

Security Clearance

**by H. W. Moss
from an idea by Clinton Vidal**

Robert Danvers awoke with no past to cling to, only the moment to dwell in and a tenuous grasp on his future. He was also blind.

Danvers leaned against a curved wall that blended without seam or corner with the floor. His normal stance was somewhat taller than the ceiling allowed, so he stood stoop shouldered. He pressed his palm against the outline of the wall. He thought he might be standing in a section of corridor or tunnel.

He blinked, was aware of the sensation of fluttering eyelids. His other senses appeared to be intact as he heard and felt a soft warm wind brush against his face and course over his entire body.

Light began to reach his retinas. His pupils must have grown to dinner plate size, he thought with remarkable calm for someone who had good reason to be frightened or in panic. But he was a calm sort, he observed to himself, and the return of his eyesight no matter how little, no matter how slow was, not surprisingly, consoling. After a few minutes he could see the outline of the rest of his body, his legs and the backs of his hands. But when he realized the light would not get any brighter by standing in one place, he began to walk, placing the wind at his back, following its direction of flow.

Within a hundred paces the low ceiling gave way to a larger corridor and he could stand upright. The gentle gust on his back was joined by another nearly equally soft pressure coming from the tributary he had just entered. Feather light, he felt the combined push as a slightly stronger breath on his back as he continued to walk in a gentle, gradual turn to the right.

There was more light ahead. It was reflected off the walls some meters distant at what appeared to be another slight bend in the road. He began a fast trot toward the brightness. Making the turn, he stopped dead still in his tracks. In front of him was the largest multiple car accident he had ever seen. He estimated fifty vehicles of every size and type, passenger and transport alike, mounded in a pileup in the middle of an arterial intersection that should have been a wide river of vehicular movement.

There were no ambulances. The accident must have taken place just a short while before his arrival because forklifts and truck-mounted cranes were only now being positioned. The men operating the machines evidently planned to dismantle the pile and remove those vehicles which were unable to operate under their own power. The accident blocked the normal flow of traffic and a long line waited their turn to pass, but that would not be any time soon. Huge floodlights lit the scene which struck Danvers as looking like a movie set.

He heard the bleating sound a Heister makes as it backs up. A car body lay in the dumpster sized outstretched maw, a broken toy in the arms of a child. A chill ran up Danvers' spine. He was so engrossed in the rescue operation he failed to notice the group of men as they began to surround him.

A white rope snaked out and looped around his shoulders; his arms were pinned to his sides. Another loop encircled his legs and prevented him from taking another step. Almost as if with minds of their own, several more cords cascaded over him and around his middle until he was nearly in a cocoon. The other end of each restraint was in the hands of an individual in the group.

“No more movement out of you,” a voice threatened. He felt the cables tighten almost in unison. His next thought was he might strangle if they did not loosen their hold.

Carefully, with the practiced hand of an animal trainer leaning into a cage, the man who had spoken moved toward Danvers. Each in the group wore a nondescript gray one-piece pullover jumpsuit, the utility clothing of laborers everywhere, with a pink badge clipped to his chest.

The leader used his white lasso like a mountain climber, crawling hand over hand toward his prey. When he was within reach, he began to frisk Danvers, gingerly patting with one hand, holding tightly to his rope with the other.

“You are in a controlled zone,” the man said through tight lips. “Your presence here is unauthorized.” Without turning or taking his eyes off the intruder, he gave an enigmatic command: “Take him out.”

Everything happened with alarming speed. Danvers was turned none-too-gently, and slammed against the wall which knocked the breath out of him. The one who frisked him took that opportunity to reach inside the breast pocket of Danvers’ coat. He withdrew a rather large leather wallet which he opened and examined. As he thumbed through the contents of the billfold, his eyes widened.

The man made a sudden gesture with his rope hand which caused the white strand to loosen its grip around Danvers' body. The lariat reeled itself in like a moray eel retreating into its underwater hole. The man motioned the others to do the same.

“Extremely high clearance for this one,” he remarked with a new tone of deference in his voice. “Cut him loose.”

In response, the cables withdrew from Danvers as quickly as they had tied themselves around him. The man holding Danvers' wallet flopped it open for the others to see. He withdrew a bright blue card with a gold badge printed on it which Danvers did not recognize, showed it around, replaced the card in the wallet. His manner became diffident and somewhat apologetic.

“Sorry about the rough house stuff, Mr. Danvers. We got a whole bunch of problems on our hands and can't be too careful. 'Sides, no one told us to expect you here.”

Danvers was still unsure of his position relative to his former captors and asked, “I'm free to go?”

“That card says you can go anywhere, yessir, into sectors we've only heard of. Yah, you won't find us trying to hold you here.”

Danvers held out his hand and was mildly surprised when his pocket book was returned. He glanced toward the wreckage. “Care to tell me where I am and what happened over there?”

“You're in Sector 12, we call it The Extremity, which is our crew's maintenance assignment. Supply commandeered some of our equipment to help with that mess you're looking at. Just one of a hundred calls we got from the Damage Center in the last hour. I don't know what happened here exactly but it looks bad, real bad from our end.”

A portable communication radio pinned to the man's lapel screeched over his voice. "Excuse me a minute." He bent his head toward the mic and concentrated on the message. When he looked up he was all business.

"Can't stay and chew the fat with you now, gotta get this crew to Sector 3 where there's at least one girder down." He motioned his men to follow and turned his back on Danvers. He did yell over the noise of the nearby forklift and crane crews, "Just show that badge to anyone who stops you. You got clearance like I haven't seen before."

Danvers was alone again. He had remained remarkably composed throughout the encounter although he was surprised at the outcome. He opened the wallet and examined the blue card. Yet it must be his, it had his name on it.

The only markings it bore, other than the gold star, were bar codes in the upper right hand corner, but no numbers beneath and no photo. He had no recollection of how it had come into his possession. For all he knew, he was carrying a stolen security clearance

He decided to move on. He skirted the bright lights and disaster crews, until well clear of the entire area. He was a dozen meters beyond the crash site when the ground shuddered in a convulsion that turned his legs to rubber and knocked him off his feet.

Falling to his knees, Danvers looked over his shoulder to see a cargo vehicle that had been balanced precariously at the apex of the pile tumble onto one of the cranes. The truck's moorings must have been loosened by the earthquake. The noise of the toppling crane as it rolled over and crushed several men rumbled in the halls of the huge tunnel like thunder.

Danvers stood and began to run. He did not stop until he was completely winded. He had no idea how much time elapsed nor how far he traveled, but the tunnel widened where he stopped to lean against it and catch his breath.

A vehicle pulled up on his right as he gulped air. Its only passenger, a man wearing orange coveralls and a light green name tag stepped out and walked over to him.

“You Danvers?” the man asked without hesitation.

He nodded, still breathing hard. Instinctively he reached for his wallet and showed his card. The man gave the merest smile when he saw it and whispered into his own lapel radio.

The man looked at Danvers and said, “We got word you were in the vicinity from one of our maintenance crews. Couldn’t believe the report at first, y’know. But Security verified you have their highest rating when we checked with them. So I’ve been sent to escort you. Name’s Alcot. And I don’t mind telling you, I’m glad you’re here.”

Danvers was at a loss. He did not know how to respond to Alcot’s intimations that he was someone important. Nor did he know what Security or Alcot expected of him, where they might want him escorted, nor what he was supposed to do if and when he got wherever they were taking him. More important, he did not want to say something that might tip them off to his ignorance. He decided it was appropriate to comment on the catastrophe which he had witnessed and from which he had fled.

“Back there is the worst traffic accident I’ve ever seen,” he ventured.

“Yah, well there’s plenty more like that up the road a piece. They tell me some of what’s going on, but not everything. ’Fraid that’ll be up to you to sort out. Similar

situations in most of the system, I'm told. Our worst fear, of course, is that we may lose power all over." He motioned toward the vehicle. "Let's get moving, okay?"

Danvers allowed himself to be ushered to the passenger side and took a seat. He settled into the fake leather upholstery with a momentarily satisfying sense of relief. He was quickly on the defensive, however, as the other man got in behind the wheel. What could he possibly do to keep up his charade if the man began to interrogate him?

As they began to travel, he decided to take the offensive by asking questions first.

"Is it a total system failure or are just the peripherals affected?" he asked in as general a way as possible. Somehow, his words did not sound silly or off the mark. Alcot did not bat an eye when he responded.

"We actually don't know. Yes, there's the possibility of total system failure," he said as the vehicle picked up speed. "Doesn't appear to be that critical, not yet, anyway. Of course, we want to avoid a shutdown at all cost."

At several junctures where other caverns joined theirs, Alcot steered right, never turning left down any of the abutting tunnels they encountered.

Danvers decided he might be able to continue directing the conversation.

"What recovery procedures have been instituted? Any input you may have about the situation is important so if you can't be specific, at least give me an overview."

Alcot accepted the questions without comment. Danvers was relieved. He appeared to be on solid ground here.

"You know the main pumping station provides all our light, energy for our vehicles, and assists air circulation. Right now it seems to be functioning, if not at optimum, at least sufficient for our needs. But if it should stop, nothing would work."

Danvers recognized concern in the other man's voice. Alcot did not sound as if he believed the pumping process would continue for very long.

Danvers asked about alternate power supplies and got a general answer. "I've been ordered to give you a quick tour, some of the hot spots, you might say. Then I'm to get you to the Agency's emergency command post. First stop coming up."

Danvers wanted to ask about this "Agency." He thought for an instant it might be known to him by some other more familiar name. He did not have time to inquire, however, as they came to rest at the juncture where several larger tunnels came together to form one enormous cavern. He was silenced by the sight which, like the accident, was a panorama filled with destruction.

The scene was not as chaotic as the last. This time, instead of a traffic pileup, a large building lay shattered, its walls a crumbled mass of brick and steel. Danvers thought it resembled a beached whale, alone in the large open space. An organized swarm of men were queued up, transferring the contents of the building's interior hand over hand onto rows of tables arranged along the tunnel walls. They formed a sort of bucket brigade.

"Commissary got hit pretty hard," Alcot said succinctly after a few silent moments. "The boys at Agency figured we might need the supplies stored in the back rooms so they organized the work gangs. Slow going though. And you should be told that there is not much prospect of any incoming shipments for -- well, no one knows the answer to that one."

Danvers' face took on a studied cast. He was not sure how to respond and was thankful when Alcot turned to him and said, "Seen enough? Care to move on?"

Danvers gave tacit approval by nodding once.

“Right.” The vehicle circumvented the shattered building and worked its way toward a branch of the main tunnel. Alcot stopped abruptly at the entrance and sighed.

“What’s the matter now?” asked Danvers with some anxiety.

“Blocked. Can’t make it this way.” Alcot pointed at an obstruction several hundred meters down the cavern which Danvers would probably not have noticed had his attention not been directed toward it. “Have to go against the flow on this one,” said the driver grimly.

The vehicle made its first left turn. Alcot angled into a tunnel that junctioned with the others to form the large open space they had just visited.

“I hate this,” he muttered under his breath just loud enough for Danvers to hear.

“Why is that?” Danvers ventured to ask.

“Puts a hell of a strain on the outer linings. We’ll only make half speed if we’re lucky.” Alcot was also having difficulty steering a straight path. It was as if some invisible hand were pushing the vehicle aside.

Danvers dwelt on his predicament as Alcot fought the wheel. He was isolated even while in the company of other men. He felt ineffectual, perhaps because he was operating with so little information, yet he was being treated as if he had a job to perform like all the other workers he met.

These thoughts troubled him. He tried making sense of the calamity into which he had been thrust, but nothing in his memory could account for where he was or what he had seen.

His memory. Why did he have no recollections up to the time he opened his eyes in this enclosed world? And why did he think in terms of power supplies, input and output? The image of Alcot's Agency came to him as a Central Processing Unit.

With a sudden flash of insight, Danvers equated the tunnels they were traveling in with a computer communication bus. His next thought frightened him more than any that washed over him since his arrival. I'm inside a computer chip, he said to himself with an assurance he could not explain. Impossible! was the thought that immediately followed.

"Sanitation and Disposal coming 'round the next curve there," said his driver, waking Danvers from the haunting fear his thoughts had conjured up for him.

Steam billowed from a section of tunnel where Alcot pointed. The hissing sound of venting broken pipes was loud enough to reach them even though they were completely enclosed in their vehicle.

"I've a feeling we're not going to be able to get too close to this one," Alcot intoned. "Hot. And a lot of rubble came down from the ceiling was the report I got before I picked you up."

The roadway began to shake from a steady pounding that appeared to originate in the general vicinity of the escaping steam. A moment passed and the pounding subsided. Alcot again sighed audibly.

"Not good," he remarked. He turned the vehicle and began to take the easier tack, going with the steady pressure, or wind, instead of against it.

Danvers was nearing his wit's end. He had grown increasingly more concerned as the scenes of calamity with which he was being presented worsened. It was as if this world had been struck a sudden and crushing blow. And where did he fit in? What could

he possibly do about the destruction of the commissary or the pounding noise that emanated from Sanitation or any of the traffic problems for that matter?

Nothing made sense, not his presence here, not his high security classification, not his being squired around by a tight-lipped chauffeur who could only point out how badly damaged everything was. And certainly it made no sense to believe he was some type of consultant having a level of expertise and familiarity with the system that would allow him to provide answers to questions, let alone find solutions.

They assumed he knew so much, he thought, but they told him almost nothing from which to base decisions.

“It’s time to get you to the temporary Agency HQ,” Alcot said as he broke in on Danvers’ reverie.

They made swift progress up a tunnel, but slowed several times to give wide berth to more crash sites. These had all started to look the same to Danvers who began to despair. There was just too much wrong in here.

After a few minutes of travel, Alcot parked and motioned Danvers to exit. A sentry was posted outside a decrepit building that had somehow withstood the forces that felled the commissary and the sanitation system. He was asked for his wallet badge which the sentry gave a cursory examination, then handed back to him.

He and Alcot entered the building through a door that creaked because it hung on only half its hinges.

Inside they were greeted by a dozen grim faced men wearing white smocks. One approached with outstretched hand in greeting. Danvers heard the man introduce himself as Dr. Miter.

“Very pleased you were able to make it here, what with all the turmoil outside,” Miter said apologetically. “My colleagues and I are sorry we must meet you under such stressful circumstances.”

Danvers was now at a complete loss for words. His status had been elevated to the highest level he could imagine and he still had no inkling of what was expected of him.

They were in a central control room, of that he was certain. One wall was a bank of computer terminals while another was devoted to video displays of disaster sites. At least twenty screens more were blanked out with the word “Shutdown” superimposed in bright red letters. He shuddered when he saw these.

“Is *everything* coming apart around here all a once?” he asked incredulously.

“I see you have grasped the complete situation intuitively,” Dr. Miter replied brightly. “Yes, I’m afraid so. We have control of a few functions, but I was about to order our people out of most sectors. I’d say less than half our modules are performing satisfactorily, the rest are not operating at all.”

The man was too damned pleased with himself, Danvers thought. You’d think he was outside looking in instead of at the center of operations and, presumably, in charge of whatever measures were being taken to reconstruct the system.

“Now that you’re here, I shall of course defer to your judgment.”

That sounded as if the man was opting out, thought Danvers, and leaving me at the helm. The idea was absurd. Furthermore, the thought of taking over in the midst of a rout did not sit well with him. He felt like a private on an overrun battlefield watching his general beat a hasty retreat.

“You may, of course, recommend an action we have not already taken, Mr. Danvers, but I have news that may impinge on anything you wish to pursue.”

“What news is that?” Danvers asked with a growing sense of dread.

Miter studied his wrist watch and said: “About 12 minutes ago it looks as if they decided to pull the plug.”

With those words the people and the room began to dissolve around Danvers. Alcot was the first to fade, his body gradually thinning to ghost-like translucence, then disappearing altogether. Miter and the others became chimeras, then distant wisps of smoke that melted as the wind from outside swept through the paper-thin walls of the building in which they stood. Finally, the structure, too, drifted into the ether and Danvers found himself standing alone on the white expanse of a large barren plane.

Robert Danvers did not himself evaporate and saw through squinted eyes a machine in what he realized was the far corner of a room. On the machine, a screen continued to pulse and lisp and displayed a series of sine waves, one on top of another.

The sines were losing their peaks and valleys, became more and more flat as he watched. Complete horror washed over Danvers as he realized one of the waves tracked the main pumping station Alcot had warned him might fail at any time. Another, already robbed of its peaks and valleys, was merely a steady green line.

Vision blended with the bleached whiteness of the sheets on which he lay. At his bedside he recognized his son, Alcot, and his physician who wore the face of Dr. Miter.

Danvers’ awareness was a brief thing, however, and lasted for an instant only. He held no anger toward these people because he now knew the full extent of the damage. He had witnessed it first hand.

Alcot Danvers was at his father's side when Dr. Miter gave him the news the old man had passed over. He looked down at the frail figure on the bed with a heavy sadness. The man appeared to be peacefully asleep.

"There really was no pain at the end," the doctor said in his most consoling tone of voice. "I know the decision is a hard one to make, but your father would have understood. The life support system is only that. When so much of the body goes all at once, we are stretching out a natural process by keeping it turned on. Believe me, it was the best thing you could do, your decision to end it."

Alcot pursed his lips and thought of ways to keep telling himself what the doctor said was true.

"What a waste. All that knowledge lost. Dad was so sure of life and he carried that into his work. He was a Senior Systems Analyst, you know, and used to say he could overcome any equipment or software problem so long as he had power in the system."

Alcot stood and began to walk out of the hospital room. "System Analysts are like that. They never know when to turn off the machine and walk away. I feel like I owed him that much, though. I had to keep the power on as long as possible."

He closed the door behind him, leaving the doctor to fill out the death certificate and call a gurney to remove the body. In the instant before his eyes went dark again, this time forever, Robert Danvers knew he had been staring at his own EKG.

The last sine wave went flat.

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