

Youth

By H. W. Moss

Jeremy leaned over and kissed the girl full on her lips, then thrust his tongue down her throat and pressed his pelvis into hers leaving nothing to the imagination. Obviously he was ready. No one else in the crowded nightclub noticed, but the girl certainly did.

“I know this great hotel with Victorian décor.” He suggested they check out of the club and check in there.

That crooked smile of hers, the one that reminded Jeremy of another, was all she gave in reply, but he understood her answer. He looped his arm through her bent elbow and led the way to his car, pressed his keychain remote as they approached the vehicle. The headlights came on as did two interior lamps, one focused on the driver’s seat and one on the passenger side; the doors unlocked and the engine came to life, purring at idle.

The hint of promised sex from the young woman almost overpowered Jeremy’s ability to drive safely. The hotel had a garage with an attendant. He left the key in the ignition and got out, walked quickly to her side and gallantly opened the door for her. Again taking her arm, he escorted her into the foyer where he began filling out the registry.

There was a photo in a corner on the counter top. Two young men in their mid-thirties stood close together and smiled at the camera.

“Mike or John still alive?” Jeremy asked idly as he produced a credit card and flashed a second piece of identification.

“You mean the Pietro brothers?” the young man nodded as the desk clerk swiped his card and replied, “John still is, yah,” he said absently as he plucked the receipt from

the printer and passed it across for signature. “He owns the hotel. Mike passed away some years ago.”

Jeremy signed, accepted the room key, examined it and stepped back to take the hand of the pretty girl who accompanied him. The elevator doors separated and they entered, turned and faced the foyer. Just before the doors glided shut, Jeremy said, “Tell John I said hello. Give him my full name. He ought to remember me.”

They were lying naked next to each other collapsed in exhaustion when a set of knuckles rapped on the door. Jeremy rose, pulled on his pants, said “Just a minute,” and walked over to place an eye to the through hole and a hand on the door latch. He tugged the door open which allowed hallway light to flood the room

Staring up at him with wizened features and white hair was a wiry old man. He had once been taller, but old age had shrunk his bones. The young man towered over him and stood smiling benignly down until the old gentleman had a good long look. His eyes grew large.

“Migod, it is you,” the old man said with obvious astonishment. “How is this possible? Or are you his son? This is amazing. You look just like him”

“Hello, John. I’d invite you in but,” the young man glanced over his shoulder at the naked woman who had crawled under the covers and pulled the sheets up to her chin, “I don’t think she’s ready to receive visitors.”

John took a step into the hall backing away from the threshold.

Jeremy pushed the door closed, retrieved his shirt from the seat of a chair where he had tossed it last night, sat on the edge of the bed and buttoned the shirt. He dangled the card key in front of the girl, laid it on the night stand.

Outside in the hall he said to John, “I left my room key with her. If she splits on me, you can fix that, right? After all, you do own the place.”

John’s eyes seemed to have grown even larger as he stood transfixed, his mouth open but unable to speak.

“Hey, I know it’s a bit of a shock,” Jeremy said with a wry smile. He placed one arm over the old man’s shoulder and steered him toward the bank of elevators. “Talk over coffee? Café on the first floor still open?”

“Jesus Christ, boy,” the old man said as the elevator arrived and he was guided through its opening, “you’re my age. At least, you were my age when I was your age. How the fuck can this be happening?”

They entered. The elevator began its descent.

* * *

The corner of Sixteenth and Valencia attracted a crowd of young people nightly. They hung out and did little else. Not exactly a “gang” of youth, but certainly a bunch, a group, a pile of boys and girls who stood on the sidewalk, backs against a building wall, some seated on porch steps reclining, smoking tobacco, sucking on cans or bottles of soda or water because even with a fake ID they rarely passed for old enough to purchase liquor.

One boy had his arm slung over a girl’s shoulder in a loose and careless manner as if hanging onto a pack horse. The couple had their heads together in intimate conversation when the boy raised his lips to brush the girl’s neck with a kiss and take a drag from a lit cigarette in his other hand.

“Mmmmm, that feels good,” the girl whispered in his ear. He licked her ear lobe and exhaled smoke.

Although ordinarily he paid close attention to ear lobes, the boy became suddenly distracted. He found himself staring over the girl’s shoulder at a gray haired woman who walked with a cane and who had just begun to step around the gathered loiterers. The old woman took one look at him with his mouth open, smoke billowing out, and fell to her knees as if struck a hammer blow to the head. Then she fell over on her side.

* * *

John guided Jeremy to a table in the small, well lighted restaurant which fronted Lombard Street. For a hotel café, the place had a good reputation and drew locals as well as tourists. However, at this time of night it was practically empty. A waitress approached intending to point out that bare feet were not allowed, but John waved her off. His face bore a serious and determined expression which caused her to drift immediately away.

John walked closely behind his guest never allowing the young man an opportunity to break and run, not that he gave any indication he might. They took facing seats at the table as the waitress returned a moment later with a full pot of coffee, filled two cups, took the hint and disappeared again.

John immediately asked, “How do I know it’s really you? This could be some giant practical joke. You might be the grandson of my old friend and he’s really somewhere behind the scenes pulling strings in a grotesque gag.”

“Why, John. I’m flattered you would think I could be so devious. Seems to me we were always pretty straight with each other. I know it’s hard to believe, but it really is me.”

“Yah? Well, where did we meet?”

“Downstairs at City Lights Books on Columbus and Broadway. I was looking in the Science Fiction section and you were perusing the poetry, as I recall.”

“Anyone could have told you that. What was it we did together that New Year’s Eve?”

“Got drunk?”

“Good guess.”

“But first we got laid. By the same girl.”

John’s face blanched with this last statement. “I’ve never told anyone that.”

“Neither have I.”

“I still can’t believe it’s you. You look, what? You look maybe 25.”

“Actually, I’m considerably older than that. Many centuries older.”

“Impossible!”

“I know, but it’s true. And not by accident, I might add.”

The old man’s mind was still spry and he seemed willing to accept what he was told, especially in light of what he saw before him. “Why are you here?”

“You mean here in your hotel or here in San Francisco?”

“Both.”

“I live here. Have for decades. I was living here long before you and I met, in fact. But, frankly, John, tonight was unplanned. I didn’t come looking for you. I just wanted to ball this chick and needed a hotel room so we checked in. And, much to my surprise, I saw the picture of you and Mike on the counter. Didn’t know if you were still the owner. Sorry to hear about Mike, always liked him. Just thought I’d tell the desk clerk to say

hello, is all. It was a whim. I had no idea they would phone you immediately. I thought I'd be checked out long before you even got the message and you'd let it slide. How'd I know you'd come knocking this late?"

The old man listened quietly with hands clasped together on the table in front of him. Then he said, "They have standing orders to call me in an emergency or, in this case the clerk thought it important enough, it did seem personal. That's cuz I live in the neighborhood and the clerks know I go to bed late and can get here real quick. When I heard your name I walked over thinking I was going to find an old man like me. Not the kid I knew in my twenties still a kid in his twenties."

"Well, it's good seeing you anyway, John."

"Yah? Well, it's creepy seeing you."

* * *

Someone standing on the sidewalk, one of the girls, said calmly, "LOL down. Who's got a cell phone? Call nine-one-one."

Two adolescent men walked over to the fainting victim and appeared to be offering help. However, one was rifling her purse while the other unsnapped a piece of costume jewelry from the woman's wrist. As he examined it, the bracelet was snatched from his hand.

"Get the fuck out of here before I kick your ass!"

They rose and backed away. The boy who approached them had a girl in tow. What did he care what happened to an old lady, anyway?

"Aw. We just wanted to see what she carried. No harm," said the smaller of the two.

There were a tense few seconds in which the larger, the one with the purse, must have considered taking up the challenge. His opponent was certainly no match for size or weight, but he had a military bearing that might hide martial arts ability. His tone was commanding and he had a maturity that, despite his appearance, forced them into grudging respect. The purse snatcher thought better of it, threw the handbag on top of the woman who was just then coming around, turned and walked away. His companion did the same.

“Yah, well, did anyone call an ambulance?” the young man asked of no one in particular. When none took responsibility for having done so, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cell and punched the emergency numbers. He gave dispatch an exact address without even looking at the street signs.

“Jeez, what do you care?” the girl he had just been nuzzling asked indignantly. “It’s an ol’ lady. Hey? That’s not your mom or something, is it?”

He turned his attention to the supine woman who was now staring into his eyes. She was awake and aware and there was a very frightened look on her face. She said weakly, “Dax? Can that be you, Dax?”

“Yes, Claire, it’s me. Now lie calm, okay? Paramedics are on their way.” He put a hand under her head, raised it and gently placed the purse beneath as a cushion. Within another minute the sound of a siren could be heard.

“Do you have insurance, Claire? Can you tell me where you want to be taken?” She answered and he conveyed this to the paramedics when they arrived. They lifted the old woman onto a stretcher which popped up into a gurney. Dax walked beside and held her hand. Not until they were at the tailgate of the ambulance did he let go.

The paramedics stood waiting either for instructions from Dax or for him to leave the woman alone. Either way was all the same to them.

He looked around and realized the girl he had been with was nowhere in sight. “Where’s Caroline?” he asked one of the porch sitters.

“Soon’s the guys in uniform appeared, she cut out.”

Dax shrugged, leaped into the back of the ambulance. “I’ll ride with you,” he said to the patient as the doors closed and the vehicle lurched to life. “Just to be sure. After all, we are still married, aren’t we?”

* * *

John pushed the coffee cup away and reached for a wine glass. He poured from a bottle of Chardonnay the waitress brought without him asking. Instead of sipping slowly, John took a big gulp. If seeing was believing, he was not having difficulty believing what he saw and heard, he was simply astonished by it.

“Are you going to tell me the whole story or just parts of it?” he asked as he put the glass down, refilled it.

“Hey, John. Like I told you, it’s not like I planned to find you tonight. I didn’t go looking. It just brought back fond memories when I saw your picture on the counter is all.” He accepted a glass, sipped thoughtfully, put it down. “Mmmmmm. Nice oak flavor. Yes, I suppose I can tell you the whole story, but, John, you are not going to find this easy to take.”

“Try me.”

“Okay. I am member of an interstellar crew, a ranking officer as a matter of fact. Our ship has a compliment of 300 and we landed on your planet one thousand eight

hundred and twenty-five years ago, according to how you calculate time. However, to me that was only 183 days ago, about six months. When we arrived Rome had not yet fallen, Christianity was just beginning to take in a lot more converts and your ability to refrigerate or freeze food for storage was about 17 centuries in the future.”

John sat silently as he absorbed this information. “You’re right. I am not going to find this easy to take.” He lifted his glass, saluted the man across the table from him who claimed to be thousands of years old and drained the drink in one gulp.

“Told ya. But it gets worse.”

“I reserve the right to make my own judgment on that, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, John. Well, here goes.”

* * *

The air was hot, hotter than a burning summer day. Runner Catches Rabbits withdrew further into the shade of the rocky formation where he panted like a dog with its tongue lolling. He was puzzled, for he knew the seasons, and could not explain why the air around him felt so wrong. It was the cold season, yet at the mouth of this shallow cave where he sought temporary shelter the heat was stifling, had become oppressive.

He thought his eyes were playing tricks as something began to form into a shape there at the cave entrance. It was as if the air itself were coalescing as a rapidly moving form, two, then four shimmering shapes appeared which were almost, but not quite, substantial enough for his vision to latch onto and hold. The figures appeared and disappeared, wove intricate patterns in the sand as they went about an arcane business apparently completely unaware of his watchful presence. The day waned and still the forms frenetically wove paths in the sand in front of him.

Time passed as fear kept him at the back of the cave. Hunger began to work its way up and he forced it down. Thirst parched his throat and he imagined spring water from a nearby stream which satisfied him for a while. He put a pebble in his mouth. Still, the forms moved frantically, urgently, purposefully but without ever taking a true shape, like a snake or a bird or the burrowing animals. Nor did they rest. But Runner Catches Rabbits could not keep the awakening at bay for more than another sunrise, and so he awoke and stayed awake until he was forced to return to the dream world.

When he did open his eyes on the dream world again, he stretched and felt the emptiness in his stomach and then remembered why he was cowering like a fearful rodent in the back of the cave.

Runner peered out and found himself surrounded by the same frenetic activity, but now the forms were more vivid. They had become firmer, sturdier, more substantial. And, although it was as if he could see right through them, they bore the likeness of other hunters. They had the same proportions and number of limbs and they did not hiss or make threatening gestures as the large hopping animal often did. They were, however, covered with a strange colored skin. And the air remained hot all around them.

The day eroded and Runner found himself hard pressed to control the demands of his body. He knew the time would soon come when he had no choice but to sprint past the strange apparitions which could still barely be seen, moving very fast, evanescent, unreal like heat rising from a dry lake bed.

He waited until it was dark and the sky at the mouth of his hiding place filled with the reassuring lights with which he had been awake since birth. This was his last best

opportunity, now while he still had the strength and a few hours remained before the moon rose to flood the plain outside with its bright glow.

Runner Catches Rabbits gathered his bundle of spears, tightened the animal skin around his shoulders so it would not fall while he made his getaway, and moved cautiously, stealthily toward the cave entrance. He knelt and watched and when he thought the chimeras would take the least notice, he assumed the stance which made him famous as a source for food among his people.

He was prepared to spring when, at his feet, there suddenly appeared several objects. They were not natural and bore strange, inexplicable markings. He had no time to examine them closely, nor to decide which to take. It was an arbitrary and purely instinctive move made in the split second between seeing them and the act of taking. He placed a hand on a small flat circular object no bigger than his palm which made it easy to pick up and carry. Then he jumped out of the cave and ran like the wind.

“How did you like living with the locals?” Captain Stanton inquired of his junior lieutenant. “They seem friendly enough from what I’ve heard.”

“Oh, they are, sir. And quite intelligent. However, while many cultures on the rest of this planet have progressed toward urbanization and an agrarian lifestyle, these people are isolated. They are, after all, on an island with no real predators, plenty of resources and we know what that means. There is no push. As a result, little change occurs. They don’t even have the wheel yet. Once we were acclimated and could communicate directly, they accepted us as visitors from what they call the Dream Time and never made a threatening move toward us. Their language is quite advanced and rather complicated, but easily learned. However, they are still in the stone age. While we may have been

roughing it, setting up tents and camping out beneath the stars, they were naked among the elements.”

The captain made a few notations, nodded toward his JG and said, “Proceed with your debriefing.”

“Well, we were there a full week, sir, taking samples and examining microbes. You know, one of the hardest things to get used to is that blinking sun. It keeps going on and off with annoying rapidity. It took three days to get acclimated and it was quite disconcerting until our bodies and brains adjusted. One of our days is equivalent to nearly ten of their years. As a result, we were sure the locals would be totally unaware of us. However, we were quite mistaken. To my knowledge, this is the first time a native people could actually sense our presence almost immediately. They even developed a myth around us. They know we are here, but cannot compare it to anything. Thus, the myth. They say Uluru, which is the name they have given our ship, has a hollow beneath it even if they have no idea what it might contain. They use a word, ‘Tjukurpa,’ which has no exact translation for us, but is quite modern. It conceptualizes the past, the present and the future as well as describing the physical features of the land with relation to their own social structure.”

“That’s quite a word, Lieutenant. ‘Tjukurpa’ sounds like something we ought to take back with us.”

“Yessir. Oh, and one of the crew, Dano it was sir, seems to have misplaced his access. He went into a cave to do his private business and when he came out his EA was gone. Thinks an animal may have picked it up and walked off with it. Careless. He has already been reprimanded, but I suggest we change the code, sir, just in case.”

The captain looked surprised. “In case what, Lieutenant? In case one of the locals figures out what it is and attempts to come aboard? I find that highly unlikely. However, I will take your advice and make sure a new EA code is issued. That will be all for now. I look forward to reading your full report. You are relieved. Send in Blake.”

* * *

“I don’t get it,” John said with one hand on the wine bottle and the other on his glass. He hefted the container, squinted at it, decided there was not enough and motioned for the waitress. When she did not immediately arrive, he shouted her name.

“Murielle. Where are you, girl?” He turned in his seat to find her at his side.

“Yes, Mister Pietro. What can I do for you?”

“A scotch.” He looked tightly at Jeremy, then with another squint of his eyes that asked, “You want one too?” When Jeremy nodded, John said, “Second thought, bring a full bottle and two glasses. This is going to be a long night.”

She left to fill the order and John turned to the young man opposite. “Here’s what I don’t get. If half what you say is true, how come nobody knows you’re here?”

“John, they do. We have shown ourselves to your government officials and presented ourselves to your heads of state time and time again, all to no avail. We have shown your scientists and mathematicians numerous innovations which they invariably take credit for when someone asks. I think you are a mostly cynical people, John, and the idea that aliens have already landed is an invitation to be put on meds or made a laughing stock. Frankly, until a couple weeks ago, um, a hundred and fifty years ago or so, the idea was completely unfamiliar to any of you. There just were not enough people to try and explain the concept to at around the time of the American Civil War.”

“Yet you’re telling me now.”

“You think you’ll be able to convince anyone after I’m gone that you talked with an alien creature? C’mon, John, let’s get real. Try telling it to the tabloids. We read them too, you know.”

“Yah. I see your point. But what have you done all these years? Don’t you get bored?”

Jeremy looked wistful. Then he said, “That’s one of the big bennys of this branch of service. We are all volunteers on a dangerous mission, no doubt about it. But we receive a side benefit you just don’t get in any other specialization. We are able to enjoy more than one life, John, many lifetimes in fact. Bored? No, quite the contrary, John, it’s exciting.”

* * *

Marilyn was the most beautiful woman Cend had ever seen. Her short blonde hair was cut in an unusual style for the 13th Century, but she had no way of knowing how much this reminded Cend of a girl from his childhood. She was just happy to have found a husband so young and virile, one with all the accoutrements wealth brought. He was educated, he had his own private estate and he seemed overjoyed to be in her presence. She had never heard of such devotion. When he lay beside her after making love, she felt fulfilled and looked forward to bearing his children and sharing a long life with him.

Who cared if he seemed never to sleep?

She rolled over and placed a hand on his flat stomach. He responded by pulling her toward him and taking one of her nipples in his mouth. It hardened and she felt a wave of desire course down her spine. He placed his open palm on the other breast and began to

squeeze. She was lost in the ecstasy of the moment when he suddenly drew back. His mouth was free of one, but his hand continued fondling the milky white flesh of the other breast in a gentle but most serious manner.

“How long have you had this, my dearest one?” Cend asked with incredible tenderness and sincerity.

“Why, whatever do you mean?” she said in astonished reply. His speech and action were completely disconcerting and she hoped she had not offended him in some way.

“This lump I detect. It is important for you to tell me how long you have had it.”

“My darling, it is nothing. I only noticed it the other day myself. It will go away, I promise.”

In response, her husband leaped out of the bed and pulled on his pantaloons. Ordinarily, he demanded his servants bring hot water, soap and towels before he donned his apparel. This morning he did not wash, but fled to the outer chamber where she heard him talking as if to the air. She crept to the edge of the bed and overheard him say, “Tokunaga here. Florence. Emergency clearance to return. Repeat. Emergency clearance to make an immediate return.”

There came an unfamiliar voice in reply even though she was sure none but servants were in the house and they were to remain subdued and silent in front of their master. In a moment, Cend returned. He plucked his loose fitting chemise from a couch, tucked it in and tightened a belt sash before he began pulling on an expensive pair of boots.

“I have to go somewhere. Listen to me Marilyn, I want you to listen very closely to what I have to say: I will be gone for several days. Is that clear? I cannot be certain

exactly how long it will take, but you must stay here until I get back. Do you understand? You must wait for me.”

She was too surprised to say no to his demand. “Certainly, my darling. Whatever you say. But why? Where are you going? Why can’t I come with you?”

He was in too much of a hurry and in no mood to answer. But he could not brush her off without a farewell. He touched her forehead, dropped the tips of his fingers down her brow, ran them over her nose, settled them on her lips where she kissed them.

“Wait for me. I’ll be back.”

Several days passed and eventually she settled into a routine. In addition to her responsibilities taking care of their large home, it was the height of the growing season and there were crops to be tended. Field hands did the work, but Cend had overseen the process until now. Marilyn took up his tasks as well her own, the no less demanding household chores. More than a month elapsed before he returned.

Cend wore a stern expression on his face, one that might be described as grim as he entered their bedroom. He embraced her, but did not raise her skirts above her head and have congress as she fully expected. Instead, he sat her down, took a position beside her and said, “I know this is not going to be easy for you, but you must listen. You are ill. I know -- you don’t feel sick. You have no symptoms and it sounds as if I am off my head to tell you this, but I am not. I have just returned from a place that can help you, that could have helped you, but they refused. I won’t go into the details, however, now I must ask you to forsake this beautiful place, our lovely home, and come with me. We have a long, arduous journey to make which may not even be in time. But, my dear, if you do not at least attempt this with me, you will surely die.”

She was shocked and amazed. He spoke of sickness and death as if he could see the future. And what was this he said about going somewhere? Leave the home they had made together and go -- where? He had not even told her. She asked.

“It is to a land no one has heard of, to a far away place no one can reach that is thousands of leagues distant and we must do this on our own, now, immediately.”

If he was joking, it was with such a serious demeanor that she was unable to laugh. If he was serious, where could he possibly think he might take her that could be described thus?

“We begin tonight. I have a carriage ready that will bring us to the quay. From there down river to a more sea worthy vessel, with a captain who will follow my orders. We are going to an undiscovered island and we must leave now. There is no time to pack. The clothes on your back. My love.”

Three weeks on the open seas took their toll on Marilyn. She felt exhausted and her patience with her husband was wearing thin. But that did not stop him from doing everything he could to make her comfortable. He warned her the waters were treacherous and alive with shark and stinging jellyfish. He took a position high in the crow's nest when they neared shore and guided the captain through what Cend called a barrier reef. The water seemed clear and clean, but when it came time to disembark she learned the true hazard of going to sea was landing. There was a shoreline with waves plashing silently against it, but no manmade features. Their ten man vessel nearly capsized as it raced for shore, the sailors paddling madly to Cend's shouted commands. The small boat crested the waves and eventually slipped into a final resting place in the sand.

Cend lifted Marilyn's hand from her lap, held it as he jumped into the shallow water. He hefted her whole body in his arms and waded ashore. Planting her in soft sand on a perfect beach, he said, "And now I'm afraid the worst is yet to come, my dear. See those mountains?" He pointed at a far distant range. "First we must cross them. On the other side lies a desert and deep within that, practically on the other side of this huge continent, is a tremendous rock. That is our destination. We begin as soon as I can convince the locals they should help us." He removed his money belt and hefted it. The contents jingled full of coins. "I only hope this is enough."

The mountain passage was not as rough as Marilyn had thought it might be. Once she got up close to the base of the range she knew she was capable of hiking over it. The question was more where that should occur since none of the native peoples, with whom her husband somehow found it easy to communicate, said they had ever approached let alone crossed over and returned.

They spent several weeks preparing for the climb. Cend insisted on taking a great quantity of supplies for which she had no description. While still aboard ship he had the chandler cut and sew sail cloth into a number of empty bags which now were being carried by several porters and watched over by Cend with the eye of a hawk. Among their food stuffs was nothing fresh, all was dried, desiccated meat and ground meal and grain as well as dried fruit and vegetables that must have taken a great deal of trouble to locate or order prepared. He insisted she have a hat that fit her head, no thought of fashion in its lines, thank goodness for short hair. He had the natives make a salve from coconut oil and bees wax which he strapped next to his body in a tightly woven basket lined with the

ubiquitous sail cloth. Yet she never questioned his motives because, so far, his foresight had proven to be astounding.

Nor was she the soft female she had been while living in the Italian city state. She wore on her feet the boots of a sailor who gave them to her in exchange for one of Cend's dwindling pieces of gold. Her outer garments were equally coarse having been cut from canvas, although over time she had become quite used to them and they had become rather comfortable. Cend insisted she start wearing breeches on the boat after he had them fashioned by the ship's chandler to his best approximation of her size. The man was embarrassed as he attempted the fitting, turning red when Cend insisted the cloth be measured and held against her lovely body.

Real fear caught in her throat at the top of the mountain pass as she looked down the other side. A vast empty desert lay at their feet and she was unprepared for the sight. She fell into Cend's arms as he stood beside her surveying the great sand ocean. He asked if she was ill.

"Only at the thought of crossing that," she replied. He kissed her nose and propped her back up on her feet. Then he went and ordered the porters to find a mountain stream and showed them how to fill the canvas sacks, to sew them shut and soak and wet them against leakage. They caravanned out of the mountains and began the desert crossing.

The trek was mind numbingly hot. The sun beat mercilessly down against her and nothing, not repeated drenching with water down her back, nor the small shadow which her hat provided, not the sweet smelling salve Cend rubbed on her sunburned arms and legs brought relief. It seemed they walked for thousands of miles when, in fact, the mountain range lay close behind. They could not have been twenty miles into the parched

terrain when their first porter deserted. Cend brandished a knife of unique manufacture, one he said could kill any man from a distance, and swore to use it on anyone else foolish enough to attempt to flee back through the desert which, he added, would be certain death.

They were two weeks into this terrible land when Cend halted, put his arm around her and pointed. It was a speck on the horizon but already she knew it as their destination. Why and for whatever reason, however, she still did not understand.

All she knew for certain was that she had become weak these last few days with a fatigue that did not seem natural. And the lump inside her breast had grown to at least twice the size it was when she first noticed it.

Evening, and the fire was nearly cold. The night air was even colder and Marilyn shivered as Cend shook her awake. Her eyes opened in the starlight as he put a finger to his lips bidding her be silent.

He gave her a chance to pull on her boots and quietly led the way toward the huge rock at the base of which they were camped. Cend indicated she should follow and he led the way up a steep incline. Somehow, even in the dark, she found sure footing and was surprised at the ease and agility Cend exhibited in leading the way.

They were no more than thirty meters above the sandy base when Cend stopped, pulled something from his money belt and touched it to the rock. He stood silently waiting. In seconds there came a mysterious hissing sound and a light shown from inside. It was impossible to comprehend and before she could stop and stare in wonder, Cend had his arm around her shoulders and was guiding her inside.

She found herself in an eerily lighted room, again with the hissing in her ears. She turned and saw a sliding door close out the stars as the lights in the room brightened. Cend paid no attention to her as he punched his fingers at a square box on the wall. The hissing sound and another sliding door opened in front of them to reveal the incredibly large interior of the spacecraft.

Strong as she was, she fainted.

“ . . . told you when you arrived under color of emergency we could not spare any medicine for any of the locals under any conditions. I took an oath to preserve our medical supplies unless or until such time as I am ordered to disburse them to someone other than the crew. Do you understand?”

“Doc, I’m not fooling around. She is a sick woman and I want her cured.”

Then a third voice said, “Stand down gentlemen, I am in command here.”

“Yessir,” the two men said in unison.

“Warrant Officer Cendant Tokunaga. You have just made a serious breach of protocol and forced entry to the ship. You also brought a native with you. Can you explain your actions?”

“Yessir, Captain Stanton, Sir! I am in love with this woman, Sir! I was willing to take my R & R with her and live out her life, but it would not have lasted, Sir. I detected a lump in her breast, Sir, and I could not let the cancer cut short her life. Sir. Not while I still had breath in me, Sir.”

“Doc, can you save her?”

“Well, yes, I am sure I can, if that’s what you want, Captain. I haven’t examined her yet, but the procedure is common enough. I won’t even need to perform surgery. I can assure you Mister Tokunaga, no scars. That should make you happy.”

Captain Stanton directed his attention to the woman on the table near them. “Ah, I see you are awake. Well, Mister Tokunaga, aren’t you going to introduce me to our new shipmate?”

Marilyn looked quizzically up into the Captain’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Stanton said, “I probably haven’t been all that clear, ma’am. You will be treated by our doctor here and then you and your husband will be confined to the ship. You see, once you arrive, you cannot very well be sent back. After all, a hundred years elapsed while you slept.”

* * *

“Are you telling me you and your crew have been living among us, pushing us along all these years, giving us samples, tidbits to chew on, pieces of technology without our even knowing you were here? How is that possible?”

“It’s quite easy, thank you very much.” Jeremy sounded a bit perturbed as if reciting the alphabet to an infant. “Until rather recently, you couldn’t keep track of anyone who chose to disappear. I mean, recalling one of the crew early is not unheard of and, except for the family they might leave behind, there’s no trace of them.”

“What! Are you telling me you can propagate with us?” John was astonished and for the first time seemed skeptical. “That would mean you’ve altered our genetic material, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes and no, John. The crew works down here and plays down here. While working, we are supposed to concentrate on the mission at hand. That could mean getting you to split the atom or invent photography, but we are not supposed to fool around when we’re on duty. Now, shore leave, that’s a whole other ball game. Did I tell you I like baseball very much? Well, anyway, not everyone gets the same time off for rest and recreation. We rotate shore leave and it does take a couple days’ preparation to seamlessly join your civilization whenever and wherever we may find it. As a matter of fact, the reason we reconnected, you and I, is that I’ve been on extended leave for personal reasons I’d rather not go into at this moment. Ordinarily the captain gives us four day weekends which, until recently, did not mean we would be here the length of an entire human lifetime. You used to die young. But what with current medical advances, nutritional and social adjustments that have all come together at this moment to give you, John, the luxury of a comfortable older age, it has also made it possible that some of the people we abandoned decades ago might stumble on one of us again. Or in your case, call you up and say hello.”

John was momentarily silent, apparently deep in thought. Jeremy took another sip of scotch. Finally, John asked, “You’re telling me you helped our scientists and inventors along, is that what you are saying?”

“Sure am. Take Johann Gutenberg, for example. I knew him personally. I was part of his guidance team. He was our 20th serious attempt to produce moveable type. We raised all the other potential typesetters from pups, and you know what? They all died before reaching puberty! See, that’s another thing holding you guys back, John, those frail bodies of yours. They are subject to every wasting disease and self-inflicted wound

ever devised. You do realize that starvation worldwide can be eliminated? Malnutrition due to over population and failed production quotas is a self-inflicted disease. You do not have to do that. You could fix the food problem if you put your collective mind to it. But you don't and you probably won't. You are your own worst enemy."

"Anything else you'd like to complain about?"

"Well, yes as a matter of fact. Back to Gutenberg. After years of poking and prodding, what did we finally get? Wood type. Not metal, not plastic, not even carved rock although he really did try and make that idea work. And why a bible, for heaven's sake? It took centuries after that for almost universal literacy to actually set in, before real mass production on a scale that took books down to the lowest class where, quite often I'll have you know, the brightest with the best potential are lost, wasted because we cannot find them in time."

"Find them? What do you mean?"

"We set up a means of identifying your best and your brightest. After all, if we didn't we would be faced with the sad fact that you will stagnate and quite likely turn to religion. And that's something else I'd like to complain about, this god thing you carry on about. It really is a great disappointment, far as I am concerned. You do realize you made all those religious beliefs up, don't you? I don't mean you personally, John, I mean the founders of each organized religion realized a good ghost story can capture the minds of millions and those millions will send them money."

"There is no god?"

"I didn't say that. What I said was: We don't know and you don't know. So don't be so darn arrogant and think you do know. "

The old man did not care to defend his own religious upbringing which, he knew, was primarily an accident of birth, so he changed the subject. “Why not just come out front and give us the tools?”

“We have, John, but you can’t fly before you can walk. Take television, for example. My specialty is communications, so I introduced TV as quickly as I could after you had the vacuum tube. Still, you had to invent more tools to make that work and we set you on those paths as well. But what I mean about television is we pushed it on you only to find you use it to dumb yourselves down. That’s contra to our vision, John, and sometimes there just isn’t any way to explain it.”

“You have a vision?”

“Well, it’s a sort of loose plan. We need the brightest to rise to the surface quickly, and television seemed like a means of speeding up the process. Trouble is, we didn’t count on your programming. Day time soaps and situation comedies with laugh tracks and forensic crime dramas contribute to a lower IQ. I’ll admit it was touch and go for a while, like in the 70’s when we tried desperately to get rid of the laugh track. We introduced ‘Monty Python’ which almost caught on, almost knocked thinking back into your heads. But we live with your mistakes and, I hope, we learn from them.”

“So why has it taken so long, centuries, to get to this stage of human development?”

Jeremy became defensive. “That’s not our fault, is it? We have been introducing technological developments left and right. You cannot hand a calculator to a Neanderthal and expect trajectory theory. And, frankly, it’s only been six months since we got here, far as we’re concerned. Sure, I experience time just as you do, but with another slight

benefit. Where we come from our day is to you a decade. Let me put it another way. I had to become acclimated, to slow down to your pace.”

“A decade? A decade is a day to you?”

“Essentially correct. Thousands of days on this planet flit by with the speed of a bullet. However, we have the benefit of subjective sensitivity. Thus, I exist in your time, I experience interaction with the environment exactly as you do. I cannot run faster, nor am I much stronger. My metabolism is different and your medical tools will some day be able to detect that, if the doctor or technician believes what they see. But, until recently, a stethoscope gave away nothing out of the ordinary. Of course, we avoided your physicians entirely until about the end of the last half of the last century. They were incompetent and it was far too dangerous to allow any of them to attempt to fix a problem we might develop. You’d chop off an arm before you figured out how to splint it.”

John did not believe the scotch was having much effect on him. He was still thinking far too clearly. “Hasn’t anyone died or fallen ill while you’ve been here?”

“We’ve been lucky. No life threatening situations any of our people could not handle. Whenever we take an assignment we are issued standard equipment including a communications device, weapons and coin of the realm. Back on board, we have a full hospital with medical personnel capable of treating every trauma our bodies have ever known. We also have a marvelous method of instant transport, a ‘Beam Me Up Scotty’ technique which . . .”

Jeremy broke off in mid-sentence. He checked his watch, made an adjustment to the device which was lost on John and said, “Actually, John, I don’t have a lot of time left here.”

“Yah, well, six months. You’ve only been here six months.” Perhaps the alcohol was having an effect; he was becoming sarcastic. “Wait ’til you’ve been here a year and the law of averages catches up with you. Couldn’t you just come forward and give us the technology instead of being so Machiavellian about it?”

“John, it’s through no fault of your own, but your species has limited capacity. You are still evolving and right now your senses are just not sharp enough. Which is why sometimes the hard part is just getting you to listen. Aldous Huxley came close when he described how your senses are filters which reduce what you perceive to a manageable level. After all, there really is too much information out there. The spectrum of visible light you can see or detect with your instruments is only a small fraction of the wavelengths available. Your hearing is within such a tiny range, so small it is pointless to try and talk to you. Shouting doesn’t help, because you don’t speak any other languages.”

“We are blind, deaf and stupid, is that it?”

“John, I don’t mean to be insulting. I am merely trying to explain why it seems like it has taken such a long time, when in reality you’ve made a lot of progress.”

“How come it doesn’t seem that way to me?”

“Well, because you are stuck here in this gravity well just like everybody else. Have you any idea how difficult it is to nudge someone along, feed them hints, suggestions, ideas in small enough doses they can work without becoming hopelessly lost or confused, or letting them know where the ideas are coming from? It would scare hell out of them if we said, ‘Hey! I’m from another planet and I want to give you some free technological innovations.’ We’ve done that before with mostly bad results. Sometimes

we try and do it while you sleep, but even that's tricky. No, we've learned about the only tack to take is slow and careful."

"So, you're telling me humans did not invent anything on our own. Not in 51 centuries, far back as the pyramids."

"Velcro. You came up with Velcro all by yourself and it really is rather clever. We intend to take that back with us. Oh, and jazz music. Good stuff, peculiar to your planet."

"What about intervention? I mean, even Star Trek had a Prime Directive where they were not supposed to meddle in a civilization, make it do something out of the ordinary. Don't you have any similar restrictions?"

"Nope. There is no rule against interfering. In fact, we give you every incentive we can think of. And we told you a bunch of times we are not from here, but you just don't want to believe it. We could offer up one of us for dissection, but nobody has died on this expedition and I don't think the captain is going to ask for volunteers. Besides, your tools are still not up to the challenge. It's like trying to paint colors with charcoal."

John was aghast. "Don't tell me you're going to take all the credit for our arts and literature as well!"

"Well, it's true some of us go into the arts, but some of us just want to get laid."

"Da Vinci was one of you?"

"No, John, da Vinci did it all on his own. Van Gogh and Faulkner did as well. However, many of us are drawn to the stage, legitimate theatre and even television. Take Chris Rock and Robin Williams, for example."

"Take them for what?"

“Here, Williams is a major talent, of course. On board ship he’s a store room clerk, barely earning rank. And Rock’s a JG. But here, they’re comedic geniuses. Who knew? I have to tell everyone that when I get back.”

John was too surprised by this information to respond.

“And that’s another thing, this race thing. You do know there is absolutely no difference between your DNA and that of an Ainu, the aboriginal Japanese people? Or a Roman gladiator, or a Massai warrior. Not like chimpanzees and humans which really are different. You only share 98.5 percent of the same DNA with the apes, but all humans share 100 percent with one another. Know what that means? Means there is no us and no them: You’re all the same. There is no human subspecies and we, as outsiders, don’t see any difference whatsoever between you. So you should just drop this whole race thing, will ya?”

* * *

Dax confronted a nurse. “I’m looking for a patient, an older woman named Claire Bloom. Where is she?”

“Room 405. Critical care.”

She lay on her back in the bed with a full head of white hair flowing out onto the pillow. Her rheumy eyes were open and clear, but he could not be sure they actually saw him until she said, “Why now? Why after all these years have you come back, Dax? Why not when I would have welcomed you, could have helped you, instead of now at the end of my days?”

“What do you mean, honey?”

“I’ve known all along, Dax, that you are not from this world. At first when you went away I simply thanked my lucky stars I had been allowed to have that much time with you and you left me so well off financially. As the years passed, however, I began to wonder why you had visited me at all. Why we married, had children, why you never slept or seemed to grow old. And then one day you were gone. It was heartbreaking, but by then I knew. I was able to see through you, literally. I developed a sort of second sight because you were near. That all went away when you deserted me.”

Dax held her frail fingers in his and said, “I suppose you are owed an explanation. You are correct. When I visited your world the first time I became enamored of your beauty and, the social mores of the time being what they were, I asked you to marry me. But I was briefly called back to duty. I returned to complete my interrupted shore leave, but by then you were lost to me. Tell me, can you really see me in a different way than when we first met? It would mean a lot to know if you do. It might even mean we could be together again.”

A smile came over her wrinkled face, but apparently the thought was too much for the old woman who simply closed her eyes and died.

* * *

“But why? I mean, why bother? “

Jeremy sat back with the scotch in hand. He sniffed, sipped from the tumbler obviously relishing the flavor. He sipped again and smacked his lips before he continued.

“John, that’s what we do. Our job is to visit life and nurture it along. The idea is to get it to jump off its Petri dish and into the universe. Not everyone can do that, you know. We first visited several hundred million years ago, by your reckoning, and all we found

were gigantic reptiles running loose. Not a lot of thought in the head of a T. Rex. On the other hand, there were these little mammals scurrying about that had promise, so we penciled you in for a return visit. I was not on that original expedition. That goes back a bit far even for me. I think I was in college when it was reported this galaxy had a few promising species.” He stopped and grinned widely at his host. “Just kidding. I wasn’t even born then.”

John did not appear amused by the joke.

“Anyway, what was so unusual about all this, John, is that you live in a spiral and you know what’s at the heart of all spiral galaxies, don’t you John?”

“You tell me.”

“Why, a black hole, of course. Which is why it is so unusual for life to escape and why we hold so much hope for you, even if the odds are truly long against you. You are, you know, circling the drain. And although you may think you have a lot of time before the last chance of escape slips through your fingers, that’s not the way it looks from our perspective.”

“No? How does it look?”

“Well, actually, not all that hot, really. While it’s true you have figured a few things out, you have a lot holding you back. Take Dark Matter and Dark Energy, for example. Only recently have you decided the universe is expanding and accelerating. None of this steady state or shrinking universe crap. When you figured that out, you had to come up with a reason, and so you calculated that in order for this to be true, there had to be a lot of matter and energy you could not see, thus it’s dark. Well, believe me, you have no idea how much more you don’t know.”

The old man put his empty glass down and said, “Tell me.”

“I’m going to John, so listen. All the visible matter in the universe, including all the stars in the heavens and faint reddish spots you have detected at the furthest reaches of space as well as you and me and every SUV on the road amounts to less than half a percent of what is out there. You just can’t see it. In practical terms, that means the real cosmos, the one my shipmates and I inhabit, is simply not visible to you.”

“Is that all?”

“Actually, it gets worse than that. How much you cannot see or account for is astounding. Dark Matter and Dark Energy comprise 96 percent of the cosmos to which you can add four more percent of ‘non-luminous’ ordinary matter, which results in a calculation that totals 100 percent and does not even include the stars or the planet earth or us.”

“Right. One hundred percent.”

“In case this is still not clear to you, John, let me put it another way. The material world on which you stride plus all the stars everywhere add up to so little matter, is such a small amount in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t even figure in the calculations. And worse, that tiny, itty-bitty miniscule amount your people believe is quote ‘real’ unquote, is actually just an afterthought. It’s a rounding error that occurs when using such big numbers.”

John sat there letting the ice cubes melt. His glass had long since been emptied of scotch, but he did not feel like refilling it. He wanted to take in with a clear head the words he had just heard.

* * *

“As it was done in the Dreamtime, so it must be done today,” Charlie Horse muttered to himself as he fondled the one sure piece of his people’s past that could not exist.

Horse had spent a lifetime peering at it, prodding it, attempting to slice, sever, separate any portion of it with no success. Flat, round, credit card sized, it was made of a material unlike any he had ever examined and it was impervious to all modern tools at his disposal. It had come down to him as a gift from uncounted generations ago as an aboriginal artifact, but he knew without any way of explaining to anyone else that it was from another world.

Even as a child, shortly after it was given to him by an elder, Horse knew it was nothing native to the Australian outback or this planet, for that matter. Yet its existence shaped his life, made him more curious and was, in fact, the reason he had gone into biochemistry in the first place. From the rural racist township where he was born into poverty, this small flat object caused him to aspire toward something in the White world that no Abo ever achieved: an extremely high level of education.

Unfortunately, in mid-life he reached a crisis point. After years of working in the field of medical research which allowed him to take the time and use the resources to carry his investigations as far as they would go, Horse despaired of ever learning what the artifact was, what it did, if it was a device of some kind or merely a bauble, a worthless bijou that had been discarded by a long gone god. Yes, the gods must be crazy.

“All right, Horse, get your fanny in gear,” Bailey, a white crew boss, loomed over him at the picnic table where he sat puzzling over the relic. “There’s a panicky tourist

half way up the rock, stuck to the rope, won't move. Your job is to bring her down safely. That's what you're trained to do, that's what we pay you for."

Yes, for all his education and intellect, Charlie Horse had been reduced to nothing more than a glorified tourist guide. He was the Saint Bernard of Ayers Rock who carried medical supplies and had the enviable position of being able to tell even the staff to fuck off, but he knew he was nothing special, was merely a cog in the wheel of a business that had erupted when the land had been returned to the people, his people, from whom it had been stolen centuries ago.

Although the 1.6 kilometer hike to the top was well traveled and rope ladders assisted the climber, it was not easy, even for someone who was born in the region. Charlie took little solace in the fact that his education made him too valuable to be wasted as an aboriginal guide giving walking tours around the base.

He pocketed his strange toy with the full knowledge he was no closer to answering the question of its origin than when it was first presented to him. This added to his disillusionment with the way his life had followed a pointless path, how it had taken turns devised by a white world and had returned to the point of origin. There was something ironic in that.

He rose and pondered the rock itself. Photographers often set up for days to catch its changing colors. It was spooky, the way the Mona Lisa's eyes follow you around the room in The Louvre and how Ayers Rock changed color, from blue or red to yellow. And it's origins as the world's largest single stone were as much a mystery as its magnetic properties. It was eight kilometers around and rose from the desert floor to be one of the great wonders of the world.

Charlie Horse picked up his satchel and started the climb up to the stranded tourist. For the thousandth time he marveled at how odd it was for people to become frozen with fear, unable to move, stuck mid-way up on a rope which, if you only followed it would lead you to safety.

* * *

John at last achieved the level of inebriation he sought. Tomorrow this conversation would be a vague memory of a forgotten time in his past when his brother was alive and his best friend was a pretty smart fellow who seemed to know a great deal about modern hi-fi equipment.

“Remember when we patched together that oscilloscope back in the day? How we had such plans to market it as a measuring tool for ham radio operators? Boy, some things just slip through your fingers, don’t they? I really thought we’d make a fortune on that. Then Hewlett and Packard beat us to the patent office. Well . . .”

Jeremy listened to this monologue, but seemed resigned rather than pleased to be there with his old friend. “Yes, John, I remember.”

“That was another of your little nudges, is that correct?”

“Well, I did help some, but I want to give credit to Mike for actually getting it to work.”

“I do have one question that’s bothered me since the first moment you re-entered my life.”

“Go ahead, John, shoot.”

“Why tell me this? What possible reason could you have for telling me all this now, when it is too late for me to benefit or do anything to help my fellow man?”

Jeremy looked at his wrist watch and said, “Because it is too late, John. We’re leaving. I’ve been recalled and was just getting in a final fling when you and I sat down to these fine beverages.”

* * *

The tourist needed calming, soothing words more than anything. Her husband was unable to offer that, but had enough sense to seek professional assistance and went back down the rock until he came upon a member of the staff. They radioed for Bailey who found Horse and sent him to the rescue. Charlie’s smile was radiant.

“Hello, ma’am. I’m here to offer you assistance. Horse, Charlie Horse. That’s my name, don’t laugh.” She did anyway which was the response he hoped he would get. “I’m going to take your hand now and guide you to the base of the rock. Is that all right with you?”

She seemed to have stopped shaking so he put a hand on hers, began prying her fingers from the rope which she gripped with vice-like strength. “I told you my name, now what’s yours?”

She said it was Carrie.

“Okay, Carrie. We have a little walking to do, but we can’t do that without you letting go of the rope here. So ease your fingers off on my count. Ready? On one, two, three . . .”

Which worked perfectly. He took a wrist and gingerly, slowly showed her how to put one foot in front of the other, her fright waning, her mastery of the situation gaining strength with his able guidance. They were a dozen meters from the base when she saw they were safe and ran the rest of the way down into her husband’s waiting arms.

Charlie knew his job was complete, turned to readjust the medical supplies and found himself staring at a slit in the rock he had never noticed. In fact, no one could ever have noticed if everyone hiked along the same path, took the same steps up and down, never veering or varying their journey. No one could have noticed the gap which was at a strange angle and in shadow and appeared to his prepared mind as if it was artificial.

The idea slammed into his brain with a stinging sense of awareness, brighter than a light turning on, like a gong slamming into his skull. He knew instantly upon spotting the crevice that this was a receptacle and it exactly fit the shape and width of the artifact in his pocket.

The trail was alive with aboriginal guides and tourists in their charge. He took a step beyond the demarcation point at which everyone was admonished not to go and knew he was being observed. It did not matter.

He leaned down and inserted the object. It fit perfectly, yet nothing happened. He wriggled it in the slot, pushed it and then removed it, turned it around and stuck it in again. Nothing. He pulled it out, turned it upside down and put it in again. After several more minutes of attempting to elicit a response, Charlie Horse resolved to climb back down and wait, to return later, perhaps at night, so he could be alone in his attempt to learn more about his discovery.

* * *

“When?”

“Shortly. Soon. Before sunrise. Everyone has had leave cancelled, all the technical advisers have been recalled. We’re taking off, John.”

“Well, that’s a load of happy horse shit. You show up on my doorstep to convince me you’re from another planet and tell me you have nothing but good things you want to do for humanity, then you split just as I’m at the point where I half believe your story.”

“That’s the way it goes, John. But if it’s any consolation, I think you’ll make it.”

“What, make what?”

“Well, there are those who think your planet is a lost cause. After all, it is nearing the event horizon. That’s one of the reasons we have to depart before we are unable to do so ever again. It takes a lot of energy to thwart a black hole. Your people may or may not be able to summon that energy before it is forever impossible. As for us, we don’t like cutting things too thin, so it’s time we got out of here. But it really was good to see you again, I just wanted you to know that. “

At that second a chime in the air sounded and the young man who had been seated opposite John Pietro simply disappeared. Jeremy had returned to the ship.

* * *

It was a clear night, the stars were out and the moon had risen which made the climb easy. Charlie lay on his stomach searching the rock formation for any other opening. He spent half an hour punching the artifact into the hole which he was convinced was made for it. But after an hour of meticulous searching and numerous attempts, Charlie was growing weary of his new find. He sat up and resigned himself to a full night on the side of the mountain, by himself, since everyone else had gone home and he alone was able to talk his way past the guards at the gate who were charged with preventing nocturnal visits to the Aboriginal holy site.

As he searched his mind for the next thing he wanted to try, the rock did something it had never done in all recorded history: it moved. He was nearly knocked off the side but grabbed the rope and clung with all his strength as the rock did something else that was utterly impossible: it began to rise.

Charlie clung to the ship as it started its steady ascent. He gripped the climbing rope even more tightly, knew nothing of what was happening, only that his fingernails dug into the palms of his hands. He looked down and saw a huge empty space where the rock once sat, proof of the curved hollow the ancient stories told was beneath the monolith. His next thought was that perhaps his tinkering with the rock was the cause of this crazy climb toward the heavens.

Captain Stanton responded to the first mate's hail. "Report, number one."

"Intruder alert, sir. We have a live one on the hull." A screen focused on the determined features of Charlie Horse clinging to the rope.

"Better bring him in, Dax. If he got this far, he's well on the way to proving his people can succeed after all."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Stanton turned to his communications officer. "Jeremy, why don't you go down and officially greet our human emissary's arrival aboard."

"Yessir. Right away sir."

The captain began to muse aloud. "I guess at least two of them will get out of here after all. There was that woman Tokunaga dragged home with him and now this fellow."

"Three, sir," Jeremy said as he departed the control room.

"Three? Who is the third?"

“Tokunaga’s woman, sir. She’s pregnant.”

With an all knowing smile, Captain Stanton said, “Ah, yes. Wouldn’t you know. Motherhood.”

The End