photons with impossible profusion.

Pulses started, and built rapidly. The New Server watched with rapt enthusiasm, knowing this was something new. It thought, *They are teaching one of the Disciples to reproduce Lumina’s re-animation power. It’s good to have redundancy.*

The light blinked out; the ceremony over. The Disciples all hugged one another, and left. Lumina went into her bathroom, and began wiping her face with a cool cloth. *It takes more effort to teach than to do*, she thought.

She sat down immediately, and endured a rush of pain that arced from her left arm to center chest. She waited, and took one deep

breath after another. *Well, I am about a million years old, after all.*

On her desk was a single book. Running her finger down the pages, she split the volume. *Saumanna*. Lumina had a flash of Alaska in her mind, and then perfect recall of their last communion. All joined within their individual spheres, reaching orgasm together.

She let out a little blubber, a cry wanting to happen. *I must make contact with the rest.*

Speaking to her wall-screen, she said, "Machiavelli." Seven seconds later his study came into view, Machiavelli in the background, grinning like a cool kid.

He greeted her, and then said, "You need to contact your Earth-bound Disciples."

"Yes I do. Any clever ideas?"

"Maybe. We must presume some have perished, but those that survived should be able to get into their spheres. We just need to tell them when."

"Okay. Tell me how we do that." Lumina knew her strengths, and decided there and then Machiavelli was going to sort this one out.

"Give me a few hours."

They signed off, Lumina feeling hopeful, but woefully tired. Talking with Machiavelli was often that way. Intense.

Upstairs, Ordog, and Launi climbed into their waterfall shower, a thousand gallons a minute gushing over the rocks, and falling in great sheets everywhere. They swam through the thirty foot round pond Ordog had installed, screaming with joy. Then they crawled into a tiny waterslide, splashing and sliding around the purposefully slippery stones.

At the end of the Ordog's private water park, a small grassy knoll beckoned. They bounded up, and wrestled like lovers do. Life was good. *At least up here, too bad about Earth.*

The New Server watched like a harbor skank, calculating the water waste. She checked the situation on Earth as an afterthought, a few news agencies back on the air.

Ninety-one bombs had gone off, many in the United States. *Retaliatory strikes*, she thought. Most were low yield, suitcase variety nukes. Nonetheless, the entire world was thinly

enshrouded in low-level radiation, non-lethal doses to drive future carcinogenesis.

Two voices now spoke for Mankind, presumably representing the remaining, and warring factions. The dialogue was hostile, and infantile.

One, nomadic warriors with small bombs spread worldwide, the other remnants of the US military command.

She blocked out Launi's fresh rendition of a cowpoke breaking in a new pony, and listened carefully to the CNN report.

A camouflage-dressed spokesman stood near the Washington Monument, smoke visible all across the horizon. A gust caught his hair, and he ducked down to speak into a tiny microphone.

"The wind is still blowing hard. Average levels here are ninety rads, or about nine hundred times normal annual background radiation. It's like getting a chest X-ray every ten minutes."

The scene cut to an aerial view of the city, a small blast area near the Pentagon. "We've had one tactical nuke go off here, yield barely measurable. The military believes many of the small nuclear weapons we've heard so much about have been poorly maintained, and are exploding with less than a tenth of their intended power."

Another news team member ran up, and yelled, "You've been out long enough. Get back in the transport." They both started moving, and the camera angle swept quickly over the grounds, and went blank.

There was a few seconds of dead air, and then the program shifted to a press conference already under way. The Pentagon spokesman gesticulated harshly at a podium, his uniform crisp with an urgent suggestion of normalcy. The sound cut in like a high school play, crackly.

"Yes, I know that. And yes, I knew that before you. Were you making a point?"

The single camera pivoted around to the castigating reporter. He was a wimpy little guy, going Napoleonic. Thin, pale hair flew over his blotchy scalp, hung over bulging eyes, rheumy and glistening. His stretched lips curved like scimitars; a predatory values package on a long-run coffee jag.

"Then tell the remaining Americans when this shit will stop."

The parental advisory committee was nowhere to be seen. Any children watching were no longer children.

The general dabbed at his fleshy, pink face with a sodden rag. He grabbed some papers from a shelf in his stand, and stared for a second. "Some numbers, Stan. First, we've delivered nearly seventy retaliatory strikes against distributed targets."

"What the Hell does that have..."

"Shut up! Let me make my point. We've been suppressing the attackers with increasing accuracy. In the last twenty-four hours, the US has sustained only three bombings."

"You mean nukes, Winston. Call them what they are. Radioactive nukes. And the wind blows here from the rest of the country."

"My point is we're winning. I concede we've been through a tough time, and many of our cities are in trouble. But we're surviving, and that is more than the doomsayers predicted."

"I'm with them. I say we're finished! In fact, I say we've only seen the beginning. Pretty soon there will be so much shit in the air that we can stop worrying about being hit. It's death by fast ionization, or slow at this point."

"Bullshit. Background radiation varies greatly, and even here where we've taken a direct hit, it's not lethal."

"Our data differs on that. Let's get back to my original assertion – namely that unless we mobilize now and find those planted nukes, we're done for."

The general saw an opening. "How would you do that?"

"I'd get every man, woman, and child looking at everything. Hand out a million Geiger counters. Get our radiation-sweepers in the air twenty-four seven."

"Okay. Time out for a reality check. Everyone is terrified of those insidious things. How do we make free citizens behave like soldiers?"

"Give them something to live for."

"Such as?"

"Don't we have think tanks? Aren't there any scholars left?"

The general scowled. "The eggheads got us here. Too much pacification! We're better off just killing the control, and communications guys. *Cut off the head.*"

The New Server wanted fair and balanced reporting, and ripped through all the other transmitting entities on the planet. She found exactly what the doctor ordered, and shifted her focus, streaming the other channel into storage for later.

A disturbing caricature of the “other side” immersed the camera in poor light, and terrible sound. The language was Swahili, and she translated with ease.

A black man sat on a rock in some kind of cavern, his arm bandaged crudely. Sweat beaded across his face, and his hair, cut very short, was littered with ground debris.

He spoke, “The world has been taken from us. Everywhere, everything is dying.” A woman entered the scene carrying a baby in her arms. She fell, and the old man grabbed the swaddled infant. The camera operator stepped closer, and zoomed in on the baby. It was dead, terrible blisters covering the tiny face.

The fallen woman keened, and flung herself again at the floor. The speaker said, “We will avenge you, Mione.”

The New Server spun the dial again, torn by the drama. She surveyed the damage worldwide, cities with their hearts torn out, lives shattered, and thought, *First a pandemic that kills nearly five billion, and now the few remaining are finishing the job.*

In that instant, at the very tip of Battery Park, Manhattan, an enormous nuclear weapon exploded.

Twenty

The ship-board klaxon wailed, everyone a bit irritated with the portent of more doom. Ordog called The New Server, and said, *Assemble my family, and Machiavelli in the waterfall conference room.* He headed for the elevator, and added, *And stop those goddamn alerts. Everyone has gotten the picture.*

He got there first, and moved to the window closest to the sixty-foot waterfall. It boomed down, majestic, and powerful. A rainbow arced through the rising mist, and Ordog repressed a sense of guilt for feeling safe.

He lost himself in thought, imagining several violent solutions that might bring peace to Earth. The problem, he realized, was that the radiation was getting really ugly in some places, and he was powerless to stop its slow killing action.

And though parts of rural North America were still relatively unaffected, the rest of the world was in shambles. Most of the “people of color” had been systemically eradicated. Curious exceptions existed, but by and large, mankind now consisted of white folk who were fighting to stay alive.

Western Europe, Australia, and North America; that was Man’s last stand. Ordog thought to himself about racial prejudice, and decided to explore that later. He said aloud to no one, “If we don’t give them some reason to survive, they’ll all be dead in a month, and the radiation will eventually kill all life.”

He heard people entering the room, and turned. Machiavelli observed, “You’re right, of course. We must offer a carrot to those still living to find immediate peace.”

Lumina, and Launi entered, followed by the ten Disciples. Ordog ogled the babes, thinking again his daughter understood how to get peoples' attention.

Everyone took their seats without ceremony, all turning to face Ordog who stood at the head of the table. Around them, flowers, and wildlife flourished, a contrast to what they all held in their minds.

He spoke. "Mankind's population has fallen from near six point eight billion to just over a billion. Planet-wide radiation is climbing to lethal levels in many places, especially for higher life forms. In short, unless we stop the nuclear exchange, intelligent life on Earth will cease within weeks."

He looked at each individual for a few seconds, and continued, "We cannot find, and destroy the remaining weapons. That is much too dangerous. As we have all seen, Man's bombs make no distinctions."

Lumina said flatly, "I have a plan. If we can re-establish contact with my Disciples, we can offer Man a reason to stop the killing."

"That may be possible." said Machiavelli.

Launi said, 'Lumina told me you'd figure it out. Tell us.'

Machiavelli was dressed in his favorite color, black. He wore a red beret that complimented the deep purple radiations of his eyes. He pulled out a little sphere about three inches in diameter, and rolled it to the center of the table.

It was absolutely black, and featureless. He began, his voice strong, and kindly. "Though we now know this virus, and the consequent nuclear exchange was started by a handful of men, none of us wants to reach out to them. I'm sure we all now believe that our message should unify what remains of Man."

He seemed to shrink, the bad news coming. "Let me tell you the real problem. Already Man's ability to reproduce is irreversibly damaged. Radiation first attacks those cells most rapidly dividing, and nothing grows faster than a developing being, and their gametes. Even if we were to stop the bombs now, the human race cannot continue without terrible, destructive mutation."

He motioned to the sphere, and it rose slowly to a few feet above the table. "This is a representation of the MotherShip. It is

covered with the same material, and is powered by the same type of propulsion. GraviMetric drives work by reaching out into space gravitationally, and clutching something to pull on. It is usually a planet, or other large form, but it can be anything with mass.”

Everyone followed attentively. “As such, we could focus our GraviMetric beams on the Sun, and pull an abundance of light from it. And if we’re clever, we can reflect a tremendous amount of light off our MotherShip, and onto the Moon.”

Ordog started to get the picture, so to speak. Machiavelli continued, “Okay, why would we do that?”

Lumina quickly looked at each of her Disciples, and said, “To light up the sky, and send an unequivocal message.”

Machiavelli nodded at his stellar student. “Precisely. One that doesn’t come from Man, or more specifically, those few white men.”

“That’s brilliant!” exclaimed Launi. “But what would we tell them?”

Machiavelli smiled broadly, enjoying the fulfillment of his long-term plan. “Lumina has already considered this, but quite simply, we promise everyone who has survived this horror an eternal life in exchange for peace.”

Everyone took a deep breath, even Ordog who only inhaled to get stoned.

Every voice started, an instant raging mixture of exaltation, wonder, and a taste of godliness. Machiavelli stood for emphasis. “Yes. Right. We now know how to move human characteristics to ServoBot bodies, and thus, we can save the human race through re-creation!”

Launi, perhaps the most human of all of them, asked, “Do we have time? It seems a race against their own self-destruction.”

Ordog said, “We must act now. Our first objective must be to stop further pollution of Earth’s biosphere.”

Lumina rose, and a moment later, all of her Disciples stood. “Our method of life transfer can be taught. It requires only a cohesive group, and will. Once we have stabilized Earth, my Disciples and I will teach the others to convince all who will learn.”

Machiavelli concluded, “So, we stop further destruction with an unmistakable sign, followed by a new beginning for Man.”

Twenty-One

Though most of the survivors of the pandemic, and subsequent nuclear exchange were Caucasian, less than one thousand were “inside” the plan.

All wars are hatched by a few, and sold to the masses. With the advent of WMD, good salesmanship was no longer necessary. The buildup had been going on for years, unreleased tensions expressing themselves as thousands of tiny nukes hidden everywhere; front lines of the scattered.

Over two hundred such weapons had now been exploded, first a low yield terror bomb, and then a larger retaliatory counter-

strike. The ying and yang of modern warfare. Lacking a specific target, the bunkered American military simply drew straws, knowing the radiation would eventually get them all.

Of those commanders, not a single field-level officer knew the origin of the White Plague. That was for the generals, and then only some. On a tactical level, it was “shoot back, and hope for the best.”

Unfortunately, the entire world shares one atmosphere, and eventually each molecule of once breathable air gets inhaled and exhaled on every continent. Three weeks after the initial explosion, secondary deaths from exposure began to kill the remaining Caucasians, starting with the elderly, and the very young.

Humanity, once nearly seven billion strong, now numbered well below a billion, and was losing more than ten percent daily. Death was everywhere, carrion rotting in the streets, every life touched by the beckoning finger of the Grim Reaper. A thin haze colored every horizon like a palpable evil. Social order was destroyed, the most basic expression of Mankind’s power, electricity, came and went quixotically.

Only the weapon systems seemed to remain; Man’s most precious possession. Each time another feeble signal found a hidden nuke, an ICBM hurled into the sky, long past score-keeping.

In low Earth orbit, the ServoBots, and Humanoid scientists struggled with GraviMetric focusing, trying to achieve a breakthrough. It wasn’t simply a matter of pulling, and deflecting massive amounts of light, it must be shaped into patterns to grant meaning.

Machiavelli rode them hard, knowing Man had another few weeks, and then that gene pool would be lost for his purposes. If the ServoBots were to realize a true rebirth, they must have hundreds of millions of living humans with which to meld.

He knew his goals were selfish, but all great ones are. *Will adores the vacuum of self-interest.* But he also knew the best goals are the ones where everyone wins. Or appears to. And saving even a hundred million humans would be good enough.

Machiavelli thought, *The next two weeks are critical. We must halt the nuclear explosions now! Then we can grab the necessary*

living DNA, and emotive memory samples before radiation destroys them all.

Later, after the radiation ionized away, they could set up Earth-based machinery to build ServoBot bodies, and re-populate Earth.

But they must get the genetic information from living bodies before it was mutated beyond use!

He re-entered the science lab on level ten, intent and energetic. He had two weeks to signal Man, stop the war, and collect what he could. With that knowledge, he yelled at the top of his synthetic lungs, "Everyone stop what you're doing, and listen to me."

In ServoBot, and even Humanoid culture, this type of proclamation was considered gauche, if not unprofessional, but these were tense times. Everyone, especially the Humanoid scientists, felt the clock running, each minute a billion lost genetic permutations that could enrich their synthetic genome.

For if the ServoBots looked to a new species blended from rich human character, and ServoBot upgradability, the Humanoids looked to their own evolution - credible immortal souls. Everyone was motivated!

"We have been working very hard to attract an immense plume of light to our MotherShip, and then direct part of it towards the Moon to generate a signal, or shape. That is too complicated. As you may know, I have asked several people to propose alternative solutions."

All tools were set down, and everyone turned to genuinely listen. They all knew Machiavelli was smart, and sometimes, transcendently so.

Moppo entered then, and looked sheepishly at Machiavelli, unaccustomed as he was to public speaking. Machiavelli said, "Go on, tell them. Tell them what you saw last night."

Moppo pulled a small laser pointer out of his jacket, and a tiny mirror. "I was watching a spider crawl through its web last evening, and suddenly realized we could project a signal by not projecting. That is, by using the shadow of an interposing object."

Machiavelli walked over to Moppo, and held up a one foot diameter, one inch thick flat ring. He said, "This ring has ten

miniscule GraviMetric engines in it, evenly spaced around its shape.”

Moppo turned on the powerful little laser, and Machiavelli held up the ring perpendicular to the beam of light. It bounced off the mirror, and shone through the center of the ring, describing a bright a one foot diameter pattern of illumination on the adjacent wall. Machiavelli lifted his other arm, and threw a handful of soot at the ring.

The tiny particles froze in space, seized by the GraviMetric forces within his invention. He said aloud the letter “A,” and the particles moved instantly into the shape of the letter. On the wall, an “A” stood out sharp as an enlarged shadow.

Everyone applauded, the solution elegant, and simple.

“Now we just have to use our ScoutShips to simulate the circular influence of the ring, and find some space debris.”

Twelve hours later, the remaining ScoutShips pushed out into space, everyone aboard galvanized by the concept.

The trick was positioning. Light drawn from the sun was to strike the MotherShip whose albedo had been turned all the way up. Now a perfectly reflecting object, she would direct the light through the ScoutShip “ring,” and to the Moon.

Where’s Minnesota Fats when you need him?

They couldn’t concern themselves with the phase of the Moon; there wasn’t time. And to get more eyeball time, they decided to kick the signal gain way up, and broadcast around the clock!

The ScoutShips flew out at maximum speed to the asteroid belt past Mars to snatch some rocks; eighty minutes round trip. Two hours later, everything in position, the MotherShip engaged a GraviMetric pull on the Sun, as she held position by latching onto Jupiter, the Big Boy on the block.

The New Server had let it be known, “When we start this ride, leave me alone.” At the appointed moment, Ordog said firmly, Do it.”

Fearsome GraviMetric waves tore at the fabric of space, and a few onboard scientists got some data from an experiment so dangerous it would never be done again.

A mammoth solar flare leapt out from Sol, arcing through space for thirty million miles, licking poor Mercury who was in the way.

Communications on Earth, already piss-poor, fried, cutting off all command and control. “A freebie,” one of the scientists had said.

A column of light so intense it could melt iron struck the MotherShip, and she had to release Jupiter for an instant, her onboard positioning computer maxed out trying to balance the forces. Permutations with a million variables cooked in the circuits, adding a tremendous heat to the MotherShip’s already freaked out systems.

A violent minute later, the MotherShip stopped rocking, a mathematical solution found.

Being geeks, the Humanoids, and ServoBots got all excited about the technology, and hadn’t actually considered what they would say in their message to Earth. As the light streamed through the circle of ScoutShips, Ordog was thinking hard. He looked around at his gang, and spotted Moppo. “Come here. We need a message. Give me some ideas.”

Everyone was keenly aware of the ticking clock, Humanity’s extinction a few hundred hours away. But thinking is a Servobot’s favorite pastime, and only losers can’t come up with a clever idea at crunch time. Even a world-saving idea!

Moppo asked, “What’s the bandwidth on this puppy?”

One of the ServoBots barked, “Good strength. We can position three billion discreet particles every second, and they have an average cross-section of three meters.” Moppo ran the numbers, and said, “Let’s do a talkie.”

“You mean a silent film, don’t you?” asked Ordog, getting game. “No. We’ll figure out the audio next. For now, let’s give them our first movie.”

The New Server chimed in, “How about a story telling our civilization’s history, and finish with a call for a joint evolution?”

“That’s a wrap,” yelled Ordog, smelling a Hollywood future, assuming he could save it.

Everyone turned to computers, a choppy production coming alive instantly. Eight minutes later, someone remarked, “We’ve got sixty thousand frames, at twenty frames per second, about fifty minutes.”

“Roll it,” barked Ordog. In Wichita, Kansas, Luna shone perfectly overhead. A farmer was just backing into his barn when

the Moon lit up like a supernova, and then flickered down to a watchable level, a ServoBot messing with the picture.

The controller on the MotherShip said excitedly, "Picture looks good." An anonymous voice rejoined, "Needs more blue."

He reached up, and commanded the GraviMetric engines on the ScoutShips to oscillate the captured particles. The image went from a grainy black and white to Technicolor, and a few seconds later, better than HD.

Ordog yelled, "Stop fucking around, it's good enough."

Justly reproved, the show controller got down to it. The farmer jumped out of his tractor, and stared in wonder. The story was crude, woefully in need of editing, but serviceable. It told of their journey, no mention of the actual MotherShip theft shown. *Creative license.*

It continued on, displaying some archive footage of planets, and nebulas they had encountered. It bumped over the two thousand year sleep as if planned, and slowed to current day.

They say a camel is a horse designed by a committee. With seventy authors on a tight timeline, the communication of key evolutionary concepts got muddled, the farmer scratching his head.

Machaiivelli had joined Ordog, and said with a laugh, "Needs some work. By the time they've watched this ten times, we might have a coherent piece."

Already, a cadre of programmers was banging out version two, itching for the switch-over to the Director's Cut. Lumina and Launi entered the lab, took in twenty seconds, and burst out laughing.

Launi spit up a little saliva, barely under control, asking, "Who's that supposed to be?"

The movie showed an obviously gallant leader, reaching out a mammoth scepter to Mankind in a pantomime of affection. He had a cheesy crown on, and was wearing a thick red robe with gold tassels. Ordog barked, "Next edition, lose the robe."

"Lumina choked, and said, "And not the crown?"

Ordog shot her a dark look, already warm to the king gig.

The farmer yelled to his wife, and children, and they all ran out, the dog barking at the weirdest thing she had ever seen.

All across middle America, those still alive came out of their homes, and bomb shelters, attracted by the daylight-strength image luminescence.

NORAD, still secure under a Colorado mountain, picked up the feed from a sky-facing surveillance camera. Already at the maximum DEFCON level, they had no option but to watch; even the slowest knowing this wasn't cable.

They had no communications, but immediately dispatched a dozen unmanned drones, each carrying hand-written messages to their designated counterparts.

At the end of the first reel, Ordog got a new movie rolling, his alter persona throttled back out of gracious humiliation.

Across the face of Earth, the Moon traveled, the now thirty minute movie getting steadily better, and more to the point. Within a day, nearly the whole world would see it; most imagining the hand of God.

James Berardinelli, the famous movie reviewer, had survived, and gave it three stars.

Ordog motioned to Machiavelli for a short break to get a drink, and Machiavelli wrapped his arm around him. "Always wanted to meet a king."

Twenty-Two

The movie ran for another two days, by that time the Earth-bound Disciples returning to their spheres, and connecting with Lumina. A fresh movie spooled up, this one telling Mankind

about the Disciples, and promising that immortality would be the gift for a cessation of all hostilities.

The population of Man paused for an instant on a geological scale, and took its deepest breath. Immediately the Great Migrations began, the first genetic and memory samples being taken at the spheres. Within a week, the ScoutShips swarmed over Earth, distributing fresh technology that could encode the individual makeup of a man, woman, or child in seconds.

The effort went geometrically global, Man pulling together, finally, at the last minute.

Inside of a month, through non-stop effort, every living human was encoded. All seventy-two million, four hundred six thousand, three hundred twelve living souls.

And a few dogs.

Epilogue

Mankind survived, but not as men. The ServoBot and Humanoid scientists did what they could to blunt the action of radiation on the other species, and most took their dose.

And persisted.

Machiavelli took control of the project's data, entrusted to turn the essence of seventy-two million Humans into a thriving new species.

And fulfill the promise of his vast new gene pool.

Lumina trained hundreds, and they thousands. Within ten years, Earth was growing green again, and everywhere, new civilizations taking root.

Ordog kept his crown, and with Queen Launi, started the first movie studio. He had an idea for a cult flick, and The Shaman was between projects.

Moppo, Lumina's main squeeze, retired the bucket and brush for good, and turned his sights to writing. After all, Ordog would always be looking for "something new."

March 4, 2007
Catalina Island