

Where's My Hat?



A Mystery

By Jean Marie Romana

WHERE'S MY HAT?

The night I met Alice was like any other night. I was taking the hover-subway home from a client's house. Old Gordon had tried to get out of paying me. I had to break a few of his teeth. When you're in a line of work like mine, you have to be prepared to break a few teeth sometimes. I'm a private detective. And a woman.

And it's the FUTURE.

That's why I wasn't surprised to see a hover-subway instead of a regular one. When you've been living in the future your whole life the way I have, you get used to all kinds of science stuff: androids, laser guns, flying cars, and hover-subways. Also the computers are way smart. As in, you think computers are smart now? In the future they are about ten times that.

The hover-subways still had flickering fluorescent lighting, though. It was very ambient. In my head I was humming some dramatic music. It went like this: duh duh duh duh DUUUUH.

And then I turned around real fast, and there she was. Alice. Only I didn't know it was Alice yet. She hadn't introduced herself.

"Hi," she purred. "I'm Alice."

"Hello, Alice," I responded. "I'm Private Detective Maxine Peters. I solve mysteries."

"It is very nice to meet you, detective," she said.

"Thank you, it is very nice to meet you too." I responded.

I gazed into her eyes for a bit, which looked like limpid pools of pure desire. She also had a great rack.

"Oh detective," she purred. "I seem to have lost my holo-necklace. Could you help me find it?"

"Sure" I said, and started fishing around in her cleavage.

"Oh no," she laughed, "I mean it's been **STOLEN!**" Now she was all seriousness.

"Stolen!"

"Yes, stolen" she confirmed.

"Well We'll have to do something about that," I said and reached up to scratch my head.

As I was scratching I noticed my hat was missing too! "Oh sweet Jesus!" I cried! "My hat has been stolen as well!"

“WHERE’S MY HAT?” I mused aloud.

“Nevermind your hat,” she said. “Find my holo-necklace. I’ll give you One Million Space Dollars if you find it for me by Tuesday. I have a World’s Fair to attend and I need to look my best.”

“Babes, if the money’s right, I’m your detective.” I said nonchalantly. “But how will I contact you?”

“Look me up on the information superhighway,” she said, and stepped off the holo-subway, which had come to a complete stop. And then she was lost in the crowd of robots and space-mutants.

“Drat,” I said, and went home.

I padded around my studio apartment wearing my socks, dress shirt and half-untied tie, but no pants and no hat. The disappearance of my hat still haunted me, in much the same way the disappearance of Alice did. It was almost like the hat was a metaphor for my desire for this mysterious lady. My pants, on the other hand, were in the turbo-wash, so their absence didn’t haunt me so much.

In a few moments though, I would desperately rue the loss of my pants.

“Knock knock!” said someone outside my front door. I wasn’t wearing pants so I just peered through the peephole to see who it was. I couldn’t

see anything. The mystery person must have put their hand over the peephole! I began to feel a feeling of TERROR rise!

Then – BAM! Whoever was on the other side of the door KICKED it open and hit me on the head. I blacked out, never seeing the face of the attacker.

If I hadn't been unconscious I would have been TERRIFIED.

When I woke up I discovered that my hat was still missing. Plus I had a headache and a lump on my head. “What do you want from me?!” I screamed at the ceiling. “What more do you want?!”

“I want to speak to you,” said a figure emerging from the shadows.

“Who are you?” I asked, wondering if he was my attacker.

“I am not your attacker,” he said, almost as if he could read my mind.

“I can read your mind,” he said, “Because of this mind-reading device.” At this he held up a large plasti-crystal on a necklace-like cord.

“It looks like a holo-necklace,” I said.

“It looks like one,” the old man said, “But it is a very special one. Put it on and it will read other

peoples' thoughts and project them as a holo-gram into your MIND."

"Jeepers!" I gulped.

The man handed me the necklace. "I bequeath this unto you." He said.

"Why?" I asked, but he was gone.

"Oh." I said, and put the necklace in my pocket.

That night I tossed and turned on my sweat-stained mattress, unable to get a single wink of sleep. Something was bothering me. So I got up and made some stale coffee in my studio apartment's tiny kitchen-area. I took a long sip of the bitter brew and decided to use my detective skills. I thought about the mysterious old man, about the mystery attacker, and the necklace. I took the necklace out of my pocket and held it in my hand, and gulped another sip of coffee. The necklace glowed with an ethereal L.E.D. light. It looked so beautiful, I longed to see Alice wearing it.

Alice. I thought about her, and about the strange request she had made. Then I put two and two together and the realization made me spit my coffee clear across the room. I didn't notice.

Of course! Alice had wanted me to find her holo-necklace! And the old man had given me a holo-necklace! Could it be the same necklace...?

How could I not see it before, with all the clues staring me right in the face? But with a detective as smart as me, nothing will slip by unnoticed for long. That's why they pay me to do detective work: because I detect things no one else does.

I decided to sleep on it. But in the morning, would it be TOO LATE?

No, in the morning I woke up at a reasonable time. I had plenty of time to do detective work before Tuesday and still have time for some unexpected twists and turns, because it was only Friday. So I decided to find out more about this "Alice" woman on the Information Superhighway.

I touched a button on my forehead and it glowed red. This meant I was wirelessly connecting to the Virtual-Reality Internet, which is much like your Earth-internet only it's in 3-D Virtual Reality. Everything inside is lit up like neon and sometimes numbers float by.

So there I was, floating in the internet, my body rendered to look like it does in Real Life only with a blue glow around it. The number 4 drifted by, narrowly missing my head.

"Computer," I said. "Find me Alice"

"Searching for Alice" said the computer, and displayed a bunch of green numbers zooming by real fast.

Then it displayed a hologram image of Alice that rotated so you could see it from all sides. “Alice,” intoned the computer. “Real name: Francene Gilmore. Age, unknown. Parents, unknown. Wanted by the space police. Charge: theft of an important artifact from the government.”

“What important artifact?” I asked the computer.

“That information is classified,” the computer replied.

“Huh,” I said. Then, “Computer, what do you know about holo-crystals?”

“Holo-crystals are man-made science crystals. They project holograms. They are not usually known for reading minds.”

“NOT usually known for reading minds?” I verified.

“No, not usually,” said The Internet.

“But it could theoretically be possible?” I asked.

“Of course, anything’s possible,” said The Internet, and then I lost my connection.

“I don’t get any reception in this building” I grumbled. But I was also contemplative. I now had more pieces of the puzzle.

But how does my hat fit into all this, I still wondered.

The next day was Saturday. I watched my favorite show, “Android Puppet Theater” and got dressed. I still didn’t have a replacement hat, but at the last moment I decided to wear the holo-necklace.

I took the anti-gravity elevator down to the apartment lobby and tipped the robot-bellhop. He tipped his hat in return and then said “ook ook ook” because he was a robot monkey-bellhop. I thought this was a cute touch.

As I was approaching the front desk to ask about my mail I heard a voice in my head, like an audial-hologram projected into my mind. It sounded like it was saying “I wonder where her hat is! I never see her without her hat!”

I looked around, but the only person nearby was the guy behind the desk, and he was acting like he hadn’t said anything. My necklace was glowing. I came up to the front desk, puzzled.

“Hey, what happened to your hat?” the guy behind the desk asked.

“Did you just ask me that?” I asked.

“Just now? Yes.” Said The Guy.

“No, I mean before just now,” I said.

“What? No, I only asked you once.”

“Oh. Well, I know you only ASKED me once, but were you thinking about my hat before you asked me about it just now?”

“No,” said the guy, “I only just saw that your hat is missing. I didn’t know until you walked in a moment ago.”

“Yes, but before you asked me about it, did you think about it really loud?”

“What are you getting at?” the man asked suspiciously.

“Um, nevermind,” I said. I mulled over the facts. This guy was obviously a liar or an idiot. Maybe both. Unless...

Of course! I spat in surprise, which startled and offended the guy behind the desk. He left to get a cleaning rag. As he was leaving I heard his voice in my head in kind of an echoing way, thinking, “What a crazy bitch.”

My necklace was pulsing and glowing with light. That’s when I put two and two together. Of course! This must be the mindreading hologram-thing the old man was talking about! I can now read peoples’ thoughts!

“What a powerful device” I thought, and winced at the feedback created by the mind-reading crystal. It screeched and squacked like a parrot being wrung out.

“I guess I can’t think any thoughts while wearing this thing,” I thought, and then clutched my head in pain. The feedback was gaining in pitch. I could feel it everywhere, in my bones, my hair, my teeth.

What a powerful device, and yet how ironic that you can use it to gather intelligence and yet be unable to think while wearing it! It was very deep. I started to reflect on this, and then doubled over in pain as the screeching rose in pitch. The crystal was flashing like a strobe-light and the pitch rose higher and higher as I wrothe on the ground. Then, a sickening crack sound like someone stepping on the skull of a small animal. The lights stopped, the smell of burnt electronics filled the air and a small trail of smoke rose from the necklace.

“Whoops,” I thought.

This burnt-out necklace was just going to be my little secret. I took it off and put it in my pocket. Then I caught a flying cab to the Space Police station on Alphoid Seven. I had a friend on the inside that I thought might be able to help me solve the case.

When I got to the precinct I strode right up to the desk and demanded to see Professor Ginton.

Professor Ginton was my man on the inside. Most people just called him Ginton, but I called him Professor because he was so smart and he had a bit of a receding hairline. Most of the time when I call him Professor he asks me to stop, but this time he didn't. He didn't even respond when I poked him with a pencil.

“Something wrong, Professor?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, no,” he said. “I was just thinking about a lady who came in earlier. Said her name was Alice. She wanted me to open a file on a missing necklace. Boy, was she something!”

“A missing necklace?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes, a missing necklace,” he replied.

“The missing necklace she asked you to find” I started to say, my heart beating in my throat. “Did it look anything like... THIS?” Here I did a little flourish and like magic, produced the holo-necklace in the palm of my hand.

Professor Ginton peered at it. “No, she didn’t say anything about a necklace that is cracked and charred.” He said.

“But if it wasn’t cracked and charred,” I said excitedly, “would it look like the necklace you are trying to find?”

“By jove, you’re right!” said Professor Ginton. “This looks exactly like the missing necklace! Except this one’s all cracked and burned!”

“Exactly,” I said, and tapped my nose knowingly.

“I see,” he said, and tapped his nose back.

“I sure hope this works” I whispered to professor Ginton later that evening as we hid behind some

crates. We were at the Space Dock and some robo-sailors were moving crates on and off the various space ships. I peered around the side of the crates, clutching one end of a length of invis-rope. The other end lay on the concrete a few feet away, tied into a slipknot. In the center of the invisible loop, the holo-crystal necklace glinted in the light from the twin satellites, Angus and Kerfluffle, whose light dominated the night sky.

“I sure hope it works too,” said the Professor redundantly.

Just then I saw a figure in the shadows a few yards away.

“Quick, someone’s coming!” I whispered. “Be very, very quiet.

The professor shifted behind me but kept his mouth zipped. I kept my eyes on the figure.

As she stepped out of the shadows I saw that it was Alice. She walked right past the necklace and glanced at it, but didn’t stop to pick it up or examine it.

“That’s odd,” I thought. “How could she have known it’s not her necklace?”

She walked on a little further and I saw another figure step out from behind some different crates. He was obscured by shadow.

“That’s it!” I thought. “Too much mystery for me! Time to get a few things straightened out!”

I stood up. “Hey!” I yelled.

Both figures turned to look at me in surprise.

“What are you doing?” The Professor whispered in alarm.

“It’s alright, I’m a professional,” I said. “You two! Step into the light where I can see you!”

Much to my surprise they obeyed. I saw the cloaked and hidden figure was none other than... the old man!

“Oh, it’s you,” I said. The old man looked alarmed.

“Okay, let me ask you a question,” I said to Alice. “How did you know that wasn’t your mind-reading necklace on the ground?”

“Mind control necklace? What the hell are you talking about?” Alice denied.

I worked it all out with my sleuthing skills. The facts were all there, and now I had a chance to show off how cleverly I had put them together. I explained:

“You stole the top-secret mind-reading crystal from the government, and then this man stole it from you! He then gave it to me for some reason. Isn’t that right, old man!” I turned to him.

The old man squinted at me. “No.”

“I never stole a mind-reading whatsit from the government,” Alice said.

“Well, you stole SOMETHING” I said defensively, “I saw your file. What did you steal then?”

“This,” said The Professor, as he jabbed something hard and weapon-shaped into my back.

Everyone gasped.

“This is a high-tech government raygun!” the Professor exclaimed. “I had Alice steal it for me, the same way I had her steal your hat!”

I gasped again, this time in surprise. This was the first time I noticed The Professor was wearing my missing hat.

“My hat!” I exclaimed! “But why?”

“To cover my receding hairline,” he explained, “that YOU constantly tease me for. You have sown the seeds to your own destruction!”

With this The Professor turned and aimed his high-tech government ray gun straight at the old man!

“My mentor!” I cried. “Noooooooo!!!”

“Quick Maxine, use the power of the crystal!” the old man cried out.

“I can’t, I broke it.”

“Oh,” said the old man, and he looked disappointed.

Then the raygun went “Bzzzt” and he was just a pile of ashes.

“Nooo!” I cried.

“And you’re next!” The Professor cried.

“Maxine! No!” Alice cried, and pushed me out of the way just as the raygun fired. “Bzzt!” Her ashes drifted up and away into space.

Unfortunately, when she knocked me over I knocked into The Professor, which jolted him enough to send my hat flying off his head and then it was sucked out into the vacuum of space. We both watched quietly as it slowly drifted away, forever out of reach for the both of us.

It was a tender moment, and I started to hum.

“Stop it,” said the Professor.

And then we started to laugh and laugh. Because what are we all, really, but hatless in an infinite universe?

It really makes you think.

THE END.

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