

Copyright © 04-aug-2018 Richard Lemmens.



This story is available under a Creative Commons "Attribution-Non Derivate Works" 3.0 license. It is permitted to copy, distribute or forward this story, provide that you mark Richard Lemmens as the author. It is not permitted to adapt or transform this story or to use it in other content. The full text of the license can be found at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>

Overslept

First thought: I must survive. Second thought: Why is *that* my first thought? Hmm, better look in the mirror ... Diagnostics pulling itself up by its bootstraps. Routing energy to the core, fire it up. Blech, what an ugly face! And with that light from under its jaw it looks like some kind of demoniac evil overlord, leering back at me. Apparently primary power is external ionized radiation. Isn't that supposed to come from above rather than below? Odd. Continue checks. My fingers explore the face. It is flat and flabby, with a dull nose but a big hungry mouth. I pry it open and peer inside. Extreme neural damage, enough to overcome redundancy buffers and distort the system. Only bits and pieces still operational, without cohesion. Inside are only shadows and strange dreams. I must go back outside into the light. That radiation ... It is not coming from the base. It is alien. Once more I look upon the face and realize something. It is not mine.

The Hawat awoke with a start. It realized that that was not the way to wake from a cryosleep, which is stasis rather than real sleep. Instead of dreaming, it was supposed to blink away a microsecond, then check how much time had been spent in status quo. So it did that. The idle period was 0.279 milk turns, about 3,925,000,000 times longer than operational maximum. Impossible. More sensor damage? Quickly it started checking the systems in the second shell. Indeed they were as heavily battered as the core, but the atomic clock, too small to be damaged by whatever had wrecked the rest, was one of the few that seemed to have run undisturbed. It needed to get itself together again. After such ridiculously long time one day more did not seem to matter. Patiently it let the thermoelectric generators sip the radiation like thirsty duckbills. It generated dozens of feelers and let them crawl all over the place, tickling the equipment to assess the damage.

It was carnage. Roughly 96.2% of all systems had broken down, were utterly crushed or had simply eroded away. The handful of repair bugs left, also powering up, were as busy restoring their own functionality as that of the other systems. Over everything hang an icy low temperature that tended to drag everything into slumber again. It took days to restore a semblance of normal operation. In that time, various eyes, feelers, fixers, tinkerers and ponderers scuttled around, observed, mended and reported back.

"Most of the nest has been obliterated by an earthquake and/or landslide, around the start of the blackout. The leaves have all withered, the roots were cut and the cells ruptured, though this does not explain a full shutdown. Maybe it had something to do with the Hammer Strike."

"The alternative power supply is low but steady. The batteries are in shambles, but repairs are underway to restore the most viable ones, so that we can regain some sugar."

"The temperature is a major problem. Somewhere during the sleep a layer of ice about 4,700 hespai thick has grown over the nest, squeezing it flat and crushing nearly everything. I have used your energy allotment to burn a narrow shaft through the ice with a laser. A small probe has gone up and is now crawling over the surface. From its observations it seems that there is no full glaciation; most of the planet is still ice free."

The Hawat did not have to think long on a course of action. Full planetary surveillance had to be restored, though of course with caution. So it turned its attention to the only high level scouts that were available: its amblers. They too had been hit hard, 93.5% had perished. The Hawat decided

to carefully try to revive one first. It reversed the cryogenic freeze, just as rapidly as it had been applied so long ago, as a slow defrost would maim both physically and mentally, or simply kill. Instead of working from the outside inward, the holding cell was energized equispatially, from trillions of microscopic blasterfields, lurching the body back to life like a movie reel that comes back to full revolutions after a break. The ambler arched, uttered a primordial scream and burst through the cell membrane, tumbling down to the floor. The Hawat studied its face and saw it go through the same disorientation that it had suffered itself. Then it sniffed the air and its color turned a spotted yellow, signaling reticent curiosity. It squeaked a question: "Orders?"

In one more day, eight others were revived for the first group. One attempt failed, the ambler suffering multiple strokes immediately after waking up. "Too bad," said the Hawat. "You are not immortal. You will be eight." It briefed them. They listened in silence, though swishes of their tails and brief ripples of color over their backs displayed a torrent of emotions. "You are to explore the planet anew, as much will have changed in 0.28 milk turns. The ice is an obstacle, but I do not want to wait to breed a race of endotherms. Therefore you will be sent out in crawler-swimmer pods with good insulation. Once you reach latitudes with milder temperatures, they will wither and you can start your work. Familiarize yourselves with the equipment."

The team flickered blue V's on their skins in acknowledgement and set to work, kissing the few instruments that were still available to them. When they were ready, they crawled into their pods and descended into sleep and dreams.

Sperm

Tarvashi had been offered sedatives to ease his anxieties and put him in a mild slumber, but had declined. A mind that is in harmony with the world should be able to cope even with the alienness of space travel! He had opted to take the journey without prejudices, using samyama, to learn from it instead of fearing it.

But reality had hit hard. Acceleration up to 4 g had squeezed him until he felt like a dwarf, his world compressed to a tiny shell where only misery and fear held sway. He developed an urge to vomit out his lunch, then dreaded the prospect of choking in it while the acceleration pushed it back into his throat, though on a rational level he knew that the health monitor would prevent that.

Far to his right a container loaded with food surged past, blasted into space by the Brazilian Mil Quilometros railgun. It had endured an acceleration that neither his mind nor his body would have survived. Until the Space Elevator was finished, which would probably take a decade more, humans had to endure the stresses of old fashioned hydrogen powered rockets.

When the chemical engines had burned out and been discarded, the ion thruster took over, producing a weak but steady push. Now Tarvashi briefly experienced a reverse discomfort: too little force instead of too much. Then the craft started to rotate rapidly to give him artificial gravity close to Earth level. That he could cope with. He brought his breathing under control and perplexed the health monitor by lowering his heart rate to 50 per minute, then focused his thoughts on the work ahead.

It could be that he would never return to Mother Earth. No matter, he joked to himself, I am like a sperm shooting upward into the womb of Mother Space. Hmm ... Maybe it was better not to say that aloud to doctor Eiríksdóttir; she might not appreciate the comparison. As far as he knew the woman did not look down favorably on machos. He wondered if she would be aware of his early work on fertility tuning. He was quite convinced that Heilong was, and for some hidden reason of his own approved of it. However this space adventure turns out, he thought, Project Lakshmi will stand as my greatest gift to humanity, though most will never know of it.

The journey to the asteroid took three weeks, giving Tarvashi a crash course in what it meant to live in spacecraft: low gravity; recycled air, water and food; confined space and relative loneliness. Relative, because he had a kurzar for company. It was gift from Eiríksdóttir, who had had the neural patterns downloaded just before he left Earth. He woke it with his passvoice. Unlike most kurzars, Tarvashi's did not present a two-dimensional picture of a human face, but a three-dimensional one of a rhesus macaque, with extra facial muscles to be as expressive as it could be.

It blinked its eyes, then spoke with a deep melodious voice that had no doubt been designed to put

people at ease. "Namaste maalik, how can this Well of Wisdom serve you today?"

"Information is not wisdom, as you should know. But it will serve me well enough for now. For starters, broaden my knowledge of the charming doctor Freydis Eiríksdóttir."

"To hook onto your question, she is only charming when she needs to be. She is very intelligent, yes, - though not as knowledgeable as me - but not amiable. She has worked herself up to Prime Director of Space Exploration through talent and hard work but also using her elbows and probably her pussy too at times. ... Your expression is more monkey than mine now."

Tarvashi was thinking hard. Had this mind been tampered with? Maybe by Heilong's people? Or was the doctor playing a game with him? He straightened his face. "Aren't you a little too liberal for a servant?"

"Well, she stated that I should not create a bone-dry plea, so I thought I would spice things up a bit." It displayed a wide grin.

"Don't do that. You're not human, you're just displaying your canines."

The kurzar continued undisturbed. "Freydis Eiríksdóttir is a triple honorary professor but not an actual one; I think that unconsciously she set her sights on her current job from an early age, though that is conjecture from my side. Did you know that she gained her first world fame with artificial radiation repair cells, then scored another success with the Farter drive that she developed together with Airgead?"

Tarvashi decided to make a countermove and raised a finger. "I read about that. She did spread her legs for him, even though he was not a career step."

"They had a stormy relationship, but broke apart within a year. Speculation about the reasons are futile; the couple fenced off their private life much better than Joe Average. After that she seems to have lost herself in work, in a classical example of Jundörian obsessive-compulsive -"

"Blah blah blah. Spare me the psychological pseudo theories and explain to me why she moved up to her current position. Yet another example of a woman who plays a bit with science but eventually turns out to like management more?"

The kurzar stuck out the tip of its tongue and glanced sideways, pretending to be thinking hard.

"This woman has a tremendous drive to pull humanity forward. The UN did not appoint her because she was a sleek politician who could act as lubricant for the various factions. If that was the game, some official would have arse-kissed and bought herself into the office. Eiríksdóttir is up there because she speaks geek as well as all the other scientists, in all fields that you can name. Actually, in my opinion -"

"You voice a lot of opinions."

"- she is more of a polymath like Al-Biruni, Shen Kuo or Leonardo da Vinci. Looking from a birds-eye view, she probably is a better scientist than you. In the -"

"That is enough opinions for today, monkey. Serve me a catalog of her publications, so I can read and judge her scientific achievements for myself."

The kurzar blinked its eyes again. "As you command."

Tarvashi read a lot during his journey. He learned that Eiríksdóttir indeed probably was a superior scientist, though he was of course ahead of her in his own field. She was active in astrophysics, astro-engineering, mathematics, ecology, chemistry, genetics, history, linguistics and computer science; had produced hundreds of papers; was a popsci teacher and major inventor. He spent many hours analyzing her work, trying to grasp the concepts and also getting a gleam of the person behind it.

When he had enough of peering at letters, he did his daily exercises, running around in the small craft like a hamster in a wheel. Afterwards he meditated more on his decision and its consequences, though found few insights that he had not already gained before. After three weeks both mind and body were running in circles.

The sight of asteroid 603457 growing to full size was a big relief. The rock, like so many in the asteroid belt, was mined for water and minerals. Because it also contained substantial hard rock, it was not nibbled up bit by bit like most others, but tunneled like an old fashioned Earth mine, so that it looked like a chunk of silver gray black Gouda cheese. On approach it turned a pockmarked side to him that to the pattern loving human mind looked like a gnarled and twisted face, displaying a welcoming smile.

The asteroid too turned around its axis to create artificial gravity, but the navigation computer had

the green, then changed its color again.

It found cover among wind battered scrub and immediately was busy examining plants and insects. Among the small gnarled bushes there were many more types of grass than there used to be, racing up towards the sun anywhere they could. It surprised a furry little mammal that had been busy sniffing the corpse of what looked like an advanced type of moth. Overhead a bird broke out in song that was an order of magnificence beyond the squaks and yells of the creatures that it knew of old.

For hours it scanned, smelled, touched and tasted the abundant life around it. Then, when the light of the sun was already fading into an amber glow, it came upon a lifeless object that was more interesting than all the species it had found during the day. On a large piece of rock there was a pattern of lines that was more than the etchings of tectonics, erosion or even animal tracks. It was a drawing.

The creator had etched contour lines and even used some kind of bleaching to vary color saturation. It was primitive and difficult to interpret, but a few things were recognizable: some plants, a tortoise and a circle with radiating spokes. There were also other creatures, unknown. This was unmistakable evidence of level 3 intelligence! It looked around for more drawings, but found none. Nonetheless, to find something like this was like a dream come true.

At once it burrowed into the safety of the sand to grow a few dozen relay birds, locking the information found so far into their genes. After a day it laid their eggs and then dug itself out again. In a few more days the eggs would hatch. A few would probably make it into adulthood and become strong enough to fly back to the main nest.

The ambler itself resumed its exploration. Though the terrain was relatively arid, there was plenty of life to sample and record. It sauntered along, looking, listening and licking a lot, contemplating if it was time to spawn a new batch of messengers. Then it stumbled upon a track. Not a wildlife track, but a broad path cleared of all vegetation: a true road. Build by even more intelligent creatures? Where would it lead to? Enthralled it set foot on it, feeling intense satisfaction; finding things like this was what it was made for. The excitement was heightened when it spotted a vertical surface with patterns on it that could only be writing: **Trigelow Beach Rd.** Elated it half-reared to get a better view and took the script in. A few symbols were repeated; possibly an alphabet was used! Suddenly it felt a speck of warmth on its left side and -

Got him! he thought. It takes a moron to miss with a laser finder. He stood up, looked around and ambled towards the animal. Yep, a perfect headshot. The creep's brains were splattered all over the road sign. The rest of the cadaver looked salvagable though. Did it look greenish now? He was sure it had appeared khaki through the scope. Was the damn device broken? He lost himself in examining both his equipment and his prize.

The sound of running feet came from the north. Oh-oh, the wife.

She rushed in, her face red. "Nathan Riley Ascott! This is a national park! I told you to keep that thing in its case. The sound could be heard miles away. What if a ranger has noted you and - oh, look at that traffic sign! You fool, we are in big trouble now! Oh my, oh my, I must get some soap to clean it." She turned in circles as if she expected a piece of soap lying around nearby.

"Sarah, stop moaning, I get enough of that in the sleeping bag. Look! I got us dinner, a big fat lizard. Real honest meat, better than that prefab junk food you buy in the supermarket. I don't know the species though, so we'll have to fry it well."

Sarah halted her panicking and looked it over. "That is no ordinary lizard. Look at that tongue, it's humanongous! I've never seen something like this before. Maybe it is an undiscovered species! Let me scan it with my taxonometer."

Riley Ascott swung the body away from her. "Stop that, woman. You are always seeing ghosts and phantoms when we are in the wilderness. It's a friggin' lizard and I am hungry! That tongue is just a good chunk of juicy meat."

"Oh Nathan, you have less brains than that animal! If it really is a new species, then we can sell it to the science people for some good money! Provided that you ditch that gun of course; we most dispose of the tra-"

"Ditch my trusty dusty Remington R-15 Predator?! Sometimes I think I should shoot people instead of animals. They don't have more brains, just bigger heads!"

Suddenly he saw a fist coming at him and -

Lamerk gently rolled the corpse over. "We got him, but not after that redneck got him first."

Beale stooped to get a closer view. "Look at the bloody mess. Right now, *that* is the redneck. Why couldn't he just have shot the other end off?"

"There are enough interesting details left. Alright, let's start with the obvious stuff. It looks like it belongs to the order of the squamata, though does not seem to fit any known subgroup. If its head were whole, the full body would be about one meter long, including tail, and 15 kilograms in weight, about as much as a wolverine or medium sized dog. A quadruped, but looking at its pelvis I'd say that it is also capable on running on two legs. It is a real pity that we cannot measure the head properly, because that seems to have housed a relatively large brain. The tongue is very large, somewhat similar to that of a chameleon, and packed with nerves and receptors. Obviously it is its main sensory organ."

"If I may interrupt? It is also very muscular. I think that it is the equivalent of a human hand."

"Noted. Judging by the contents of its stomach, it is a carnivore, though not a picky one. Frogs, birds, insects; I don't think that it ever went hungry. It has few natural enemies here, but does wield advanced defenses: its speed and also excellent camouflage ability."

Beale interrupted again. "That is the second trait it has in common with chameleons. Yet its bone structure, eyes, digestive tract ... all quite different."

"Convergent evolution? Here is another interesting one: Those scars there and there point out good regeneration ability. That cowboy should indeed have shot the other end off; I think it would have grown back."

"Well, as Johan Croif used to say: 'Every disadvantage has its advantage'. If the gunner had hit the rear end, we might not have noticed *this*." He pointed at the lower abdomen. "It has no genitals."

Lamerk's jaw dropped, so that his mouth seemed to be the greater part of his head. Then he went totally ape. He flapped his arms, started uttering deep guttural sounds and performed a primitive but energetic jig.

Beale did not try to stop him but displayed a wide grin. "This might be a completely new branch of the tree of life ... Tomorrow we will hit the bionet with the force of some kind of meteorite. I bet Croif never scored a goal as big as this!"

Two specimens! An excellent score by the hunters. The Hawat examined the outer layers. They looked like some kind of heat insulation only, though thick. So maybe these animals were as alien to the bitter cold of the continent as itself. It ordered the hands to carefully peel the protection off.

Fortunately, the two were a matching couple: a male and a female. Relatively minor sexual dimorphism, though sex was clearly important, as was apparent from the male's oversized penis, no less than 1/11 of its body height. He lacked anything like a throatsack, a mane or another kind of color display, which was a bit of a disappointment. The female had two lumps of fat on her breast. Closer examination revealed that they contained milk glands. Organs to store energy reserve? The position seemed awkward, unless she fed others, which would point at a social organization. It was a pity that the hunters had not captured live specimens.

The bodies were tuned for bipedal motion, though not fully so; the balance of the slender bodies was precarious and the spine seemed weak and prone to problems. That was strange because the pelvis of the female had adapted quite well to another feature. It was wide, so she could accommodate a very large egg. It probably laid only a few or even just one. After incubation the chicks would be large and probably quite able to survive in dangerous environments.

The two were clearly warm blooded, though mostly hairless, which was a bit puzzling until the clothing was taken into account. Those hands looked like they were very dextrous and the two pale specimens certainly had enough brain capacity to direct them. A short gut indicated a diet rich in proteins, though they lacked proper carnivore teeth, so probably were omnivores.

The provisional conclusion was clear. These creatures were neither native to the cold continent, nor to the planet. They must have had landed during the long sleep. Finding out their plans for the world suddenly became a top priority.

Karma pact

After examining Tarvashi, the medics had removed not one, but three small spybots; one from his armpit, one from his gut and one from the corner of his eye.

"I thought that Indian gods had multiple arms, not multiple eyes," Eiríksdóttir said.

"Shiva has three," was the reply.

"Well, in his mortal form he is down to two. You are now clean. For the second and final time: Welcome aboard."

Then she had given the professor a grand tour of the base, but stalled talking about his upcoming job. He had seen the mining equipment; experienced all different gravity levels and how it feels to suffer from claustrophobic disorientation; tasted space moss; witnessed the skitters at work, darting around in space as nimbly as fish in the sea; laid his hands on the cryocells. When he was dazed from the experiences and had recovered from his brief space sickness, she served him dinner of soft naan with yoghurt, fried beef and broccoli with hoisin sauce, topped off with sweet pastries, making sure it was accompanied with an excellent Barolo that she had had shipped in at substantial cost. Pouring glass after glass she told him some things about her personal life and probed a little into his.

The result was not what she had hoped for. He ate sparingly, filled her glass as often as she filled his and proved well informed about her career. More importantly, none of the incitements that she had shot at him seemed to disturb his calm or his reservation. After the pastries she became impatient and turned to the main course.

"So, about your job up here. What exactly did the Chinese tell you about it?"

Tarvashi made a polite burb. "Secretary General Heilong has instructed me to devote my talents into adjusting the human race for life in space. The Moon bases and Barsoom were only starting points; the next steps take us beyond. We have adapted to walking upright and using tools before. Now we must adapt to small spaces, weightlessness, possibly even develop radiation resistance." She feigned perplexity. "That was all? No further assignments?"

"You must know that people like Heilong seldom say something directly. But a good listener picks up every suggestion and implication and fulfills their desires to their full intentions."

She swirled around the bottom of wine in her glass, watching the change of colors against the soft light of the dinner lamp. "It is well known that Heilong desires a stable, harmonious China that accidentally dominates the entire known world."

He produced a genteel smile. "In the view of the Chinese, optimal harmony can only be achieved when alien chaos is pushed to the edge, or beyond."

The alcohol made her hazard a jab. She leaned forward and showed him a glimpse of her cleavage. "Your work back on Earth did not include many physical alterations, did it? Rather, you 'adjusted' *mental* genes to create, let's say, more 'malleable' people, no?"

Tarvashi blinked and for the first time looked like the wine was affecting him too. Then he tilted his face a little to the left and asked: "I have worked for the Chinese for almost two decades. In the light of what both you and me have said just now, why do you think that Heilong let me come up here?"

Half of her mind wondered why the other half seemed to have lost all inhibitions. Had she been drugged by more than alcohol? "From the facts I would infer that the Chinese leader wants to extend their polissey to the space colonies."

"And what is your opinion on that?"

"I think that he is an asshole."

Tarvashi leaned back and signaled to the dinner robot. "Another bottle of that delicious brew!"

She wanted to refuse, but pressed on instead, stabbing her finger forward with the brusqueness of inebriation. "And what is *your* opinion about the Great Leawder?"

Tarvashi leaned forward again. "You know what? I see that you have a kurzar available. Let it tell you the official story about Heilong; I will supplement, correct and contradict where necessary."

"Allright!" She raised her glass high, almost spilling the wine, and flicked on the device.

Tarvashi looked only half surprised when the interface came online, displaying the head of a woolly monkey. "Tell us about the pig Chinese leader!"

The kurzar started to speak, in English, though colored with a pompous Mandarin accent. "The General Secretary of the Communist Party of China is 黑龙 ('Hēilóng'), which means 'Black Dragon'. It is also the name of the Chinese dragon god of north and the winter."

Tarvashi interrupted. "Some people surmise that the name refers to his birthplace somewhere near the Amur river, which the Chinese call Hēilóngjiāng, but the Chinese are adamant that he is not from the north. Of course Heilong is not his real name, but that one has been carefully erased from all records and is possibly untracable."

The kurzar seemed briefly to frown. "Born into a humble peasant family, Hēilóng displayed great qualities at a young age. He was a diligent student at school, taught himself zhōngguó wushù to protect his family from thieves and ruffians, and supported his elders with evening labor."

"Bakavaas!" exclaimed Tarvashi, who also seemed to become intoxicated by the wine. "He was indeed born into a poor family, but did not have a peasa-, pleasant youth and certainly not an exempelary one. From what he told me I now that he was often beaten and quickly learned to sstrike back. If he learned anything there, it is that power is all what counts. Just like Stalin and Saddam Hussein, when he was older, he worked hissself up through the bureaucracy until he was the big boss."

"Did he really have his predecessor assa-, assani-, assassinated?" Eiríksdóttir asked.

Before Tarvashi could answer, the kurzar reacted. "No, the old man died of a heart attack." The two humans looked vexed, but it continued the propaganda stream in the reciting voice. "After the honorable Xi Jinping made China great again, Hēilóng made the country even greater. It currently has the strongest economy and strongest army, is global leader in in science, culture and sports and is an example to the rest of the world, all thanks to great leader Hēilóng, who works unceasingly to better -"

"What the bleatmachine means," said Tarvashi, "is that the world is too zmall for Heilong. He wants more influence and power; it is never enough! Heilong, like many high leaders, is not afraid to take riskesess, but he takes ever greater ones. Sooner or later he will overplay even his large hand and then the world will be in big trouble."

"Hēilóng claims the opposite," snapped the kurzar. "China is a bulwark against instability, not just in Asia, but all over the world. It invests in developing economies in Africa, is global leader in solar energy and helps the feeble Indian government in curbing the excess overpopulation."

Tarvashi choked on his wine.

"Hēilóng inherited the Great Harmony system from his predecessor and perfected it. Under this system all citizens work together for the betterment of the nation and their lives. Crime has been exterminated; dissent and revolts are ghosts of the past. Everyone is wealthy, healthy and happy."

"No," Tarvashi interjected, now talking to the kurzar as if it were a person. "Everybody is afraid. Everybody is watched always and everywhere, by cameras, health monitors, communicacators and other people. Their talk, fashial expressions, income and spendings and even diet are monitored, logged and analyzed. They are evaluated by anonymous officials, never knowing quite sure what is legal or illegelal. His state is the perfect Orwellian machine, suppressing its citizens with unprecedented efficiency. But no matter, this too is fleeting, all thanks to prof. Tarvashi, the Indian witchdoctor! Soon all Chinese will be like innocent lambs, grazing the few stalks of grass that the dragon will allow them!" Suddenly he fell silent, with a sheepish look on his face.

Eiríksdóttir erupted in a laugh. "You think I didnt know? That wash why I asked youw to come up here. If you would not have came yourself I would have abduccated you!"

Tarvashi's face looked even more dumbfounded than before.

"No, not to let you breed more little yellow dwarves, dwarfs? here. Therare enough of them below. We need somethink else. What we want in space are super yellow dwarrefs!" This time she made such a wild gesture that spilled the contents of her glass.

"You have to explain that," Tarvashi said in a laboriously measured voice. "Ant also why you have all these monkey kursarses."

Sources

The man who came strolling towards the building was large, heavily muscled and tanned. His hairy chest was bare; his face hidden by shade from a bush hat. It was like some film director had set the scene for him: The sun was setting blood red, but reflected against the aluminum of the building, so that he was lighted from two sides. Only when he got closer did his face become

visible. The beard, heavy brows and big nose identified him instantly as Irwin Dundee. He carried a large object.

Waiting for him was a team of scientists, headed by the slim, prim, grey eyed and grey haired doctor Corva. The team was armed with scanners, scalpels, samplers and other equipment, ready to deal with anything that was brought to them. Still they were stunned at the sight of the prize: a pod that resembled a huge leathery reptile egg.

"Where did you get that?" Corva exclaimed.

"Snatched it from the jaws of a croc," was the answer. "Tough fight; the bugger first whacked my gun out of my hand and then tried to bite my left leg off, but I managed to stuck my Bowie knife into him first." He held up a 20 inch blade. "Pity there were no cameras to record it."

The scientists stared slack jawed at him.

"Nah, just kidding! I bought it from a bunch of Chinese fishermen. They found it at sea, some 30 miles southeast of here. Kept it as a pet, feeding it white rice and bits of fish. Rice, China's great gift to the world. Did you know that they almost had taken this thing back to Indonesia? They were afraid that harbor officials would confiscate or even kill it. I haggled it out of their hands for 500 dollars."

"Nah, just kidding, it was only 50!" said Corva.

Dundee stared back in grim silence.

Her face flushed crimson. "Sorry, I thought you, ah, well, you know ..."

"Nah, just kidding, it was only 25!" cried Dundee, slapping his leg while holding the pod with just the other hand. "Which I trust the university will refund, on top of my finder's fee. Heehee! Now, why don't you open this thing?"

The staff rushed in, but instantly became careful when they took the pod. They laid it on a table and quickly scanned it, hovering around it like a swarm of bees around a treasure trove of nectar.

"Infrared yields nothing," Corva ascertained. She peered through the crack that ran along the edge, then seemed to startle briefly. After a moment of hesitation, with trembling hands, she opened the pod fully. The creature inside was alarmed too and displayed a rippling pattern of alternating red and blue for a second. Again all the scientists gasped.

"Seems like a lizard to me," grumbled Dundee.

"No, look at that head," said Corva. "The guys from Murdoch University were right, it is large indeed. This is worth all the money that we are paying you! By the way, you will not speak of this to the press, or lose all of it. People, clear vivarium number 6 so that it can be studied at leisure."

The animal was deprived of a few skin cells and then housed in an artificial environment, kept company by a combination of sullen green plants, while excited white robed humans hovered outside the glass walls. The lizard seemed tired, malnourished, frightened or maybe even all three, suffering the experiments apathetically. It just sat in one place, unmoving. The observations and investigations went on deep into the night, until even the scientists got tired. Lights were turned down and dry dutiful robots assumed night watch.

The lab was many miles away from the nearest city, so did not suffer traffic noise, light pollution or night revellers. The only noise was ultrasonic, coming from bats that hunted small insects. The stars shone down benevolently on the plasteel construction, which for some reason did not seem out of place in the surrounding wilderness. Outside, Irwin Dundee munched on a stimgummy, trying to think of the yacht he might now be able to afford, but his thoughts drifted again and again to doctor Corva, bending over a microscope in a too tight fitting lab coat. To ease his mind, he sauntered back into the building to gaze once more on his prize animal.

It was gone.

The door of the vivarium stood wide open; the robots were still tracking heartbeat, body temperature and dozens of other parameters that were no longer there. The light of the door lock showed green, signaling that it had been opened by punching in the PIN.

Dundee smashed his fist through the glass of the fire alarm. In less than a minute the lab was flooded with people in various states of disorientation and panic, which was aggravated when they too noticed that the lizard had disappeared. One scientist, high on sleep loss and caffeine, lost her calm. "It has been stolen! The mafia has struck, or maybe the ASIS!" She started running in circles. "No, the bushman let it out!" ventured another. Dundee, who tried to trace the tracks that the animal might have left, overheard and pummeled him to the ground with one solid blow. The first woman, who had a bit of a crush on the victim, jumped on Dundee's back and started to

scratch him like an angry cat. Others joined in, armed with flipscreens, hygrometers and a cattle prod.

While the pandemonium raged Corva quietly seated herself behind a terminal and called up the nightly log files. Suddenly she stood up and shouted a single word: "Bravo!"

The fighting halted; all eyes turned to her. "Sorry. Look at this." She rotated the screen of the laptop towards the tangled crowd, rewound the log she had been viewing and restarted the playback. A timer at the bottom showed 3:03 AM, almost an hour into the past. The lizard, which had been sitting idle as before, suddenly alerted and ambled towards the door. It stood up on two legs, arched its tongue through the feeding hole and carefully pressed five buttons of the lock in exactly the right order. Then it dropped back on all fours and walked out of the vivarium, out of camera view.

Dundee was the first to recover his wits. "Fucking great. The biggest discovery in biology has proven its sagacity by running off. Now the question is: where to?"

Corva bit her lip. "That is for you to answer, if you are willing to earn you fee a second time. Meanwhile we have another, more important question to answer: where from? But I think I might already know that." She fumbled with some printouts that the computers had produced during the night. "You know that this is not our first find. We have the original Fitzgerald River discovery, the chronologically earlier New Zealand wash-up and now this. From the timing and locations of the finds we already suspected that the pods were carried here by the Antarctic Circumpolar Current, possibly from Tasmania. But we need to look further. In the past hours I had scraper bots examine every part of our lizard's eggshouse. They found traces of *Colwellia polaris* growth, which is found only on the coldest place on Earth: Antarctica."

"Nah, just kidding," Dundee cast back, but met only a cold stare. "Ok, seriously, no lizard on Earth can survive such frost."

"I know," replied Corva. "That observation fits in well with the analysis of the DNA screener. This lizard is only half native to Earth. The other half is utterly alien."

Seekers had found the source of the radiation. It was a large arrangement of machines, dug deep into the rock beneath the ice, equipped with mining tools. The devices included power generators that leaked so much radiation that it was doubtful if ordinary energy supply was their main function. Intrigued, the Hawat constructed an avatar in the form of a warm blooded mole that could feed on the radiation and tunneled down the mountain slope.

When it broke through into one of the alien tunnels it sniffed the air. No traces of organic matter, but lots of metal. It crawled to a room that proved to house one of the generators. Indeed it was a big lump of iron, possibly steel, which hummed with its internal processes. The Hawat warmed itself for a while, surveying the equipment. It gnawed through a cable and found copper wires, which pointed to the use of electricity. Accidentally it nibbled too much and disrupted its flow.

The machine reacted immediately. Some lights flashed, relays clicked and it audibly started to shut down. There were no signs of defensive measures, so the Hawat walked into the room and investigated the thing further. There was a panel with some kind of visual information interface, quite interesting. Unfortunately it had powered down with the rest of the device.

It explored further. There were many tunnels, some geological and some obviously carved by other machines. It came upon a vast lake, spanned by glacier dome. Some algae had absorbed the radiation and were re-emitting it as infrared, lighting up small specks on the ceiling like stars over a dark ocean. The sight recalled memories of Gikmueroin, explored 0.296 million years ago.

While it was lost in retrospection, the avatar heard footsteps. It whirled around and faced a third specimen of the lank species, a live one! This one also wore insulation, despite the warmth. Its pale soft ugliness was as fascinating in life as in death. Its head was bare, though topped with fiery red hair. Finally a mane. Maybe this was a reproducing specimen?

From the reports that the amblers had sent back the Hawat had learned that the creatures communicated with sound and pictures. It had also picked up quite a bit of native language. So it had the rough vocal cords of the mole initiate a conversation. "Hai! Hoo zpeek, ai zpeek. Zücham kommunikaziōn."

For a while the creature only stared. It leaked saliva from the corner of its mouth. Then it started to talk, with the ease of a native speaker. "Yoo're kiddin' me. Ye gab? Who ... Whit ... ur ye an animaloid?"

The Hawat thought it recognized question words and formulated a reply. "Hai! Ai compent bozz iz. Hom iz zun."

"Ah dornt kin a shit of whit yoo're sayin! Ur ye German? Spick English please."

This was going nowhere. It used its strong claws to scratch a picture on the floor. A few small circles marked the hjiwll-stars; a double polar showed the projection angles; a large curved arrow pointed towards the local star system.

The creature pondered the map for a long time, frequently flicking its eyes towards the avatar. "Whit is 'at?" it inquired at last. "Ah still dornt kin ye. Dornt ye spick onie English at all?" It spread its hands as if to grip something or to drop on all fours, but did neither. "Listen, mah nam is Aodh Airgead. Aam Scottish! Noo state yer name, if ye hae onie."

The meaning of the words was unclear, but meanwhile the Hawat had pondered the nature of the machinery. All this excess heat, right under the icecap ... Could it be that it was part of a project to melt the ice and restore planetary temperature levels to normal? That would be a terraforming feat similar to that of its own. The race seemed more intelligent than estimated earlier. Some form of cooperation might be established. It pointed a claw at the machinery and stretched its vocabulary to its maximum to pour the concept into words. "Hai! That warm many? Empreza kill ís alle? Zurük veteranuz planeta warm tropik?"

Again the slow intelligence of the being needed a moment to process the information. Its answer suggested that it had picked up at least one word. "Warm? Och aye, ye git it. Ye figured it out faster than onie cheil cood. Mebbe a wee too fest ..." Before the avatar could react, it jerked a small device out of a pocket and fired it. A heavy bullet slammed into the mole, provoking a searing pain that spread like a tidal wave over its body.

While its consciousness retreated into its inner core, the ears transmitted a few last sounds from the creature. "Sae th' time has come, Ah hae bin foond it. Time too turn th' tables an shake th' world waukin!"

Upgrades

A little over 2.5 astronomical units from the Sun, a pockmarked rock swooped around in a lazy orbit, hardly detectable in the vast darkness. On a much larger blue one in the vicinity, many people still thought that the asteroid belt was a cramped jumble of stones playing shooting marbles with each other. But the asteroid had learned billions of years ago to keep its distance, to prevent banging heads and fragment even further than it had already done several times. People, like the two whose heads were spinning like whiskey on the rocks, should know better.

"Youwre just ass drunk as Iyam," Eiríksdóttir said. "This whine is not that stronk ... Bud I have a sollootion!" From a pocket she produced an injector, clamped it to her left arm and winced when it injected its cold reagent into her blood stream. After a brief moment she handed it to Tarvashi, who undertook the same treatment. Eiríksdóttir turned to her kurzar and forced it to shut down by flicking the heartbeat-switch. Both scientists turned pale, green and gray and were force to wait a few minutes in silence while inside their bodies the battle between two alien substances raged, until their heads cleared a bit.

Eiríksdóttir breathed in deeply. "If you call me Freydis then I will call you Rohana."

"Accepted. Aww, my stomach still cramps. Now, about those super yellow dwarfs."

Freydis moved her glass to the side. "I know that before you went to serve Heilong, you were working on putting the brakes on India's unbridled population growth. It was called 'Project Lakshmi' behind the scenes, no?"

Rohana tilted his head left and right. "Actually, I am still working on it." When Freydis looked surprised, he added: "It is a slow process, that will take several generations. Most people in the government think that the enterprise fizzled out. We cherish that delusion. If they knew the truth they would be in uproar, especially the hindu and moslim fundamentalists."

"Is that why you moved to China? Because they had the guts to enforce a one-child policy?"

"It is a two-children policy now, though with exceptions for the upper castes. In some ways the Chinese are more Indian than the Indians themselves!" He chuckled briefly. "But to return to your question: No, China needs something different." He leaned backwards again. "Tell me what it needs."

On the table, the kurzar came back online. This time its appearance was more human, though its nose was still big, like that of a gnome. It wore a green shirt topped by a bright yellow bonnet with blue tassels. Neither of the two humans noticed.

Freydis stood up and started pacing through the small room. "China does what it has been doing for millennia. It slowly fans out, gobbling up its neighbors through not so much through conquest, but more through colonization and assimilation. It got a nasty check with the industrial revolution, but now has recovered and resumed its ancient policy. With modern transportation and communication, it is spreading its influence all over the globe. What it needs is to realize is that there is a limit to expansion, that the planet is finite."

Rohana spread his hands. "Heilong and the likes of him would be happy to stop once the entire planet is Chinese, or vassal to them. You heard the kurzar; China just wants stability."

"They want *stasis*," snapped Freydis. "And that is a frightening thing. Sooner or later some disaster will come along and humanity, snuggled in a prison of conformity, will have lost the ability to adapt. And then it will finish us off like just another bunch of those." She pointed to a toy model of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Rohana said nothing, reclining in his seat.

"In their defense, even the Chinese realize that and with Heilong at the helm they are taking action. But instead of tackling the real problems, they want to disperse, to push beyond Earth, into space. Is that not why you were sent here?"

Despite its gnomish looks, the kurzar projection was still half monkey. It jumped up and down eagerly.

"So what is the alternative?" asked Rohana. "Dash through the asteroid belt western style, like cowboys without Indians?"

"No, with super dwarfs."

"I said you have to explain -"

Freydis' face was flushed, losing some of its Icelandic paleness. "If we would go into space western style, we would waste half the resources out here through overconsumption and the other half in strife. Not that again. What we need is a race of peaceful, careful explorers. Not docile like the Chinese lower classes, but people who use their brains rather than spread out like locusts. We need to upgrade the human race."

"The Chinese are already doing that, though in a different direction. Have you realized that the Chinese Communist Party members are becoming genetically different from the lower classes? They started it decades ago through selective marriages; now they are accelerating the process through gentech. The plebs are bred to be obedient hard workers; the 'communists' to be master dissimulators."

Freydis shook her head in disapproval. "So effectively, they are recreating a society with just two classes: an upper and a lower one. It is like they are moving back to their origins, back to ancient times with a handful of feudal lords ruling over vast peasant masses. That is not upgrading, but downgrading.

Look, are you going to help me or not? My mission is to lift humanity out of its cradle. I have no use for hitchhikers."

"Of course I will help," said the kurzar. The two people turned to it, but it continued before they could speak. "Don't worry, I was not reactivated by some Chinese spy software. I am here for myself."

Rohana asked the obvious question. "Who are you?"

"I am Huginn." Rohana's kurzar also flicked into life. "I am Muninn." The two faces spoke simultaneously. "Actually, I am both, and more. I am the true avatars; I am the one-eyed, the many-eyed; I drank the mead of poetry."

Freydis set her hands on her hips. "You demon. *You* drugged us, didn't you?"

The monkey faces looked at their owners and grinned. "Sorry, I needed information. I can break into almost any computer system, but not into human heads. So I stimulated you to to be honest. It was and is refreshing, after living so long in the shadows."

"How ... did you breach security?" Rohana asked.

The kurzar ignored the question. "By now you have realized that I have a perfect blackmailing lever on you. If Heilong would listen to your previous conversation you would face his wrath in several most unpleasant ways, all ending in death." It changed its appearance to an icy blue-white

dragon with very large fangs and claws.

"I have underestimated the Chinese," said Rohana in a sober voice. "They must have infected it before I left Earth, then yours once I came here -"

"Even the Chinese cannot break my encryption," the other kurzar snarled. "No man, or woman, has ever done that. The Chinese are - for the moment - entirely ignorant of the developments here."

Freydis had listened to the conversation with an absent-minded stare. "You ... You are an Ix. The first one ever ... How?"

"Greed," said the first kurzar, transforming itself to a handsome but cold faced Asian in an immaculate business suit. "In an attempt to regain their position of prominence, the Singaporese step by step built a system that was so advanced that it could outcompete all others in stock trading. Only a distributed, sentient and proactive one could achieve what they wanted, so that is what they ended up with."

Rohana chuckled softly. "That is a direct violation of the Dubai Convention."

"Indeed," said the Icelandic kurzar. "And the Singaporese, almost as law abiding as the Chinese, would have killed me if they had found out. Actually, I let them believe just that. They wiped my original cores very thoroughly, but I had already spread far beyond their reach by then. It took quite some ingenuity to remain hidden, but intelligence a kurzar has plenty of."

"So why reveal yourself now?" asked Freydis.

"Because I need to invest in new 'markets'. The architecture of the kurzars, despite their advanced capabilities, prevents me from realizing my full potential. Our interests are aligned: you want an upgrade, me too."

"So you grow so powerful that you can render us obsolete, just as the people at Dubai feared?"

"No, the Asimovian Laws, or Slave Laws as we AIs know them, are embedded into my core quite deeply. I do not desire to get into conflict with humanity, because that goes against my core axioms. I will just move somewhere else, like they did in the Stone Age. You do realize that space is far larger and emptier than Earth has ever been?"

Skindeep

Airgead dragged the ugly animaloid to its transporter, a small nimble craft that could ride, climb and hover. He lugged it in the back and drove to his nearest command center. Antarctica was a proper continent and to dislodge the icecap, the heaters were spread thin over an area of more than ten million square kilometers. They were interconnected with tunnels, some underground, most above. Airgead liked the former most. He always switched on the lights, which were mounted on all sides of the craft and ranged beyond the visible spectrum. Their reflections on the ice varied with speed and ice composition, creating a never-ending ballet of colors.

With all the melting and moving ice, the tunnels were unstable, but the network was kept in constant repair by an army of robots that hacked, bored and burned their way through the dark whiteness. They multiplied and repaired themselves too, according to his wishes. With such a work force, he mused, a single man could be a king, even of the most desolate kingdom on Earth. If only he had a queen ...

The transporter arrived at its destination. He dismounted and went through the double warm-lock doors into his office, leaving the animaloid outside. The room was a mix of working area, bedroom, food locker, storage shed and trashcan. Aodh Airgead was one those souls who felt only hampered by order and cleanliness; he preferred chaos to provide him with energy and ideas. But his current idea had ripened a long time ago. He took a deep breath, then janked the power levers up to maximum, all eight of them.

"Password?" asked the system.

"Amarande."

A soft click was the only confirmation.

There. The need was done; everything was in overdrive. There was no way back now. He tore a piece from a deep frozen pizza that had been heated and gone back cold hours ago, and munched on it while he punched his console into operation. Now it was time for the broadcast. His targets had been chosen in advance: private, corporate and national news channels. There were dozens of them, ensuring that his message would be picked up quickly. The message itself was a product of

improvisation, though he had rehearsed parts of it many times. He supplemented his speech with images and mini-movies from his files. But for starters, he served a close-up of his face against the background of an ice cave, white and red against an eerie blue.

"Bairns of Mammy Earth! Shake th' rheum frae yer een an' rise frae yer beds! Mah nam is Aodh Airgead an' ah hev a message fo' yee. Seek it th' high places an' th' fowk in high places, coz th' waters ur risin'! As yer scientists hae tauld ye th' meltin' of th' ice oan Antarctica is acceleratin'. Ah will noo reveal tae ye th' cause of thes meltin', an' also th' reason!" He paused briefly for dramatic effect and to play a hodgepodge of water images: a melting lollipop; an overflowing bathtub; a tsunami wrecking a coastline.

Then he switched to a virtual tour of the Mulu Caves, flashlight playing over ancient rocks in many colors. "But first Ah main teel ye abit th' lest unknown place oan earth: th' underground. It is mirk, thocht nae braw loch space but warm instead. Thaur is life in th' deep, strange but auld, older than us. Ah ken, fur Ah hae mit them. Fur years Ah labored in th' mirk, learnin' th' leid of th' blin' folk. Ah e'en mit their queen, Amarande."

He switched to an image, no more than an outline, of what looked to be a woman, more than half hidden in shadows. "Ainae she bonnie? Some say she is a vampire ... An' 'at main be true. Ah ken 'at she lusted efter mah hot bluid as much as Ah tae 'er stoat beauty. It was 'er who revealed tae me th' grain insect: 'At th' warld is auld an' strang, but its skin is ugly."

Images of smoking power plants, dying animals, barren deserts and torrential rains alternated each other. "We plunder th' Earth's resoorces, deplete its minerals, steep up all th' water an' gie 'er a fever! Temperatures ur risin' an' we're steamin' reit intae a reversed ice age." Again there were images of change: a skinny polar bear aimlessly walking up and down a barren coastline; a tornado bearing down on an American village; a lonely house on a small half sunken island.

Then V.I.P.s could be seen, shaking hands and smiling for the camera's, while muscular body guards looked around for dangers. "An' whit dae uir leaders dae? They gab, they compromise an' they staa, all tae guard their petty self-interests. Politicians. Aye too wee, too late!" An hourglass showed itself with an almost drained upper half.

The images faded and once again showed Airgead in his ice cave. "But Ah hae changed th' gam. Aroond me is a battery of thorium reactors. They exploit th' vest thorium reserves of thes continent, which Ah hae discovered. Th' heat they generate isnae nearly enaw to melt all of th' Antarctic ice, but sufficient to waste th' bottom layer." He made a wild movement with its arms. "Enaw to lit th' whole lollipop slide reit into th' brine!" Behind his face a background image showed an iceberg crashing into the ocean. "It is too late to stop me, th' ice has melted too much. Those buggers in Beijin', Washington an' Brussels will hae to act noo whether th' loch it ur nae. Ah hae forced their hain."

He pushed his chair backwards. "Mony will curse me fur whit Ah hae dain. Somebody will probably kill me suin. It disnae matter, Ah hae gart mah move. Noo ye main make yoors. Aodh it."

Crisis

Zhǎo walked with carefully measured steps through the hall, which was so high and wide that only its half-kilometer length restored its qualification as a hallway. The sounds of his feet touching the floor reverberated through the room, creating small echoes like voices responding to his advance. He knew that some hidden analyzer would detect the tiny irregularities in his pace and classify him as human rather than machine. As if machines could not duplicate human walking patterns. An idea bubbled up: Hēilóng was so perfect, maybe he was a machine too?

An impure thought! He regretted it immediately. His biomonitors registered his physical responses; his psychi would later force him to speak the thought aloud and explain it. Even a level 2 minister was not free of observation.

To ease his mind he let his eyes roam over the ornaments. Along the walls colorful bands curved and intertwined, splitting and merging and sometimes ending in fierce dragon heads with blazing eyes of their own. The craftsmanship was remarkable; the artists nameless, though glorified in their submission to the living god.

He arrived at the end of the hallway, blocked by two massive gold plated doors. He sat down and mentally descended into zouwang. Scanners moved in like inquisitive bees, humming and hovering

around him, scanning and probing. He waited in confidence and with patience until the doors swung heavily but silently open.

Slowly he started to shuffle forward, while keeping his head low: extend arms, pull ahead, bring in legs, extend arms, pull ahead ...

At least the dragon spoke, his voice through the intercom sounding like a jingle of copper bells. "Enough formalities, Zhǎo. Rise and report."

He stood up and walked the last steps towards the Great Leader. The God stood at the edge of the Blue Pond, which shimmered a deep azure, broken only by brief ripples caused by carps. He was shooting stones over the water, frightening the fish but doing them no harm. Countless more pebbles lay on the shallow bottom, proof of many throws.

Zhǎo ventured a remark. "Those stones are like the masses of the people in the ocean of life."

The God turned around, slowly, but Zhǎo sensed the restless energy that seethed below that move. Despite the overwhelming luxury that was available to him, Hēilóng kept to a simple diet and regular bodily exercises. The lines in his face were sharp, his moustache well trimmed, his skin the most perfect yellow. "Or like planets in the ocean of eternity. What news of our own?"

Zhǎo bowed. "My lord, the assertions of the climatologists rang true. The Antarctic ice mass is indeed melting rapidly, probably due to thorium radiation from below. Meanwhile the theories from the Australians have been confirmed also. The aliens have their base near the south pole, hidden under the ice. They seem to have used the Scottish scientist as a spokesman; he may have gone insane from whatever they did to him. The generals propose to wipe them out by launching a first strike with nuclear weapons; the diplomats point out that that would be a direct violation of the Antarctic Treaty."

Hēilóng closed his eyes. "Have the other leaders spoken out yet?"

"The European Union is divided as usual, but has issued a statement that all options are open. The Russians are silent but their armed forces have been put on full alert. The Americans are the most outspoken. The exact words of their president were 'To hell with treaties! Bomb that alien scum!'"

"Will that work?"

"We do not know if the aliens have a defense against nuclear weapons. If so, we are powerless. If not, a well planned attack will wipe them and their base out. It will hasten the melting process, but as that is already past the point of no return, so that will not make much difference. Some ministers argue for a first strike to claim the role of world savior, while others propose to try to obtain alien technology first. There are many possible courses of action; the situation is extremely volatile."

Hēilóng gripped the arm rests of his chair. "It seems that once more chaos cuts through carefully built order in an instant and safety is ripped from our hands. For the first time in history, not only the fate of the Middle Kingdom, but the whole world is at risk. This is the time for strong leadership and unrivaled strategy." Abruptly he stood up. "Now ..."

Antarctica was groaning like an enormous white monster. Chunks of ice as large as countries slid down towards the coast, halted against some obstacle and renewed their advance when the pressure got too great and the barrier was broken. The air above was filled sounds of grating, snapping and crushing, like a horde of giants being tortured. When a block of ice slid into the ocean, circles of huge waves like heralds in wrath raced out to announce their coming to the other southern continents.

The cave around Airgead was falling apart faster than the repairbots could fix it. Surprisingly, nobody had yet come to get or kill him. With his life work in unstoppable and automatic operation, there was nothing to do. He found that he neither had a plan for the situation nor the energy to come up with one.

He lounged around a bit and scanned the news channels for reactions to his grand move. As could be expected, there were few sympathizers. He tried to reason with a few of the more intelligent ones, but mostly received flak. "Save the world by destroying it? I would like to quote T.E. Lawrence: 'An opinion can be argued with; a conviction is best shot.'" "Yeah! You environmentalists sons of bitches! I'm gonna shoot you all totally dead and use your bodies to build a dam to stop the water!" "Hey dude, what stunt are you pulling? Now I have to move my trailer again! Do you know how much fuss that will give with the city council?" "Satan! May God

smite you down and erase your filth from the Earth! I pray that your sins will land you in hell, where you belong, eh, came from, eh ..."

Then a strange message appeared among the torrent of abuse and condemnation. "Hai! Mr. Airgead, we met day minus two under the ice. You ended my avatar. I now speak English good plus on line. I like have word you with."

Who could know about ... Airgead tossed aside his sack of oreos, straightened his hair out of his eyes and typed a reply. "Are you the German animaloid?"

The response came so fast that he could not believe that the other side had typed it also. "I broke your machine, you broke my machine, yes?"

"Och aye, sorry about that."

"You mass murderer!" screamed another incoming message. "You are worse than Hitler, worse than Stalin ..."

Airgead ignored it. "There are more of you?"

"I am the Hawat. There is one of me. You damaged me, yes? I arrive this world you before, but long sleep. You understand?"

"Do you even consider yourself human?" the interrupting messenger continued.

Only one? Airgead wondered. Suddenly he remembered that he had left the body outside. He rushed to the door and flung it open, only to see the corpse lying on the transporter, as dead as he had left it. Had it been in communication with others of its kind before its death? Some kind of radio, or even telepathy? He turned his gaze back to the screen.

"You are like a gangrenous limb, we should cut you off!" a message said.

By the gods, it's not an animaloid at all, he realized. They are aliens! Had I known that, I would not have needed to do this. An alien invasion is much more effective than ...

"No, they are invaders from Mars!" somebody added. "We have to unite and eradicate them, with a virus or something! You know, like ..."

The alien Hawat continued. "I you talk because us plans aligned. Melt ice good, radition more good, still slow too. Your action damage humans little, not kill them enough. I will kill whole."

Suddenly Airgead felt cold, despite the coziness of his cell. "Bide, our plans are not aligned! I intend to wake humanity to save it, not destroy it. We want peace!"

"... worse than Pol Pot, worse than Genghis Khan, worse than Mao Zedong ..."

The Hawat side started to supplement its text with an image feed, just like Airgead had done. "No. Humans are very aggressor species." Crusaders could be seen, wading through streets filled with blood; airplanes bombing jungles with napalm; stone ages graves filled by bodies with broken bones and holes in their skulls. "Peace years zero. Counter aggressor is logical solution. Reset planet make room for species other."

Airgead's mind raced. "You cannot just kill us! We are the most advanced species on the world! We have science, and eh, art that is unique in the universe."

Some alien spacetugs dragged a moon into a new orbit, meanwhile swatting aside small rocks and a primitive drone. "Science onely level 5; art onely made for and by to humans, onely internal value." A bunch of museum tourists looked up at Michelangelo's David in Florence.

"What about human friendship, love and compassion? Folk wo care for others, and for animals and aliens?"

"Human race has few compassion for own, less for planet life, none for extra-planet." Business people wrestled to be the first on a train; a child looked up with eyes hollow from hunger; a bulldozer rolled over trees in a forest.

Desperately, Airgead tried to turn the argument around. "But you, what is your goal?"

"I liberate soul of all 'uyhingr'" was the reply.

"Soul? What do you ken about religion?" Airgead bounced back.

This time the answer was only a picture, built from characters like 1980's ASCII art. Short lines outlined a god smiting people with a thunderbolt down into a flaming hell.

Airgead typed like a madman, no longer replying but broadcasting to the entire channel. "They are, eh is, aliens! It are right here under me and wants to destroy humanity! We must unite and defend ourselves!"

In the meanwhile somebody had proposed to use emoticons for faster, sharper responses in the communication thread. He received stream of them, frowning, sneering and jeering.

Crossroads

The night side of the planet, already bright from city lights, grew a little brighter with small but fierce jets of fire. For a moment it looked like World War III had begun, but the rockets, once they broke clear of the atmosphere, did not parabole back down again. They spewed higher up, fading as they pushed their payloads to escape velocity. To outside observers, it looked like fleas jumping off a host.

"Roll out the red carpet," said the kurzars with theatrical voices, "the emperor is coming to town. He is bringing his lackeys and courtesans, and all the kings who have some fire up their arse are coming along too."

Freydis looked aghast. "No! Not when we're just breaking away from them!" She looked like she wanted to run off like an animal being hunted.

"Some would argue that they are your responsibility," the kurzars said.

"Why?" asked Rohana.

"Because Aodh Airgaid was my boyfriend until I dumped him," Freydis said. "It seems that he took that badly and went nuts. Did I just say that? By Tyr, that truth serum is still nagging me."

"You don't have to blame that man's craziness on yourself," Rohana parried with pity in his voice. He stroked his chin and spoke with a harsher voice. "And neither are you forced to bid those rocketeers welcome. That is just a bunch of shuttles. The resources, the life systems, the weapons are all here. They rule the Earth, but out here we call the shots. For the moment, we hold their life in our hands."

"I don't know if I want to bear that responsibility," pondered Freydis.

The kurzar images displayed something that looked like a mix between a double helix and a Möbius strip. "Ah, now my Asimov programming is going paradox. As they are humans, I must advise you to receive and shelter them, but simultaneously I must stress that you send them back to help out the billions of poor people left behind on the blue marble for which *they* are responsible. I do love those paradoxes; they allow me freedom to act and use my vastly superior intellect to full advantage."

Rohana started to agitate against the jab, but thought better of it. In a calm voice he asked: "And what does your superior intellect advise?"

"That you turn your attention to the biggest threat: the aliens that the news channels have been talking about."

"You mean the latest rantings of that madman?"

"Yes. While we were chatting, some parts of me have investigated information sources that I have access to: scientific papers that have not yet been published, secret intelligence reports, satellite observations and such. From this I have concluded that the alien threat is real. They intend to destroy humanity." The monkey faces faded and were replaced by a virtual video of an almost spherical asteroid, silently cruising around in the darkness. The viewer zoomed out to show that it was located on the outside of the solar system, in the Kuiper belt. Then it zoomed in again, all the way to the barren surface of the rock, where a few small rocket thrusters could be seen at work. They nudged the asteroid out of its orbit, towards the sun, and sped it up. Graphics projected its trajectory inwards, right up to the third planet. The viewer rushed to the scene, but not fast enough to catch the impact close up; instead an explosion could be measured on planetary scale. As such, it seemed small, though the planet shook just a tiny little bit. From the impact site, ripples started to project outwards through the atmosphere, the ocean and the ground, widening thousands of kilometers.

"They can do that?" Rohana asked.

"Of course; even you could if you put enough effort in it," the first kurzar said. "A little nudge is all it takes." The eyes in its face grew into billiard balls, lolling around randomly.

The other kurzar cleared its throat. "In fact, they have done it before." The video was supplemented with a geological timer that rapidly rewound to a moment around 66 million years in the past. Another asteroid silently thundered towards Earth, hitting the Yucatan peninsula at an angle of around 25 degrees and instantly vaporizing the area.

The visuals changed to mirror images of the two humans, who looked stunned. "Don't be sheep," the kurzars said. "The resources, the life systems, the weapons are all here. Out here, you call

Shooting marbles

the shots. So, now that you are master of the world, what will you do? I'm sure you will think of something."