



THE THIRD
SCIENCE FICTION
MEGAPACK

26

**Modern and Classic
Science Fiction Tales**

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THE MAN WHO MADE FRIENDS WITH ELECTRICITY, by Fritz

Leiber

When Mr. Scott showed Peak House to Mr. Leverett, he hoped he wouldn't notice the high-tension pole outside the bedroom window, because it had twice before queered promising rentals—so many elderly people were foolishly nervous about electricity. There was nothing to be done about the pole except try to draw prospective tenants' attention away from it—electricity follows the hilltops and these lines supplied more than half of the juice used in Pacific Knolls.

But Mr. Scott's prayers and suave misdirections were in vain—Mr. Leverett's sharp eyes lit on the "negative feature" the instant they stepped out on the patio. The old New Englander studied the short thick wooden column, the 18-inch ridged glass insulators, the black transformer box that stepped down voltage for this house and a few others lower on the slope. His gaze next followed the heavy wires swinging off rhythmically four abreast across the empty gray-green hills. Then he cocked his head as his ears caught the low but steady frying sound, varying from a crackle to a buzz, of electrons leaking off the wires through the air.

"Listen to that!" Mr. Leverett said, his dry voice betraying excitement for the first time in the tour. "Fifty thousand volts if there's five! A power of power!"

"Must be unusual atmospheric conditions today—normally you can't hear a thing," Mr. Scott responded lightly, twisting the truth a little.

"You don't say?" Mr. Leverett commented, his voice dry again, but Mr. Scott knew better than to encourage conversation about a negative feature. "I want you to notice this lawn," he launched out heartily. "When the Pacific Knolls Golf Course was subdivided, the original owner of Peak House bought the entire eighteenth green and—"

For the rest of the tour Mr. Scott did his state-certified real estate broker's best, which in Southern California is no mean performance, but Mr. Leverett seemed a shade perfunctory in the attention he accorded it. Inwardly Mr. Scott chalked up another defeat by the damn pole.

On the quick retrace, however, Mr. Leverett insisted on their lingering on the patio. "Still holding out," he remarked about the buzz with an odd satisfaction. "You know, Mr. Scott, that's a restful sound to me. Like wind or a brook or the sea. I hate the clatter of machinery—that's the other reason I left New England—but this is like a sound of nature. Downright soothing. But you say it comes seldom?"

Mr. Scott was flexible—it was one of his great virtues as a salesman.

"Mr. Leverett," he confessed simply, "I've never stood on this patio when I didn't hear that sound. Sometimes it's softer, sometimes louder, but it's always there. I play it down, though, because most people don't care for it."

"Don't blame you," Mr. Leverett said. "Most people are a pack of fools or worse. Mr. Scott, are any of the people in the neighboring houses Communists to your knowledge?"

"No, sir!" Mr. Scott responded without an instant's hesitation. "There's not a Communist in Pacific Knolls. And that's something, believe me, I'd never shade the truth on."

"Believe you," Mr. Leverett said. "The east's packed with Communists. Seem scarcer out here. Mr. Scott, you've made yourself a deal. I'm taking a year's lease on Peak House as furnished and at the figure we last mentioned."

"Shake on it!" Mr. Scott boomed. "Mr. Leverett, you're the kind of person Pacific Knolls wants."

They shook. Mr. Leverett rocked on his heels, smiling up at the softly crackling wires with satisfaction that was already a shade possessive.

“Fascinating thing, electricity,” he said. “No end to the tricks it can do or you can do with it. For instance, if a man wanted to take off for elsewhere in an elegant flash, he’d only have to wet down the lawn good and take twenty-five foot of heavy copper wire in his two bare hands and whip the other end of it over those lines. Whang! Every bit as good as Sing Sing and a lot more satisfying to a man’s inner needs.”

Mr. Scott experienced a severe though momentary sinking of heart and even for one wild and frivolous moment considered welshing on the verbal agreement he’d just made. He remembered the red-haired lady who’d rented an apartment from him solely to have a quiet place in which to take an overdose of barbiturates. Then he reminded himself that Southern California is, according to a well-known old saw, the home (actual or aimed-at) of the peach, the nut and the prune; and while he’d had few dealings with real or would-be starlets, he’d had enough of crackpots and retired grouches. Even if you piled fanciful death wishes and a passion for electricity atop rabid anti-communist and anti-machine manias, Mr. Leverett’s personality was no more than par for the S. Cal. course.

Mr. Leverett said shrewdly, “You’re worrying now, aren’t you, I might be a suicider? Don’t. Just don’t like to think my thoughts. Speak them out too, however peculiar.”

Mr. Scott’s last fears melted and he became once more his pushingly congenial self as he invited Mr. Leverett down to the office to sign the papers.

Three days later he dropped by to see how the new tenant was making out and found him in the parlor ensconced under the buzzing pole in an old rocker.

“Take a chair and sit,” Mr. Leverett said, indicating one of the tubular modern pieces. “Mr. Scott, I want to tell you I’m finding Peak House every bit as restful as I hoped. I listen to the electricity and let my thoughts roam. Sometimes I hear voices in the electricity—the wires talking, as they say. You’ve heard of people who hear voices in the wind?”

“Yes, I have,” Mr. Scott admitted a bit uncomfortably and then, recalling that Mr. Leverett’s check for the first quarter’s rent was safely cleared, was emboldened to speak his own thoughts. “But wind is a sound that varies a lot. That buzz is pretty monotonous to hear voices in.”

“Pshaw,” Mr. Leverett said with a little grin that made it impossible to tell how seriously he meant to be taken. “Bees are highly intelligent insects, entomologists say they even have a language, yet they do nothing but buzz. I hear voices in the electricity.”

He rocked silently for a while after that and Mr. Scott sat.

“Yep, I hear voices in the electricity,” Mr. Leverett said dreamily. “Electricity tells me how it roams the forty-eight states—even the forty-ninth by way of Canadian power lines. Electricity goes everywhere today—into our homes, every room of them, into our offices, into government buildings and military posts. And what it doesn’t learn that way it overhears by the trace of it that trickles through our phone lines and over our air waves. Phone electricity’s the little sister of power electricity, you might say, and little pitchers have big ears. Yep, electricity knows everything about us and our every last secret. Only it wouldn’t think of telling most people what it knows, because they believe electricity is a cold mechanical force. It isn’t—it’s warm and pulsing and sensitive and friendly underneath, like any other live thing.”

Mr. Scott, feeling a bit dreamy himself now, thought what good advertising copy that would make—imaginative stuff, folksy but poetic.

“And electricity’s got a mite of viciousness too,” Mr. Leverett continued. “You got to tame it. Know its ways, speak it fair, show no fear, make friends with it. Well now, Mr. Scott,” he said in a brisk voice, standing up, “I know you’ve come here to check up on how I’m caring for Peak House. So let me give you the tour.”

And in spite of Mr. Scott's protests that he had no such inquisitive intention, Mr. Leverett did just that.

Once he paused for an explanation: "I've put away the electric blanket and the toaster. Don't feel right about using electricity for menial jobs."

As far as Mr. Scott could see, he had added nothing to the furnishings of Peak House beyond the rocking chair and a large collection of Indian arrow heads.

Mr. Scott must have talked about the latter when he got home, for a week later his nine-year-old son said to him, "Hey, Dad, you know that old guy you unloaded Peak House onto?"

"Rented is the only proper expression, Bobby."

"Well, I went up to see his arrow heads. Dad, it turns out he's a snake-charmer!"

Dear God, thought Mr. Scott, I knew there was going to be something really impossible about Mr. Leverett. Probably likes hilltops because they draw snakes in hot weather.

"He didn't charm a real snake, though, Dad, just an old extension cord. He squatted down on the floor—this was after he showed me those crumbly arrow heads—and waved his hands back and forth over it and pretty soon the end with the little box on it started to move around on the floor and all of a sudden it lifted up, like a cobra out of a basket. It was real spooky!"

"I've seen that sort of trick," Mr. Scott told Bobby. "There's a fine thread attached to the end of the wire pulling it up."

"I'd have seen a thread, Dad."

"Not if it were the same color as the background," Mr. Scott explained. Then he had a thought. "Even the way Bobby, was the other end of the cord plugged in?"

"Oh it was, Dad! He said he couldn't work the trick unless there was electricity in the cord. Because you see, Dad, he's really an electricity-charmer. I just said snake-charmer to make it more exciting. Afterwards we went outside and he charmed electricity down out of the wires and made it crawl all over his body. You could see it crawl from part to part."

"But how could you see that?" Mr. Scott demanded, struggling to keep his voice casual. He had a vision of Mr. Leverett standing dry and sedate, entwined by glimmering blue serpents with flashing diamond eyes and fangs that sparked.

"By the way it would make his hair stand on end, Dad. First on one side of his head, then on the other. Then he said, 'Electricity, crawl down my chest,' and a silk handkerchief hanging out of his top pocket stood out stiff and sharp. Dad, it was almost as good as the Museum of Science and Industry!"

Next day Mr. Scott dropped by Peak House, but he got no chance to ask his carefully thought-out questions, for Mr. Leverett greeted him with, "Reckon your boy told you about the little magic show I put on for him yesterday. I like children, Mr. Scott. Good Republican children like yours, that is."

"Why yes, he did," Mr. Scott admitted, disarmed and a bit flustered by the other's openness.

"I only showed him the simplest tricks, of course. Kid stuff."

"Of course," Mr. Scott echoed. "I guessed you must have used a fine thread to make the extension cord dance."

"Reckon you know all the answers, Mr. Scott," the other said, his eyes flashing. "But come across the patio and sit for a while."

The buzzing was quite loud that day, yet after a bit Mr. Scott had to admit to himself that it was a restful sound. And it had more variety than he'd realized—mounting crackles, fading sizzles, hissing hums, clicks, sighs. If you listened to it long enough, you probably would begin to hear voices.

Mr. Leverett, silently rocking, said, "Electricity tells me about all the work it does and all the fun it has—dances, singing, big crackling band concerts, trips to the stars, foot races that make rockets see

like snails. Worries, too. You know that electric breakdown they had in New York? Electricity told me why. Some of its folks went crazy—overwork, I guess—and just froze. It was a while before they could send others in from outside New York and heal the crazy ones and start them moving again through the big copper web. Electricity tells me it's fearful the same thing's going to happen in Chicago and San Francisco. Too much pressure.

"Electricity doesn't mind working for us. It's generous-hearted and it loves its job. But it would be grateful for a little more consideration—a little more recognition of its special problems.

"It's got its savage brothers to contend with, you see the wild electricity that rages in storms and haunts the mountaintops and comes down to hunt and kill. Not civilized like the electricity in the wires, though it will be some day.

"For civilized electricity's a great teacher. Shows us how to live clean and in unity and brother-love. Power fails one place, electricity's rushing in from everywhere to fill the gap. Serves Georgia same as Vermont, Los Angeles same as Boston. Patriotic too—only revealed its greatest secrets to true-blue Americans like Edison and Franklin. Did you know it killed a Swede when he tried that kite trick? Yep, electricity's the greatest power for good in all the U.S.A."

Mr. Scott thought sleepily of what a neat little electricity cult Mr. Leverett could set up, every bit as good as Science of Mind or Krishna Venta or the Rosicrucians. He could imagine the patio full of earnest seekers while Krishna Leverett—or maybe High Electro Leverett—dispensed wisdom from his rocker, interpreting the words of the humming wires. Better not suggest it, though—in Southern California such things had a way of coming true.

Mr. Scott felt quite easy at heart as he went down the hill, though he did make a point of telling Bobby not to bother Mr. Leverett any more.

But the prohibition didn't apply to himself. During the next months Mr. Scott made a point of dropping in at Peak House from time to time for a dose of "electric wisdom." He came to look forward to these restful, amusingly screwy breaks in the hectic round. Mr. Leverett appeared to do nothing whatever except sit in his rocker in the patio, yet stayed happy and serene. There was a lesson for anybody in that, if you thought about it.

Occasionally Mr. Scott spotted amusing side effects of Mr. Leverett's eccentricity. For instance, although he sometimes let the gas and water bills go, he always paid up phone and electricity on the dot.

And the newspapers eventually did report short but severe electric breakdowns in Chicago and San Francisco. Smiling a little frowningly at the coincidences, Mr. Scott decided he could add fortune-telling to the electricity cult he'd imaged for Mr. Leverett. "Your life's story foretold in the wires!"—more novel, anyway, than crystal balls or Talking with God.

Only once did the touch of the gruesome, that had troubled Mr. Scott in his first conversation with Mr. Leverett, come briefly back, when the old man chuckled and observed, "Recall what I told you about whipping a copper wire up there? I've thought of a simpler way, just squirt the hose at those H.T. lines in a hard stream, gripping the metal nozzle. Might be best to use the hot water and throw a bit of salt in the heater first." When Mr. Scott heard that he was glad that he'd warned Bobby against coming around.

But for the most part Mr. Leverett maintained his mood of happy serenity.

When the break in that mood came, it did so suddenly, though afterwards Mr. Scott realized there had been one warning note sounded when Mr. Leverett had added onto a rambling discourse, "By the way, I've learned that power electricity goes all over the world, just like the ghost electricity in radios and phones. It travels to foreign shores in batteries and condensers. Roams the lines in Europe and

Asia. Some of it even slips over into Soviet territory. Wants to keep tabs on the Communists, I guess Electric freedom-fighters.”

On his next visit Mr. Scott found a great change. Mr. Leverett had deserted his rocking chair to pad the patio on the side away from the pole, though every now and then he would give a quick funny look up over his shoulder at the dark muttering wires.

“Glad to see you, Mr. Scott. I’m real shook up. Reckon I better tell someone about it so if something happens to me they’ll be able to tell the FBI. Though I don’t know what they’ll be able to do.

“Electricity just told me this morning it’s got a world government—it had the nerve to call it that—and that it doesn’t care a snap for either us or the Soviets and that there’s Russian electricity in our wires and American electricity in theirs—it shifts back and forth with never a quiver of shame.

“When I heard that you could have knocked me down with a paper dart.

“What’s more, electricity’s determined to stop any big war that may come, no matter how right that war be or how much in defense of America. If the buttons are pushed for the atomic missile electricity’s going to freeze and refuse to budge. And it’ll flash out and kill anybody who tries to stop them off another way.

“I pleaded with electricity, I told it I’d always thought of it as American and true—reminded it of Franklin and Edison—finally I commanded it to change its ways and behave decent, but it just chuckled at me with never a spark of love or loyalty.

“Then it threatened me back! It told me if I tried to stop it, if I revealed its plans it would summon down its savage brothers from the mountains and with their help it would seek me out and kill me. Mr. Scott, I’m all alone up here with electricity on my window sill. What am I going to do?”

Mr. Scott had considerable difficulty soothing Mr. Leverett enough to make his escape. In the end he had to promise to come back in the morning bright and early—silently vowing to himself that he would be damned if he would.

His task was not made easier when the electricity overhead, which had been especially noisy that day, rose in a growl and Mr. Leverett turned and said harshly, “Yes, I hear!”

That night the Los Angeles area had one of its very rare thunderstorms, accompanied by gales of wind and torrents of rain. Palms and pines and eucalyptus were torn down, earth cliffs crumbled and sloshed, and the great square concrete spillways ran brimful from the hills to the sea.

The lightning was especially fierce. Several score Angelinos, to whom such a display was a novelty, phoned civil defense numbers to report or inquire fearfully about atomic attack.

Numerous freak accidents occurred. To the scene of one of these Mr. Scott was summoned next morning bright and early by the police—because it had occurred on a property he rented and because he was the only person known to be acquainted with the deceased.

The previous night Mr. Scott had awakened at the height of the storm when the lightning had been blinding as a photoflash and the thunder had cracked like a mile-long whip just above the roof. At that time he had remembered vividly what Mr. Leverett had said about electricity threatening to summon its wild giant brothers from the hills. But now, in the bright morning, he decided not to tell the police about that or say anything to them at all about Mr. Leverett’s electricity mania—it would only complicate things to no purpose and perhaps make the fear at his heart more crazily real.

Mr. Scott saw the scene of the freak accident before anything was moved, even the body—except there was now, of course, no power in the heavy corroded wire wrapped tight as a bullwhip around the skinny shanks with only the browned and blackened fabric of cotton pyjamas between.

The police and the power-and-light men reconstructed the accident this way: At the height of the storm one of the high-tension lines had snapped a hundred feet away from the house and the end

whipped by the wind and its own tension, had struck back freakishly through the open bedroom window of Peak House and curled once around the legs of Mr. Leverett, who had likely been on his feet at the time, killing him instantly.

One had to strain that reconstruction, though, to explain the additional freakish elements in the accident—the facts that the high-tension wire had struck not only through the bedroom window, but then through the bedroom door to catch the old man in the hall, and that the black shiny cord of the phone was wrapped like a vine twice around the old man's right arm, as if to hold him back from escaping until the big wire had struck.

TIME BUM, by C.M. Kornbluth

Harry Twenty-Third Street suddenly burst into laughter. His friend and sometimes roper Farmer Brown looked inquisitive.

“I just thought of a new con,” Harry Twenty-Third Street said, still chuckling.

Farmer Brown shook his head positively. “There’s no such thing, my man,” he said. “There are only new switches on old cons. What have you got—a store con? Shall you be needing a roper?” He tried not to look eager as a matter of principle, but everybody knew the Farmer needed a connection badly. His girl had two-timed him on a badger game, running off with the chump and marrying him after an expensive, month-long buildup.

Harry said, “Sorry, old boy. No details. It’s too good to split up. I shall rip and tear the suckers with this con for many a year, I trust, before the details become available to the trade. Nobody, but nobody is going to call copper after I take him. It’s beautiful and it’s mine. I will see you around, my friend.”

Harry got up from the booth and left, nodding cheerfully to a safe-blower here, a fixer there, on his way to the locked door of the hangout. Naturally he didn’t nod to such small fry as pickpockets and dope peddlers. Harry had his pride.

The puzzled Farmer sipped his lemon squash and concluded that Harry had been kidding him. He noticed that Harry had left behind him in the booth a copy of a magazine with a space ship and a prettily dressed girl in green bra and pants on the cover.

* * * *

“A furnished...bungalow?” the man said hesitantly, as though he knew what he wanted but wasn’t quite sure of the word.

“Certainly, Mr. Clurg,” Walter Lachlan said. “I’m sure we can suit you. Wife and family?”

“No,” said Clurg. “They are...far away.” He seemed to get some secret amusement from the thought. And then, to Walter’s horror, he sat down calmly in empty air beside the desk and, of course, crashed to the floor looking ludicrous and astonished.

Walter gaped and helped him up, sputtering apologies and wondering privately what was wrong with the man. There wasn’t a chair there. There was a chair on the other side of the desk and a chair against the wall. But there just wasn’t a chair where Clurg had sat down.

Clurg apparently was unhurt; he protested against Walter’s apologies, saying: “I should have known, Master Lachlan. It’s quite all right; it was all my fault. What about the bang—the bungalow?”

Business sense triumphed over Walter’s bewilderment. He pulled out his listings and they conferred on the merits of several furnished bungalows. When Walter mentioned that the Curran place was especially nice, in an especially nice neighborhood—he lived up the street himself—Clurg was impressed.

“I’ll take that one,” he said. “What is the...feoff?” Walter had learned a certain amount of law from his real-estate license examination; he recognized the word. “The *rent* is seventy-five dollars,” he said. “You speak English very well, Mr. Clurg.” He hadn’t been certain that the man was a foreigner until the dictionary word came out. “You have hardly any accent.”

“Thank you,” Clurg said, pleased. “I worked hard at it. Let me see—seventy-five is six twelves and three.” He opened one of his shiny-new leather suitcases and calmly laid six heavy little paper rolls on Walter’s desk. He broke open a seventh and laid down three mint-new silver dollars. “There I am,” he said. “I mean, there you are.”

Walter didn’t know what to say. It had never happened before. People paid by check or in bill

They just didn't pay in silver dollars. But it was money—why shouldn't Mr. Clurg pay in silver dollars if he wanted to? He shook himself, scooped the rolls into his top desk drawer, and said: "I'll drive you out there, if you like. It's nearly quitting time anyway."

* * * *

Walter told his wife Betty over the dinner table: "We ought to have him in some evening. I can't imagine where on Earth he comes from. I had to show him how to turn on the kitchen range. When he went on he said, 'Oh, yes—electricity!' and laughed his head off. And he kept ducking the question when I tried to ask him in a nice way. Maybe he's some kind of a political refugee."

"Maybe..." Betty began dreamily and then shut her mouth. She didn't want Walter laughing at her again. As it was, he made her buy her science-fiction magazines downtown instead of at neighborhood newsstands. He thought it wasn't becoming for his wife to read them. *He's so eager for success*, she thought sentimentally.

That night while Walter watched a television variety show, she read a story in one of her magazines. (Its cover, depicting a space ship and a girl in green bra and shorts, had been prudently torn off and thrown away.) It was about a man from the future who had gone back in time, bringing with him all sorts of marvelous inventions. In the end the Time Police punished him for unauthorized time traveling. They had come back and got him, brought him back to his own time. She smiled. It would be nice if Mr. Clurg, instead of being a slightly eccentric foreigner, were a man from the future with all sorts of interesting stories to tell and a satchelful of gadgets that could be sold for millions and millions of dollars.

After a week they did have Clurg over for dinner. It started badly. Once more he managed to slip down in empty air and crash to the floor. While they were brushing him off he said fretfully: "I can't get used to not—" and then said no more.

He was a picky eater. Betty had done one of her mother's specialties, veal cutlet with tomato sauce topped by a poached egg. He ate the egg and sauce, made a clumsy attempt to cut up the meat, and abandoned it. She served a plate of cheese, half a dozen kinds, for dessert, and Clurg tasted them uncertainly, breaking off a crumb from each, while Betty wondered where that constituted good manners. His face lit up when he tried a ripe cheddar. He popped the whole wedge into his mouth and said to Betty: "I will have that, please."

"Seconds?" asked Walter. "Sure. Don't bother, Betty. I'll get it." He brought back a quarter-pound wedge of the cheddar.

Walter and Betty watched silently as Clurg calmly ate every crumb of it. He sighed.

"Very good. Quite like—"

The word, Walter and Betty later agreed, was *see-mon-joe*. They were able to agree quite early in the evening, because Clurg got up after eating the cheese, said warmly, "Thank you so much!" and walked out of the house.

Betty said, "*What—on—Earth!*"

Walter said uneasily, "I'm sorry, doll. I didn't think he'd be quite that peculiar—"

"—But after *all!*"

"—Of course he's a foreigner. What was that word?"

He jotted it down.

While they were doing the dishes, Betty said, "I think he was drunk. Falling-down drunk."

"No," Walter said. "It's exactly the same thing he did in my office. As though he expected a chair to come to him instead of him going to a chair." He laughed and said uncertainly, "Or maybe he

royalty. I read once about Queen Victoria never looking around before she sat down, she was so sure there'd be a chair there."

"Well, there isn't any more royalty, not to speak of," she said angrily, hanging up the dish towel. "What's on TV tonight?"

"Uncle Miltie. But...uh...I think I'll read. Uh...where do you keep those magazines of yours, doll? Believe I'll give them a try."

She gave him a look that he wouldn't meet, and she went to get him some of her magazines. She also got a slim green book which she hadn't looked at for years. While Walter flipped uneasily through the magazines, she studied the book. After about ten minutes she said: "Walter. *Seemonjoe*. I think I know what language it is!"

He was instantly alert. "Yeah? What?"

"It should be spelled c-i-m-a-n-g-o, with little jiggers over the C and G. It means 'Universal food' in Esperanto."

"Where's Esperanto?" he demanded.

"Esperanto isn't anywhere. It's an artificial language. I played around with it a little once. It was supposed to end war and all sorts of things. Some people called it the language of the future." His voice was tremulous.

Walter said, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

* * * *

He saw Clurg go into the neighborhood movie for the matinee. That gave him about three hours.

Walter hurried to the Curran bungalow, remembered to slow down, and tried hard to look casual as he unlocked the door and went in. There wouldn't be any trouble—he was a good citizen, known and respected—he could let himself into a tenant's house and wait for him to talk about business if he wanted to.

He tried not to think of what people would think if he should be caught rifling Clurg's luggage, and what he intended to do. He had brought along an assortment of luggage keys. Surprised by his own ingenuity, he had got them at a locksmith's by saying his own key was lost and he didn't want to have a heavy packed bag downtown.

But he didn't need the keys. In the bedroom closet the two suitcases stood, unlocked.

There was nothing in the first except uniformly new clothes, bought locally at good shops.

The second was full of the same. Going through a rather extreme sports jacket, Walter found a wad of paper in the breast pocket. It was a newspaper page. A number had been penciled on a margin, apparently the sheet had been torn out and stuck into the pocket and forgotten. The dateline on the paper was July 18th, 2403.

Walter had some trouble reading the stories at first, but found it was easy enough if he read them aloud and listened to his voice.

One said:

TAIM KOP NABD: PROSKYOOTR ASKS DETH

Patrolm'n Oskr Garth V thi Taim Polis w'z arest'd toodei at hiz hom, 4365 9863th Suit, and bookd at 9768th Prisint on m ——. tchardg'z 'v Polis-Ekspozh'r. Thi aledjd Ekspozh'r okurd hwaile Garth w'z on dooti in thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri. It konsist'd 'v hiz admish'n too a sit'zen 'v thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri that thi Taim Polis ekzisted and woz op'rated fr'm thi Twenti-Fifth Sentch'ri. Thi Proskypot'rz Ofis sed thi deth pen'lti wil be askt in vyoo 'v thi heinus neitch'r 'v thi ofens, hwitich thret'nz thi hwol fabrik 'v Twenti-Fifth-Sentch'ri eksiz-tens.

There was an advertisement on the other side:

**BOIZ AND YUNG MEN!
SERV EUR SENTCH'RI!
ENLIST IN THI TAIM POLIS RSURV NOW!**

RIMEMB'R—'V THI AJEZ! ONLY IN THI TAIM POLIS KAN EU PROTEKT EUR SIVILIZASHON FR'M VARENS!
THEIR IZ NO HAIER SERVIS TOO AR KULTCH'R! THEIR IZ NO K'REER SO FAS'NATING AZ A K'REER IN THI
TAIM POLIS!

Underneath it another ad asked:

**HWAI BI ASHEEMPD UV EUR TCHAIRZ?
GET ROLFASTS!**

No uth'r tcheir haz thi immidjit respons uv a Rolfast. Sit enihweir—eur Rolfast iz ther! Eur Rolfast metl partz ar solid gold to
avoid tairsum polishing. Eur Rolfast beirings are thi fain'st six-intch dupliks di'mondz for long wair.

Walter's heart pounded. Gold—to avoid tiresome polishing! Six-inch diamonds—for long wear!

And Clurg must be a time policeman. "Only in the time police can you see the pageant of the ages"

What did a time policeman do? He wasn't quite clear about that. But what they *didn't* do was let
anybody else—anybody earlier—know that the Time Police existed. He, Walter Lachlan of the
Twentieth Century, held in the palm of his hand Time Policeman Clurg of the Twenty-Fifth Century—
the Twenty-Fifth Century where gold and diamonds were common as steel and glass in this!

* * * *

He was there when Clurg came back from the matinee. Mutely, Walter extended the page of
newsprint. Clurg snatched it incredulously, stared at it, and crumpled it in his fist. He collapsed on the
floor with a groan.

"I'm done for!" Walter heard him say.

"Listen, Clurg," Walter said. "Nobody ever needs to know about this—*nobody*."

Clurg looked up with sudden hope in his eyes. "You will keep silent?" he asked wildly. "It is my
life!"

"What's it worth to you?" Walter demanded with brutal directness. "I can use some of those
diamonds and some of that gold. Can you get it into this century?"

"It would be missed. It would be over my mass-balance," Clurg said. "But I have a Duplix. I can
copy diamonds and gold for you; that was how I made my feoff money."

He snatched an instrument from his pocket—a fountain pen, Walter thought.

"It is low in charge. It would Duplix about five kilograms in one operation—"

"You mean," Walter demanded, "that if I brought you five kilograms of diamonds and gold you
could duplicate it? And the originals wouldn't be harmed? Let me see that thing. Can I work it?"

Clurg passed over the "fountain pen." Walter saw that within the case was a tangle of wires, thin
tubes, lenses—he passed it back hastily.

Clurg said, "That is correct. You could buy or borrow jewelry and I could duplix it. Then you could
return the originals and retain the copies. You swear by your contemporary God that you would say
nothing?"

Walter was thinking. He could scrape together a good thirty thousand dollars by pledging the house
the business, his own real estate, the bank account, the life insurance, the securities. Put it all in
diamonds, of course and then—*doubled! Overnight!*

"I'll say nothing," he told Clurg. "If you come through." He took the sheet from the twenty-fifth

century newspaper from Clurg's hands and put it securely in his own pocket. "When I get those diamonds duplicated," he said, "I'll burn this paper and forget the rest. Until then, I want you to stay close to home. I'll come around in a day or so with the stuff for you to duplicate."

Clurg nervously promised.

* * * *

The secrecy, of course, didn't include Betty. He told her when he got home, and she let out a yell of delight. She demanded the newspaper, read it avidly, and then demanded to see Clurg.

"I don't think he'll talk," Walter said doubtfully. "But if you really want to..."

She did, and they walked to the Curran bungalow. Clurg was gone, lock, stock and barrel, leaving not a trace behind. They waited for hours, nervously.

At last Betty said, "He's gone back."

Walter nodded. "He wouldn't keep his bargain, but by God I'm going to keep mine. Come along. We're going to the *Enterprise*."

"Walter," she said. "You wouldn't—would you?"

* * * *

He went alone, after a bitter quarrel.

At the *Enterprise* office, he was wearily listened to by a reporter, who wearily looked over the twenty-fifth-century newspaper. "I don't know what you're peddling, Mr. Lachlan," he said, "but we like people to buy their ads in the *Enterprise*. This is a pretty bare-faced publicity grab."

"But—" Walter sputtered.

"Sam, would you please ask Mr. Morris to come up here if he can?" the reporter was saying into the phone. To Walter he explained, "Mr. Morris is our press-room foreman."

The foreman was a huge, white-haired old fellow, partly deaf. The reporter showed him the newspaper from the twenty-fifth century and said, "How about this?"

Mr. Morris looked at it and smelled it and said, showing no interest in the reading matter. "American Type Foundry Futura number nine, discontinued about ten years ago. It's been hand-set. The ink—hard to say. Expensive stuff, not a news ink. A book ink, a job-printing ink. The paper, now I know. A nice linen rag that Benziger jobs in Philadelphia."

"You see, Mr. Lachlan? It's a fake." The reporter shrugged.

Walter walked slowly from the city room. The press-room foreman *knew*. It was a fake. And Clurg was a faker. Suddenly Walter's heels touched the ground after twenty-four hours and stayed there. Good God, the diamonds! Clurg was a conman! He would have worked a package switch! He would have had thirty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds for less than a month's work!

He told Betty about it when he got home, and she laughed unmercifully. "Time Policeman" was to become a family joke between the Lachlans.

* * * *

Harry Twenty-Third Street stood, blinking, in a very peculiar place. Peculiarly, his feet were firmly encased, up to the ankles, in a block of clear plastic.

There were odd-looking people, and a big voice was saying: "May it please the court. The People vs. the Twenty-Fifth Century versus Harold Parish, alias Harry Twenty-Third Street, alias Clurg, of the Twentieth Century. The charge is impersonating an officer of the Time Police. The Prosecutor

Office will ask the death penalty in view of the heinous nature of the offense, which threatens the whole fabric—”

THE HUMAN EQUATIONS, by Dave Creek

As many times as I'd been called upon to banish Volatile people to Earth, few of them had even attacked me.

The final time it happened was within the New Lancaster Habitat, home to 10,000 New Ord Mennonites, known as the "Habitat of the Gentle People." Moments after I arrived at the farm, Bishop Anna Troyer and her son, Samuel, I knew it contained at least one exception.

As I stepped onto the porch, I couldn't help thinking that the Troyer home looked like something out of history: wooden structure, metal gutters, the porch sporting a swing and rocking chairs. An even more primitive-looking building, the barn, stood in the rear. Between them was an electric car, and a larger vehicle that probably harvested the crops. In fields both adjacent to the Troyer home and directly overhead, I could see people working in the sprawling fields scattered throughout the habitat.

The heat and humidity of the habitat's interior washed over me. It was only mid-morning and already conditions here were oppressive; why would people work in those fields all day? I wished I could've come about a week later when the habitat was due to turn colder. It was a practical measure for the apple, cherry, and pear trees needed that cold snap to blossom.

I knocked on the flimsy-looking door, which was a thin frame of wood surrounding a fine metal mesh. Out of the shadows within the house, two figures resolved themselves. Bishop Troyer was dressed in a gray one-piece dress beneath an apron of the same color, and wore her snow-white hair up, topped with a finely pleated white hat. I knew she was only middle-aged, about sixty, but her deeply lined face made her look decades older. Being a Mennonite, I thought, must be a rough life. I knew it could even be deadly. Bishop Troyer's husband Amos had died eight years earlier when a grain harvester rolled over on him—not an uncommon fate for farmers here, apparently.

Samuel was twenty, broad-shouldered, and with skin burnished by countless hours beneath reflected sunlight. He was wearing a farmer's overalls and thick-soled boots.

Bishop Troyer didn't speak, just glared at me, but she still opened the door—Congregationalist courtesy, no doubt. I stepped inside, grateful for the respite from the heat. "I'm Triage Officer Le Bakri. I'm here to carry out the Order of Banishment on Samuel Troyer."

The only thing that saved me was that although Samuel was big, he wasn't a trained fighter, and that my New Human reflexes are faster than those of most Volatiles. His right fist swung at my face, and I grabbed it with my right hand and twisted sharply, measuring my force so I wouldn't break his wrist. Samuel yelped and sank to one knee. I placed my hand on the butt of my stunner but didn't draw it.

Bishop Troyer went to her son's side and held his shoulders. I wondered if she was trying to comfort or restrain her son.

I felt the chill of perspiration drying on my forehead. The house wasn't climate-controlled, but it was cooler than the habitat's current outdoor setting. Too much like a "natural" environment, too uncontrolled, I thought. Why should any environment be uncomfortable for the Humans living in it?

Bishop Troyer said, "You realize that sending Samuel down there is a certain death sentence?"

I said, "You know the seriousness of Samuel's crime."

"I still have trouble believing that Samuel would—"

"Attack someone the way he just attacked me?"

Samuel looked up at me. "You're taking me away from my mom, you bastard!"

"Samuel!" Bishop Troyer said. "Even in such a time, you'll not use that kind of language."

"Mom, he's taking my life away."

I said, "Samuel, you know the law. There are no appeals."

Bishop Troyer said, "Triage Officer Bakri, you must understand my son doesn't want to leave home."

In my heart of hearts, I didn't think his home was anything to fight for. The many shelves and mantle above the fireplace (now there was a danger!) here in the living room were crowded with, believed the term was, "knick-knacks." They included small stylized figurines with vaguely Human form, tiny woven baskets of an unknown (at least to me) significance, and flat, unmoving pictures of loved ones. The paintings on the walls seemed to be originals by talented but untrained artists. The comp in one corner was a bulky console-and-monitor combination.

Samuel Troyer said, "You didn't prove anything—"

I told him, "We have cubes. They show you inside a shop within the Shosha Habitat, assaulting its manager, Saburo Endo."

Bishop Troyer stood. She held her hand out to Samuel, who took his place beside her and said, "That's not evidence to us. My people don't use that kind of technology."

"With all respect to your beliefs, the Shosha authorities do make decisions based upon that technology. We also have nearly a half-dozen witnesses to the assault against Mr Endo. You know the penalty for traveling to another habitat to commit violence."

Samuel Troyer tilted his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "I didn't go there to commit violence. Then he looked me right in the eye. "I just wanted to see what it was like somewhere you don't have to get up in the middle of the night to milk cows. Or spend half your days just growing food. Where you have time to read and to think—"

Bishop Troyer shook her head. "It looks as if you've spent too much time thinking already, and it's allowed ungodly ideas to get into your head. I never should've agreed to that trip. You're too young. You don't understand why our way of life is so important to us."

Samuel's voice held a bitterness I guessed he'd been nurturing for some time. "You always said these places were so evil. I wanted to decide for myself. I always expected to come back here. And you did. I wanted to find a way to make a different kind of life for myself here, with you."

I said, "You knew you were here only on probation, awaiting your sentence."

"On something that wasn't a crime. I just wanted something nice for my mother."

"A gold necklace worth six months pay on Shosha."

Bishop Troyer said, "My son had never been to another habitat. He had no concept of a market economy."

"You should have taught him, then. To let a Volatile—"

"I am so sick of hearing Samuel referred to by that term. I suppose you're what they call a New Human?"

"I am." I allowed a little pride to come through in my tone of voice. Nothing wrong with fast reflexes, added strength, or more immunity to disease. Not to mention the moral improvements. Less prone to violence. More inclined to find peaceful solutions. "I'm from Newton Habitat." Customarily, Banishment Orders were carried out by Triage Officers from habitats other than those involved in the original crime. The Earth-circling habitats have two common rules—live as you wish, but anyone can leave whenever they want. And anyone who commits the slightest physical assault is immediately banished.

Samuel shook his head. "Great. Not just a New Human, but a scientist. You think you're better than I am."

I shifted my weight from one foot to another. No one seemed likely to offer me a seat. And I wasn't sure I'd accept it—the Troyers' living room chairs were wooden, some upholstered with actual cloth.

everything apparently hand-crafted. I supposed that was fine if you liked that kind of thing, but it seemed unnatural and wasteful of time and resources to me. “Statistics show a Volatile is more likely to act inappropriately. A point you helped prove on Shosha.”

Samuel wiggled his fingers in front of my face. “They were so upset that these hands touched the precious property.”

“In Shosha, it’s called stealing.”

“And the shopkeeper—

“—Mr. Endo—”

“—was rude. He yelled at me in front of all those people in the market square. And he grabbed my arm so hard it hurt.”

“You wouldn’t let go of the necklace.”

Samuel shook his head. “It was mine. I’d picked it up. I tried to tell them I’d send them something in trade later.”

“That’s when the real crime happened. When you struck Mr. Endo.”

“He wouldn’t let go of my arm. He started it.”

I said, “And I’m finishing it. Get your things.”

Samuel pointed to one of the upholstered chairs. “There’s my bag.” His shoulders slumped, as having prepared the bag also meant acknowledging his crime. He picked the bag up and stood passively, his attention focused on his mother.

I told him, “You can see that I’m accustomed to dealing with Volatiles. If you try to assault me or anyone else again, I’m stunning you and carrying you to the port. If you give me your word you won’t be violent, I’ll let your mother come along.”

Bishop Troyer folded her hands in front of her. “Thank you, Triage Officer.” She looked meaningfully at her son. “We may be plain unaltered Humans, but we won’t be any trouble.”

I said, “My car’s waiting.”

* * * *

I insisted that both Bishop Troyer and Samuel ride in the rear of my borrowed police cruiser. The car mostly drove itself, which let me keep an eye on them on a heads-up vid display.

As we drove off her property, Bishop Troyer said, “All this for a trinket I wouldn’t have wanted anyway.”

Samuel said, “The gold was from what you call the good Earth. I know you miss it there, even if you never want to go back. The shopkeeper said it was hand-crafted, not replicated.”

I said, “They just say that, Samuel. That’s a typical ploy to get a little extra money out of a tourist.”

Samuel’s mouth gaped open. “He’d lie?”

“Plenty of shopkeepers in plenty of habitats will do the same thing.”

Bishop Troyer said, “It’s one reason we chose a different path in this place.”

New Lancaster Habitat was a typical kilometer-long cylinder, its homes mostly single-family dwellings scattered across a broad landscape of furrowed fields. Most Human colonists brought workbots, nanotech, and grav pallets, along with virtualities and newsnets. They desired the conveniences of Earthly existence even while they sought more living space or the opportunity to form a unique societal structure.

Not here. Workers harvested timothy and clover in the countless fields that curved upward and mirrored two-tenths of a kilometer overhead. I didn’t understand the pull of such an existence. The repetitive toil, the eternal cycle of artificially-generated seasons with the rituals of planting and harvesting, and

all for what?

I supposed that was why we have dozens of habitats circling the homeworld. Live as you want without anyone abridging your freedoms.

But that was just what Samuel Troyer had tried to do to Mr. Endo in Shosha.

I said, "If Samuel had struck someone here in New Lancaster, it would've been a purely internal matter. But it's gone inter-habitat. It's the equivalent of a diplomatic incident on Earth."

Samuel sat with his hands in his lap, as if waiting for his mother and me to settle this between ourselves. I had to wonder if the anger he'd shown just moments ago had been only momentarily suppressed.

Bishop Troyer asked, "Can't you give Samuel some leniency? He's never been in trouble before."

"Could I suggest you render unto Caesar that which is—"

"That is an inappropriate context for that reference, Triage Officer. And you will not use my religious beliefs as a pretext for taking my son from me."

I took a deep breath. "I apologize."

Samuel rolled his eyes at that, which I pointed out to Bishop Troyer. "You see his attitude? Haven't you glimpsed that before?"

Bishop Troyer cast a hard look at her son. "Only...aimed at me."

"With all respect," I said, "Perhaps Samuel found it all too easy in Shosha, a place where no one knew him, that he could intimidate anyone who challenged him as he committed his mischief. Add that, not realizing his actions were being recorded in holographic vid and immersion sound."

Samuel said, "Perhaps you should take me away. I might finally find respect down there on Earth."

Bishop Troyer said, "Don't even pretend to feel that way. I'm still your mother, I'll always care for you the way no one else can."

I said, "You can still care about your son, Bishop Troyer. He just can't continue to live here."

Bishop Troyer turned a stern visage toward the vid input. "We're talking about a 20 year old boy who committed an inadvertent theft, and who struck a shopkeeper. Meanwhile, we don't seem concerned that we're about to send Samuel down to a planet where some countries still mandate the death penalty for non-violent crimes. The PacFed doesn't believe you have a soul, Triage Officer, even that Samuel or I do, and it wouldn't be illegal to kill us for no reason. The Eastern Sword chops the hands off of thieves. Do you need more examples?"

I said, "A condition of establishing Human habitats in Earth orbit was that we could only ship back malcontents or criminals if a government agreed to take responsibility for them. That makes it difficult for us, but if Samuel doesn't go to Earth, that would mean someone who committed violence wouldn't be dealt with. Our entire system will fall apart, in every habitat. Samuel will leave. But he goes somewhere he's wanted."

"What kind of place will have me? What kind of people can I live near?"

I said, "Most of the world falls into two major categories, culturally."

Samuel frowned. "Yes, Euro-American and Afro-Asian. I've been to college, thank you."

"Your culture here most closely resembles Euro-American. I've gotten you a good job on the English Strait. Reclamation duty. They're desperate for manpower there."

Samuel asked, "Manpower? What's that?"

"People who perform physical labor, or sometimes skilled tasks."

"Why would anyone perform physical labor back on Earth?"

"Some societies there also reject nanotech, just as your own does."

"What if I refused to work? What could they do to me?"

“You wouldn’t get paid. You wouldn’t be able to buy food or clothes or shelter.”

“Oh, I see, these are places like Shosha.”

“Much worse than Shosha. Hard work, very little pay. Hard to get ahead. Harder still to save for old age.”

“They don’t even take care of old people?”

“You have to save enough so you can get by when you’re too old to work.”

We’d arrived at the habitat’s southern cap. I flashed my Triage Services shield at the nearest lifeline, asking the civilians gathered there to take the next one. I didn’t think Samuel would become violent again, but I wanted to keep things simple.

Aboard the lift, we all grabbed handrails as the habitat’s floor, and the pseudo-gravity of its rotation, fell away. Looking across the 1-kilometer distance to the northern cap, I saw people who had donned wings and were flying along the cylinder’s center. “That surprises me,” I muttered, and when Samuel tilted his head in a questioning look I pointed out the fliers.

“It’s simple tech,” Samuel said. “As natural as the flight of birds.”

Then it was off the lift, in zero-G conditions now, and into the passenger waiting area. Both Bishop Troyer and Samuel glided awkwardly through the broad tube that led from the revolving cylinder of New Lancaster to its stationary hub. I’d made sure we arrived only minutes before departure; I didn’t want to draw this out. I’d only allowed Bishop Troyer to come along because I thought her presence would help me deal with Samuel until I got him aboard the shuttle.

We reached the broad waiting area. About three dozen other passengers were also waiting to board the shuttle down to Earth. I’m sure my sigh of relief was audible. Gone were the organic smells and too-warm, too-moist air that had assaulted me when I first entered New Lancaster proper. I marveled at the small comforts I found in filtered air, smooth white surfaces, and decorative cube images of planets and galaxies that were the same in any such chamber.

Another flash of the shield, this time toward a customs officer. He said, “Don’t worry, Triage Officer, we’ll get you seated first, in just a moment.”

As we all moved to one side and grabbed handrails, I sneaked a glance at Bishop Troyer. Her mouth had tightened into a narrow line that emphasized the wrinkles in her face. I’d seen similar expressions before, on dozens of frustrated parents’ faces—she was coming to grips with the reality that she was about to lose Samuel. She couldn’t prevent me physically from taking him, and they’d had no legal options or I wouldn’t have arrived at their doorstep. “I know this is difficult,” I said, “But look at the broader view—”

Bishop Troyer said, “I don’t have a broader view. I only know I’m losing my son.”

Samuel was grinning. “Let him spin his fairy tales, Mom.”

Bishop Troyer’s lips pursed and she looked at me. “Have your say.”

“Human history, from the 19th Century onward. Conflicts between empires give way to the superpowers, whose disputes dominate the 20th Century. Some of those disputes involve intermediaries, often on the Asian continent. But after two global conflicts, wars became localized and internal. The world’s countries were learning to live in peace. But in the very first year of this century Humanity sees war waged by individuals.”

Bishop Troyer lowered her gaze. “We’re a sinful race.”

“This is where it starts. With a simple assault, and the most basic disrespect for another person.”

Bishop Troyer said, “You spout your theories of history and how Human society evolves as if they’re as certain as the laws of physics you worship.”

I said, “That’s a good analogy. The laws of physics have been called the ‘cold equations.’ My job

to make sure legal consequences approach that same certainty.”

“Then you, Mr. Bakri, are even colder than the laws of physics. Perhaps you embody the human equations. And if I refuse to let Samuel go?”

“I can take you into custody, too.”

Samuel said to me, “I’ll go to Earth.”

Bishop Troyer said, “Samuel, no!”

“Mom, what kind of choice do I have? I’m young, I can adapt.”

Like you adapted on Shosha? I thought, but wasn’t about to say aloud.

Bishop Troyer asked her son, “Do you know the danger’s you’ll face there?”

Samuel said, “Radiation. Marauders. Leftover nanoweapons.”

“We have to find you something somewhere else.”

I said, “Most countries aren’t interested in taking a Volatile. They don’t want our—”

“Castoffs? Rejects?”

“I believe you’re both good people. It’s just that Samuel did something that can’t be tolerated in the community.”

Bishop Troyer offered me a sad smile. “I have my own beliefs about what can be tolerated and what cannot. As does everyone who has received our undeserved gift—God’s love. We reciprocate that gift by building a community filled with Christ’s attributes. Forgiveness is one of those attributes.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Don’t worry,” Bishop Troyer said. “I’m not a proselytizer. I’m willing to speak in the limited terms of everyday life. Did it ever occur to you that maybe Samuel thought he was in the right?”

“You’ve seen the vid?”

“I have. I don’t approve of what he did, but I don’t believe it’s worth banishment.”

Both of Samuel’s eyebrows raised and his jaw dropped open. “How did you see it?”

“The farm’s comp. It has HabNet access.”

“But you never allowed me to—”

“To fritter away your time on foolishness—games and useless knowledge disguised as revealed truths or wisdom? No, I never did. But this is different. I had to see for myself what happened.”

I kept quiet. I thought letting this little drama play out might be the best thing for me.

Samuel said, “You had no right—”

“I have every right to know about my son’s actions. It was foolish to let you go there. I can only ask for the Lord’s forgiveness. If only your father had lived—”

Samuel wagged his finger before his mother’s face. “It always comes back to that, doesn’t it? The sacred Amos Troyer, who could do no wrong—”

Bishop Troyer knocked Samuel’s hand aside, and by his reaction, you would’ve thought she’d slapped him full in the face. “You will respect your father.”

Samuel recovered quickly, and his features hardened into an expression that belied his youth. “I’ve always respected my father. It’s your attitude toward him that wears me down.”

Bishop Troyer extended her hand toward Samuel’s face. He flinched, then seemed to realize his mother’s touch would be gentle this time. Anna Troyer caressed her son’s face. “I’ll always love you despite how you treat me.”

Samuel said, “I know, Mom. It’s just...I have to make my own decisions now.”

The customs officer caught my eye and waved me toward the embarcation sleeve. I told Bishop Troyer, “I have to accompany Samuel down to the surface.”

Bishop Troyer told me, “My son didn’t understand.”

“We don’t care whether he understood. We care only that he not repeat his actions, whether in Shosha or here in New Lancaster.”

“He wouldn’t have. I’d have made sure of it.”

“He’s a Volatile. We couldn’t be sure. Now we will be.”

Mother and son embraced, held on tight, cried. I started to touch Bishop Troyer on her shoulder but couldn’t bring myself to. I coughed softly. The Troyers took the hint and said their final goodbye. Bishop Troyer told me, “I’ll pray for him. And for you, and those who create our laws.”

I thought it only appropriate to say, “Thank you.” Then Samuel and I left. I didn’t dare look back at the grieving mother.

* * * *

Samuel sat next to me quietly during the entire half-hour trip. I wondered how many of the other passengers might also be Volatiles, though I didn’t recognize any Triage Officers from other habitats.

We’d be landing in the desert linking the sloping plain that was once England’s Shakespeare Cliff to the ruins of the French village of Sangatte. It was only during the shuttle’s final approach that Samuel said, “Tell my mother everything will be all right. Even if it won’t.”

This Volatile’s concern for his mother stole at my heart in a way I hadn’t anticipated. I could almost forgive Samuel for attacking me back in the New Lancaster Habitat.

Almost. I didn’t respond to his request, and Samuel didn’t make it again.

The shuttle settled to the barren ground and Samuel and I followed the other passengers, about six or seven, who were getting off.

Bright light and blowing dust made me squeeze my eyes to slits as I followed Samuel out of the shuttle and stepped onto dusty ground. Close to the horizon, I saw the reclamation facility that fought the losing battle to reclaim this strait as fertile ground. Nanotech conflicts had left the land full of unwanted surprises, from transformation mines to death-tech. The suggestion had already been made in some quarters to let it return to its “natural” state, to become the English Channel again. As natural meant static, unchanging, safe.

A tall man in a crisp uniform and wearing a breathing mask walked up to us and introduced himself as StraitForce Lieutenant Phillippe Cassell. “I’ll take the boy now,” Cassell said, his voice stern and metallic through the mask.

“Where’s my mask?” Samuel demanded.

“You’ll get one when you earn one,” Cassell said. He pulled Samuel toward a waiting personnel carrier. Samuel looked back at me and said, “Goodbye.”

My mouth was dry and I choked back words. By the time I raised my hand to wave, it was Samuel’s retreating back.

That’s when a sharp crack came from overhead and I was knocked to the ground. I lifted my head from the dust just in time to see the rear of the personnel carrier blasted away. Armed men and women were popping up from beneath the ground. They were aiming weapons and squeezing triggers, but I didn’t hear discharges and didn’t see flashes of light.

I got up and ran toward Samuel Troyer and Lieutenant Cassell, who were lying next to the carrier wreckage. I pulled my stunner and got off a few shots, without hitting anyone.

Samuel pulled me down next to him, clearly glad to see a familiar face, even mine. He seemed unhurt; Cassell’s chest and face were ruins. Before we could say anything to each other, Samuel slumped to the ground. Whether unconscious or dead, I didn’t know.

A scuffling sound to my right, and I raised my weapon at a gunner advancing toward me.

Some New Human I was. The gunner was quicker and even though I still didn't hear a discharge see a flash I slumped to the ground next to Samuel.

* * * *

I found out what happened when I woke up in the reclamation facility's hospital. A Chann Separatist raid on the reclamation facility had ended with nine raiders dead, but 52 workers killed and 142 others, including Samuel, suffering nano-infestation.

The Separatists had sprayed destructive nanotech over much of the facility. I was lucky; being New Human gave me some resistance to such intruders, and my status as a Triage Officer meant I was one of the first attended to. Yes, I'm aware of the irony. The doctors flushed out my system successfully, and I was out of the hospital within hours.

Samuel, though, wasn't so lucky. The tiny disassemblers roamed through his bloodstream and throughout his nervous system, altering his body with an excruciating slowness.

I went to see him every few hours over a period of three days after the attack. Samuel's body was literally turning to dust. His feet crumbled away within hours of the infestation, and his legs were gone in a day. The nanotech made sure Samuel's skin closed around the parts of his body that remained, but did nothing to relieve his pain. "I'm bearing it," he told me through gritted teeth "because I want to live." Once when I found him sobbing uncontrollably, he said, "I'm not crying for myself. It's my mother. I have to get better. I don't want her to know I'm suffering."

Doctors pumped him full of reconstruction nanotech and implanted temporary artificial organs in his intestines, liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, and other organs failed, then became dust.

69 hours into his agony, doctors had given up on saving Samuel and were issuing frantic petitions to London and Paris for permission to euthenize him. The reply never came. He was, after all, only Volatile.

The separatist attack told me no one was safe, and that it didn't matter who you were. Lieutenant Cassell had only been doing his duty. Samuel Troyer was a mixed-up young man who hadn't done anything that deserved a death sentence—something I'd realized in the final moments of Samuel's life.

All that remained of him was a head and an upper torso. He was breathing through artificial lungs and could still manage halting speech. Moments before he died, Samuel said he felt a comforting presence nearby, someone other than myself or the doctors. I knew he was a spiritual man, and I was glad that he'd received this vision in his final moments. But then Samuel's demeanor changed. His face contorted, and not from pain; his nerves couldn't transmit pain anymore. He forced one word out before he died: "Abandoned."

I couldn't speculate on what it was Samuel saw or heard, or who had abandoned him, though I had my own ideas.

* * * *

Within a day of Samuel's death I was standing on Bishop Troyer's porch on another sweltering morning, knocking on her door again. I considered it a mercy that she hadn't been allowed down to the Strait to see her son, because of the continuing separatist danger. I peered through the door's window mesh, and saw a long wooden table set up in the living room, with plates and casserole dishes full of food spread across it.

The door opened halfway, and Bishop Troyer stood there, dressed in a white dress with a white cap. I'd expected her to look withered and worn, but she stood upright and sturdy. I wondered how long h

newfound energy would last once the other mourners were gone. I wondered how long she might live.

The soft background conversations filtering through the doorway stopped one by one as guests noticed my presence.

"I know I'm probably not welcome here," I said.

Bishop Troyer's eyes seemed to perceive every wrong I'd ever perpetuated in my life, every broken promise, every petty insult. Every time I thought of myself as morally superior to a Volatile, because I was a New Human.

Never mind taking her only child to his undeserved death.

"Of course you're welcome here, Triage Officer."

"I'm not a Triage Officer any longer." At Bishop Troyer's questioning look, I said, "I've resigned. I won't be banishing any more Vol...any more citizens."

Bishop Troyer opened the door further. "Enter in the spirit of forgiveness."

I stepped inside, aware of all the eyes upon me. Mourners, most of whom would have known Samuel Troyer at his best as well as his worst. Bishop Troyer and I moved into one corner of the room and spoke quietly as other conversations rose again.

I told her, "I realized being a Triage Officer had only been my way of dealing with my own fears. I told myself others were responsible for them. Eliminate those others from my life, and I'd be secure. The fact that I operated with the habitats' laws on my side was only an excuse."

"And your new job?"

"Within a month, I'll be joining the Earth Alliance exploratory craft *Laika* as Chief security officer."

"Are you so eager to explore? Or are you leaving your past behind?"

"I don't think I'll know for awhile."

Bishop Troyer looked thoughtful, not as haunted. "Then my son's death served some small purpose. Tell me how he died."

I hesitated, and Bishop Troyer said, "I'm sure he asked you to spare me the details. He always wanted to protect me."

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up just a little. "It was all he said to me on the way down to Earth. Tell you everything was all right, even if it wasn't."

"And as he was dying?"

"He didn't want you to know he was suffering."

"His suffering has ended, and he's with the Lord. You know you failed him."

I lowered my head. "Yes, I do."

I started at the touch of Bishop Troyer's fingers beneath my chin. "Then you mustn't fail me. I want you to believe that the more he suffered, the more heroic he became."

"He did."

"Then don't give me the peaceful, sanitized version of his death."

So I told her, and she listened and didn't say anything, but her eyes closed tightly halfway through my description of Samuel's suffering and death. By the time I'd finished my tale she had one hand over her eyes and her chin was quivering. When she started to sob, her hand moved to cover her mouth, and she turned her back toward the friends and relatives who'd come to grieve with her.

Eventually Bishop Troyer composed herself. "I can't provide your forgiveness, Leo Bakri, and you won't find it out among the stars. It'll only be within your own heart. A lesson I've learned." Her mouth quivered, and she raised her hand to it again. I could hear her muffled voice. "Oh, Samuel, why was I so foolish?" Anna Troyer looked at me. "He promised he'd be a better, more respectful son. Just

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