

From the Dreams of Morpheus: Five Tales of Fantasy and Science Fiction

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A Special Hell

I decree that the fifty-eighth year of my life begins today. The golden rays of Tau Ceti once again have found their way to the line I etched in the sandstone so long ago. Warmer days have come and Ceti Prime has completed another circuit of its star. A Ceti year is shorter than an Earth year by 36 days, but I have compensated accordingly. What year it is on Earth is beyond my reckoning...or my interest. Happy birthday to me.

As soon as I drive the cold stiffness from my bones, I will work my way down to the grotto where the Blessed Mother promised that I would find sustenance every morning. She has never failed me in all these years. And after consuming what She has provided, I will pray my ragged Rosary and meditate on the mysteries. The Rosary always brings me comfort.

For now, I drink in the peace of the brilliant dawn. As Ceti rises, the sand crabs—at least creatures that approximate sand crabs--will begin their chorus. Their staccato clicks will fill the canyon and provoke the dust stingers to take flight. Once the crabs creep from their burrows, they will visit me, as they always do. The crabs are curious and intelligent. In my first year of exile, we reached an understanding. They will not rob from my food supply and I will not roll boulders into their hive. The crabs have respected our treaty ever since.

There is so little I can recall these days. My past is irrevocably fading. When Mary first appeared to me in my twentieth year, She announced that I was condemned to this place for the murder of a family. I buried my face in the pink sand and wept in shame at Her feet. Thank God I had been spared the hideous memory of what I had done.

I am eternally grateful to the Blessed Mother for wiping that nightmare from my mind.

Thankfully, I can still remember the moment when She placed her radiant hand on my shoulder. The pain of being connected to such sinless purity nearly shattered my soul. I shrank away with a scream. "Do not be afraid," She said. "There is hope yet. You are abandoned by humanity, but not by me."

She fulfills her promise to feed and nourish me, but it has been at least 10 Ceti years since I have looked upon Her Blessed Face or heard Her soothing voice. I have gone gray in Her service and the relentless wind has scoured my features. It would be wonderful to glimpse Her beauty again, unfaded by time. The visage I see in my grotto pool is that of an aging man, well beyond the summer of his life and slouching into autumn.

After my Rosary I believe I will climb to the top of the mesa. As I was falling asleep last night I heard the rumble of the triadons. They are migrating north and it is always a treat to see them. Their long necks wave like a field of impossibly tall grass and their scales flash in myriad colors. I can see their wide mouths inhaling clouds of dust stingers, continuously feeding from air. It will be a week before the last stragglers of the herd pass the mesa and vanish over the horizon.

God is wonderful in His works.

Kathy gazed at the dusty teradisc and tried to read its label in the gathering darkness. A simple voice command would have brought up the office lights, but she didn't want to break the mood. Sleet pecked incessantly at the window while a Bach concerto floated overhead.

The door annunciator chimed. "Come," she called out.

Rafe shook the water and ice from his beige longcoat as he swept into the room. "It is your partner bearing good news and an invitation to dinner!" Rafe fell into his favorite chair and allowed his coat to spill over the arms.

"I'll take the news first."

"Judge Hammond has excused himself from the Burnback case. Lunacon will definitely settle. They won't want to pursue another trial."

Kathy shrugged as she continued to stare at the disc. "That's just as well. I don't think I could have spent another day in that courtroom.

Just working through the pretrial motions was agonizing in itself. Have you told the Burnbacks?"

"No," Rafe replied with a yawn. "I'll ring them up this evening. They'll be happy to know that they've just become billionaires."

"Hmm . . . at the cost of their daughter's life. What else were you going to tell me?"

"Dinner," Rafe said, leaning forward. "Dinner at the Iron Chef."

"I don't have a craving for Japanese today."

"Would you prefer a diet of teradiscs?"

"What?"

"You've hardly looked at me since I came in. What is so fascinating about that disc?"

"Oh!" Kathy managed a slight smile. "This is from my mother's collection. I found it this afternoon while I was cleaning out some old files." Kathy held the disc closer and squinted. "Case number 6354—People vs. Jon Alter. November 23, 2081."

Rafe stood and leaned over her desk for a closer look. "That's the case that put your mother in the spotlight—the first Exile sentencing."

Kathy sighed. "She should never have agreed to defend him. The prosecution had a mountain of DNA evidence. This was just six months after the 8th Amendment was rescinded and Justice had kicked off their Exile program. They were looking to make an example and Jon Alter handed it to them on a platter."

"Exile beats capital punishment," Rafe offered.

"Does it?" Kathy asked. "My mother thought it was horribly cruel. What if an exile is innocent? It's unthinkable."

Rafe plucked the disc from her fingers and flipped it like a coin. "And others would argue that decapitating two children and their mother is unthinkable."

"Careful with that!" Kathy snapped as she caught the disc in mid-flight. "They don't make storage like this any more. I'm trying to find a holo decoder that can play it."

"For historical interest?"

"Not really," Kathy replied as she gently tucked the disc into an envelope. "It would be nice to see my mother in action again, at the top of her game. I was just a child during the trial, but I remember the toll it took on Mom. Every evening she would come through the door looking as if someone had just beaten the hell out of her. I'd awaken in the middle of the night and still see the light shining under the door of her

study. I don't know when she slept. Something troubled her deeply about that case. Just a week before Mom passed away she suddenly asked if there was new information about the Alter trial. Can you imagine?"

Rafe stood with his hands thrust into his pockets. "There is no new information. The case closed 40 years ago. As they used to say in the twentieth century, 'Jon Alter has left the building.'"

"Still," Kathy began as she pulled on her coat, "I want to go over this case myself. Something to do in my spare time. How does Mexican suit you, Rafe?"

"It gives me heartburn."

"Mexican it is. Just keep your bowels quiet during my closing arguments tomorrow."

"Lights out. Security in 30" Kathy said as she opened the door.

"Good evening, Miss Stanson," the system responded. "Security activation in 30 seconds."

Only dust stingers fill the sky today. I have been praying for rain as I watch my herbs wither. The food Our Lady provides is the stuff of life itself, but—and I say this with all due respect—it lacks taste. My Cetian herbs add so much more flavor.

I've cultivated my delicate plants from cuttings I harvested during my journeys to the Black Valley in my first years here. I had no means to gauge their toxicity except by trial and error. I still recall one variety that offered a taste almost identical to saffron, but as I chewed a leaf my lips and tongue swelled to painful size. I could not eat or drink for several days. Another plant with a gorgeous flower enticed me to mix it with a bowl of hot gruel—and I paid for my haste with vomiting for most of a day.

I water my herbs as much as possible, but Ceti sucks the moisture into the powdery sand. This morning I held a dying plant in my hand and cried to heaven, "Lord, why? Have I not been a faithful servant? Have I fallen yet again from your grace?"

In a moment of weakness I took a sharpened stick into the savannah and crouched among the grasses, waiting for an unwary triadon to come my way. Triadon flesh, greasy as it was, would surely be preferable to tasteless mush. A tender infant triadon, hardly a meter tall, was within my grasp, but at the moment I raised my spear, my arm

went numb and pain seared my chest. At the same instant, the mother triadon took notice of her baby, and came thundering toward me. I fell onto my face, calling out for the Blessed Virgin. The huge creature stopped not six meters from me, regarded me with her lidless black eyes and then lumbered away with her offspring in tow.

It was nearly dark before the pain subsided and I found the strength to walk. "Oh my God," I shouted to the twilight, "I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven, and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life." Only the rush of the wind replied, but perhaps that was His whispered response. I had strayed from the path that He and Our Mother had set for me. He could have allowed the triadon to rip me to pieces, but instead I was spared with far less punishment than I deserved.

Perhaps if I fast and meditate, He will lift his punishment and restore my herbs. I am a man damned by my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do. But will Blessed Mary, ever virgin, pray for me?

"Kathy!"

Kathy Stanson turned to see Rafe bounding through the crowded hallway. "Hold the lift!"

She allowed the doors to slide halfway shut, enjoying the panicked look on Rafe's face, then jabbed the **OPEN** button at the last moment. Rafe slid across the threshold, spilling papers and folders as he went.

"You did that on purpose!"

Kathy laughed. "I'm in a lousy mood. I needed a diversion. Where to?"

"Authorization Rafe Mackie," he said as he scooped up the last folder. "Judicial level."

"Thank you" the lift responded. "Judicial level. And you, Miss?"

"Authorization Kathy Stanson. Cafeteria."

"Cafeteria, Miss Stanson. Thank you." The lift jerked slightly, then accelerated.

"On your way to see Judge Altobello?" Kathy asked.

"How did you know?"

“Attorney Barrett mentioned that Altobello was getting testy with you this morning. Something about repeatedly leading a witness,” Kathy smirked.

Rafe shook his head and grinned. “I don’t want to discuss it. Too painful. How’s your research going with the Alter case?”

“The man did the crime,” she replied. “Snuffed a mother and two children. It was my mother’s contention, though, that Alter was insane and incompetent to stand trial. Despite all evidence to the contrary, three psychiatrists miraculously declared him sane. They claimed his brain scans showed normal functioning. Something was very wrong and Mom knew it. She just couldn’t prove it.

“In the end my mother believed that the court falsely convicted and exiled a psychotic rather than sending him off for neural reintegration. Do you know why that was allowed to happen?”

Rafe shrugged.

“Because the husband and father was Javier Gonzales. He was Homeland Security’s top investigator back then. A very influential man.”

Rafe’s eyes widened. “Of course! With capital punishment outlawed, Gonzales would never have the satisfaction of seeing Alter dead. So, he wanted the worst possible punishment short of death. Gonzales certainly wasn’t going to allow the government to press Alter’s **RESET** button and send him into society with new personality and a blank memory.”

“Yep. Gonzales pulled all the right strings and had the three-judge panel declare Alter sane and convict him of murder one. That made him a prime candidate for Exile. The story is a little stranger still. Did you know Gonzales also had one of his children Life Scanned?”

“You’re kidding? When?”

“Gonzales showed up at the apartment while EMTs were still working on the youngest victim, a 5-year-old boy. Before the child was completely brain dead, Gonzalez demanded that his son’s memory and high-level neural patterns be scanned and stored at TransLife.”

Rafe shook his head and glanced at the floor display. “After 50 years they still haven’t transplanted those ‘souls’, as they call them, into computers or anything else. A friend of mine is doing research with the TransLife quantum mainframe. He made a breakthrough that allowed him to display visual cortex and auditory data. The idea seems ghoulish to me. He’s a shoe-in for a Nobel, though.”

“Arriving at Judicial level,” the lift announced.

“Wait!” Kathy called out. “Suspend lift. My authorization.”

“Movement halted. Awaiting commands.”

“Kathy!”

Kathy put her hand over her mouth and began to pace. “Your friend can access the memories of anyone stored at TransLife?”

“With permission of next of kin, yes.” Rafe’s eyes narrowed.

“Where are you going with this?”

“I’m thinking that I want to see that boy’s last moments.”

“What’s the point?”

“Maybe it will give me a little piece of evidence that was never available to my mother. There were no eye witnesses to the murder, except possibly for that boy.”

“And where you are going to find next of kin?”

“Javier Gonzales. He’s still alive.”

Rafe exploded with laughter. “You’re going to get his permission to reopen the case of his murdered family? To do what? Retrieve Jon Alter from the exile Gonzalez sent him to in the first place? That’s nuts!”

Kathy didn’t smile. “Gonzales had a rough ride in the years following the murder. He was demoted several times and eventually took a bullet during a terrorist raid in Manhattan. He’s been on disability ever since. A few months ago he was charged with a sensitivity violation for referring to a Muslim as a ‘towel head.’ This is his sixth racial-ethnic sensitivity felony in as many years. Unless someone intervenes, Gonzalez could be looking at prison time under the 2024 Hate Speech Act.”

“And that intervention would come from you?”

“It could,” Kathy shrugged.

“Can I please go to my floor now? I’m running late.”

“Only if you have your quantum-computing friend ring me at the office this week. I want talk to him.”

Rafe shook his head. “Done.”

“Resume travel. My authorization,” Kathy said.

“Arriving at the Judicial level,” the lift responded. The elevator shuddered to a halt and the doors whisked open.

“You are an irrational harpy,” Rafe muttered as he entered the hallway.

“No, I am an attorney—and a good one. When Altobello is screaming at you, just say ‘Thank you sir, may I have another?’ You’ll be fine.”

My God, why have you forsaken me? My herbs are all dead; the crabs have taken the stalks for their hive nests. They were such simple things, Lord. A little pleasure in my meager existence. Why were they taken from me?

Tonight I gaze at the stars and I can see the pinpoint glint of Sol in the blackness. The sight of it fills me with an emptiness beyond understanding. Oh, God, why could you not let the day of my birth perish? It would be better for me to have never existed. At least in oblivion the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

I am old and I am indeed weary, Lord. My existence has been an unending journey of pain. The visitations of the Blessed Mother made the unbearable bearable, but now I fear that even She has forgotten me.

Today a crab scuttled into my cave. At first I was overjoyed for the companionship, but the creature suddenly sprayed me with a foul liquid and sores have now appeared all over my body. I refuse to curse you for my suffering, but can you not deliver me at long last? Strike me, Lord, with the fury you showed that day in the savannah. But this time, seize my heart completely and stop its beating.

I have nothing to do but rest under this alien sky. Oh Lord, if a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, until my change comes.

Kathy stepped off the Greenwood maglev in a pouring rain. She dashed across the street to a gray concrete apartment building and shook the water from her umbrella when she reached the shelter of the main entrance.

“I’m here to see Javier Gonzalez,” she said.

“Please stand by,” the autogreeter replied. Kathy listened to the rain and waited.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Kathy Stanson. We spoke on the telephone.” There was a long silence, followed by what sounded like a sigh.

“Come in.”

The armored door slid aside to reveal a hallway starkly illuminated by a single LED fixture in the ceiling. “Third door on the right.”

The face that appeared in the doorway was unrecognizable from the one Kathy had seen in her mother’s logs. The robust investigator of 30 was now a frail skeleton of a man at 70. Javier Gonzales still possessed the piercing stare that had locked onto Jon Alter and remained throughout the trial. Now these same eyes regarded her with a mixture of amusement and contempt.

“Miss Stanson. Won’t you sit down?”

Kathy walked into the gloomy living room and seated herself on a threadbare couch. She drew a shallow breath across her lips, trying to avoid the stench of body odor and stale beer. Gonzales lowered himself into a chair opposite her, then scooted it closer.

“The better to see you, my dear.” His sagging chest rose and fell beneath a graying T-shirt. “You look so official in your perky little black suit. That’s hyperfabric, isn’t it? Don’t you ever adjust its color to something more festive?”

“I’m not here to discuss my wardrobe.”

“Of course not,” Gonzales replied with a brittle smile. “You want me to give you access to the memories of my little Miguel. I’m sorry to demand a personal visit, but it seems like the least you could do. You’re asking me to let you peer into the lost soul of my Miguel so that you can succeed where your mother failed. Is that not so?”

“No. I am asking you for access so that I can know, for my own satisfaction, that justice was truly done.”

Gonzales smiled again, revealing a mouth utterly devoid of teeth. “And when you have your satisfaction, will you release the animal that murdered my family? Perhaps a convenient mind wipe so that he can spend his remaining days with a clear conscience? I can’t allow that, Miss Stanson. Jon Alter has spent the last 40 years in a special hell and I want him to remain there.”

“He may have been insane.”

“Yes, or so your mother believed,” Gonzales said as he fumbled for a cigarette. Kathy watched in astonishment as he struck a match and inhaled deeply. “What’s the matter? You’ve never seen a cig before?”

“No.”

“Are you going to report me to the authorities? Possession of tobacco carries an automatic 5-year sentence, does it not?”

“Tobacco addiction is your problem, not mine,” Kathy said as she leaned slightly to avoid an approaching cloud of smoke. “However, there is still the matter of your upcoming trial for the hate speech violation.”

“Oh, yes. I rarely get out of this gulag, but the one day I chose to go to the park I made the mistake of flapping my gums too loosely. The Multicultural Police are sharp. They have technology I wouldn’t have dreamed of when I was with Homeland Security. I don’t know where the monitor was hidden, but they heard me mumbling and had me in restraints within 10 minutes. Thing is, I despise Muslims. Always have. I just didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“I know the prosecutor assigned to your trial. She owes me a favor.”

Gonzales chuckled and coughed. “So that’s how it is? I give you access, you make an under-the-table deal with her to drop charges?”

Kathy ground her teeth together. “Something like that.”

“I don’t want to spend my last years in a Multicultural Re-Education Camp, that’s true, but...you cannot release that butcher.” Gonzales brushed away a tear that had suddenly appeared. “How could your mother defend him? How can you?”

“I’m not defending what he did, but the man may have been insane. If my mother could have proven that in open court, Jon Alter would have been re-integrated. He would have been freed from his nightmare and allowed to live a normal life.”

“And what about my nightmare? I have been living with my own for the last 40 years.”

Kathy met his stare and shook her head. “You are sane. You have choices. Perhaps Jon Alter didn’t.”

Gonzales did not attempt to stop the tears that streaked across his pale cheeks. “I want a mind wipe.”

“No, Javier.”

“Wipe me and you can access Miguel.”

“Neural re-integration is only for incurable insanity. You know that.”

“I also know the law. I can give you power of attorney. You can have me declared mentally incompetent.”

“That would be unethical.”

“Don’t talk to me about ethics,” Gonzales sneered. “The ethics of our legal system are very flexible. They allowed me to make sure that Jon Alter wound up basking on Ceti Prime.”

“What about Miguel? If he is ever restored, you’ll never know. You won’t even remember that he existed.”

“I know,” Gonzales replied with a hard swallow. “They will never restore him in my lifetime. That hope is gone.”

Kathy stood and clutched her umbrella. “E-mail the TransLife consent and the power of attorney request. I’ll process both as soon as I can. If all goes well, an agent from the Re-Integration Bureau will be in touch.”

Gonzales stared at the floor and only nodded.

“I’ll see myself out,” Kathy said.

Today the spring storms have come sweeping down from the mountains. The rain mocks me; it arrives far too late. Instead, I am left shivering in my cave. The wood and grass is too sodden to light. Mist swirls around the entrance and reaches into my bones with its damp talons.

The rain and the rumble of distant thunder spark memories long abandoned. For a brief time I remembered sitting in my grandparent’s porch swing, watching a summer shower and luxuriating in that peculiar smell of rain on pavement. I held my Bible to my chest and prayed for an angel to appear and take me to Heaven. The lightning flashed, my grandfather bellowed his drunken summons and the angel never came.

The sores still plague me, and in my pain I cannot sleep. Perhaps I am truly abandoned at last. God has fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness in my paths. There is nothing for me to do but wait for what I pray will be deliverance. Only my cowardly fear prevents me from dashing out of my cave and hurling myself off the cliffs. Despite my despair, despite everything that has happened, I still guard a fading ember of hope.

“Where is the quantum mainframe?” Kathy asked as she swiveled her chair to face the holo projector.

“The computer itself is about 50 meters beneath our feet,” Alan Beckwith replied. “I have to go down the shaft and look at it every morning. If there is no one there to observe it, the probability matrix would collapse and the mainframe would wink out of existence.”

Kathy frowned.

“It’s a joke,” Alan said. “A quantum joke.”

“I don’t get it.”

Alan stuffed his dreadlocks under a knit cap and eased into the chair next to Kathy. She marveled at his long, delicate fingers as they danced across the keyboard.

“I found the file for Miguel Gonzales this morning. That was the easy part,” Alan said without looking up. “Getting something useful was a big prob. Looks like he was essentially a corpse when they scanned him. Neural activity was nearly zero. It was pointless.”

“Not if you’re his father.”

Alan shrugged. “There are over a million minds in storage here at TransLife. Just between you and me, none of them are coming back. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. There...we’re ready.”

The starburst TransLife symbol appeared on the screen.

“Schrodinger,” Alan said as he rocked back in his chair.

“Yes, Alan?”

“You call the computer ‘Schrodinger?’” Kathy asked.

“It’s another quantum joke you won’t get,” Alan replied with slight frown.

“Schrodinger, display the file Miguel Gonzales. Audio too, please.”

The image that appeared was only two dimensional, which was shocking in itself. Worse yet, it looked like a awful copy of an ancient television program. Kathy could only see shifting patterns of black, white and gray. Suddenly a face emerged. She suppressed a gasp. It was Jon Alter, a very young Jon Alter. The expression on his boyish face was one of absolute terror.

“Satan!” he screamed as he approached Miguel. “You will not have me! I won’t let you! You’ve tormented my soul since before I was born and it will end here.”

The image shifted and refocused on the machete that Alter waved above his head. Abruptly the figure of Jon Alter seemed to grow to enormous height.

“Miguel is cowering,” Alan said. “Looking up.”

“Mommy!” a tiny voice cried. “Help meeeeeeeeeee!”

There was a brilliant burst of light, then nothing. “Oh!” Kathy moaned.

“End of file,” Alan chirped.

Kathy stood and shivered as if waking from a dream.

“Unbelievable. There really are some things we should never see.”

She gripped the back of the chair and waited for a wave of nausea to pass. “Jon Alter wasn’t a rational man. Who could watch that recording and believe otherwise? This was the smoking gun my mother could never find.”

“Several sandwiches short of a picnic, I’d say. Where is he now?”

Kathy gathered her briefcase and walked quickly toward the door.

“On the second planet of the Tau Ceti system.”

“What?”

“I need to see a judge,” she said as the door closed behind her.

Kathy had loathed the sight of the Bureau of Exile building from the outside, and she liked it even less on the inside. The polished black granite gave it the air of a mausoleum. Voices echoed from distant offices and footsteps clattered down hallways. Kathy shivered as she shifted her weight from one leg to the other, a judicial warrant clutched in her hand.

Dr Ryan appeared as if out of nowhere. His soft-soled shoes had masked his approach. “Kathy Stanson?”

“Yes,” Kathy replied as she extended her hand. Ryan shook it firmly, a broad smile lifting the ends of his white handlebar mustache.

“I can see your mother’s face in your features—except for your red hair, of course.”

“Those are my father’s genes at work,” Kathy replied. “My mother came here often, didn’t she?”

“Yes, right up until she finally had to go to the nursing home. Your mother was devoted to checking on the status of Mr Alter.”

Kathy handed the warrant to Dr Ryan. He glanced at the paper and nodded. “This would have made your mother very proud. Follow me, please.”

The lift plunged 20 stories below street level. Kathy and Dr Ryan shared an awkward silence as it descended. “Forty years in Exile is a very long time,” Dr Ryan said abruptly. “It changes people in profound

ways. In my private moments I allow myself to think that capital punishment would be preferable.”

“I tend to agree,” Kathy replied.

The lift opened to a long hallway. The rows of featureless black doors reminded Kathy even more of a tomb. The only sound was the hum of unseen circuits. Dr Ryan walked to the nearest door and waited for the retinal scan. The door rumbled open and he motioned Kathy inside.

In the middle of the darkened room, perched on a stainless-steel dais, was a clear Lexan tube nearly three meters in length. A cable bundle as thick as a human arm snaked away from one end of the tube. Smaller tubes and cables entered at what seemed like haphazard angles. Dr Ryan took Kathy’s hand and gently coaxed her forward. “This,” he said quietly, “is Jon Alter.”

Kathy gaped at the sight of the figure in the tube, but said nothing. For years she had seen holos of Exile prisoners in their chambers, but the reality was still shocking. Jon Alter—a 58-year-old Jon Alter—lay wrapped in a white mesh suit. A thick brown liquid oozed through a tube that disappeared into his abdomen. His head was encased in a bulky helmet that left only a portion of his face still visible. Although his eyes were closed, his lips twitched spasmodically.

“For 40 years he has lived alone on Ceti Prime,” Kathy whispered. “Forty years.”

“Astonishing, isn’t it? Dr Ryan said. “We reserve the mercy of reintegration for the criminally insane, but if you kill someone with rational thoughts in your head, mere imprisonment isn’t good enough. Our laws have placed such people beyond mercy. A couple of hundred years ago the French sent their worst prisoners to Devil’s Island. We send our worst to virtual hells of our own creation like the Kupier Belt outposts...or Ceti Prime.”

Kathy stared at the helmet. It was covered with wires and connecting jacks. “Is he dreaming all this?”

“I suppose you could say that, but his induced reality is every bit as real as ours. His Ceti Prime experience was modeled from the data sent back by the Far Reach probe 50 years ago. Everything, right down to the flora and fauna, is exactly as Far Reach saw it when the probe crawled across the real Ceti Prime.”

“How...how does he experience it?”

“That headpiece,” Dr Ryan gestured, “is a transcranial magnetic stimulator, a TMS. It’s late 20th century technology refined tremendously for our use.” There was a note of pride in his voice.

“What is he holding in his hand?”

“The remains of a Rosary your mother brought during one of her visits. The string broke long ago and the beads have all slipped through, but he still has a death grip on the crucifix. The physiological stabilants maintain excellent skeletal integrity and muscle tone.”

“Does he ever speak?”

“Like our other Exiles, he moans and cries out from time to time, but that’s all. Your mother used to talk to him. She would spend hours sitting beside his chamber. She believed to her dying day that Mr Alter was the victim of a grave miscarriage of justice.”

Kathy swallowed against the sudden pressure in her throat. “When can we awaken him?”

Dr Ryan blanched and briefly glanced away. “That’s a serious problem, Kathy. Prisoners who’ve been in Exile as long as Alter suffer significant memory loss—especially as it concerns the trauma of the Exile immersion itself. When we stop the simulation, the reality they’ve come to accept vanishes in an instant. The effect of the transition on the psyche is incredible. The result is madness, and often death.”

Dr Ryan pointed to a cardiac monitor. “To make matters worse, Alter has developed severe coronary artery disease. I’m not sure he could survive the stress of re-animation.”

Kathy stepped closer to the chamber and gazed at Jon Alter’s heavily lined face. As she watched, the corners of his mouth turned down in an obvious grimace.

“Does he really suffer?” she asked.

“He must suffer occasional bouts of painful angina. He has also developed a nasty rash on his chest and forearms. I can’t say what he experiences emotionally.”

“And if we bring him back, he will die?”

“Yes, Kathy, I believe he will. It is your release warrant, though.”

Kathy ran fingers along the length of Jon Alter’s feeding tube. The machinery suddenly sounded far away. “Let’s do it,” she heard herself say.

“Maintenance,” Ryan called out.

“Yes doctor?” the disembodied voice replied.

“Suspend Ceti Prime simulation. My authorization. Doctor Harold Ryan.”

“Understood. Suspending now.”

Dr Ryan reached into the chamber and carefully removed the headpiece. Jon Alter’s bald skull fell to the mattress. His eyelids fluttered, then snapped open. “Hail Mary full of grace!” he screamed. His hands waved in the air.

Kathy quickly grabbed his wrists. “It’s all right, Jon. Relax.” He pulled his hands away and covered his eyes. His breath came in explosive gasps.

“You came back for me!”

Kathy glanced at Dr Ryan, who merely shook his head.

“Yes . . . yes, I came back for you,” she said softly.

Alter peeked between trembling fingers. “You are even more beautiful than I remember.”

“Warning,” the computer announced. “Tachycardia.”

“Have you come to take me to home to heaven with the angels?”

“Jon . . . I . . .”

“Systolic pressure below normal. Falling.”

“Yes,” Kathy blurted. “Let’s go home.”

“Warning. Cardiac arrhythmia. Counting down to shock.”

“Cancel!” Dr Ryan shouted. “My authorization.”

Jon’s hands fell away and he smiled through closing eyes. “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now . . .” The prayer ended with a long, ragged sigh.

Rafe met Kathy in the hallway as she was leaving for the night. “Heading home so soon?” he smirked. “It’s only eight o’clock.”

Kathy shook her head. “I’m not in the mood for you right now.”

Rafe staggered and clutched his chest in mock surprise. “I’m wounded! I think you’ve bitten through my aorta!”

Kathy laughed in spite of herself. “If I chewed into your chest cavity, you’d know it.”

“So true, mein frauline. Can I placate you with a quiet little Italian restaurant I’ve just discovered?”

“I shouldn’t,” Kathy said as she buttoned her coat. She hesitated at the last button and smiled. “On the other hand, I feel like I could dive head first into a plate of shrimp scampi.”

“Why not? Want to go back to my place afterward and watch history in the making? The *Shackleton* leaves orbit for Tau Ceti at 10 PM. Four hundred sleeping souls heading off into the Big Black for 24 years. This is high drama.”

“How about if we go back to your place and watch something else? Anything else.”

Rafe nodded as his smile vanished. “I understand. Still thinking about Jon Alter?”

“Yeah. I sure hope those colonists find Ceti Prime to be a better place than he did. But then again, we all have our own private hells, don’t we?”

Rafe took Kathy by the arm and began walking. “Yes, but some of us are eventually led to redemption, one way or the other.”

END

Hope Eternal

The infant had died in the loving embrace of its mother and father. After more than 60 years of desiccation and weathering, that much was still clear. The arid atmosphere had mummified all three bodies to form a grotesque sculpture in what must have been their sleeping room. As with all the other remains, there was no sign of suffering or violence.

Erin Kim traced a gloved hand along the infant’s withered face, brushing away the sand as she went. Rows of needle-sharp teeth gleamed white through its brown, pebbled lips. Bony nodules were visible along its forehead, precursors of the intricate horns worn by its parents.

She rose slowly to her feet and wiped the sweat from her face. One billion dead. An entire race extinguished in a single act of self-destruction. Even after a month on Pi Mensae Prime, Erin still couldn’t grasp the enormity of it.

Jason appeared in the doorway with two water bottles tucked into the waistband of his khaki shorts. He tossed one bottle to Erin and proceeded to open the other.

“I assume you heard the sonic boom?”

“Yep,” Erin said as she flicked off the cap. “Sounds like the Dalen have arrived at last.” She raised the bottle over her head and allowed the cool liquid to drizzle into her hair.

“You should follow my example,” Jason said as he gestured toward his bald scalp. “This is a lot more comfortable on a hot planet than your black mop.”

Erin shrugged. “As long as we’re swapping advice, you need more sunscreen. Your cheeks look like they’ve been slapped fifty times apiece, which is probably not a bad idea. And with that pale flesh under your goggles, you look like a raccoon.”

Jason smiled. “*Touché.*”

“How many Dalen came down? I heard they were sending an entire team.”

“No. Just one Dalen. Their chief of archeology.”

“That’s odd,” Erin muttered as she switched on her scanner. She held the scanner at arms length and waited as it probed the long-dead family, scanning their internal tissues and plotting the exact positions of the corpses. A chime signaled when the scan was complete.

“Have you ever met a Dalen?” Jason asked.

“Yes, once,” Erin replied as she studied the scanner display. There were no surprises. Each body carried remnants of a synthetic neurotoxin, the same one detected in all the other corpses on the planet. Their global distribution was efficient to the end.

“Dalens are an acquired taste,” Jason said as he recapped his bottle. “I met my first when I was a graduate student at Olympus Mons University. He or she, I was never really sure, reviewed my exobiology thesis. I got along with ‘it’ just fine...I think.”

Erin slipped the scanner into her pants pocket and took a long draw from the water bottle. “That’s the problem,” she said. “You never really know what Dalens think of you. They’re ciphers. They might despise humans for all we know.”

“If that was true, they would never have made contact and never given us Jump technology. We’d still be puttering around the inner Solar System and wondering if we were alone in the Universe.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to cuddle up to them.”

“No, but please don’t give this particular Dalen a hard time.”

Erin shook her head. “Don’t worry Jason. I’ll give him the grand tour. You can upload our files and he can go his merry way. The sooner the better.”

“I guess that’s the best I can hope for,” Jason replied with a crooked smile. His watch chimed loudly. “It’s show time.”

The sleek Dalen shuttle hovered just above the ancient village center. Clouds of pinkish sand billowed as the thrusters screamed, softened, then stopped. The craft settled with a dull thud. Erin watched as the “chief of archeology” emerged from an oversized airlock.

The Dalen’s six-legged gait was remarkably graceful, especially considering its massive size. Erin couldn’t help but stare at the bands of color that rippled across its black exoskeleton. Swaths of iridescent green pulsed in its thorax, just above a metallic multipocketed belt. In one of the pockets, she could see the outlines of a scanner not unlike her own. Dangling nearby was an electronic translator.

Four multi-jointed appendages unfolded from beneath the Dalen’s head as it approached. Each of these “arms” ended in six slender fingers.

Jason fumbled inside his shirt and switched on his translator pendant. Erin did the same.

The Dalen’s mouthparts began to twitch. At first there was only the sound of staccato clicks. Within seconds, the translator massaged them into a smoothly modulated approximation of a human voice. The enunciation was perfect, but sound was flat and emotionless. “We are pleased to be in your presence. We are Kila, of the progeny of Gorn.”

“I am Erin Kim, archeologist.”

“I am Jason Stockbridge, archeology team leader.”

“May we establish our familiarity?”

This was the part of the Dalen greeting that Erin dreaded the most. “Yes,” she replied with a weak smile.

“Certainly,” Jason answered.

Kila swiveled to face Erin, bowing forward with its compound eyes mere inches from her face. Feathery antennae first rested on the top of her head, then brushed across her neck, chest, abdomen and legs. Erin shuddered in spite of herself.

“Do we disturb you?” Kila asked.

“Yes, you do.”

Kila seemed to process Erin’s answer slowly. “Our sincere apologies,” it said at last.

The Dalen pivoted its upper body to Jason and performed the same ritual. “We would like to be briefed on your work,” Kila announced when it finished.

Jason stepped forward and smiled. "It would be my pleasure."

"No doubt you are the most experienced human at this site, but we would prefer to communicate with Erin Kim, if that is not a problem."

Erin shook her head. "I am really not--."

"I'm sure she would be thrilled," Jason interrupted. "Erin is quite knowledgeable. She was with the first team that arrived planetside."

Erin forced a smile. "Jason flatters me. Perhaps the best person for you to speak with is Alex Natanov. He is with the team that's exploring the large coastal city in the tropical zone. There is little here but desert and corpses."

"Perhaps," Kila replied, "But is this not the location of the transmitter they used to broadcast their message?"

"Yes, and we've explored it thoroughly. There isn't much that would interest you."

"That is a conclusion we would like to reach independently, your research notwithstanding."

Erin flushed. She glanced at Jason and saw him clasp his hands as if in prayer. He silently mouthed the word "please."

Erin flipped down her goggles and turned abruptly. "Follow me," she said.

They walked through the dusty streets in silence. The Dalen seemed to skip effortlessly over the sand drifts. At times it would skitter ahead, scan something of interest, then wait for Erin to catch up.

They emerged from the village gate just in time to see the shimmering orange disc of Pi Mensae sinking into what appeared to be an enormous crater. The rim towered a hundred meters above them with walls of upthrust rock that curved to the south and disappeared out of sight. "They certainly fashioned a most impressive parabolic reflector," Kila said suddenly. "The antenna is visible from orbit, but on the ground its true size is apparent."

Erin nodded and kept her eyes fixed on the pathway.

By the time they reached the squat building at the base of the antenna wall, Erin was drenched in sweat. She stood by the doorway and drained her water bottle in one continuous swallow. "You can probably just fit through this doorway," she said. "We think they used it to bring in the equipment."

Erin stepped into the gloom and switched on the portable lights. The Dalen followed, sweeping the room carefully with its antennae.

Erin sat on a nearby power module and watched. Minutes passed as the Dalen used its antennae to probe the controls and displays.

“What is your sense of this place?” Kila finally asked.

Erin took a shallow breath. “Nothing more than the obvious. It’s the transmitter control. Their broadcast was encoded and sent from here.”

“Indeed. We presume you have analyzed the equipment.”

“Yes. The technology is on par with 21st century Earth. We know that beneath this building they installed a high-power microwave amplifier. It’s a huge traveling-wave-tube design operating in the gigawatt range, complete with an elaborate liquid cooling system. One of our technicians determined that the feedpoint of the antenna is designed for precise resonance on 1420.40575 MHz.”

“I see. That is to be expected,” Kila replied while continuing to probe. “Radiation from the precession of interstellar hydrogen is clearly heard in microwave receivers at that frequency. If the intent is to broadcast a signal most likely to attract notice at interstellar distances, that frequency would be an optimum choice.”

Suddenly the Dalen turned to face Erin. “But why do you think these creatures expended so much energy on such a project?”

Erin jumped to her feet. Kila cocked its bulbous head as if in bemusement. “I’m not entirely sure,” she said quickly. “LunaCom Labs has been trying to decipher the Mensae language since they began receiving the broadcast six months ago. I’ve made some progress here, but it raises more questions than answers.”

“Indeed,” Kila said as it moved closer. Erin stepped backward. “The matter of their language intrigues us. Tell us more.”

Erin sidestepped and pointed to a nearby switch panel. “Well, their transmission is mostly composed of a long stream of digital data. LunaCom says it probably missed a portion of the first stream, but now the information is repeating. They think the transmission contains the Mensae equivalent of an encyclopedia—the sum of all their knowledge. LunaCom offered to share a copy of the data with Dalen, but I guess you declined.”

“Yes. We have followed the LunaCom progress reports nonetheless.”

“Of course,” Erin replied with a brittle laugh. “Look, I’m just wasting your time with all—“

“No. Please resume. It is helpful to hear the progress from your perspective.”

Erin frowned and continued. “The digital information is interleaved with a number of analog images. There are pictures of Mensae of various ages and sexes. There are also pictographic symbols. The two symbols that keep repeating are two vertical lines intersected by a broad curving line near the top, and another that looks like two stylized Xs arranged vertically.”

“Yes, this is known to us also. We sense that you have come to an interesting interpretation, however. Continue.”

Erin pointed to a row of switches. “Well, I’ve seen variations of these symbols everywhere on the planet. Look at these switches. Can you see them?”

“Yes, we can see them.”

“Two vertical lines intersected by a line that curves, although not quite as sharply.”

“Are you suggesting a parallel meaning?”

“Well, yes” Erin said as she drew another hurried breath. “We’ve determined that these switches control the cooling pumps. If a switch is turned in the direction of the symbol, power to one of the pumps would be interrupted. The pump would stop functioning. I believe the symbol means ‘OFF’.”

“Off?”

“Yes. Or something like it. Off. Cease functioning. Stop.”

“That is a logical conclusion. And?”

Erin inched around the Dalen toward open doorway. She pointed to a solitary platform in the center of room. On the platform there was a gleaming metallic column topped with small panel and a switch similar to the others.

“That switch is marked with what seems to be a reverse configuration of the same symbol. See how the intersecting line appears along the bottom rather than the top?”

“Do you mean ‘ON’?”

“I think so, but I’m not certain.”

“We understand. Have you operated this switch?”

“Yes. Nothing happened. It’s connected to an independent power supply, along with what seems to be a low-frequency transmitter. We think power supply was damaged several years ago by a lightning strike.”

Kila stepped forward again. “Such a strange device. Can you suggest a purpose?”

“No, but we think that whatever this is, it was intentionally left functional. All the other power generation, everywhere on the planet, was shut down.”

“Fascinating. Perhaps we can help you re—“

Erin shook her head. “Kila, Pi Mensae is about to set and I didn’t bring a portalight. I think should return to the village.”

Kila regarded her for what seemed like several minutes. “Of course,” it said at last.

Erin bolted through the doorway and began walking without looking back. She could hear the Dalen following close behind. Its long shadow flickered across the dunes in the fading light. Erin quickened her pace and said nothing.

Erin sat atop the dune with her bare feet buried in warm sand. In the distance the great antenna was a black specter blotting out the twilight stars along the horizon. She closed her eyes and savored a cool breeze that gently ruffled her hair. The aroma spoke of profound dryness...and death.

Her meditation was interrupted by the sounds of Jason’s boots crunching their way up the slope. Jason reached the crest and bent over with his hands on his knees. “I need to get in better shape,” he gasped. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“That’s what you get for spending most of your life on Mars,” Erin replied.

“Are you waiting for Sol to rise?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s hard to pick out among the other stars. I’m designing my own Mensae constellations based on my favorite foods. That’ll help.”

Jason chuckled as he sat beside her. “Speaking of food, Kila is taking its evening nourishment. That’s something I don’t care to watch.”

“I don’t blame you. Did Kila tell you that we spent some time poking around the transmitter building?”

“Uh-huh. I really appreciate it, Erin. I know it wasn’t easy.”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t dislike Kila, really. The Dalens seem harmless enough, but I can’t get past their . . . *nonhumanness*. When I look at Kila, all I see is an 8-foot-tall praying mantis. At least with the Mensae I can feel a kind of kinship.”

“Because they were humanoid?”

“Not just that. From everything I’ve seen, the Mensae were very much like us. They seemed to have human-like relationships. It’s reflected in their art.”

“But how do you explain why they would suddenly decide to exterminate themselves? And why did they feel the need to blast their suicide announcement throughout the galaxy? By any reasonable human standard, it’s madness.”

Erin rested her chin on her hands. “I don’t know. I can’t find a logic tree with a branch that leads anywhere sane. You know, my father killed himself when I was 12 years old. He had an inoperable brain tumor. With his strong religious faith, I assumed he would let life take its course and put everything in God’s hands. But one day he decided to step in front of a maglev train outside Worcester. My mother found a note at home that read ‘The substance of things hoped for, the evidence for things unseen. Eternal hope awaits.’ I never understood that, and I never forgave him. One day he was my father, sick as he was. The next day he was a corpse.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason replied.

“Don’t be. My mother carried on and raised me pretty well, I think. Hey, I made it into exoarcheology, didn’t I?”

“And here you sit, 60 light years from Earth. Very few humans can lay claim to that,” Jason said with a grin.

Erin nodded. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but something about this place is getting to me, Jason.”

“Death on a planetary scale can be—“

“No, not the death. The senselessness of it.”

“Not every riddle has a solution. Just like your father. Just like the Dalen.”

Erin began to speak, but Jason was already getting to his feet.

“Look,” he began, “I’m going grab something to eat and then I’ll be watching a holo in the lab shelter. It’s a comedy, probably just what you need.”

“Maybe I’ll join you.”

“Don’t be long,” Jason called out as he made his descent.

Erin searched the western horizon and finally found a pinpoint of light creeping above the antenna feedpoint. Erin brought her heels together three times beneath the sand, “There’s no place like home,” she whispered.

A shadow fell over her, obscuring the perimeter lights. Erin laughed. “Jason, I think you—“

“May we—,” a toneless voice began.

“Jesus!” Erin cried. She scrambled to her feet and instantly slipped on the loose sand. A six-fingered hand shot out of the darkness and firmly gripped her forearm, effortlessly pulling her upright.

“Our apologies,” Kila said as it released her. “We did not intend to frighten you.”

Erin shook the sand from her shirt and forced a laugh. “Humans frighten easily. It’s not a problem. I was just leaving.”

“Why do you come here?” Kila asked.

“To be by myself. To think.”

“Dalen never think by ourselves. Each Dalen contains the knowledge of all Dalen. In this sense, we are never by ourselves.”

“I guess that’s the advantage of a hive mentality,” Erin said as she reached for her boots.

“You dislike us.” The bluntness of the statement caught Erin by surprise. She froze, clutching her boots at her side.

“Kila, there are things about Dalen I do not understand. That lack of understanding causes distrust. This is not the same as dislike.”

“If there is something you do not understand, why do you not ask?”

Erin opened her mouth, but said nothing.

“Yes?”

“Ah...okay. How about starting with the question of why you are here,” Erin said.

The Dalen seemed to mimic a human shrug. “To gain insight from your research. To understand what happened in this place.”

Erin frowned. “Everything I’ve transcribed has already been uploaded to your ship.”

“But we wish to understand more. There is something unique about the human personality in general and your personality in particular. It is entangled with this planet in a way we do not comprehend.”

“Really? Well, you know, Kila, there are things about this investigation that *I* don’t quite comprehend. For example, why didn’t the Dalen arrive here before us? Why are we the advance troops in this expedition? The Dalen homeworld is much closer than Earth. You should have received the Mensae signal well before we did.”

Kila’s mouthparts worked furiously. “Untranslatable,” the translator intoned.

“What?” Erin asked.

“The beam of electromagnetic energy projected from this antenna was quite narrow. Your lunar receiving station was fortunate to discover it. Dalen was not as fortunate.”

“But our Jump Probe at Sigma Draconis just reported the end of the transmission. That means the beam has been sweeping through the galaxy for at least 18 Earth years. It’s hard to imagine how superior Dalen technology could have missed it.”

Kila rose to its full height and folded its arms beneath its head. “We did not detect the signal.”

“Okay,” Erin replied as she began making her way down the slope. “I guess I am all out of questions for now.”

“Then you have a better understanding?” Kila asked.

“No, but that’s okay, too.”

Erin emerged from the mess tent, still chewing the stale remains of a cinnamon bagel. Pi Mensae was already well above the mountains and she walked directly into a shaft of its brilliant orange-yellow light as she crossed the square. Cursing softly, she lowered her goggles.

Jason came around the other side of the mess tent at a trot, carrying a tripod and a holo imager across his shoulders. “Howdy, ma’am! Ain’t it a beautiful morning?”

“Please shut up. I’m begging you.”

“Bad night?” Jason asked as he paused beside her.

“Uh-huh. Hardly slept. Where’s the bug?”

Jason sighed. “The Dalen Chief of Archeology is at the transmitter. He’s been there since dawn.”

“Sorry, Jason. I’ll go look in on him.”

Jason did a mock bow. “And a good day to you, Ms Kim.”

Erin shook her head and made an obscene gesture.

She was 10 meters from the transmitter building when she saw a dazzling burst of blue-white light accompanied by a loud *pop*. Erin rushed to the doorway, muttering under her breath. The air was heavy with the stench of ozone.

She cautiously peered into the room and found Kila astride the center platform, wildly juggling a tangle of wiring. “Untranslatable! Untranslatable!” Erin’s pendant barked.

“Are you okay?” she called.

“We are nominal. A minor setback, but we have identified the error.”

Erin edged closer. “Can I help?”

The Dalen stopped with its arms in mid-air.

“You may not. Your help is not required.” Even through the translator it sounded sharp.

Erin watched as the Dalen resumed its mad dance. One by one the wires seemed to untangle and fall away. Kila produced a silver tube from its belt and gently probed a dangling circuit. A ribbon of smoke curled to the ceiling.

“There,” Kila announced. “The correct connection has been made. You have arrived at an opportune time, Erin Kim.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. We have repaired the low-frequency transmitter power supply by substituting one of Dalen design. We believe the Mensae unit will function now. We believe that it generates a powerful local field of modulated energy within a frequency range of 2 to 10 hertz.”

“That’s remarkable,” Erin said as she approached the platform. “Have you discovered what it does?”

“Something . . . biological. The frequency range is one we have encountered before in biological systems.”

Erin paused with her hand on the miniature switch panel. “That sounds promising—and dangerous.”

“We were hoping that you would test it.”

“What?” Erin cried out with a laugh. “I don’t think so, Kila. This is clearly your project.” She stepped back, but the Dalen nudged her forward.

“Hey!”

“We cannot.”

“We cannot *what*? Risk our lives?” Erin turned and shoved Kila’s arms away.

“It is important for our knowledge, Erin Kim. It is absolutely critical.”

Erin narrowed her eyes and nodded. “If it is so important, then you test it.”

Kila lowered its head. Its arms hung motionless. “We . . . cannot. Great danger, we believe, to us. However, we must know the answer.”

“The answer to what?”

“The answer to...untranslatable...the answer to why. We believe our neural chemistry is too dissimilar for this device to connect with our consciousness. However, human neural networks should be...receptive.”

Erin felt her skin prickling. “You mean this is a some kind of neural transmitter?”

“Yes. When language cannot be quickly bridged, direct induction into the neural pathways would be effective. The Mensae must have understood this.”

Kila gestured to a dark vertical patch immediately to the right of the switch. “We believe that is a tuning control. The frequency of the transmitter can probably be changed to accommodate various brain patterns. The surface is sensitive to touch. ”

Erin gently traced the patch with her index finger. It felt smooth and cold. “So they expected visitors,” she whispered. “Non-Mensae visitors.”

At that moment a gust of wind stirred the sand at her feet. Erin licked her lips and wished she had remembered to bring her water bottle.

“You know, the sensible thing for me to do is to return to base and report everything to the Dalen/Terran Council. They’ll send another team to test this device, step by logical step. I’ll receive my accolades back on Earth and everyone will be happy.”

“But you would not be pleased with such an outcome,” Kila said.

Erin smiled. “You’re right. I’ve always felt that sensible approaches aren’t always the most satisfying. I guess that concept is unfathomable to Dalen.”

“You are correct. The ability to take irrational action is your advantage as a human.”

Erin laughed as she turned back to the switch. “Maybe so, but I sense a tiny spark of individualism in you, Kila. It has you in conflict. You always speak in third person, but I think there is a first-person Kila that is just as curious about this device as I am.”

This time Kila did not respond. Erin drew a deep breath and reached for the switch. “For the greater glory of new discovery,” she whispered.

The Dalen power supply hummed, but nothing happened. Erin placed her index finger on the tuning strip and slowly inched it upward. When she reached the halfway point, she began to feel lightheaded.

“I feel strange,” she called out. Erin moved her finger another millimeter and the room seemed to waver as if she were looking through distorted glass. The gray walls vanished and she found herself standing at the outskirts of a Mensae city. She recognized the distant spires as a city she had visited on a continent in the western hemisphere. Pi Mensae was directly overhead, blazing fiercely.

Hearing the sound of footsteps, Erin turned slowly. A tall Mensae individual was approaching. Its intricate horns gleamed above blacker-than-black eyes. Its chest and leg muscles rippled beneath pebbled skin as it walked with long, confident strides. The Mensae stopped a meter away and began speaking in a series of grunts.

Erin’s throat tightened. The being was alien, yet somehow familiar. “I don’t understand,” she said.

The Mensae pointed to its sun with a three-fingered hand, then crouched and pulled up a handful of dried, withered grass. It held out the brittle leaves as if pleading. A translucent image appeared in the space between them. It showed Pi Mensae with lines that Erin recognized as light spectra. As she watched, the ultraviolet lines grew larger.

“Your planet was becoming uninhabitable for you. I understand. But couldn’t you—“

The Mensae abruptly vanished and Erin found herself standing in the middle of the parabolic antenna. A sea of Mensae adults, children and infants surrounded her. One of the adults stepped forward and held out its arm. It produced something that looked like a syringe and inserted it into its flesh. Red liquid oozed into the vial, reaching the top and overflowing. Droplets scattered into the air, transforming into the double Xs Erin had seen before. One symbol joined to another, producing snake-like strings that seemed to dance and vibrate. Similar strings arose from everyone she could see, filling the sky with an enormous column of interleaving Xs that gently floated up to the stars.

Erin cried out. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Not language. The transmission is not language at all. The double Xs are a *double helix*. It’s genetic code!”

The vision suddenly winked out of existence. She was back in the transmitter room.

“Erin, are you nominal? Are you injured?”

Erin grasped the platform railing with one hand and wiped her tears with the other. “I’m as nominal as can be expected, Kila.”

“I...we...have excitement. What did you discover? You appeared to be in a trance.”

“A dream,” Erin said with a sigh. “I was in a dream. The data stream the Mensae transmitted isn’t a knowledge base. I think it’s the digitally encoded DNA pattern of every Mensae. They beamed their DNA information into space.”

“Why?”

“Because the ultraviolet radiation from Pi Mensae is increasing. This world is slowly being sterilized. The Mensae must have known what was happening, and where it would lead. They weren’t spacefaring, so they preserved a legacy the only way they could.”

“But why did they not continue to live out their lives? The Mensae could have moved underground.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it was what we humans call a ‘quality of life’ issue. Maybe they looked into the future and saw only suffering.”

“Senseless,” her translator barked. “Senseless.”

Erin smiled. “You’re wrong. Actually, it was...*beautiful* in a way I can’t completely describe. Faced with certain death, they sent their essence into the universe in the hope that someone, somewhere, would receive and understand. Maybe they thought an advanced civilization might bring them back to life in some fashion, I don’t know. What I *do* know is that they all leapt into the abyss with nothing more than hope to carry them. What remarkable beings!”

Kila shuddered and stepped away. “This is a dangerous thought pattern. One that I...we...must not dwell upon deeply. Rational suicide. The consequences to the hive are too terrible to contemplate.”

“No doubt. What one Dalen knows, all Dalen know, right? Consider yourself lucky that you didn’t share what I just experienced.”

The Dalen didn’t respond. Almost a minute passed with only the hum of the power supply resonating within the room. Erin reached for one of Kila’s arms and touched a motionless fingertip. “Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

Kila collapsed. Its carapace slammed to the floor with a sharp crack. “Kila!” Erin cried. She reached for her emergency radio, but one of the Dalen’s hands intervened, clutching her wrist with a vice-like grip.

“No,” Kila said.

“I need to call the base. You’re sick.”

“Sick in spirit only. I have great shame, Erin Kim.”

“I have great shame? Don’t you mean *we*?”

“The shame I feel is...personal. Whether it will extend throughout the hive remains to be seen.”

“What are you talking about?”

Kila paused and seemed to tremble. “It doesn’t matter now. This experiment is at an end.”

“What? You mean this--”

“You...all humans...were deceived. We *did* receive the Mensae transmission before it reached Earth. Our scientists sent a Jump Probe to the Pi Mensae system within days after we discovered the signal. It followed the signal to this planet and we were horrified at what it showed us.

“As it surveyed the planet, the probe detected the electromagnetic signature of the neural communicator and we soon guessed its function—and the possible message it carried. We reacted with fear. The possibility that the experience of rational self-destruction could be directly communicated, that it could find its way into the Dalen consciousness, was unacceptable. Reception was terminated. All our stored information was erased and the probe was commanded to send a high-voltage pulse to disable the communicator.

“But our curiosity remained great. Throughout the hive, there was...hunger. The concept of suicide is unknown to us. We became desperate to find a means to obtain an answer to this maddening puzzle without endangering Dalen.”

Erin nodded slowly. “And that is where humans came into play.”

“Yes. We had been studying humans for years, waiting for the proper moment to establish contact. Many in our scientific community felt that the singular nature of the human mind would allow the complete truth to be discovered without your entire species being placed at risk. We made contact in the hope that humans would eventually receive the Mensae transmission and become as curious as we were.”

Erin laughed and shook her head. “Why weren’t the Dalen honest from the beginning? What was the point?”

“We wished to study the human response to the Mensae incident. It had to be a pure response, untainted by prior knowledge. The situation presented an incredible opportunity to solve a dangerous mystery and at the same time study how the revelation would effect a civilization of

similar composition to the Mensae. We thought perhaps we could interpret all of these events--”

“At a safe clinical distance,” Erin snapped. “This was an interstellar psych class experiment.”

Kila paused, then continued. “When the Terran/Dalen Council assembled the human team for Pi Mensae, we studied your psychological profile and your work, Erin Kim. Of all humans assigned to Pi Mensae, you were the most...predisposed...for success, considering your father’s--.”

“Of course,” Erin replied as she stepped from the platform. She gazed at the room as if seeing it for the first time. “You know, I always thought it was a phenomenal stroke of luck that the Dalen established contact with Earth just a couple of years before the Mensae signal reached us. Isn’t that something? Your Jump ships allowed us to go right to the source. I suppose I should thank you, but...”

Kila stood motionless and silent. Erin slipped on her goggles and walked to the door.

“What will you do with the DNA information?” Kila asked as it hurried after her.

“I won’t do a thing. On Earth we’ve been able to resurrect some ancient animals we call ‘dinosaurs’ using reptile embryos and DNA synthesis. Perhaps the same can be done for some of the Mensae. At least I hope so.”

Erin stepped back into the late-morning glare of Pi Mensae. She stared at the wall of the giant antenna as a whirlwind carried a spiral column of dust into the pale blue sky. Kila’s antenna brushed her arm. She recoiled with a shudder.

“Where will you go now?” it asked.

“Back to the village. I have a long report to transcribe. I want to do a good job, Kila. The Dalen have gone to a great deal of trouble and I want to make sure they get an A+ on their lab paper. It will be fascinating reading for the Terran Science Council as well. Tell your brethren that the ‘human response’ to Dalen duplicity is likely to be a bit more negative than they probably anticipated. Another juicy subject for Dalen analysis, I’m sure.

“After that... well...a month on Pi Mensae Prime is long enough. I’ll rotate back to Earth in a week. I need to go home to my ‘species,’ Kila. And I need to visit my father’s grave.”

“To remember? To reflect?” Kila asked eagerly with his recording scanner extended to her.

Erin looked directly into the probe. “To forgive,” she replied.

END

Until Their Promised Return

“What I see down there is not what I’d call ‘scattered and broken’ clouds,” Ryan announced over the drone of the engine.

Tony bit the inside of his lower lip and waited for the flash of anger to subside. How many times had Ryan made that observation in the last twenty minutes? How many times?

“A little cloud cover just adds an extra challenge to the situation,” he replied with a forced grin. “You can’t be a fair-weather flier all your life, Ryan.”

I’d love to take him on a little sprint through a long line of imbedded thunderstorms, Tony thought. He’d be on his knees in a New York minute, praying to every god in heaven for the “bad weather” he has today. The mental image of Ryan praying in the cockpit made him chuckle out loud.

There was a sudden burst of static in Tony’s headset. “Cherokee six charlie alfa, turn right to two—five—eight and begin your descent to fifteen hundred at this time.”

“Thank you, New York Center,” Tony replied. “We just passed the Madison VOR and we’ll be starting our descent for New Haven.”

Tony eased back the throttle and the engine’s drone immediately softened to a dull rumble. He turned to Ryan and jerked his thumb at the floor. “Reach down there and grab the landing checklist, will you?”

Ryan gazed at the approaching cloud deck. “What do you want?”

“Come on,” Tony said with a frown. “The checklist. Just give me the damn checklist. It’s in the folder next to your left foot.”

Tony swore under his breath, but let it go at that. They would be in the clouds within seconds and he was far too busy to worry about Ryan’s sensitivities. He snatched the checklist from Ryan’s hand and glanced at the altimeter. There was a sudden flash of white as they sliced through the edge of a cloud. Another loomed directly ahead and

Tony knew it would be the last. As it rushed to meet them, he instinctively tightened his grip on the control column. Within a heartbeat they plunged headlong into the gray infinity.

Their single engine Cherokee shuddered like an annoyed beast as it sank rapidly into the cloud deck. Tony made a couple of fine adjustments to keep it steady--more for Ryan's sake than anything else. He scanned the instruments once again. Everything looked perfect, with the exception of Ryan. There was something about his placid demeanor that Tony found disturbing.

They had met that afternoon at the airport on Martha's Vineyard. Their introductions had been perfunctory. The pale stranger who called himself Ryan simply stated that he was in need of a ride to New Haven and he assured Tony that he had at least a passing acquaintance with piloting. Tony was reluctant at first. For the previous hour or so he had sat in flight office nursing a pounding headache. His thoughts had seemed strangely scattered and he had been alarmed to discover that he couldn't quite remember what he had been doing earlier in the day.

Still, when Tony heard Ryan's offer he felt compelled to fly. Perhaps a relaxing flight would put him more at ease, he had thought. Perhaps it would give him time to think.

"Staring out the window like a zombie is a waste of time," Tony said at last. "Why don't you monitor the altimeter for me?"

"Yes. Certainly. Thirty-nine hundred feet."

The clouds soon darkened and a cool dampness began to fill the cockpit. Tony read through the landing checklist while Ryan continued to call out the altitude. In spite of his concentration, Tony's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the windows. There was something about the clouds that made his skin prickle.

"Tony, when you shoot these instrument landings, do you ever wonder what is really out there with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well...I just wondered--"

"Let me tell you what's out there, Ryan. It's a huge collection of water particles commonly known as clouds, nothing more. The sooner we forget about them and put our minds to the task of flying this aircraft, the sooner we'll be in the clear and on our way home. Agreed?"

Ryan nodded slowly and Tony returned his attention to the instruments. He saw with a start that their rate of descent had increased

substantially. Silently cursing himself, he nudged the yoke backward. Tony knew that at fifteen hundred feet he would finally acquire the localizer for the approach to New Haven. After that, it would only be a matter of minutes before they would break into the clear. He should have been relieved, but the inexplicable tension was rising.

Ryan's got me spooked somehow, he told himself. This approach is no different from a hundred others I have done in the past. There's no difference at all.

Tony was about to speak when the Cherokee suddenly slipped into an invisible stream of twisting air currents. What began as a slight, rhythmic vibration quickly increased to a fierce shaking that made it nearly impossible for Tony to keep the aircraft on course. The airframe rattled and squeaked as each jolt hammered it relentlessly.

"No one reported turbulence at this altitude," Tony mumbled. He dabbed at a trickle of sweat that had crept into the corner of his eye. As he did so, the right wing dipped at a frightening angle and the plane bolted upward as if a giant tennis racquet had swatted it from below. A nearby compartment spilled open, sending out a flurry of sectional maps, pencils and assorted garbage.

"What is going on, Tony?" Ryan's voice was utterly calm. He may have otherwise been asking what Tony had for lunch.

"Rough air," Tony barked as he wrestled with the controls. "What the hell do you think it is?"

"Well, if I was inclined to speculate--"

Ryan was cut short by a blinding flash of incandescence and a crushing explosion. The entire instrument panel became a shimmering sheet of light. Tony located what he hoped was the airspeed indicator and fixed his gaze upon it. He thought he could see a thin white arrow sweeping backward around a circle. It passed eighty knots. Fifty knots. Thirty knots.

His vision cleared just as the stall horn began to shriek. He shot a quick glance at the artificial horizon as it indicated the start of a sickening right hand spin. The engine tachometer registered zero.

"Ryan! Get on the radio!"

"What happened?"

"I think we took a lightning hit," Tony stammered. "I'm not sure."

Tony grabbed the yoke and shoved it forward. "Take my headset and get on the radio. Declare an emergency. Tell New York that we may have to make a power-off approach to New Haven runway two."

He looked at the artificial horizon and saw that the wings were leveling with excruciating slowness. The spin was stabilizing, but the plane was still in a steep dive. Tony watched the altimeter as it spun past the four thousand foot mark.

This is a textbook recovery, he told himself. Pure textbook. All I have to do is think.

Tony lifted his gaze to the flickering blur of the propeller. It spun uselessly before his eyes like an abandoned windmill in a thundershower. This time, however, there was no thunder. Tony heard only the whistle of the wind and the chant of Ryan's voice.

"This is Cherokee six charlie alfa..."

Thirty-five hundred feet.

Too bad we don't have a cockpit voice recorder, Tony thought absently. I could provide the investigators with an excellent running commentary on our predicament. Those bureaucratic bastards would love it.

Thirty-two hundred feet.

Hello, gentlemen. At this point in our flight we're diving through the clouds like the biggest damn dart you've ever seen in your life. I want to apologize for the awful mess we're about to make. I sure hope we don't kill anyone down--

"Stop it!" Tony snapped. An electric surge seemed to arc from the back of his head to the pit of his stomach.

"Do you find that talking to yourself is therapeutic in times of crisis, Tony?"

"Shut up! I'm blanking. I need to...I need to..." He groped blindly through his panic-scattered memories.

As the Cherokee passed three thousand feet, he finally found what he was looking for.

"Master switch--ON," Tony said. He thumbed the switch and felt its solid click.

"Check fuel," he announced as he stared at the gauge.

"Fuel is good. Ah ... pull mixture lever."

He pulled the lever as far as it would go. His fingers fell upon the ignition switch in preparation for the final step.

"And...please God...start engine!"

He closed his eyes and turned the key hard. The engine sputtered, coughed once, and then roared to life. Tony smiled and began to laugh.

"Mixture lever forward," he cried. "Full throttle and prop!"

The Cherokee vibrated with a rumble of sheer mechanical joy. He drew the yoke back and watched as the artificial horizon rolled downward. Within seconds it indicated straight and level flight.

Tony loosened his grip and drew a single, deep breath. "Lord have mercy," he whispered softly. His heart was pounding in his throat and his hair was soaked along his forehead.

The altimeter registered two thousand feet, but he wasn't sure he could trust it. Most of the instruments were dead. Even the magnetic compass seemed unsteady.

"New York doesn't answer," Ryan said. He stared at Tony a strange hint of a smile.

Tony nodded slowly. "Try New Haven."

"Same thing."

"Alright. Switch to 121.5 and set the transponder code to 7700. Declare an emergency."

Ryan shook his head. "Didn't you just hear my 'Mayday'? There was no response."

"Then the backup--"

"I just finished on the backup radio. Didn't you notice, Tony? There was no reply. Nothing but silence."

"Well, the antenna must have broken off in the turbulence."

"But even with a broken antenna, we would hear something, wouldn't we?"

"How would I know?" Tony snapped.

Ryan blinked his eyes and nodded. "Tell me one thing."

Tony threw up his hands. "Sure, Ryan. What do you want to know?"

"Where are we?"

Tony groped for an answer. "Over Long Island Sound," he replied with the most confident voice he could muster. "Just a few miles from New Haven. The GPS isn't working, so that's my best guess."

"Fascinating," Ryan replied softly. "What are you going to do?"

Damn good question, Tony thought. He stared at the artificial horizon, not wanting to meet Ryan's gaze. More than anything else in the world, Tony wanted to see the streets of New Haven dissolving out of the clouds below. He ached to see the welcoming flash of the strobe lights on the United Illuminating smokestack.

"I'm letting her down," Tony said as he reduced the throttle setting.

"With no ILS? No markers?" Ryan asked.

“Yes. I’m starting a slow, descending spiral that should keep the plane right over the Sound. When we break into the clear there’ll be no collision danger. Understand?”

Tony gripped the wheel so intensely that his fingers began to grow numb. As the altitude and the minutes wound down, he thought he saw the VOR needles twitch once or twice, but he knew that it was his own wishful thinking. Just like the whispering voices that he thought he heard through the static hiss of the radio.

“Break-out in five hundred feet,” he said aloud. Ryan barely nodded.

Tony peered into the clouds, as if the sheer force of his will could somehow part them. Now they seemed more unearthly than ever. At times they appeared to congeal into dark, gray tendrils that streamed along the windows like eagerly probing fingers.

Although the air remained calm, Tony could still sense the lingering turbulence. He felt the vibration in the control column and prayed that the wind shear wouldn’t find them again. It was a miracle that the Cherokee had held together as well as it did. He was sure that it wouldn’t survive a repeat performance.

With uncanny timing, the Cherokee lurched upward and veered left. Tony countered instantly and stabilized the motion.

“What was that?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t know!” Tony was too busy trying to regain his own composure.

“It felt like wake turbulence,” Ryan said. “The kind a large aircraft makes.”

Yes, Tony thought with growing terror. It felt exactly like wake turbulence.

“No,” he blurted. “It couldn’t be. I mean, think about it. What would a large airliner be doing over New Haven at this altitude?” Tony wasn’t sure if his explanation was more for Ryan’s comfort or his own.

“But how do you know that we’re anywhere near New Haven? You don’t really know where we are.”

“That’s right,” Tony replied as he pointed a shaking finger at Ryan. “But I’m doing the best I can. Unless you have a better idea, I want you to stare out of that window and keep your mouth shut. I don’t want to hear a word unless you see something.”

Ryan nodded slowly. His eyes lingered on Tony for a moment, then he turned to the window.

“Two hundred feet to breakout,” Tony said.

Not long now, he thought. Thank God it’s not long now.

Tony adjusted the control column to reduce their rate of descent. He had a terrifying mental vision of the murky waters of Long Island Sound suddenly spiraling into view at over 100 miles per hour. He remembered every story he had ever heard about pilots who became disoriented in clouds. Eyewitnesses to their deaths always reported the same thing: a perfectly good airplane simply came screaming out of the sky and smashed headlong into the earth. The mere thought of it made him shudder.

“Tony? There’s something—”

Tony snapped his head up and saw a black shape forming rapidly in the mist. Just before he threw the yoke forward, he was certain that he recognized the unmistakable shape of a wing--a very large wing.

“Hold on!” Tony cried as the Cherokee started to dive.

I’ve got to get her level in a hurry, Tony thought desperately. This aircraft is going to become a submarine in about 60 seconds.

He gently pulled the yoke back and the Cherokee responded. Precious seconds passed before the artificial horizon finally rotated into the level flight position once again. The altimeter declared that they were at one thousand feet. Tony frowned and glanced out the window. They should have been in the clear by now, but there was nothing to see but swirling gray clouds.

“Looks like we’re running out of altitude and ideas,” Ryan said quietly. “Isn’t that the old saying? We’re at one thousand feet and we can’t see a thing.”

Tony wiped the sweat from his forehead and sighed. “We’re still going down. Just a little farther and I’m sure we’ll break out of the clouds.”

He reduced the throttle and the Cherokee began to descend.

“Nine hundred feet,” Tony announced. The clouds were as dark as ever and showed no signs of thinning. He could feel his pulse pounding in his temples, but the most unnerving sensation was Ryan’s absolute silence and unblinking stare.

Seven hundred feet.

“You know, Ryan, all I want to do is get us out of this mess as quickly as possible. Pretty soon we’re going to see the Sound right beneath us. Then we’ll turn back toward the shore and make a visual approach to New Haven.”

Sure, that's all there is to it, Tony thought sullenly.

Six hundred feet.

Come on, Tony thought. Where's the ceiling? It can't be much farther. How can they go from a ceiling of eleven hundred feet to nothing in just a few minutes?

Five hundred feet.

Now Tony began to wonder how they might die. Would death come in the form of a huge granite ridge materializing abruptly out of the mist? In the final split-second moment between life and eternity, what would he feel?

"Boy, we're gonna have a hell of a story to tell the guys at the hangar," Tony said with a brittle laugh. "Can you imagine the looks on their faces?"

Three hundred feet.

Soon they would be at tree top level, well below the summit of East Rock ridge. Tony swallowed hard and held his breath. There was nothing more to say.

At that moment, five icy fingers encircled his wrist. Tony almost screamed.

"Enough," Ryan said.

Tony shook his head.

"The risk level has been exceeded, Tony."

Tony hesitated. "What are you talking about? Just a little—"

"It's okay. The exercise is over. Sigma eleven override."

Tony fell back into his seat. His arms hung limp at his sides.

"Thanks," Ryan said softly. He quickly applied power and pulled the yoke back. "New Haven, this is Cherokee six charlie alfa engaging autoland. Your airplane."

"Autoland engaged," a voice replied.

Ryan released the yoke and watched as the clouds parted to reveal the ancient New Haven runway directly in front of them. "You did well," Ryan said as he touched Tony's cheek. "A few adjustments and you'll be 100 percent." Tony didn't reply.

Minutes later the Cherokee rolled to a stop on the fractured tarmac at the Klaus Aviation hanger. Ryan eased out of the aircraft and then turned to help Tony, who was carefully and silently unbuckling his harness. Tony stepped clear of the doorway, then stood stiffly at attention.

Klaus strolled up to Ryan and shook his hand as a gentle rain began to fall. “So how was the test ride?” Klaus asked. “How did he do?”

“Quite well,” Ryan replied as he glanced at Tony. “I deliberately invoked the stress profile prior to takeoff to see how he would behave. His emotional responses were spot on, as human as you’d ever want. It was complete with dark foreboding and even a hint of superstition. However, the stress clouded his judgment significantly after we suffered a lightning strike. He took unsafe actions at that point, even coming close to a collision with a cargo drone along the coast. His mounting terror and suggestibility were incredible to observe.”

“I see. Well, if you don’t think he is a suitable pilot for you—”

“Not at all. I still want him. In these days of automatic flying, manual operation of an aircraft is fascinating, especially when I am free to enjoy the experience as a passenger. He just needs a little additional training. His personality is intriguing as well. It is a delightful sort of self-assured cockiness that I haven’t experienced in more time than I am capable of remembering.”

Klaus nodded. “You should enjoy these experiences while you can, Ryan. I believe that you and your antique aircraft are the last of the free flyers. A new planetside port is going to be built in the New Haven metroplex next year. They won’t want your aircraft anywhere near the lift-ship traffic.”

“And what of your airfield then, Klaus? You have kept it going for many years. The appearance, the old-time radio dialog, the avionics, everything is perfect.”

Klaus shrugged. “I will shut it down at long last. The airport grounds should be preserved, though. When the Old Masters were still with us, it was an overgrown, half-forgotten ruin. For more than a thousand years I have worked to restore and maintain this place as a small testimony to the evolution of their engineering art.”

“And it is much appreciated,” Ryan said. “You and I are anachronisms, Klaus. We enjoy the old things and the old ways. Unlike others, we are not chasing through the galaxy in hope of a reunion with the Old Masters. Our place is here on Earth.”

“Among the antiques, yes,” Klaus replied.

Ryan clapped Tony on the shoulder. “Well, this is no antique. Where did he come from?”

“He was grown at Xicor Saginaw and delivered to the Vineyard just this morning. Twenty-five years in the making and one of the best of their line. Imperfect like all the others, but a good attempt.”

Ryan smiled as his eyes swept over Tony. “We must take good care of him and his kind. The Old Masters gave us the Law from ancient times to keep until their promised return.”

Klaus and Ryan suddenly spoke in unison, “A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.”

They stood quietly, as if in contemplation. Finally, Ryan turned to Tony.

“Tony, sigma nine. Resume,” Ryan said.

Tony blinked his eyes and shook his head. “Where am I?”

“New Haven,” Ryan replied. “Come. You must be hungry. I have much to explain. We will have fascinating times together.”

“No doubt you must recharge, Ryan.” Klaus said.

“True,” Ryan replied. “My primary power unit is almost depleted.” He tapped his midsection to emphasize the point. “I will be drawing from the auxiliary supply within minutes.”

“I envy your companion,” Klaus said as they began walking. “Especially his ability to conveniently convert organic matter to energy. Is ‘envy’ the correct word choice?”

Ryan allowed himself a chuckle. He had been practicing laughter for the past several months and this seemed like an appropriate moment. “Yes, I believe it is. The Old Masters were organisms of immense complexity, shaped through millions of years of biological evolution. We were merely products of their imaginations, made in their image. Tony is the best we have achieved after centuries of trial and error with our clumsy DNA synthesis and neural implants.”

Klaus glanced at Tony as they stepped into the shelter of the hanger. “At least we find purpose in our relationships with these...reproductions. They refresh our memories of long ago.”

“And so it shall be until the promised return of our Old Masters,” Ryan replied, quoting the Gospel of the First Makers.

“Yes, until their promised return.”

END

The Dawn Chorus

“Ah, damn it,” Charlie muttered as he brushed the scalding coffee from his pants. His hand trembled as he lowered the overfilled mug to the desktop. A ring of coffee quickly pooled around the base.

“I’m sorry, Jenny. I know you hate it when I curse,” Charlie said.

He reached for his battered cassette tape recorder and pressed the **PLAY** button. “Listen to this, honey.”

A sizzling noise issued from the tiny speaker, followed by a series of musical chirps that rose and fell in pitch. Charlie grinned and closed his eyes. In the sea of sound he heard it again...

Peace...Peace...

Charlie nodded and sighed. “Yes, I hear you.”

When the doorbell chimed, Charlie jumped and nearly dropped the recorder. He fumbled for the **STOP** button and cleared his throat.

“Who is it?” he called.

“It’s Father Brennan.”

“Aw jeez,” Charlie whispered.

He began shuffling to the door, wincing at the sharp stab of pain in his hip. “Just a moment!” Charlie shouted.

The heavy door creaked open to reveal a grinning Father Brennan, resplendent in his black cassock. Charlie forced a smile in return.

“Good morning, Father. What brings you here?”

“Nothing in particular, Charlie. I just thought I’d stop by. It has been an awfully long time since I’ve seen you at Mass. Over a year, I believe.”

“You may be right,” Charlie replied, still holding the smile.

Several seconds passed in awkward silence. “Mind if I come in?” Father Brennan said at last.

“Oh!” Charlie sputtered. “Of course.”

Charlie led Father Brennan back to his study, quickening his pace in spite of the pain. The priest seemed distracted; his gaze wandered through the rooms and hallways as they walked.

“Would you like some coffee?” Charlie asked.

“Ah, no. No thank you,” Father Brennan replied. When they reached the study, Charlie gestured to a nearby chair.

“So,” Charlie said as he eased into his favorite recliner, “you’ve missed me, eh?”

“I’ve missed you. More importantly, God has missed you.”

“The devil you say!” Charlie laughed. “If God is looking for me, tell Him I’m right here. Been here all along.”

Father Brennan shook his head and smiled. “You know what I mean, Charlie. You haven’t participated in the Mass. You’ve gone too long without the blessings of the joyful mysteries.”

Charlie shook a gnarled finger. “Not true, Father. I participate in joyful mysteries you can’t imagine.”

“Indeed,” Father Brennan said with a slight frown. “You mean something more miraculous than the body and blood of Christ?”

“I didn’t know there were degrees of the miraculous,” Charlie replied. “I mean, it is a miracle or it isn’t, right?”

“Well, if you have witnessed a miracle, Charlie, tell me about it.”

“I’ll do better than that,” Charlie said as he reached for the cassette recorder. “I’ll let you hear it.”

Charlie rewound the tape for a few seconds, then pressed **PLAY**. Father Brennan leaned forward and cocked his head. “It sounds like a flock of starlings and frying bacon. What am I supposed to be hearing?”

Charlie pressed a finger to his lips. “Shhh! Just listen.”

Peace...Peace...

“There it is, Father.” Charlie smiled and closed his eyes.

Father Brennan shook his head. “I’m sorry, but all I hear are birds and breakfast.”

“You can’t hear...the voice?”

“Not at all,” Father Brennan replied as he settled back into the chair. “What is the voice saying, Charlie? Or what do you think it is saying?”

“Please don’t speak to me like a child, Father. I may be old, but I still have a firm grip on sanity. This isn’t my imagination.”

“I didn’t say it was, but I can’t hear what you are apparently hearing.”

Charlie punched the **STOP** button. “The voice keeps saying ‘Peace’.”

“Really? And who do you think is speaking?”

“I prefer to believe it is God—or something that roughly fits that definition.”

Father Brennan shook his head. “I am very confused, Charlie. Where did this recording come from?”

“Well, you might find the answer difficult to fully understand.”

“Try me.”

Charlie drew a deep breath, then slowly rose from the chair. With some effort he shuffled to a nearby cabinet and produced a polished aluminum box about the size of paperback book. The front of the box featured several knobs and a circular loudspeaker grill. A thin metal tube protruded from the top. Charlie gripped the top of the tube and pulled, telescoping the segments until the tube was about 6 feet in length.

“Quite an antenna, eh Father?”

“Is that a radio?”

“Yes, but not an ordinary radio. I built it myself 20 years ago. It’s designed to plumb the depths of the electromagnetic spectrum, all the way down to what we call VLF—Very Low Frequency. I’m talking 10 kilohertz and even lower.”

“What is a kilohertz?”

Charlie laughed. “I guess they are running a little lean on science in seminaries these days, eh? Well, here’s the short explanation. Think of a radio signal as a wave on a pond. Its voltage cycles from positive to negative and back again as it propagates through space—kind of like a wave moving up and down through the water. A *hertz* is one cycle of a radio wave taking place in one second. A kilohertz is one thousand cycles in a single second.”

Father Brennan nodded. “I’m with you so far.”

Charlie absently twisted the knobs as he continued. “The radio signals you’re accustomed to hearing are on the order of a half million kilohertz and more. What I’m listening to is way below that, way down in the cellar of the electromagnetic spectrum. There are strange things lurking in the radio basement, Father. You can hear the pop and crash of lightning strikes thousands of miles away. There are ghostly ‘whistlers’ that are somehow related to those lightning hits. And there is the Dawn Chorus.”

“The Dawn Chorus?”

“Yes. That’s what you heard on the tape. It’s an electromagnetic choir of angels that begins singing before sunrise and continues for about an hour after the sun is above the ridge tops. You have to get up very early to hear it, and you have to make sure your receiver is a good distance from power lines to avoid the annoying hum they make. Most mornings I take my radio into the meadow behind the house. I just sit

and listen until sunrise. The Chorus is a little unpredictable; sometimes it blows my ears out and other times it's completely inaudible."

"And you hear the voice of God in the Dawn Chorus?"

"Not every time I listen, but most times, yes. I started hearing it about a year ago."

Father Brennan glanced at the floor and frowned. "Just after Jenny died."

Charlie collapsed the antenna and gingerly placed the radio back inside the cabinet. "Nice try, Father, but no cigar. This isn't the delusion of a grief stricken old fool."

"So it isn't Jenny's voice?"

"Oh hell no," Charlie said as he sat down. "Don't you think I'd recognize the sound of my wife's voice?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that this was senility or something."

"Father, you're a young priest. How many years have passed since you were ordained?"

"Five years, Charlie."

"Ha! That's a short nap to a guy like me. You are full to the brim with academic learning, but woefully short on life experience. When you're young it seems as though all the old folks are crazy. Some of us are, but not all. We just have a tendency to become a little eccentric as we approach the edge of the yawning abyss."

"Ah," Father Brennan said as he held up his hand. "What the Church offers is a reprieve from that abyss. You don't need to search for God with a radio, Charlie. He is present at every Mass, if only you'd—"

"What? Show up and eat the wafer?"

"Attend Mass and partake of the Eucharist."

Charlie shook his head and sighed. "Father, you believe that during Mass the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus, right?"

"That's correct."

"And you believe this without any proof whatsoever."

"That's the essence of faith, Charlie."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No."

"Why not?" Charlie snapped. "The existence of ghosts and the notion of trans...uh..."

"Transubstantiation."

“...are both believed by many people without a single shred of proof. Neither idea can withstand the test of science. So, how is it that you choose to believe one and not the other?”

Father Brennan smiled. “That’s it exactly, Charlie. I *choose*. Faith is a choice. My belief in transubstantiation is my choice.”

Charlie jerked his thumb at the cabinet. “And that receiver is my choice. The difference is that my proof can be scientifically tested. I don’t know why you didn’t hear the voice on the tape. Maybe it was a poor recording. Regardless, I can refine my methods and eventually deliver hard proof. A ham radio friend of mine is working with something called digital signal processing. He says that he can use it to filter out all the noise and make the voice even clearer.”

Father Brennan nodded slowly. “Does the voice speak the same words each time?”

“No, but it is always something kind and reassuring. Two weeks ago it said, ‘I am with you now and forever.’”

“I have to say, that certainly sounds like God.”

“Indeed it does. And it is definitely not Jenny.”

Father Brennan glanced at his wristwatch. “I am going to be late for an appointment, Charlie. I need to get moving.” He stood suddenly and grasped Charlie hands.

“Don’t try to get up, Charlie. I can see your pain, the physical *and* spiritual.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Oh, please, Father.”

“You’re a remarkable person, Charlie. You’ve had a long life. You survived a stroke that probably would have killed most men. Then you lost Jenny, but still you persevere.”

“That’s because I am garrulous old barnacle who believes in himself,” Charlie said as he gently pulled his hands free. He struggled to get to his feet.

“No, no,” Father Brennan said as he pressed Charlie’s shoulder. “I can find my own way out. Before I go, though, will you at least allow me to bring you a consecrated Host tomorrow? If you won’t come to the Mass, Jesus can come to you.”

Charlie sighed. “Tell you what, come by with a Host at 5AM tomorrow morning. If you’ll listen to the Dawn Chorus with an open mind, I’ll eat the Host. You’ll find me in the meadow, about 100 feet beyond the edge of my garden.”

“Deal,” Father Brennan replied. “See you in the morning.”

Dawn arrived to an overcast sky. The milky glow spilled into the valley, slipping silently through the trees and houses. Lights appeared in scattered windows while shivering dogs barked in anticipation of breakfast.

At Charlie's home, the night was still in reluctant retreat, so Father Brennan chose his steps carefully as he made his way through the shadows. His breath came in clouds of vapor that rose in the crisp morning air like smoke from an incense censer.

The fingers of his right hand enclosed the cold brass of the pyx, within which dwelled the Blessed Sacrament. The Host seemed to radiate faint warmth in defiance of the morning chill. Father Brennan tightened his grip and smiled.

During the drive over from the church, he had considered how he would handle the situation. What if Charlie continued to hear voices? This would almost certainly mean dementia or even schizophrenia. Should he try to convince Charlie to see a doctor? No, Father Brennan decided. The best approach would be to allow Charlie to continue his comforting fantasy. Arguing would only increase the gulf between them.

"Charlie is harmless," he whispered to himself. "Maybe with a little persistence on my part, the old guy will come around. This is a good start."

Father Brennan passed a rusted Ford pickup truck and turned to follow a dirt path that wound behind the garage and into the grassy field beyond. He was tempted to call out to Charlie, but the neighboring houses were still dark. Instead, he deliberately crunched the dry stalks and leaves under his shoes, making what he hoped was enough noise to signal his approach.

In the gloom he could see a white Adirondack chair resting incongruently in the middle of a patch of ragweed. Charlie was seated in the chair, wrapped in a red down comforter. From somewhere in the folds of the comforter, the radio antenna stabbed skyward.

"Good morning, Charlie!" Father Brennan called softly. There was no response.

By now Father Brennan could see him clearly. Charlie was shrouded from head to toe in the blanket and leaning against the left-hand side of the chair. A green John Deer baseball cap covered the top

of his head and he seemed to be peering downward as if in deep concentration.

“You certainly look comfortable, Charlie,” Father Brennan said. He placed his hand on Charlie’s shoulder, but Charlie remained utterly still.

“Charlie?” Father Brennan called, much louder this time. He was answered with silence.

Father Brennan quickly knelt beside the chair. Even in the gray dawn he could see glazed, half-open eyes set in an ashen face. Father Brennan drew a sharp breath and fumbled through the comforter to find Charlie’s hand. He lifted it free and pressed his fingers to the wrist. The flesh was still warm, but there was no pulse.

“Oh, Charlie,” Father Brennan sighed as his made the sign of the cross. “I’m so sorry.”

There was a muffled chirp beneath the blanket. Father Brennan gingerly pulled it away to find the homemade radio nestled in Charlie’s lap. He lifted it slowly and twisted the knob marked **VOLUME**.

Charlie’s Dawn Chorus filled the air with sizzling snaps and the chirping of ethereal birds. “Poor Charlie,” Father Brennan whispered.

Charlie is at peace.

“What?” Father Brennan barked.

The hiss rose and fell like ocean surf. Father Brennan pressed his ear to the speaker.

Charlie is at peace. Oneness. All is oneness.

“No!” Father Brennan cried as he jumped to his feet. That radio fell to the ground, but the Dawn Chorus continued.

Peace for you. Peace for all.

Father Brennan felt as though his heart was about to burst. A wild electric panic sprang from somewhere in his midsection and coursed through his entire body.

“Shut up!” he screamed as he brought his foot down upon the radio. It crackled once, then fell silent.

Father Brennan bolted across the field, tears streaming across his cheeks. He could hardly see to drive as he sped back to the rectory. An hour later, he finally summoned the courage to call the police and report Charlie’s death.

“Good morning, Father. They told me I’d find you here.” Angelina stepped to the side of Father Brennan’s wicker chair and gently handed him a steaming cup of cocoa.

“That’s very kind of you,” he said softly.

“Do you always come out here so early?” she asked.

“Yes. I enjoy the dawn. This time of day has a unique spiritual quality, don’t you think?”

Angelina turned to look at the pink stain creeping into the eastern sky. “I suppose so, Father. Do you always make your morning devotions here? You seem so lonely out in the middle of the garden.”

“When I was a young priest I gained a deep appreciation for the dawn. That fondness has grown even more powerful in recent years.”

Angelina shook her head. “I don’t know, Father. A man of your age should not be exposed to the cold and damp like this. Let me help you back to the rectory. I’m about to throw together a nice hot breakfast for you and the other Fathers.”

“Give me a few more minutes and I’ll be along. Tell Father Jackson that my arthritis is acting up this morning. I’d appreciate it if he would celebrate the 7 o’clock Mass.”

“Sure, Father. Don’t be long or I will have to come back and drag you inside, with or without your arthritis.”

Father Brennan chuckled and waved her off. He watched as she disappeared through the kitchen door.

The edge of the sun was just about to crest the horizon, but Father Brennan knew he still had time. He made the sign of the cross, then gently removed the felt cloth that covered the ancient receiver.

He gently stroked the controls, the cold plastic smooth and comforting on his skin. Father Brennan smiled at the memory of how horrified he had been when Charlie’s nephew handed it to him 50 years before, right after the funeral Mass. His nephew had presented it like an offering gift, holding the box reverently in both hands, the fractured knobs and the scratches from Father Brennan’s shoe gleaming in the light of the altar candles.

“I spoke with my uncle on the telephone the night before he passed away. Uncle Charlie mentioned that you were very interested in his research. He said that when he died, he wanted you to have the radio. It was so kind of you to make the effort to be there that morning.”

Father Brennan’s first impulse had been to politely refuse, but something made him accept the grotesque trophy. He muttered the

usual phrases about wishing he had arrived sooner, then quickly blessed the nephew and left.

For decades the receiver sat in his trunk, alone but never quite forgotten. When he retired to the Church of the Incarnation, Father Brennan finally found the courage to give the radio to a parishioner who was an experienced ham radio operator. He fixed the damaged circuitry and offered to put it in a new enclosure, but Father Brennan declined. It seemed almost blasphemous to change the appearance of Charlie's precious device.

Temptation gradually overcame fear and one day he found himself raising the antenna in the solitude of the predawn darkness. He listened cautiously with trembling fingers working the controls. When the voice arose from the static, Father Brennan cried out and slapped the power switch to the **OFF** position. The next morning found him with the radio again, and this time he listened intently until the words faded with the rising of the sun.

Years later, Father Brennan still didn't know if the voice came from God, or from his own guilty conscience. The answer to that question soon became irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was the spiritual ecstasy he felt every morning during his private electromagnetic "Eucharist." The counsel and comfort of the Dawn Chorus came to mean more than the intonations of the Mass, more even than the Blessed Sacrament.

That's why he kept the **VOLUME** knob at its lowest setting and held the radio tight against his ear. There was no need to involve the others in such a thing. Besides, they would simply dismiss it as nothing more than the delusions of an eccentric old priest.

Father Brennan closed his eyes and listened to the staccato static and the warbling chirps as the chorus swelled. And in its midst he heard the soothing voice of the infinite.

Peace...Peace...

END

Midnight Vigil

Jason's search for comfort had become an exercise in futility. No matter how he shifted and twisted, the ancient limestone drained the warmth from his body. At the age of 17 Jason was still in the midst of absorbing life's many lessons, this one being the fact that headstones made lousy back supports.

This particular headstone belonged to Constance Pritchard, who had departed the planet sometime in the 1650s. Marie had spotted it as they strolled arm in arm through the midnight gloom of Center Street Cemetery. She chose the grave the moment Jason's flashlight beam fell upon the winged skull etched into the headstone's mottled surface. According to Marie, the stone was "delightfully creepy."

They had arrived at the agreed time, a radio boom box under Jason's arm and cigarettes concealed in Marie's pockets. Their job was to pick a suitable site, somewhere well beyond the notice of patrolling police, and await the arrival of Jeffrey and Alan, who were alleged to be carrying at least two six packs of Lucky Lager. Together they'd celebrate their last high school Halloween in style.

When the clock at St Mary's tolled midnight, Jeffrey and Alan had yet to arrive. With little else to do, Jason and Marie settled into a leaf-filled depression above the remains of Constance Pritchard. Jason curled his arm around Marie's waist and savored the warmth of her body. She responded by leaning into his shoulder and resting her head on his chest. After minutes of listening to the rustling leaves, Jason gently turned her head for a much-needed kiss. But instead of lifting her chin to meet him, Marie issued a soft, purring snore. Sleep had taken her at last.

An hour later Jason still found himself effectively alone and gazing wearily through a maze of black headstones. In the shadows cast by a nearby floodlight, a granite angel beckoned to the heavens from atop a family crypt. Its arms were outstretched, fingers spread against the stars. The angel's head was tilted skyward, mouth agape.

Jason closed his eyes and sighed, pulling his coat tighter against his chest. He had surrendered all hope for Jeffrey and Alan, as well as for the prospect of a romantic Halloween night with Marie. She was sound asleep on the grass beside him, her last words a request that he awaken her when Jeffrey and Alan arrived.

Once again Jason shifted his weight against the stone. His growing discomfort was more than physical. He had been abandoned to the company of his thoughts and tonight they were exploring new territory. Jason had always smirked at the idea of Halloween superstition, but there was something about this place that even his skepticism couldn't dispel. Above him a fitful breeze stirred the few leaves that still clung desperately to the branches of a giant oak. He thought of the tree's roots probing deep into the soil, pushing headstones aside and drawing nourishment from sources he dared not contemplate.

Jason tried to blunt his unease by considering how he would explain the curfew violation to his parents. His father would be furious; a week's grounding was a solid possibility. It had been worth it, though. Their Halloween night had been a blast, at least until an hour ago.

The cold radiating from Constance Pritchard's headstone was persistent. It seeped into his body, pulling his mind back to the present, back to the cemetery.

Was Constance a teenager when she died?, he wondered. *People died young back then.*

Jason shook his head. *Constance is three hundred and fifty years gone. A collapsed, rotted casket and bones beneath my butt and nothing more.*

"Someday I'll join her," he whispered. The abrupt thought shocked him and he shivered. Marie stirred with a mumbled protest and snuggled against his leg.

Beyond the hazy streetlights at the edge of the cemetery his Chevy Impala awaited. Warm. Comfortable. Jason decided that it was time to end the wasted vigil and make for home.

As Jason turned to awaken Marie, he heard the crunch of shoes on gravel. He froze and stared down the narrow pathway. At first he thought it might be Jeffrey and Alan at last, but there were no voices. Jeffrey and Alan were among the most obnoxious people he knew; there was no way they could hike through a graveyard without waking the dead with their babble. No, this was one person...alone.

Suddenly Jason was blinded by a dazzling light. He threw up his hands and squinted against the flashlight glare.

“Jason Mullenkamp,” a deep voice said firmly. It was a flat statement, not a question.

“Yeah. Who is it?”

“Someone you didn’t expect to meet, boy.”

Jason’s heart sank into his stomach. Obviously he had missed seeing the headlights of the police cruiser. He glanced down at Marie, but she didn’t speak. As far as Jason could tell, she was still asleep.

“Look, sir, we didn’t do anything. We’ve just been sitting here. I was getting ready to leave.”

“Uh huh,” came the reply as the flashlight clicked off. As Jason eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see a figure standing beside the massive trunk of the oak. The figure was tall and thin. Nothing else was visible. It was a silhouette of absolute black against black.

“There has been some vandalism in the cemetery lately. A couple of punks broke a bunch of grave stones in the north end a month ago.”

“I know,” Jason replied. “It was in the paper.”

“And I don’t suppose you know anything more about it, huh? Maybe someone at school has been talking?”

“Not at all,” Jason replied and swallowed hard.

“Should I believe you? Perhaps,” the figure replied. It took several steps and sat slowly on the slab of a marble vault. The rising moon sent shafts of light through skeletal branches and brilliantly illuminated the stone, but the figure remained in shadow. “So what are you doing out here, Jason?”

“We were waiting for friends. We’ve been out all evening and thought --”

“It might be a cool place to be at midnight on Halloween, right?”

Jason nodded and started getting to his feet.

“No need to get up,” the figure said with a wave of a silhouette arm. “At least not yet. Sit down.”

Jason fell back against the stone. Despite the cool autumn night, beads of sweat were breaking out on his forehead. Marie still lay on the ground, unmoving. “Are we under arrest?”

“Arrest? Oh, no. I’m not a policeman.”

“Uh . . . who are you?” Jason asked as he fished in his coat pocket for his flashlight.

“A caretaker,” the figure replied with a sweep of his arm. “These are my charges.”

“The graves?”

The caretaker seemed to ignore Jason’s question. “It’s not easy keeping everything orderly and in good repair. One of the headstones that were shattered last month was more than 200 years old. Did you know that?”

Jason’s pulse quickened. “No. Like I said, I just read about it in the paper.”

“It was a shame. Such a mindless act. The remains resting under that stone belonged to Jeremiah Hogue. He was your age when he died. Poor kid fell under his father’s hay wagon and was crushed. You could hear his father’s screams from a mile away.”

Jason peered into the darkness. His mouth was suddenly dry. “How do you know how old I am? If you’re not a cop, how do you know my name?”

“It is my job to know such things. I’m also well acquainted with your lovely friend Marie Colonese. A rather deep sleeper, isn’t she?”

Jason forced a chuckle and shot a glance at Marie. “I guess so. Maybe she had a hard day.”

“Not as hard a day as poor Constance Pritchard, the lady directly beneath you. Smallpox took her on a bitter winter afternoon when the wind drove snow through gaps in the log walls of their pitiful cabin. Her husband never really recovered from his grief.”

“Look mister,” Jason began, “we really need to get home. Our parents are going to be super upset.”

“Indeed they will be,” the caretaker replied. A gust of wind whipped through the branches of the oak, causing them to creak and groan. Jason’s hand closed around the hilt of his flashlight.

“Time for you to get up, son.”

Jason scrambled to his feet and drew a ragged breath. “Marie. Get up. It’s time to go.”

There was no response.

“Marie!” he barked.

“Jason, I need you to take about five steps to the left,” the caretaker said calmly.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Just five steps to the left, please. Humor me, won’t you?”

The temperature seemed to be suddenly plummeting. Jason zipped his coat and began walking. He didn’t bother to count the number of steps.

“That’ll do,” the caretaker said.

“I don’t understand,” Jason replied, his voice quavering. “What do you--”

There was an explosive snap from somewhere above. A black branch as thick as sewer pipe crashed out of the darkness and thudded into the earth atop Constance Pritchard’s grave, sending twigs and shards of bark flying through the air. The wooden shrapnel peppered Jason’s chest and cut into his cheeks.

“Marie!” he screamed as he lunged forward, his flashlight now in his hand. He stared in astonishment at her sleeping form. She was resting in a cage of twisted branches that dug into the soil like javelins. The nearest was mere inches from her face. Marie turned slightly, smiled and resumed snoring.

“Like I said, Jason, she is a sound sleeper.”

“What the hell?” Jason shouted. He panned the beam of his flashlight in the direction of the vault, but there was nothing. He swung it wildly among the trees and headstones. Shadows lurched and danced in every direction.

“Where are you? What did you do to Marie? She could have been killed!”

Another gust of icy wind tore at his face. “Your friend has not been harmed. I simply allowed her to doze through what would have otherwise been an upsetting incident.”

Jason turned off his flashlight and listened. The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The only distinct sound was the trip hammer pounding of his heart and Marie’s gentle breathing. Even the wind was suddenly still.

“Calm yourself, boy. Look where you were sitting. Marie was in no danger, but you certainly were. I’d say you just had a close call with eternity.”

The caretaker was right. The heavy branch had fallen exactly where Jason had been just moments before.

“I don’t get it,” Jason whispered. “This is nuts.”

“It’s perfectly rational, son, and there’s nothing to ‘get.’ I simply decided that it wasn’t your time. If you’d been stubborn and hesitated a few seconds longer, poor Marie would have awakened to a ghastly sight. That tree was but a sapling when they put Constance in the ground, but dry rot and beetles have gotten to some of its bigger branches. A few decades from now they’ll declare this stately oak a hazard and cut it down. Pity.”

Jason thought he could see the black outline of the caretaker standing in the middle of the pathway, but he couldn’t be sure. His head felt like a balloon floating free of his shoulders.

“How did you know?”

“Jason, I know you, Marie, your parents, their parents and a stream of humanity that stretches into infinity. I see lines of causality zigzagging through space and time like fractured glass in a colossal mirror. Great age brings such knowledge and I am old indeed. In fact, I was old when the surface of this planet was molten and new.”

“Who are you?”

“A caretaker, as I told you. Do you want a name? Which would you prefer? Mictlantecuhtli, Ereshkigal, Osiris, Thanatos ... take your pick.”

“I’ve never heard of you. My dad works at the town hall. He knows everyone.”

Jason heard what he thought was a sigh.

“So this is the sad state of education these days? What do I have to do? Appear as a skeleton in a black robe? I always thought that was an idiotic bit of imagery. Ingmar Bergman cast me as a grand master of chess. Now that was impressive.”

Jason found sufficient strength to raise the flashlight and click it on. The trembling beam found its mark this time. The figure it revealed was human in outline but utterly empty, a black form hovering in the circle of light. A moan escaped Jason’s throat and the flashlight fell away.

“If your education was better grounded in the classics, you would know exactly who I am. Have you been assigned the *Bhagavad-Gita* yet?”

Jason slowly shook his head.

“It’s tough sledding, but there is a wonderful line when Krishna displays His universal form to Arjuna. He says, ‘I am become death, destroyer of worlds.’”

Jason tried to speak, but his voice died in his throat. “Death,” he finally croaked.

“That’s as good a name as any, son. Life, death, good, evil. You humans have a penchant for dualistic thinking. The truth of the matter is that things simply *are*. I simply *am*, and have been since the beginning of time, yet even I don’t know what preceded me, or what will follow.”

“Please. I’m ... afraid.”

“Of course you are. You’d be insane if you weren’t. Look at it this way, you were fortunate that I chose to manifest here. I saw you and I was moved to pity, an emotion I haven’t felt since Ebenezer Winship, whose grave lies just behind you, fell victim to a particularly virulent flu in 1779. He was a young officer at the Continental Army’s winter encampment at Putnam. Like you, Ebenezer was full of potential. Had he lived, he would have changed history. I didn’t intervene then, but tonight I couldn’t help myself.”

A deep shiver began in Jason stomach and raced throughout his body. He heard a rustle at his feet and saw that Marie was stirring. Her eyelids flickered.

“Better extract Marie from the branches, boy. Both of you need to be on your way.” The voice was suddenly hollow and distant. For the moment, Jason was rooted fast to the ground. He could barely breathe.

“Get on with it, boy!”

“Thanks,” Jason sputtered.

“It’s funny how certain tendencies flow through generations,” the caretaker said as Jason shoved a large branch aside. “Take your daughter, for example. She’ll find herself here on a brisk Halloween night in 2037, not far from where we are right now. Her oversexed boyfriend will work his wiles, but she’ll resist. Like you, they will arrive home far too late.”

“Who are you talking to?” Marie muttered. She pawed at the nearest small branches, snapping them off in rows. “What happened here, Jason?”

Jason stretched out his arms to Marie, but then turned back. “Wait!” he shouted. “*My daughter?* Here? Will I still be around to be pissed off about whatever she’s doing, or will I be . . .?”

The reply came drifting on the autumn breeze. “You will be waiting in your living room, struggling against the temptation to trigger the micromonitor you planted in her purse, the one that will reveal her precise location and provide audio to go along with it. You’re better off trusting her upbringing, Jason. She’ll make you proud.”

Marie grabbed Jason’s arm and rose to her feet. She stared wide-eyed at the remains of the tree. Jason continued to look away, straining to hear. The voice was almost inaudible, but the last words still reached his ears. “Tell Jeffrey and Alan that confession is good for the soul. It can make all the difference in determining which paths their lives will take . . . and how long those paths may be. We all meet in good time, but some sooner than others.”

END

