



**The Centre
for the Study of
Non-human
Intelligence**

by

G. L. Eikenberry

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THE MUSIC ROOM

FIRST MOVEMENT

In one sense it was all Dr. Lofton's doing. It was a grand scheme, on the very grandest of scales. Imagine the natural beauty of the central Yukon wilderness, and there, after a five hour drive along rough gravel roads, in the midst of a spruce board and tar paper shack mining town, a magnificent concert hall – a music room – underground, carved out of native rock, engineered for brilliant acoustics and majestically appointed.

Doc Lofton was always trying to "upgrade the miners culturally." He generally felt this end was served only when he was successful in attracting a classical music act or perhaps a famous poet to the isolated northern mining outpost. Before he moved north his former wife had dragged him to plenty of operas, concerts, and readings, although in the privacy of his own home he tended to prefer Dixieland music and westerns. Nonetheless, he firmly believed in the value of exposure to the higher art forms.

It really began on a plane as he returned home from his daughter's wedding in Seattle. While plugged into the recorded in-flight music, the Doctor took the recorded master of ceremonies quite seriously when he opined that a harpist by the name of Jean-Paul Hireault was quite possibly the world's greatest living musician. Thus began a three year attempt to attract M. Hireault to the humble company town Doc Lofton called home.

It was almost three years later that Bev Dubinski, his part-time nurse receptionist, informed Dr. Lofton that one of his numerous letters had finally found its way to M. Hireault. The maestro had replied to say that he would be most honoured to perform for the people of Moose Hill. The Doctor's elation lasted less than a week as it became apparent that a suitable place for a musician of Jean-Paul Hireault's calibre to perform was not among the few amenities afforded by the simple company owned mining town of Moose Hill in the Yukon Territory.

"Excuse me, Doctor, Mr. Yount will see you now."

"Yes, thank you, Betty. I can show myself in." It was a crazy idea. He didn't really expect Howard Yount to go for it.

"Good morning, Gordon. I don't guess I've really talked to you since – hell, not since you looked at me when I bruised my back last spring. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I can't complain."

"Good. Good. So, uh, what can we do for you? I, uh haven't forgotten the roof on the clinic. It'll be first priority after the mill when we start doing roofs in June –"

"I'm not here about the roof. That tar is doing the job for now. Howard, let me get right to the point. How would you like this town to see the kind of publicity that makes the national news?"

"National news? This isn't some kind of epidemic is it?"

"No, Howard, I'm talking about good publicity."

"I don't think I'm following you, Gordon."

"Picture this: a black limousine pulls up outside the headframe. You're there for the cameras, all decked out in black tie and tails, greeting a world famous musician as he emerges from the car –"

"Doctor Gordon C. Lofton, what in Sam Hill are you talking about?"

"A music room like no other music room, Howard. You must have at least a dozen large open areas underground all you have to do is clean one up – I've already secured a commitment from one of the world's greatest musicians and I think I might have a line on some government funding –"

"Whoa there, slow down, Gordon –"

In the Yukon it's hard for even a miner to be superstitious about ravens. The crazy things are so commonplace they constitute more of a nuisance than an omen. Even so, Hugo Grunfeldt couldn't keep his mind off the great congregation

of the black, jostling comedians he had watched outside the cookhouse that morning. It was rare to see so many of them right down in the camp when the weather was still warm. They generally preferred to range across the open bush during the brief Yukon summers.

But it wasn't just the ravens that made him uneasy. There was the strange old Indian woman he'd seen rummaging around out by the dump. He had seen her only from a distance, but he knew all the native people in the area. He was positive she wasn't anyone who belonged around there. She might have been somebody's grandmother visiting from Pelly, but if that was the case, what was she doing so far from the village, heading down into the valley, out into the bush alone on foot?

Hugo wasn't ashamed to admit that he was a little superstitious at times, but he didn't mention the ravens or the old crone to his partner. With any conversation requiring so much effort over the noise of the jackleg drill, they rarely spoke unless it related to the job at hand. Besides, there wasn't much point in talking to Jack about funny feelings or omens. Jack didn't seem to believe in much of anything except, maybe, as he put it, "Good times and Saturday night."

By the time they broke for lunch nothing was further from Hugo's mind than ravens and old women. The previous day's blast had opened up a nasty expanse of bad ground. Drilling was anything but easy, and it was beginning to look as if they wouldn't be ready to blast again by quitting time. Hugo wouldn't mind missing a blast. He had been mining for twelve years now, and had long since given up breaking his back just to keep up with the company's production schedule. The paltry few dollars they paid out in his monthly bonus cheque never really made it worth the extra effort. He was far more concerned about all the loose rock and the ugly seam that was starting to open up along the hanging-wall than he was about his bonus.

Jack, however, as usual, had other ideas. "So what do you say, partner? Might as well make lunch a hurry up job so we can really boot it this afternoon, eh? With a little luck we should still be able to make our blast." Jack didn't give half a damn about the company's production schedule either, but he practically lived for his bonus cheque.

"What's the rush, Jack? Lots of time to blast tomorrow. Take a look. We get in too much a hurry today and that hanging-wall up there won't be hanging for long. She'll come right down on our heads. I guarantee it."

"Yeah, well, I say screw the hanging-wall and full speed ahead. If she's gonna bean us, she's gonna bean us. I could use the extra money at bonus time. I've got a trip to Dawson planned for the end of the month, and every round we miss means a hand or two I miss at Diamond Tooth Gertie's blackjack tables."

"Is it worth a busted head to you? Maybe worse? Look, partner, what's the point? You think an extra blast in this knucklehead operation is going to increase our bonus? We're not mining silver here, partner, remember? We're mining music. They want it pretty, not rich."

"I don't particularly give a damn what we're mining. We drill and blast and they pay bonus based on how much muck we send out in the tram cars. You worry too much. Look, partner, if it's the hanging-wall that's got you spooked, I'll take care of the drilling and loading. You can finish up with the timber and haul the powder. What do you say?"

"Did I ever tell you the story about the old man and the gold piece at the bottom of the well?"

"I'm sure you did. Any way, I guess I'd better get on with that drilling."

"Okay, sure, let me finish my coffee and we'll see what we can do. But you keep an eye on that seam, or you might not be in any shape to gamble away those few extra pennies they give you for all this foolishness."

The seam in the hanging-wall did continue to open up from the vibration of the drill, but it didn't come down. In fact, things seemed to go pretty well all afternoon. They worked like hell right through to quitting time, and even though they were the last to ring for the hoistman at the end of the shift, they did make their blast. They stood at the bottom of their manway and counted as the shots went off. Fourteen holes drilled and loaded, and fourteen muffled pops.

Perfect. A rough day, but a good ending. A relief.

It was only as they were waiting for the lift cage to pick them up and take them to the surface that Hugo thought back to breakfast and the omens. He had dreaded that morning's walk to the headframe even more than usual.

"A good shift to have behind us, eh, Jack?"

"A real bugger for sure."

"Tell me, did you notice anything funny this morning?"

"Not unless you mean that we never had a visit from the shift boss all day."

"No, I meant like all the ravens around the cookhouse this morning, or that strange old woman down on the Keno road. You know, like omens. Then we ran into all that bad ground and that seam in the hanging-wall –"

"Hugo, buddy, it's like I said before, you worry too much. You're always seeing something or hearing something. I mean, what'll it be next? Last week it was that 'kobull' nonsense or whatever it was, now it's ravens and old ladies –"

"That was kobold. It's supposed to be a friendly spirit that lives underground –"

"Whatever – I take it ravens and old ladies aren't considered so friendly? What's next? Godzilla?"

"The kobold is a German spirit. We Swiss don't believe in such things. I was just telling you about it."

"Yeah, I know. You and your stories. Besides, German, Swiss, what's the difference? A squarehead's a squarehead as far as I can tell. You're all crazy." He grinned and ducked as Hugo good-naturedly flicked a small chunk of "loose" at his hard hat.

"Anyway, here comes the cage. Let's get out of this hole."

The weather outside had stayed good. Emerging from a day in the bowels of the earth is always a relief. It doesn't matter how many times you do it, it's always a relief. It doesn't matter how many times you do it, it's always like the shedding of an oppressive weight. No matter how hard you've worked and no matter how tired you are, your energy surges when you step out into the daylight. Hugo felt alive again as he left the darkness behind and headed for the changehouse.

He hung back just a little to let his lungs fill with the fresh Yukon air before entering the steamy atmosphere of the changehouse. He was in no great hurry to trade the crispness and sunlight for the hustle, jostle, and humidity inside for even the few short minutes it would take him to shower and change. When he finally relented and pulled open the door, the place was buzzing even more than usual.

The shift boss was standing with Jack, his partner. The young geologist, Mark Lewis was there as well. There were also two strangers looking very out of place. He assumed they were the latest in the long line of acoustical engineers, professors of music, and other southern experts to parade through his stope since the Doc came up with his hair-brained idea about an underground concert hall. At least these two didn't look too professorial. The eggheads were the worst.

As Hugo walked toward them, the strangers were trying to fight their way into coveralls and mining gear. The mine captain was trying to shoo the men into the showers, but not having a great deal of luck.

"There he is – Grunfeldt, don't bother changing." It was Vernon Burt, his shift boss. He was clearly excited about something – not that it took too much to get Burt excited.

"Come on over here for a minute, will you, Hugo?"

"What is this, Burt? What's with these guys? Don't they know it's quitting time?" He looked at his partner. Jack just smirked and shrugged.

"Relax, Grunfeldt," Burt was trying to sound as reassuring as he herded several large, curious miners back toward the showers, "These gentlemen would just like to have a look at your stope, that's all. Mr. Myron and his associate Mr. Dundas, are the architects that will be designing the stage and so forth once you and Jack are finished."

"Pleased to meet you. Now, there's nothing to worry about, Mr. Grunfeldt. This has shouldn't take long. We just need to have a quick look around and take a few measurements – maybe a few pictures."

"Right now?"

"That's why we're here."

"I've been trying to tell them, Hugo, old buddy but I don't think they believe me. You see, guys, the thing is, buried treasure or no, there's no way you're going down into that particular hole right now. We just blasted. The place'll be so full of smoke you'll never breathe, let alone see. Better leave it for another day."

"Jack's right. No air. Come back tomorrow when the smoke is gone and we can have a chance to clean up after the blast, and maybe then we can give you a few minutes to snoop around." This time he really meant it when he headed for the showers.

"We have spoken to your mine manager, and we certainly didn't drive all this way –"

"Well, look, Hugo –" The shift boss made a half-hearted attempt to exercise a little authority on behalf of the strangers.

"You're not going to ask me to take a couple of greenhorns down into a smoky stope?"

"Hugo, please. What I was about to ask you was how heavy did you blast?"

"Not all that heavy, I guess. Why?"

"How about after supper?"

"Burt, I get paid as a miner, not a tour guide. And I don't get paid for anything after supper."

"You'll get paid."

"Overtime?"

"Overtime. We'll send the bill to Doc Lofton or something. Why don't we all gather back here at about eight? You gentlemen can leave those coveralls and your other gear right there. I'll take you over to the cookhouse where you can get something to eat."

"Don't look at those timbers so suspiciously, boys. It stays put more often than not," Jack ribbed.

"How safe is a place like this, really? Are there many injuries?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, mining isn't exactly the safest occupation in the world, is it, Hugo?"

Hugo pretended he didn't hear the shifter. He didn't have a very high opinion of bosses in general, and Burt in particular.

Nor did he have any great desire to dredge up unpleasant memories of the accident which had come within inches of costing him a leg two years earlier. Only luck had saved him, and his partner at the time, Neil Klein, hadn't been so lucky.

"Maybe you'd better let me and Jack go up and have a look first, Burt. We counted our shots, and as far as I could tell, they all went off, but it wouldn't hurt to have a look around just in case. You never know what to expect with this crazy place."

Burt let Hugo's well known opinion of the conditions on this particular working place pass. The man didn't like the idea of so much open ground and he never let up with his whining about it.

Of course, after the accident he wasn't going to consider any working place safe. But, whining aside, he happened to be one of the best stope miners around, and a good man for the job. Even though he knew Hugo was inclined to exaggerate about the dangers involved, he also knew that it was a good idea to let the two professionals go up and check things out before giving a couple of greenhorns the okay to go in and poke around.

Hugo made his way up the ladders first, calling back down to his partner as he reached their current working level, "We've got problems, Jack. It looks like a whole set of timber's blasted all to hell. A real mess. Better grab a couple of scaling bars and picks on your way up."

They cleared away the worst of the mess so they could get a good look at

the new face exposed by their blast. There were cracks and seams running in every direction. "Well, Jack, I guess you'd better see if there's anything you can do about that timber. I'll try to scale down the worst of this loose so we can get the tour group up here."

"I don't know, partner, that sounds like an awful lot of work for a time when by rights I should be cuddling up to a bottle of pilsner."

Hugo started scaling down the face, but he didn't get too far. After knocking away the obvious stuff that was just barely hanging there, he jammed the bar into the biggest crack and peeled away a huge slab. "Jack – better get Burt the hell up here right away. Fast, damn it! And just Burt. No tourists!"

Burt had heard the loud crash when Hugo brought down the slab and feared the worst. He and the others were halfway up into the stope before Jack started down.

"What the hell was that," Burt gasped as he poked his head out of the manway. The crash had brought him up the ladders faster than usual. He had put on a lot of weight and smoked a lot of cigarettes since his own days as a miner.

Hugo called back down the ladder, "Burt, I don't know if you're going to want those guys up here – " but it was too late. One by one, as they emerged from the manway, they froze.

The rock face was dominated by a large patch of smooth, lustrous material – something much bigger was embedded in the rock.

SECOND MOVEMENT

Howard Yount, manager of Yukon Amalgamated Silver Limited's operations at the Moose Hill town site, had mixed feelings about all the commotion that had descended upon his previously isolated and relatively smooth running fiefdom. There was something about all the attention which was exciting. What other mine manager stuck out miles from nowhere awaiting retirement could boast representatives from the top scientific, security, and government circles from two countries waiting in his office, as well as an impressive array of media people waiting outside? When he agreed to go along with Doc Lofton's music room scheme he knew there would be something of a fuss, but a trickle of reporters and musician types was altogether different from the full scale invasion he was now facing. A town full of pushy outsiders did tend to disrupt things, and, almost more than anything else, Howard Yount valued the absence of disruptions. His job was to run a mine to the satisfaction of his own bosses and the shareholders of the company. His preference was to do so with as little bother or direct involvement as humanly possible. This strategy did not work very well in the presence of a horde of experts and politicians, or the curving wall of polished metal the intruders had labelled the "artifact."

He lapsed into a daydream about what the so-called artifact might mean to the future of 04-800 Stope or to his entire operation. As for the completion of the doctor's concert hall, that was clearly out of the question. But his daydream was cut short when he became aware of a big silver car pulling up to the front of the office. The driver got out and held the door for Mr. Glover. Yount rushed to meet him and usher him into the board room where the others were waiting.

"Gentlemen, Mr. David Glover, President and Chairman of the Board of Yukon Amalgamated Silver Limited. Mr. Glover, this is Colonel Gaskin of the U.S. Air Force and NORAD, Dr. George Beale, of the University of Southern California, Mr. Tom Archer, U.S. State Department, and, of course, Lieutenant Myron, and Lieutenant Colonel Levoisin of our own Canadian Armed Forces."

An awkward silence followed the nods and mumbles of greeting. Pipes were tapped, cigarettes were lit, papers were adjusted and then readjusted until Glover grew impatient. "I'm not at all sure what the proper procedure is supposed to be for something like this, but I know I came too long a distance on too short a notice to sit around wasting time. I understand that someone has found something other than ore in our mine. What is it?"

The American Air Force officer rose, "I'm afraid there isn't a great deal we can tell you at this time, Mr. Glover. We do, however, have reason to believe that whatever we have found most definitely constitutes something of very great significance to both our countries. It is also quite probable that it poses a substantial threat to the security of both our countries. You've had a chance to examine it this morning, Dr. Beale, would you care to comment?"

"I only had a few minutes down there, and I'm neither a metallurgist nor a physicist, but it appears to be quite large and constructed of a polished, refined metal, an alloy probably, although we haven't had time to analyze its composition. We do know that it is embedded in more or less solid rock approximately 230 meters below the surface. As for how it came to be there, I wouldn't even begin to venture a hypothesis at this stage in the enquiry. I would agree with Col. Gaskin that it is definitely a significant discovery. As for its security implications, I personally think it's a bit premature to speculate."

"Significant? That's it? A new ore body is significant, but I don't fly in from Toronto every time somebody uncovers a new patch of shiny rock. An unauthorized scheme to turn a paying stope into a music hall is significant." Glover glared. "If you want me to disrupt my production schedule further, you'd better come up with something pretty good pretty fast."

Howard Yount's palms were sweating. His collar suddenly seemed much too tight.

Gaskin shifted his weight in his seat. He had been given no workable guidelines as to how much could be revealed, but his instinct was to say as little as possible. He had, of course, been made aware of the fact that the willing co-operation of the Canadians was essential – especially when it came to Canadians of Glover's stature. "I can assure you, Mr. Glover, that we have something here which is considerably more important and unusual than a new ore body or even an underground concert hall. The decision to send for you was not a frivolous one."

"Fine, I appreciate that. But I would appreciate it even more if you'd stop beating around the bush and tell me what the hell's going on. What exactly do you think you've found? It may surprise you, Colonel, but as the representative of the shareholders of this company, I have no intention of co-operating with whatever it is that you have in mind unless you play straight with me. You can huff and puff about national or international security all you want –" He began to rise, as if to leave.

Gaskin, too, was on his feet, in an instant. He took the offensive almost instinctively, without a thought to the implications, "Now just wait a minute, there –" Glover turned and stared at him.

Howard Yount wanted desperately to intervene. He hated to see the whole

thing deteriorate into a pointless power game between two men used to being in charge. He wanted to tell them both to cool off and act like reasonable adults, but that wasn't the sort of thing one told one's boss in public – especially under the circumstances. How had it skipped his mind to call Glover about Doc Lofton's scheme? Damn. He had always been a little too quick to put off (infinitely if possible) things which he did not expect to go well. He put off telling his boss and the abrasive American general to grow up. Instead, he pretended clumsiness, reaching for a water pitcher and spilling a glass, splashing Gaskin in the process. It had the desired results, complete with Glover calling him a clumsy baboon, and taking Gaskin's side. When things settled back down the tone was a bit more cordial.

"Now then, Colonel, I believe you were about to say something?"

"I, um, yes. I assume we all understand that none of what I am about to say is to leave this room? Good. For some time now, the U.S. Air Force has been experimenting with a satellite based surveillance system which, among other things, should enable us to pinpoint underground enemy installations –"

"You're not trying to tell me that you've discovered an enemy installation in my mine?"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Glover, that at this point we can't be sure what we've found or how it got there. The one thing we know for certain is that it shouldn't be there – a fact which makes us extremely uncomfortable. We certainly can't rule out the possibility of terrorist involvement."

Yount slipped off briefly into a reverie about being interviewed on "The National." When he returned to earth, Lieutenant Colonel Levoisin was speaking, "...So, as you can see, Mr. Glover, we feel that it is of utmost importance that this artifact be uncovered and that it be done with the greatest of care. Our first concern will be to pick out a crew of your best men. We're talking about crackerjack miners who are also absolutely trustworthy. We can discuss the financial aspects later, but we have assurances from your Prime Minister's office that your company will be compensated for any loss of production...."

The way Hugo saw things, it would be a welcome break from the unrewarding tedium of carving out a big hole so some guy could be the world's first underground harpist. Instead, they'd be carving out a big hole for a bunch of toy soldiers and science guys. He expected it would mean two or three weeks

digging out the artifact. They promised to pay top bonus, and the work didn't look particularly hard.

There was a lot of drilling, scaling and pick and shovel stuff since they didn't dare blast, but he was used to that. And nobody seemed to be in a big hurry, so why not?

And he was right. Things weren't bad for the first few days, but then the soldiers and the scientists began to show up. None of them knew the first thing about mining, but they all wanted to give orders. That was bad enough, but then it became obvious that the thing they called the artifact was quite a bit bigger than anyone had first suspected. Worse yet, the rock it was embedded in was riddled with cracks, slips, and faults – not exactly safe.

The bad rock tended to break loose unpredictably. No one had been hurt yet, but there had already been several close calls.

Hugo kept turning it over and over in his mind, but it always came up the same, and he didn't like the way it came up. Even in the best of times, when you knew what to expect, mining isn't the kind of job you plan on doing for the rest of your life. You always have a plan for getting into something better – maybe a promotion, maybe saving up some money to buy a farm. Hugo was no different. He was going to set himself up as an outfitter and guide. He loved the Yukon, and he loved taking off out into the bush to hunt or fish or maybe doing a little prospecting. And he knew there were plenty of rich tourists from all over the world – they came to the Territory every year looking for guides and outfitters. He didn't like mining. He had been wanting out ever since the accident. But it was a way to make the money he needed to stay in the north. He was good at it, and if it was the way to achieve his dream, he could put up with it for another few months – at least he could put up with it when it was regular stope mining. Regular stope mining was dangerous enough, but trying to pry loose some crazy wall of metal that wasn't supposed to be there in the first place, that was going a little too far. It wasn't safe – especially when he had to take orders from a bunch of soldiers and scientists that couldn't mine their way out of a sandbox if their lives depended on it.

He kept to himself at breakfast and lingered over his coffee. The cookhouse was nearly empty by the time he made up his mind and headed for the changehouse intent on telling Burt he had decided to quit. But as he started down the changehouse steps he was met by a wave of people headed in the opposite direction.

"Hey, what is this? Where's everybody going anyway?" He spotted Leo Van de Rief, local union president, "Hey, Leo, what's up? Is this a strike or something?"

"No strike, Hugo, at least not yet. They say they're having some kind of meeting. Burt says we're all supposed to gather in the rec hall. No regular shift today, but they're going to pay us anyway."

So Hugo joined the crowd. This was no time to quit. Yukon Amalgamated Silver was not in the habit of paying its employees to go to meetings instead of work. This could be a once in a lifetime event.

A long table had been set up at the front of the rec hall. Behind it sat Mr. Yount, the big boss, Lt. Col. Levoisin, the ranking Canadian military officer in the camp, Dr. Beale, the pain-in-the-ass American scientist, some other scientist-looking guy and some woman none of them had seen before. In the predominantly male Moose Hill camp, the woman attracted quite a bit of attention. It took quite a while for everyone to get seated and settled down to the point where Yount stood somewhat unsteadily to call the meeting to order. Even then the hoots and crude jokes could still be heard.

"Now then, if I could have your attention, please. We'll try to make this a brief as possible. First I want to make sure that you all understand that you will be paid based on a regular eight hour shift even though we won't be asking most of you to report for work today or for the next few days. Those that are selected for special duty will be paid a special bonus. However, even if you're not actually working, you will only be credited for payroll purposes for the days you actually sign in at the office, so if you leave town you won't be paid. For today we have a sheet on the table at the rear exit. You can sign it as you leave. For tomorrow and subsequent days, for as long as we remain on this system, you will be asked to sign in at the personnel office. Is that clear? If you don't sign – if you leave town or go on a ten day drunk – you don't get paid." There were, of course, the inevitable quips, questions, and complaints.

"Well rather than spend too much time on this today, how about if anyone with any problems or questions reports to the personnel office tomorrow? Now then, the primary reason for this rather unusual meeting is to inform you that we are suspending all regular production for the next few days. We're not sure how long this suspension will continue, but...." He rambled on for quite a while, mostly talking about the so-called artifact, but not saying anything everybody didn't already know. It was beginning to look as if he was never going to get around to the two questions on almost every mind in the rec hall, why was the normally stingy company paying them for not working, and, even more

importantly, who was the good looking woman in the trim fitting denim jumpsuit?

"...and, of course, I'm sure most of you recognize Dr. George Beale by now. But I'm equally sure that you're all wondering about the two new people at the table. To my left is Dr. Charles Fendick of the Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence of Prince Albert University. That's quite a mouthful. Did I get it right, Dr. Fendick. And before the jokes start I will hasten to add that even though a number of our employees might fall into his area of expertise, he is actually here with regards to the artifact. Then there's the lovely lady who has also joined us at the head table. I would like to introduce Dr. Margaret MacEwen. Dr. MacEwen has just arrived from Montreal to join the research team. Dr. MacEwen –"

"Thank you, Mr Yount." The cat calls and heckling rose to a fevered pitch, with all kinds of shouts of imagined medical complaints. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, gentlemen but I'm not a medical doctor, so you guys will have to come up with a better angle than that." She cleared her throat and took what was intended to be a firm stance. "Gentlemen, last week," her voice took on a tone of authority that eventually produced some semblance of order, "monitoring equipment at a site some distance from here began to pick up pulses of an extremely short wave length. There is reason to believe that your artifact is the source of these emissions. This being more or less within my area of expertise, I was invited to join the consulting team overseeing your work. After reviewing the data accumulated up to this point, and –"

"Hey lady, is that damned thing dangerous or what?"

"To be quite frank with you, at this point in time we don't really know. It certainly isn't dangerous in the same sense that you might consider radioactive material dangerous, if that's what you mean. And there's no reason to suspect that it's going to explode. The biggest problem is that we still haven't been able to determine what it is or how it got where it is."

"Perhaps, Dr. MacEwen, the men would like to know a little something about what we do know."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Dr. Beale. The object, or artifact, as it has become labelled, is an inverted cone. As near as we can ascertain, it is perfectly symmetrical, and measures approximately twelve meters in diameter at the base, and thirty meters from base to tip. It appears to be hollow except for the lower area, or, rather, the area which would be nearest the base of the cone. I say that it appears to be hollow, although this is difficult to confirm since the walls are quite thick, and appear to be shielded with lead or a similar substance, which – I'm sorry, gentlemen, I'm afraid I may be getting too technical – let me try to get right to the crux of the matter. The emissions I mentioned earlier are not harmful, per

se, but there is some concern that they could cause problems in an underground environment."

It was Yount's turn again. He explained, in ponderously vague terms, that, while the chance of serious slippage or a full scale cave-in were extremely remote, they didn't want to risk it. They had decided to try to approach the problem from a new angle.

They would start from the surface and drive what was known as an incline shaft. The new plan would not only free the artifact, but provide a way to get it out of the mine completely and let them get back to mining. The engineers and the geologists still had a little work to do to map out the new incline, but the driving of the shaft would be able to get under way in just two or three days. Until then the scientists were going to be conducting further tests and the regular workforce would be enjoying an unplanned paid holiday.

THIRD MOVEMENT

The notice on the cookhouse door was like a sliver of rock in his eye. Another damned meeting wasn't going to kill him, but it sure as hell was a major irritant. He was supposed to be a miner, not a student. For three weeks now they had been driving the incline shaft with three large shifts working around the clock.

Putting up with shift work was bad enough, but it seemed as if either Yount or the scientific bitch was calling a meeting for one reason or another almost every other day. The meetings weren't so bad for the guys who were supposed to be mining at the time, but this latest one was going to come right at the time when he would otherwise be resting up for the graveyard shift. He grumbled his way through supper and then went back to bed. He didn't bother to set his alarm. If he didn't happen to wake up for the meeting he could always catch up on the latest official foolishness from Jack. Jack could go to the meeting and sign in for him. He had nothing better to do. He was one of the ones getting paid to sit around and do nothing. He bitched about missing out on the bonus, but he didn't seem to mind missing out on the risks and the pick and shovel work. Jack's less than exemplary exit from the military left him with a poor security rating.

Howard Yount was just about fed up. He was overrun with Ph. D. flaunting idiots and their exuberant research assistants. He hated the all-too-frequent briefings they felt compelled to deliver. He hated their unmasked attitudes of superiority. And – he quickly tucked the rum flask into his pocket as the door swung open. Fortunately it was one of his own people – early for a change.

"Oh, Lewis, its only you. Thank God for that. I was afraid it might be Queen MacEwen and her royal court or than Fendick lunatic. They're always showing up early. Mark – that is your first name, isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, Mark, how does it feel to be my head geologist? Well sure, you

might as well be. I dub thee, Mark Lewis, Head Geologist for Yukon Amalgamated Silver. Barnett, that old fool got fed up with all this crap and quit on me this morning."

"I guess that doesn't really surprise me. But you're not really serious about me being in charge, are you?"

"Of course I am. Why the hell not? How old are you, Mark?"

"I'm, uh, twenty three, sir."

"Good, at least you're legal drinking age. Any man in charge of my staff has to at least be legal drinking age. Here, help yourself to a quick snort before the Lords of Olympus get here."

"Thanks, sir, but I'd better not. I came here from the beer parlour. I'm afraid I've already had a couple."

"Suit yourself."

"So, uh, what's this session supposed to be about?"

"Damned if I – ah, good evening, Dr. Beale. How are you this evening? – other than early, of course."

"I'm tired, Mr. Yount, very, very tired."

It was the usual sort of thing. The scientists dispensed their dribs and drabs of information, always implying that they knew more than they were at liberty to disclose, and persistently displaying their unfaltering ignorance of what was and was not possible in an underground mine. But with each meeting, it became increasingly obvious that their weeks and weeks of work were producing a lot more questions than answers.

Yount managed to survive the meetings by dreaming up excuses for slipping out to work on his rum flask. MacEwen was less than ten minutes into her briefing about the difficulties of monitoring the bewildering array of rumbles, hums, and squeaks from the artifact when Yount's newly appointed head geologist found reason to join him in the outer office. After two further visits, even though they felt covert enough, their motives were quite obvious to the rest.

MacEwen was still speaking when they returned for the third time, "...as soon as possible. Ah, Mr. Yount, I'm glad you're back. What could be your current estimate of how long we can expect it to be before your miners are able to afford us unobstructed access to the upper end of the artifact.?"

"How long? Well, let's see – today is – wait a minute – what day is this, anyway?"

"Mr. Yount, are you alright?"

"Fine. Just fine. Yes, I am fine, Dr. MacEwen. Now, er, let's see – the way I figure it is that we have been driving that shaft for three and a half weeks, and the last I heard, we had progressed about five hundred and fifty feet on an incline of about twenty degrees, now that would be – let's see –" He almost giggled – "um – damned if I know, Doctor. How about you, Mark?"

"You'll have to give me a couple of minutes, sir, but at least I brought my calculator."

"Fine, Mark, fine. Good man – I've just promoted him, you know – Head Geologist. Uh, in the meantime, Dr. MacEwen, maybe you could answer a question for me."

"And what would that be, Mr. Yount?" Her voice was tinged with contempt.

"Well, you see, a lot of my men have been asking questions about – well I know I'm not really in charge any more, but –"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Mr. Yount. Surely you know that it has never been our intent to usurp you in your role as manager of this mine."

"Mine? What mine? What we've got here isn't a mine – a damned foolish research station is more like it if you – er – ask me, which you – I, ah didn't really mean that the way it must have sounded – I –"

Beale cut in, "What is it that the men have been asking you, Mr. Yount?"

"Right, well, the thing is that the men have been asking – well how the hell did that thing get there in the first place?"

"The simple truth, Mr. Yount, is that we don't know. Rest assured that we are working on it, but at this point in time, we just don't know."

"I see." He paused to gain a better hold on himself. But the room was starting to tip slightly. If he didn't keep a good grip on things, it would begin to spin. He had it. "Do you mean to say that after – how long? Five weeks? After all this time, and God knows how much tax money you've burned up, you still don't know – oh, boy – Oh BOY...." The room was starting to undulate.

"Maybe I'd better have a go at this, sir." Mark had been paying more attention to his boss's difficulties than to his calculator. "Mr. Yount is tired – he's been under a lot of pressure lately – we all have. I, uh – what he was getting at, Dr. MacEwen, is that there are some pretty wild rumours making the rounds of this camp. Some people say it's a military thing – maybe the Americans, maybe the Russians, maybe even ours. Now I'm a geologist – a B. Sc. not a Ph. D. or anything like that, but I know that that thing is embedded in rock a lot older than –"

Beale cut in, "You're quite right, young man. Whatever Col. Gaskin here, or Lt. Col. Levoisin may think to the contrary, we suspect that the results of the Ar40 dating we're having done would place that artifact solidly in that rock long before this region was inhabited by human beings – roughly –"

Mark wasn't in the mood for another of Beale's pompous, condescending technical tirades. "Look, old is old. The silly mountains around here are at least four hundred million years old, so if the Russians did it, they either planned way ahead of time, or they did one hell of a job putting a lot of rock back in place without leaving a trace. I think we can probably rule that one out, okay?"

Mark's analysis was nothing new. Beale and his team had been over it and similar lines many times. He started to reply, but caught himself. When it came right down to it, what had his people accomplished in almost five weeks that a technical school graduate couldn't deduce in half an hour?

Mark continued even as he felt the affects of the alcohol surge over him. "Some of the guys think it's science fiction stuff – you know, maybe teleportation experiments, time machines, or how about little green men – who knows? I mean, why would Dr. Fendick with all that no-human intelligence stuff be here if somebody official didn't think maybe there was – maybe there might be –" Suddenly it all seemed very funny. He was having a hard time keeping a straight face. Yount, too, found it all a little too much – he was beginning to giggle into his handkerchief, pretending to cough. The others in the room were starting to squirm in their seats.

"Mr. Lewis," Beale's patience was at its limit, "if I may interrupt, I would like to assure you that we are well aware of the rumours, but I don't think this is really the time to deal with them. We have a general meeting scheduled for 8 P.M., which leaves us approximately thirty minutes if we allow time to get over to the recreation hall. There are several things we really must discuss in that time. Mr. Yount, if you, uh, if you would agree with –"

Yount cleared his throat and tried to act like a mine manager. "Ah, yes, I couldn't agree with you more, Mr. – er – Dr. Beale. As a matter of fact –" a grin was slipping in. He leaned forward, trying to control the giggle building up in his throat. "You were, er, asking how long it might take to finish that, uh, shaft at the present rate of – excuse me, I, uh – I would estimate that – that is, of course –" He was losing it. He looked over to Mark for help, but the young geologist was having enough trouble of his own trying to look and act serious and sober. "Let me, er, put it bluntly, gentlemen, and, uh, Dr. MacEwen. If we can get a little help –" he covered his mouth, trying once again to disguise his giggling as coughing, but the tears rolling down his cheeks gave him away – "from some of those – of those little green men –" He broke up completely. The giggling burst

through as roaring, nearly hysterical laughter. He nearly fell out of his chair.

"Mr. Yount!" Col. Gaskin was beside himself with rage. "You, there, Lewis –" but Mark was in no better condition than his boss. "For Christ's sake, somebody get these drunken idiots out of here. Glover will hear about this!"

It was after 8:30 by the time Lt. Col. Levoisin made an appearance at the rec hall and called the meeting to order. He had never conducted one of the meetings before, so everyone was curious – especially since none of the other big shots were present. Something was definitely up. The crowd was quickly attentive.

"Gentlemen, there is no reason for this to take a long time. Work on the incline shaft has been suspended. Men scheduled for this evening's shift will not report."

"What about pay?" Leo Van de Rief was none too pleased about the way they had been completely ignoring the union in all the wheeling and dealing that had been going on. It was about time they made room for him at all those special meetings up on the hill in Yount's office.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Van de Rief, but some of those details have not yet been worked out. A meeting up in the administrative office is still under way. The important thing for now is that the regular shifts for tonight will not report, but we will be needing three crews of twelve volunteers each. These crews will be working rotating twelve hour shifts. They will be working underground in the area where the artifact was first discovered. We are asking for volunteers because the work may be dangerous."

"Wrong. The important thing is that nobody works until we get a few things straight, such as pay, and such as who makes the decisions and who gives the orders." Enough was enough. It was time for the union, in the ample form of Leo Van de Rief, to take a stand.

"You'll have to meet with your own superiors to discuss those issues. I am not authorized to get involved with questions of employee relations. All I want right now is the names of the volunteers, so if –"

"What about the ones that don't volunteer? Or the ones that volunteer but don't get picked?"

"I'm afraid that's another question you'll have to take up with the

appropriate people."

"They'll be laid off, that's what. Now everybody listen up. This is the president of your local union speaking. Forget about soldier boy over there. If we don't stick together on this thing most of us are going to get laid off. So if our big shot tin soldier, here, can't answer any questions, we'll just have to wait until we get somebody who can. Are you with me?" The response came more in the form of rumbling and nods than the rousing cheers he was fishing for, but he didn't let that slow him down. "So, tell you what, General, why don't you go back up the hill and tell those guys you didn't get no volunteers and you won't get no volunteers until somebody comes up with some answers? You tell them there's a union here –"

"You're making this much more complicated that it has to be. I was sent here to inform you about –"

"You were sent here, and now you're being sent back. Got that? Now I think it's about time we had ourselves a union meeting, and you, sir, are not a member, so I'll have to ask you to leave."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Van de Rief, but –"

"I'll bet you are sorry, and you're going to be even more sorry if you don't clear out and let us have our meeting."

"I'm sure there will be plenty of time for your meeting as soon as –" His foolish persistence was definitely turning the tide in Leo's favour. The entire hall was starting to get rowdy. The next time Leo gave them a cue he was definitely going to get his shouts of rousing support. "Gentlemen, please –"

Leo was a large man. His long, heavy strides carried him to the front of the hall quickly, dramatically, threateningly. He didn't stop until he was almost nose to nose with Levoisin, looming over him. He spoke just one word, "Leave!" The crowd sensed the fireworks in the air. They cheered Leo on.

Levoisin felt cornered. The only defence he knew in such a situation was to take command. "Back off, mister," he growled, pulling himself up to the greatest height he could muster.

Leo laughed. He made the most of his size advantage, leering contemptuously over his adversary.

"You seem to forget that I have forty well-trained, armed fighting men at my disposal, Mr. Van de Rief. So if you are trying to threaten me –"

Leo was not known for his patience. Neither was he known for making idle threats. His big fist may well have been Levoisin's first taste of actual combat. He threw a single fast and devastating right.

The uniformed man sat on the floor, stunned, staring up at Leo in disbelief. He dabbed at his bloodied lip and his somewhat rearranged nose with his sleeve. He seemed too preoccupied to notice the six burly miners that had rushed to the aid of their union leader in the unlikely event that he needed it.

"You boys better deliver him back to his toy soldiers. The rest of you guys go and check the bunkhouses and bring back anybody that isn't already here. The beer parlour too. Let them all know there's going to be an important union meeting here at nine o'clock, sharp. Meanwhile, I want to meet with the executive...."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Glover, but I'm afraid Mr. Yount is kind of ill. Could he call you back tomorrow?"

"Going by what that hysterical Yankee flyboy told me when he called a little while ago, I gather Howard's 'illness' might have something to do with the quantity of alcohol he's been consuming?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but –" Yount grabbed the phone out of Mark's hand.

"Glover? This is Howard Yount. Now before you launch into some sort of temperance lecture, I want to know who the hell's running this company, you or the U.S. military?"

"Settle down, Howard."

"Settle down? That's easy enough for you to say. You haven't got a pack of idiot scientists and pushy military goons coming out of the woodwork down there. And let me tell you something, half of these so called experts can barely figure out which end goes in the chair and which end goes in the hat. This is supposed to be a mine, for Christ's sake, not a God damned scout camp!"

"Howard, is it true that you showed up for a meeting drunk?"

"Not strictly speaking, no – but what if it is?"

"Will you just keep your shirt on – I just wanted to hear your side of the story."

"Well my side of the story is that I'm sick and tired of all this crap."

"Look, Howard, I'm sorry. I realize it's no picnic up there, but they've got my hands pretty well tied down on this end too. And believe me, we don't have things all that much better. I'm afraid that the best I could do for you was to tell

them to pick out a few good miners and a handful of technical people and send the rest home. Lay them off and shut the place down. That should simplify things. Of course we'll want you to stay around to keep an eye on things – Howard? Are you still there, Howard?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Glover, but, uh, Mr. Yount isn't very well –" The truth was that Mark had grabbed the phone away just as Yount had started to ooze out of his chair. It looked as if putting up a strong front for the boss had been too much under the circumstances.

"Well will you try to sober him up and see if you can hold him together until I can get up there? I should be able to make it before the end of the week. By the way, who is this, anyway?"

"Mark Lewis, sir. I was the assistant geologist until Mr. Barnett quit."

"I see. Well, Mr. Lewis, I'm counting on you to keep things under control for the time being. I'll be calling tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

FOURTH MOVEMENT

"I think we should pay a visit to my grandfather. His place isn't far from here. We can wait out the storm there and come back for the skidoo later."

Hugo hadn't quit – not yet anyway – but he had managed to beg a few days off to do some hunting and some thinking. He and his Innu friend, Thomas had been out hunting every day for almost a week since he had arrived. Their luck hadn't been too good near the village, so they decided on an overnight trip deeper into the bush where the game was usually more plentiful. Even there the scarcity of the game left them plenty of time to discuss their new partnership. The lack of game and the unexpectedly early storm had them headed back to Thomas's place when the snowmobile quit on them.

Old Mike, Thomas's grandfather almost seemed to be expecting them. His fire burned high and warm, and the tea kettle was boiling. "So how's the hunting, boys?"

"Lousy, Grandfather. The hunting's lousy, but the weather is worse."

"Who's this?"

"My friend, Hugo. He works at the mine."

"The mine, eh? Are you a soldier? I hear there are soldiers at the mine. Why do they need soldiers?"

"Who knows? But they sure have quite a crowd there. Soldiers, scientists, even politicians sometimes. Everything except miners."

"Those people don't know what they're messing around with. They've got no business fooling around inside that mountain." He paused to find the fixings for a homemade cigarette. "You boys had better stay a while. Sit closer to the stove and warm up. I'll make tea."

"The skidoo broke down a couple of miles back. Down by the lake."

"You see, Grandson, dogs don't break down like that. Especially not on short trips. And you can't feed skidoos stew either."

Thomas laughed. "And you can't eat them if you get hungry – I know, I know. Grandfather thinks I should trade in my skidoo for a dog team. Ever ride a dog sled, Hugo?"

But Hugo wasn't paying much attention to the conversation. He was

scraping at the frost on the window with his fingernails, trying to see in the direction of the mine. The wall of white had intensified, but even on a clear day he never would have seen that far.

"I'm not surprised you boys haven't been having much luck. There are too many things wrong – winter too early, game animals down off the mountains too soon, the sky is all wrong. I wouldn't want to be in a mine down under the ground with so many things wrong." He stopped to lick and finish rolling his cigarette. His hands were surprisingly steady for so old a man. "Maybe all these things have something to do with your mine. Maybe that's why you have all those strange people down there. A few days ago I was thinking about one of the old stories. Thomas, pour us some more tea and sit down."

"You're not going to tell one of your stories, Grandfather."

"Sit down. It will be good for you to hear this too."

"It was a long time ago – before The People ever thought to look at the sky – in the days when the game was on the move and The People left everything they knew to follow the game to a new place. There was a woman. She looked just like most other women, but she stood on her own. She had no man. Well that woman turned out to be a weather spirit.

"Now I'm not sure how it happened, but the way I heard it was that somehow this weather spirit woman got mad at The People. Maybe she didn't like them following the game into her place, I don't know, but she decided to kill off the game with a long, cold winter. She decided to spin a web of ice over all the world. It was a bad time. The People had never thought to look at the sky before, but now they missed it. The snow and the clouds hid it from their eyes for many generations.

"Well, after a long time, the spirit chiefs heard the cries of The People over the howling of the icy winds. They agreed that the only thing to do was to go off hunting for that weather spirit woman and chase her from the land.

"Oh, but she was a crafty one. They say she took the form of a raven and flew south, spreading winter as she went. But the spirit chiefs kept after her in spite of all the tricks she played on them. The hunt went on for a long time – several generations – until they finally had chased her all the way back up north to near the world's navel.

"They thought they had her, but as they stalked her she flew off and landed on a mountain – remember, now, she had a raven's form. She stood on that mountain looking all around her. They stalked her again, moving up the mountainside, only this time she didn't move. But when the spirit chiefs were close enough to shoot her, the weather spirit woman took the form of water and

flowed deep into the mountain. The spirit chiefs shot her with their arrows, but arrows cannot harm water, so she kept going, deeper and deeper.

"But finally, her own magic caught up with her. The winter she had made had also gone deep into the mountain. The water turned to ice. The arrows of the spirit chiefs found her and they shattered the ice. Then they told the weather spirit woman that she had made too much winter, and they made her put things back the way they were.

"This is the way I heard it a long time ago when I was even younger than you. Of course I never believed the old tales then, but now I'm not so sure."

There was a long silence. The old man sipped tea. Thomas looked slightly annoyed. Hugo was back at the window, scraping at the frost, and trying to peer through the snow.

"So you think the thing we found in the mine has something to do with your story?"

"Aw come on, Hugo, don't tell me you believe all this old crap. Grandfather tells so many of those old stories sometimes he starts to believe them himself."

"You're just like I was, Thomas. Sure it's just a story, and I probably got some of it wrong, but those old stories, they always mean something. Maybe that thing you found has something to do with the weather spirit woman – or something just as powerful. It's not too smart to go messing around with something if you don't know what it is or what it might do."

Hugo didn't need much convincing on that point. He slipped on his parka and excused himself. The sky was dark and cold. The wind whipped the world into a white void without reference points. He didn't believe the old Indian legends any more than Thomas, but neither did he believe that the artifact had anything to do with the Russians. Why couldn't it be connected with the weather? The snow assaulted him fiercely. He couldn't see or hear a thing. He was suffocating.

He never noticed Thomas by his left shoulder until he shouted in his ear. "Forget it, Hugo – you'd never make – besides, west is that way. Come on, let's get back inside."

Hugo looked down at his hand. The cigarette he had lit had burned down to the filter and was beginning to singe his bare fingers. Old Mike came up behind them and turned first Hugo and then Thomas by the shoulders and pushed them back to the cabin.

He poured them tea. "You boys feel the earth rumble? Or did winter have

you wrapped too tightly in her blanket?"

"The mine – would we feel it this far away?" He looked at his watch.
"That would be the 'A' shift – a lot of young guys on that shift –"

In the short time Hugo had been away the place had taken on a very different look and feel. Desolate. Almost a ghost town. For one thing, the weather had taken a weird turn. Wintry – even for the Yukon. It was, after all, just barely October. Then too, the camp's population had been cut by more than half in less than three weeks. The reporters were gone, banished to poorly attended weekly news conferences four hundred kilometres south in Whitehorse. Under the new rules no one, press or otherwise, was allowed in past a checkpoint on the south road without a letter of authorization signed by the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources.

Most of the USAF personnel had been removed and billeted down in Whitehorse. Levoisin and his men remained, maintaining the checkpoint and security in general, but they kept a low profile and didn't mingle.

A self-imposed segregation kept each of the groups to themselves. The few remaining technical and administrative people had taken over the main office building for eating and sleeping as well as working – not that they had much work. Howard Yount, however didn't join the rest of his staff. He kept to his own house. He didn't have much to do any more except drink or maybe answer the phone from time to time if the mood happened to strike him when it rang.

Only the scientific team had increased its numbers. They filled up an entire bunkhouse and had also taken over the building that had served as the company's geology and assay lab. There were over thirty of them. Only Levoisin's crew exceeded their numbers, and then not by much. Their work kept them too busy and too involved for them to pay much attention to the growing tension in the camp.

Members of Beale's team hadn't been on very good terms with the rest of the camp from the very beginning, but in the last few days they had been having trouble just getting along with each other. Few of them were prepared for the isolation or the weather. Neither did they adapt well to the long hours underground. And their work seemed to be going nowhere. It generated little in the way of satisfaction or excitement. The miners, at least, were working toward a physically attainable goal. They could see their progress. The researchers were

still arguing amongst themselves about which questions needed answering. And the arguments were no longer confined to matters relating to the artifact.

Dr. Beale was accompanying Dr. MacEwen back to their makeshift lab after inspecting the work underground and checking their monitoring equipment. He pulled off his heavy insulated gloves, "Look at us. Covered in that muck from head to toe. And all we did was watch them work. God, I'll be glad when we get that thing out of there."

"I know what you mean. I find it difficult to conceive what it must be like for those men. Day after day, eight to twelve hours a day down in that dampness and dirt can't be healthy."

"Well it is definitely a far cry from laboratory conditions, and, as you say, Dr. MacEwen, not particularly healthy."

"I was speaking about the miners."

"Yes, I realize that. Oh, damn! Here comes that pseudo-scientist, Fendick"

"Dr. Beale, I'm glad I caught you."

"Fendick." His omission of a title was both pointed and noted. "I was telling Dr. MacEwen that I don't find much to recommend the weather around here either. Is this normal for this time of year?"

"You sound as if you expect me to know. I'm from Toronto – practically the tropics compared to this."

"Well it is your country."

"I think someone told me this was the coldest summer on record for this part of the Yukon and the fall too. Somehow, I'm not surprised. Which reminds me, Dr. Beale, were you able to get that material I asked for?"

"Yes, I suppose you learn to expect this sort of thing in a northern country."

"You could always go back to California –"

"I am, as you know, head of this project. I could hardly pack up and leave."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry if I sounded rude." As far as Charlie Fendick was concerned, he was head of pomposity and little else. "I was asking you about the material I requested."

They had reached the bunkhouse that had been assigned to the scientific team. While Beale and MacEwen sat on benches on opposite sides of the foyer to

remove their muck and slime-encrusted boots and their equally filthy parkas, Dr. Fendick stood and waited. "Yes, so you did. You know, of course, my own opinion of your hypothesis?"

"I don't really care what you think of my theory or my request. I only want to know what you came up with."

"I can assure you that the only reason I have made such a concerted effort to exploit my security clearance on your behalf is that we seem to have reached a juncture at which even the most preposterous hypotheses must be given full consideration."

"What did you find out?"

"The material you requested is not, as it turns out, merely restricted. It is classified. I suspect that I would be allowed to examine it if I were to travel to Washington, but under no circumstances would I be permitted to supply it to you." If Charlie had had a camera at that precise moment he would have been able to produce the perfect illustration of why the Canadians had taken to calling him "Big Deal Beale."

"I see." he didn't intend to give him the satisfaction of insults or arguments.

"Dr. Beale, what ever you may think of Charlie's area of study, I think you'll have to admit that we're rapidly running out of conventional explanations. Perhaps you need to try a little harder at exercising your undoubted influence with Washington. By the way, I trust you won't mind giving me first shot at the showers?"

"Dr. MacEwen –"

"Doctor Beale, you know full well that the material I requested dealt with research done in Labrador, which, in case your American geography books teach it differently, is part of Canada. The research team in question consisted of both Americans and Canadians. If you insist on discussing this matter further I suggest that you explain, in terms that my obviously inferior Canadian brain can comprehend, how the hell your government gets away with –"

"Please, please, Dr. Fendick, I didn't intend to offend you. I certainly don't intend to be condescending, and I am truly sorry if you took it that way. Now, as for your suspicions concerning microwaves and weather control, I can tell you, without violating any security restrictions, that the former Soviet Union was suspected of conducting experiments involving the transmission of ultra-low frequency microwaves between sites in their own country and Cuba. One theory currently under investigation links those experiments to weather control for possible defence applications. However –"

"However, you can't or won't supply Charlie or any other Canadian with any of the pertinent details because your government –" There had to be some degree of solidarity among the Canadian contingent.

"Young lady, do you suppose the two of you could control your resentment of my country long enough for me to finish what I was about to say?"

"I'm sorry." She glared.

"I was about to say that I find it difficult to believe that there is any connection between the Soviet transmissions of a number of years ago and the artifact here. We have, after all, established that the object of our investigations could not have been placed there by a contemporary force. If I may say so without further offending your collective national pride, I would suggest that you are both barking up the wrong –"

"And if I may say so, Dr. Beale, you are nearly as dense as that miserable rock down there – and I seriously doubt that it has anything to do with your country of origin. I have never even hinted at any connection with the Soviets. If my memory serves me, that idea was first championed by you and your Col. Gaskin."

"Dr. Fendick, I would thank you to refrain from referring to that uniformed baboon as 'my' Col. Gaskin. I neither supported nor refuted his assumptions until we began to accumulate compelling evidence against it. I do hope you aren't lumping me in with the likes of Gaskin simply because I come from the same country."

"Sorry. At any rate, I wasn't looking for information to tie our white elephant to the Russians. Have you looked at a weather map lately? Climate control studies have been going on all over the world and for years. I was merely trying to get a look at what I understood to be the most recent information. And, by the way, in case you have missed the point, as I was discussing with Maggie, here over breakfast, now that it has been officially accepted that our artifact lies entombed in rock that predates humanity, I would say that it is a small leap to conclude that it is the product of, dare I say, non-human intelligence."

Beale snorted. He wasn't about to let on that they had changed his mind even slightly, but as soon as Dr. MacEwan closed the door behind her, he took his leave of Fendick and proceeded, mud, slime, and all, to the room he had turned into a study. He wanted to have a closer look at the precis he had received earlier that day. He had already decided that it couldn't hurt to give it more than his original cursory glance.

Most of the men didn't object to working twelve hour shifts on the one and a half day rotation. And there were very few complaints about how well they were being paid. Of course, by the time each shift wound down, they were all dead tired. Motivating them was getting to be a big problem. Their bonus was now guaranteed rather than tied to production. They were working under team or union chosen shift leaders rather than shift bosses. It kept the lid on any further labour problems, but didn't exactly get the most out of the men.

Leo was supposed to be the shift leader for the "B" shift. The problem was that he didn't feel much like leading any more. The cone was almost entirely exposed, and surrounded and supported by cribbing and scaffolding. They had finished and converted what was originally intended as the underground concert hall into a workroom for the scientists and all their electronic gear. It kept them out of the way most of the time. The main job at present was finishing the incline shaft which had been abandoned earlier. It was a massive affair since it was intended for removing the artifact from the mine. It wasn't such a bad job since they didn't have to work too close to the cone and therefore didn't have to worry about the extra precautions required near the thing. They also didn't have to worry about scientists and their student assistants scurrying around asking questions and getting in the way. Of course they still had to contend with the engineers who spent a lot of time trying to determine the safest way to cut and timber a shaft of such massive proportions.

On this particular day the engineers and geologists were as much a nuisance as the research scientists. This meant that Leo was in a lousy mood. He didn't feel much like doing anything.

"So, Hugo, how's it going?"

"You heard, didn't you?"

"I heard that a bunch of engineers came through, all in a panic, but I can't get one of them to stand still long enough to find out what all the uproar is about."

"Well, the way I see it, the best plan is to get Louie to back over the whole bunch of them with the scoop tram."

"What makes you say that?"

"Leo, those stupid bastards have just decided we're four degrees off line. That means we'll miss that thing by at least twenty feet if we don't correct the line right now. And that means that they won't let me load two shifts worth of drilling until they figure out the new angles, which is going to mean drilling new holes in a face that already looks like a swiss cheese – Hey, Leo, did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"That vibration – like something slipping someplace."

"Careless trammers. Probably just a big spill."

"Oh, come on, Leo, there's no trammers working around here, and you know it. This is something else. Bigger. Put your hand up against the wall – no, down lower. Feel that vibration? Almost like a pulse, only real slow – like a giant heart –"

"A giant heart? I think you need a rest, Hugo – we all do – hey, wait a minute – I do feel something. Yeah. Maybe it's those scientists with their sonar or something – maybe they're trying to figure out what's inside by shaking it – you know, rattling their surprise package like a kid with a Christmas present."

"Yeah, maybe you're right, but if they keep fooling around like that they're going to bring this whole mess down around our ears. I don't like it, Leo. Look at this place, it's too open. And that damned music room down there is even worse. They shouldn't be messing around like that. This whole place could cave-in easier than sneezing."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe we ought to call it a day and see if we can find us some engineers to have a chat with. Go gather up the boys and tell them to go home. If the big shots don't like it they can talk to me."

"Best idea I've heard all week."

"So, what's the story, boss," Lenny always made him scowl when he called him that. Leo didn't like being called a boss, even in jest. "What did the smart ass engineers have to say?"

"Not a hell of a lot. They're more worried about missing their music room. They say they don't know anything about sonar or anything like that. They think maybe it's got something to do with the surprise package itself."

"Yeah, sure, maybe Godzilla's finally waking up in there. So what are they going to do about it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean how are they going to stop it?"

"They're not."

"Well do you think it's safe down there with the whole works shaking like a lot of jelly?"

"No, I guess not, but if it is the surprise package I don't see how there's going to be much of anything anybody can do about it until we get the bugger out of there."

"Yeah, well don't stand around holding your breath waiting for me to get it out of there."

"You're probably right. Yeah, you are right. Come on, Hugo, I guess we'd better go see the big boss about all this shaking business. You coming Lenny?"

"Me? No. I'll leave the union business to you guys. I've got some business to attend to over at the beer parlour."

It took quite a while to get any sign of life at Yount's place. Leo banged on the door and Hugo yelled at several windows.

It didn't look like anyone was home, but they knew that the big boss rarely left his hermitage any more.

"I don't know, Leo, maybe he's eating over with the rest of the management guys tonight."

"Are you kidding? The only supper he has these days is the kind you pour from a bottle. He's probably drunk himself unconscious in there. Maybe he's sick or something. I think we'd better break in."

"Break in? You think you can break into the manager's house just because you're president of the union –"

"What's that got to do with it? If the man might be in trouble – wait a minute, I think I just heard something."

Yount's face appeared in the window. "Well at least he can still stand up - but look at him – I don't think he's going to be much good to us." He was a real mess. He looked like he'd been wearing the same clothes for at least a week, and hadn't bothered to shave or bathe since the last time he changed clothes.

"So, it's just you boys – well come on in. I was afraid it might be a flock of those damned eggheads or the military or something. Oh, Christ, no, don't bother to wipe your feet. The place is kind of a mess already, a little more mud and slush won't matter. 'S a real pisser the way those goddam over-educated bastards try to take over, isn't it? Well have a shair, boys – a chair – have a chair."

"Mr. Yount –"

"Now, wait a minute, lesh see – which one are you? I'm terrible with names."

"I'm Hugo Grunfeldt, and this is –"

"Oh, I already know Leo Van der whatever – President Leo. And just for the record, you can call me Howard. I'm way passed being Mr. anybody. And off the record, of course, I'm also way passed being drunk. Have been since Tuesday, and will continue to be until Hell and all its suburbs freeze over, which won't take too long if this weather keeps up."

"Mr. Yount –"

"Howard. Really, Hugo, I insist you call me Howard. hey, where's my manners – I didn't even offer you fellows a drink. What'll you have?"

"Sir, this isn't a social visit. We're afraid there's going to be a cave-in if –"

"A cave-in, eh? Yes, mines do have a way of doing that, don't they? Not that it's really much of a mine any more, eh? I used to manage a mine you know.... Now what about that drink?"

"No thanks, sir. It's too early for me."

"What about you, Leo? Say, you boys aren't thinking about a strike or anything like that, are you?"

"Well, Howard, we haven't had a meeting about it yet, but if we don't get some serious answers about this problem there is always that possibility."

"Well good for you, Leo! As far as I'm concerned, it would serve those idiots right. How, uh – you'll uh, I, uh have to see a man about a – I have to piss. Be right back, boys." He left them at the kitchen table and lurched off down the hall, tripping over a throw rug and bouncing off the living room wall.

Leo wasted no time. "Come on, Hugo, let's get the hell out of here before he comes back."

Beale, MacEwen and Fendick were sober, but there wasn't much else that could be said for the way they received Leo and Hugo. They were more interested in the argument they had brought back from their supper than anything a couple of miners might have to say. MacEwen at least made a show of concern, but she told them that any vibrations were definitely caused by the mining process. She even complained that the constant shaking caused by their blasting disrupted her monitoring equipment. Beale, on the other hand, couldn't be bothered about any of it. He picked up a scratch pad and scribbled notes for the resumption of his discussion with his colleagues.

Fendick was actually "fascinated" by their description of the vibrations, but not out of any concern for safety, "Which is yet another reason I should be allowed access to the artifact. What's the point of me being here if all I do is sit in that damned trailer and pour over read outs and reports?"

"I couldn't agree more, *Dr. Fendick*. Perhaps we would all be best served if you were to return to Toronto. I'm sure arrangements could be made to have the results of each day's investigations transmitted to you electronically."

"I'm sure you'd love that, Beale. Maybe do a little redacting before it was sent off to make sure I didn't see anything which might actually support my primary hypothesis."

As Beale and Fendick continued bickering MacEwen promised them she would "look into it" and then headed off to the trailer that served as their field office.

"Bunch of computerized idiots don't even give a damn. Lunatics! Educated assholes!" Leo was getting himself revved up for one of his rabble-rousing tirades. The first thing we have to do, Brother Hugo, is call us a union meeting. The next thing we have to do is make us some picket signs. Maybe the big boss was right about that strike. We'll show these guys who really calls the shots around here."

"Let's not jump the gun, Leo. What good is a strike going to do? Who would we strike against? The company? The scientists? The army? What would we be striking for? What demands?" Hugo was more interested in safety than in showing MacEwen or Beale or Yount or anyone else who called the shots.

"Details. First we shut the place down. Then we can work out the details."

Leo was trying to cut off discussion and get a strike vote organized when Levoisin appeared. "Well if it isn't the junior general. Looking for another meeting with the union, sir?"

"I have been sent to inform you that the 'C' shift is considered absent without leave and has been so for over two hours. If the 'C' shift does not report for work in fifteen minutes it will be cancelled, and all three shifts will forfeit one rotation and its pay. My men are stationed at the headframe at this moment with live ammunition and fixed bayonets."

"Yeah, well you'd just better get your ass out of here before I fix your bayonet like I did last time." Leo did his best to get the membership fired up at Levoisin's expense, but the vote was a hurry up affair. Fourteen hands came up favouring a strike, and nineteen were against it. The rest abstained as they headed for the door. Leo was still stomping and bellowing as the last of the rank and file filtered out. He took the defeat personally. He screamed his resignation to a nearly empty room. He wanted nothing to do with leading a bunch of stupid spineless bastards.

Hugo, too, had resignation on his mind. He was packing his gear when Jack entered his room without knocking fifteen minutes later.

"Heading down the road, eh partner? You're going to be missing out on some big bucks. You know that, don't you?"

"When are you going to learn, Jack? Dead men can't spend money. Why don't you get smart and come with me?"

"You've got to be kidding. Things are just starting to get interesting. You can bet your bonus something's about to hit the fan when they get excited enough to call out the toy soldiers and give them real guns to play with."

"The bastards are just getting impatient with our necks, that's all."

"So where'll you go? What'll you do?"

"Maybe a little hunting. If you change your mind, I'm heading back out into the bush to see Thomas. We've been kind of talking about setting up a guiding and outfitting business."

"That Indian fellow you hunt with?"

Hugo nodded as he pulled on a sweater and anorak. He hauled his heavily loaded pack onto his shoulders and took his snowshoes down from their hook by the door.

"Well, Hugo, old buddy, I never did figure out which one of us was crazier – crazy in different ways, maybe. Well as long as you're set on leaving, what are your plans for that vodka bottle over there on the dresser? You wouldn't want to leave it an orphan, would you?"

"Take anything you think you can use. I'm not coming back."

FIFTH MOVEMENT

Darkness sat gingerly above the snow as Hugo set out, slowly, deliberately asserting his existence, imprinting the tracks of his snowshoes in the cold silence.

Fresh snow was beginning to fall. Older snow was rising to the wind, swirling, reaching toward the sky to pull it down to earth.

He trudged for miles, for hours, pressing against the mountain, watching in disbelief as the summit continued to slip away even as he pushed his way higher into thinner air, into thicker, more violent snow – wind.

Not long after the summit had somehow slipped behind him and he had begun his slow descent into the valley beyond he heard – no, felt – the throbbing. It pulsed up through the rock, earth, snow under foot, conducted up along the bones of his legs – driving, insistent. A throbbing, forceful beat without rhythm, mechanical, inorganic yet sentient – somehow like the pounding of the Innu drum, but random, chaotic. His feet began to respond, taking up the shuffling motion, rising against immense gravity, only to be pulled heavily back to earth, stomping with the inexorable non-beat – the anti-dance.

The earth too takes up the motion, lurching, shifting, pulsing, to the chaotic, now frantic vibration. Like a cancer, eroding, corroding life, time, everything that dares to cling, heaving off the mantel of snow, sobbing deeply, throwing open its coat of soil, opening up, exposing its veins, its hammering heart.

A massive metallic cone rises slowly to fill the sky, overwhelming all other sounds with its music.

A seam opens up in the cone. It unfurls across the firmament, cutting off the sun, the moon, the universe – freeing its prisoner – severing the earth and all it holds from its moorings, setting it adrift in time.

Overcome by the ferment, the turmoil, an insignificant prop, Hugo is picked up and buffeted by snow melt and mud, hammered by exploding, liberated rock, driven by the irresistible heat of a hell not known in this land for some hundreds of generations.

“Here in our studio this morning we have Professor Charles Fendick, Director of Prince Albert University's Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence, and one of the small number of survivors at the epicentre of last month's earthquake in the central Yukon. Good morning, Professor Fendick.”

“Good morning, Connie.”

“It must have been a horrific experience. Tell us how you managed to survive when so many perished.”

“It was, horrific, that is, Connie. As for how I survived, I guess for once being considered a fringe scientist had its advantages. You see, most of the research teams and other people left at the site were either in the mine or its immediate vicinity when the cave-in occurred. And I want to stress the word cave-in. I'm sure it was significant enough to register on seismic equipment, but the fact is, in spite of any official versions of the story -”

“Yes, of course, Professor. I wonder if you could explain for our viewers why someone whose area of expertise is the study on non-human intelligence ended up in the Yukon at a research site studying an unusual geological find.”

“Well, Connie, I guess I should start by explaining that, while we, at the institute do devote a great deal of our energy to areas like animal intelligence, we have also been known to range somewhat farther afield into investigating phenomena which provide evidence of non-human intelligence that has nothing to do with animals.”

“Sort of an academic X-Files?”

“That's a comparison that gets made in the tabloids from time to time, but I assure you that very little of our work is anywhere nearly that dramatic.”

“But back to the Yukon -”

“Yes, well, you see, the so-called geological find was anything but -”

“I'm sorry, Professor, but the voice in my ear piece has just informed me that we're out of time.”

Hurt. All over, it hurts. His frail, brittle body is torn and bloody – unresponsive. The hands he finds at the end of his arms are useless, wrinkled husks. He wants to run to Mother with the hurt, but he's scared – at least a little bit – of what she will say about his ruined trousers.

He cries a feeble, crackling cry.

She turns.

He screams. Shriek after shriek after shriek, stripping away what little remains of his voice. He screams at the repulsive creature, more ancient than time itself. The word he screams is "Mayuk." It is a word he has never heard before.

And yet, somehow, the old wrinkled Tlingit woman that can not be his mother – somehow something crystal sharp, more lucid than thought makes him know that he has seen this woman before – makes him know that Mayuk is the name of this time-walking woman.

His wind exhausted, his heart near bursting, he can scream no longer. He crumples, melting back, blending back into the sea of mud beneath him.

Forcing air into the depths of lungs withered from lack of use, she is in no particular hurry to stir things up right away now that she's free. She takes her time, wanders the world – visiting many times, many places, but always returning to care for the old man, an unintended casualty of her liberation.

One night, deciding she has seen enough, she sits by the fire, talking to him as she often does. "I guess I didn't miss a hell of a lot, eh? You'd think that a race with the power to open up a mountain would be able to do a better job running a world."

He doesn't answer. He never does.

"Anyway, I've made up my mind. This world stinks. What say we try another one?"

He stares blankly. She shrugs. "Come on, old one." She puts her arms around his chest, turns off all her outward senses, finds a strong current, and steadies herself for the jump.

The chaos always catches her by surprise – the random hurtling backwards and forwards through the ages of existence. She grabs onto an opportunity – a brief congruence – she pulls him to her – spinning, heaving, whirling, tumbling in free fall, they merge.

Satiated, relaxed, she is caught off guard by a sudden surge of gravity. Her grip slips. He slides, plunges, caroms, away from her.

It is the steam escaping from the rocks, searing the inner recesses of his consciousness that awakens him. With massive effort he brings his faculties to into focus and takes stock. As the rock cools around him, he realizes the coarse ferns and rushes of his hair, the waters of his hands, microbes, the simple swimming creatures of his breath. Eons of steady, insistent scanning are rewarded; he finds her sleeping near a stream which cascades down from the mountain range of his thigh. She is younger, supple, beautiful, hopeful in her repose. He recognizes the swelling in her belly as his own son. Fissures in distant rocks open up, new land masses burst forth from his seas, momentous storms are born as his consciousness subsides, as he gently breathes her name, "Mayuk."

NEXT BORN

A flame. It had no business in his laundry room. It wasn't a flame in the ordinary sense of combustion. Flame was merely a convenient label for a phenomenon clearly outside his personal experience. And it took some doing to come up with anything outside the personal experience of Charlie Fendick.

Of course, he couldn't be entirely sure. He might have been drinking a bit too much since the University gave him the sack. The 48-ouncer of Canadian Club some well-meaning colleagues had presented to him by way of farewell gift seemed to be empty and not lacking for company in the recycling bin. He, of course, preferred a good single malt scotch, but over the last nine days preference had nothing to do with it.

Nine days without going into the office, without facing classes of illiterates signed up for what the grapevine labelled as an entertaining "gut" course offered by a nut with a reputation for cancelling classes and handing out easy A's and B's.

Nine days without a crank call or a query from a tabloid "journalist" – of course they would probably track down his home phone number soon enough. Nine days since Fred, the janitor with the M.A. in Comparative Lit. applied the ugly, overly dramatic padlock to the door of the Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence. "Just doing my job, Doc. No hard feelings."

Seven days since he first encountered the shimmering phenomenon he thought of as the flame in the cellar.

"Cellar?" That's what he always called it. Susan, his estranged wife insisted on "basement." "Estranged." He liked the sound of that word. Less ominous than "flame" or "unexplained shimmering phenomenon." Less ominous and more accurate. His wife had grown strange, unknowable. His life, too, had grown strange – stranger. Stranger: an abrupt turn away from its predictably bizarre but at least linear nature. A turn toward what he wasn't quite sure. What loomed before him might portend immeasurable possibilities, concentrated into a shimmering, flickering nexus hovering in the bleak dampness behind the door to the left of the washing machine. On the other hand, it might just be a very persistent hallucination.

He had mapped out several of the less devastating alternatives the chalk

board in the living room (with no wife left to retreat from keeping the board in the darker, more cramped space of his study seemed pointless):

1. Liquid fire in the gut (a.k.a. Canadian Club) externalized
2. Former "case" returning to "haunt"
 - a. Godling at the stadium
 - b. "Projection" experiment with marine mammals
 - c. Andrew Maullen's (doctoral candidate from Northwestern) claim to have discovered a gaseous alien life-form (unsubstantiated, possible hoax)
 - d. Bessinger phenomenon – c.f. Navaho forbidden cave case
3. The Fires of Hell sneak preview
4. A clever prank perpetrated by students (with or without the assistance or support of Biology, Physics or Psychology Departments)
- 5.

The last space had been filled with several ideas, all of which resulted in smudges on his sleeve and the board. At one point an arrow had promoted the Fires of Hell to the top of the list, but two stiff belts of Canadian Club later, the arrow went the way of hypothesis #5. He had enough hell right here, right now without hypothesizing some supernatural version sending him personalized invitations.

The phone rang. Probably June, his former secretary, auxiliary conscience, fairy godmother, etc., recently reassigned to Blodgett and his crew in Biochemistry, but still, if somewhat clandestinely, faithful to her former boss.

"Yes?" The door did not open. The voice came through the heavily screened hole at eye level to her right.

"I come on business with the equivocator. I have travelled a great distance under a Royal Commission." She heard the snort of contempt through the heavy linen screen, but nothing disrespectful was actually said.

"You will not find the equivocator here in this time or place."

"And how may I find him?" She intoned the standard response almost ritually.

"A door which neither opens nor closes;
Which yields neither to latch nor to searching;
A search not furthered by walking."

Perhaps times were hard for equivocators too. Perhaps the equivocator of this small frontier village couldn't afford to riddle away too much business.

Not that the riddle mattered. However the riddle was posed, the required response never varied. She closed her eyes and withdrew inward.

She released her breathing and stilled all sensation and waited, an hour, perhaps more – time became irrelevant, and once she was somehow outside of time, she welcomed the wave of power that surged over her.

She slowly "sunk" through the flag stones at her feet. She knew the sense of sinking to be illusory, but how it was accomplished she did not know. Equivocators might not be much at riddling, but even the less significant ones in frontier villages had their secrets.

The old man facing her sat in a once elegant, but now threadbare chair. The upholstery suggested a world other than her own. The equivocators had first made their presence felt during her grandmother's time. They were never wholly in nor wholly out of her world. They made their future by manipulating reality – not by magic or machine, and not by engineering changes which tended to prevail in the world one inhabited. Someone who, for instance, sought revenge against an enemy might, if she could afford the equivocator's price, intervene in a different "permutation" (the equivocators' term). The death of an enemy in another permutation would cause no lasting harm in her own world, nor would it break any law there. Very few changes wrought in another permutation endured in the world of one's origin. Items retrieved rarely retained the qualities of the real. The equivocators alone, or so it was rumoured, knew how to exempt themselves from these limitations, but Mir had seen no convincing proof of this. The chair could have just as easily been imported from some distant land.

It was rumoured that if one died in another permutation one did not return, either bodily or in transmigrated form, but she had never heard of anyone experiencing death in a foreign permutation.

The equivocators had, for a time, seemed harmless enough. Some of her peers even thought they served a useful function. But their time was now passed. Their impact on the economics of birth was approaching dangerous proportions. Clearly, they would not withdraw from her world just by being asked. They had

not so much defied as simply ignored the Mother's edicts. All other attempts at eliminating them had been unsuccessful.

"I come on a Royal Mission. I come at the direct bidding of the Mother of the Race."

"I believe I've heard something of these missions."

"I have not come to attempt to expel or harm you or your kind."

"If what you say is true I don't much care how or at whose bidding you come to be here. I don't believe in special treatment – especially where your queen bee is concerned. Tell me what you want and I'll set my price."

Her Royal Chit was good to five and seven ninths, but she was only authorized to commit three. Two and four ninths was the highest demand she had ever heard reported, and more than high enough for even the best equivocator.

It was not known what these odd, male wizards did with the progeny they drew off from the economy of the Island, but the toll had grown precariously high. It was, however, almost certain that none of the females and very few of the males they claimed ever found their way back into the workforce through the black market. Some believed that the equivocators were populating their own private permutation, but this was pure speculation. The Mother and her elected matrons discussed the problem often these days. They were concerned, not only with the toll against the Royal Brood, but against the futures of private citizens as well.

"I trust your price will be a fair one. It has been estimated that I will require three triads in a permutation with a mechanically advanced civilization; one where I might study mechanical transportation. It would be male-dominated and materialistic in spiritual orientation. The details are specified on this scroll from the Matron of History."

She, of course, had no interest in transportation aided by mechanical devices. Assuming that the equivocators originated in a different permutation, one could not simply ask to be translated to that permutation. One could, however, learn as many of the characteristics of that permutation as possible, and then specify those characteristics. It was in arriving at the proper permutation that previous attempts had failed, but trial and error had narrowed the target to the point the Matrons had become increasingly confident of the chances of success.

The equivocator studied the scroll uttering an unsettling assortment of odd purring and snorting sounds. When he finally spoke, he did so without looking up from the scroll. "Yes, young lady, it is possible that I am aware of such a reality – one where the rate of material development far out paces the finer aspects of civilizations such as your own. It might even be possible to translate you to such

a permutation of your own reality, but you would find life there quite difficult, even for a few days. I have heard of similar requests; always, it seems, from servants of the Mother."

She tensed. "Don't take me for a neophyte. I know a great deal about your kind. I know all about the way you fuss about the difficulties and dress yourselves in concern and scruples in an attempt to justify a higher price. Let's get to the point, shall we?" She was bluffing, of course, and he probably knew it.

"Yes let's. I'm surprised at how accurate your scroll's description is. Of course I could follow it to the letter and still make sure you miss the mark, but we both know what you're after. Getting you there would be risky. I could face extreme sanctions at the hand of my fellow equivocators. A single infant, or even the two which the delegates of the Mother are accustomed to exchanging would not induce me to indulge in such a risk."

"Your price, old man."

"A note promising the delivery of six infants, freshly weaned and unschooled."

Every hint of blood drained from her face. Such a price was unheard of. She fought down the quiver in her throat before she spoke. "You ask for much more than I am authorized to offer. If you are not prepared to modify your exorbitant demands I shall be forced to return to the Mother, Herself, to discuss this matter further. There are other equivocators."

"I'm sure there are, but I doubt you will find another honestly prepared to fulfill your request at any price."

The Mother was encouraged rather than outraged by the price. It might be that he couldn't be trusted, but it might also be that, for reasons of his own, in spite of knowing what they sought, he would co-operate. If so, he obviously underestimated them, or he wouldn't deal with them at any price.

The Mother, Herself, emphasized that Mir would be carrying a great responsibility. It was unlikely that they would have a second chance. She urged Mir to bargain carefully, reducing the price if at all possible, but She was emphatic that a deal was to be struck at whatever price.

The final price, while lower in sum, weighed even more heavily upon Mir. The note she signed committed four of the Royal Brood, delivered in advance, as

well as her own next born, to be delivered on demand.

By the end of her second triad in the reality of Charlie Fendick she was able to get about and function more or less effectively without drawing unnecessary attention to herself but the task seemed hopeless. Even his village was vast with hundreds upon thousands of people. In her scant remaining time she would never be able to survey it in its entirety, let alone other villages, some of which he assured he were even larger.

She was still far from certain she could trust Charlie Fendick, but he did provide her with accommodation and food and helped her understand his world and find her way around. The written language still confused her, but she was able to understand and speak enough of the oral language for the purpose of her mission. Charlie Fendick had also found less conspicuous clothes for her. They were difficult to operate and wear at first – the first time she put them on he laughed. How was she to know that the smaller pieces were meant to be worn underneath?

She wore her small mesh sack of horse lichen inside the little pants intended to be worn beneath the other garments. Thrice and two years back it was Mir, herself who was credited with the discovery that horse lichen curled into a tight, coarse ball when it was exposed to the aura of an equivocator, much as it did when used in the detection of untransmigrated souls. She had reasoned that the first of the equivocators might be found in this way. If not yet born its mother could be induced to drink steelwort to purge the womb. If still a child it could be given The Sleep. If it had already reached maturity there was always her dagger. She had been granted absolution in advance for any life she might be required to violate.

As she pulled on the last piece of clothing under the outer and inner skirts, and put the horse lichen in its place she felt it change.

She looked down on Charlie Fendick, still asleep. He was the only person close enough to affect the lichen. But why hadn't the lichen responded earlier. Perhaps awake he had a way of guarding himself against detection. With the roughness of the portent against her thigh, she felt the blood within her veins spring to life, awakening every fibre of her being to the task that often filled her dreams, but that she had rarely dared to believe would be hers to carry out.

She set aside the horse lichen. It had served its purpose. She left the room

quietly, quickly. Poison would be best. She would spend the morning finding millweed – sweet and fragrant, but deadly. She would bake it into temple cakes to serve him with the "microwave" meals he would prepare that evening.

Charlie was in the cellar when his house guest returned. It was pitch black after he loosened the light bulb. He had already covered the two dingy windows with cardboard. Convinced that there was not hint of the flame, he groped his way to the stairs. When he opened the door into the kitchen he was surprised to see Mir rummaging through the cupboards.

"Find everything you need?"

She was startled. She cursed herself silently for not being aware of him before he entered the room.

"I understand that this small packet contains leavening, but I can't make out the riddle intended to tell me how to use it."

"Yeast, Mir. It must be pretty old. Left over from the former regime, probably. Let me have a look. Try putting it in warm water. What other-worldly marvel are you cooking up?"

"You have been very helpful to me. I am making temple cakes to go with your microwave meal. It is meant as a show of my appreciation."

"That's great, although I kind of figured last night was about the biggest expression of appreciation an involuntary bachelor like me could hope for. I'm sure the cakes will be wonderful, but I'd still rather know more about who you are, where you come from and why you're here. What do you do every day when you go out?"

"Today I was collecting some of the things I need for my cakes."

"That's it?"

"There is a great deal I would not be able to explain in terms you would understand."

"You might be surprised."

"Perhaps." Her face said what her tongue did not. He wasn't going to get anywhere with that particular line of enquiry just yet.

"Suit yourself. I'm going upstairs for a while. Give me a shout if you need anything."

He retired the room his former wife had used as a studio. He hadn't done much to change it except move in a few boxes of old files from his office – when he had an office. He was thinking about taking it over as his study. It was bigger and just generally more suitable as a work space than the room Susan had allotted to him.

It took him completely by surprise. It was there. Not so much a flame in the brightness of the sunlit room as a concentration of shimmering light near the wardrobe.

He approached it carefully. He picked up a roll of Christmas wrapping paper and poked at the "flame." The portion of the roll that penetrated the phenomenon vanished.

"Comic book stuff, eh? A window into another reality – an exotically beautiful young woman wearing odd clothes walks through on some mysterious mission which apparently has something to do with cooking clover into cupcakes. Close, but not quite my area of specialization. Mir down there in the kitchen clearly doesn't qualify as non-human intelligence. I wonder why she was trying to conceal the clover from me?"

He threw the wrapping paper into the light. As he expected, it "ceased to exist." He wondered what or whom it had surprised at the other end.

"Well what do you say, Charlie, old man?" He talked to himself even more these days than he had in the past. "Think there might be an opening for a discarded fringe academic in a parallel reality? What the hell, it might make a good book. I always figured I ought to be an author someday. I wonder how long this flame-portal-gateway thing will last in this location? Maybe I'd better give this some thought. It's not every day a body goes strolling off into another reality."

He was still giving it some thought when Mir appeared in the doorway with a tray bearing a microwave dinner and two of her temple cakes.

A wave of unnameable discomfort welled over her when she saw him standing there, transfixed, contemplating the equivocator's portal.

"You must not step through the portal Charlie Fendick."

"Why, what's on the other side? I assume this is how you got here? Where did you hide it?"

"You must not go near the portal. Sit down. Here, eat. Then we will go together, once again, to your bed chamber."

"Yeah, well, I am kind of hungry, but this portal thing could be pretty important. I think maybe it's time we had a talk –"

She took his hand with a tenderness he couldn't remember feeling for years. "We can talk later, Charlie Fendick, perhaps at the next sun's rising. Now you must eat and then the bed."

He looked back to the light. It was still there. Somehow its pull eased. It would still be there later. He had to learn to – he couldn't always go rashly chasing off after every peculiar phenomenon. Even in his own house. It would still be there later. And what if it wasn't? And, come to think of it, why was this incredible young woman so interested in getting him back between the sheets again – of, for that matter, why was she so willing in the first place?

He awoke in a dark, chill, damp void. He had been down in a Yukon silver mine once and that was kind of what it felt like now in his room. He was alone. She was gone – not out of the room – gone – gone more completely than Susan or any other woman had ever been gone. Gone not from his life, but from his entire reality. He didn't even have to go to the cellar or the studio. He knew what he would see – or, more to the point, what he would not see.

It was too bad he was too cowardly for suicide. On the spur of the moment he couldn't think of much else to do. At his age a wasted opportunity was the bitterest of pills to swallow. Worse even than being fired or being abandoned by his wife. He considered the emergency bottle of 18 year old Glenlivet he had stashed in the nightstand, but regret and self pity held him transfixed for what might well have been hours.

Eventually he got up from the bed and put on his pants. The place was a mess. He began to straighten up the bedroom. How could anybody live in such a mess? He knew there had to be a vacuum cleaner around some place. His imaginary house guest sure as hell hadn't taken the vacuum with her.

The dream came again. This time it was clearer, more insistent – sifting over her like an early, gentle snowfall at first, then stirring, whipping, wilder, fiercer, punishing, startling her awake. She cried out, sweating, trembling.

Darneen awoke and rushed in from the next room.

"Mir – what is it? Is it time? The temple – should we wake Trou and get you to the temple? What is it, Mir?"

Mir was still trembling, her head and shoulders bowed. "A dream, a terrible, terrible dream, but one I fear tells much truth."

"Tell me."

"It has come before, but not so clearly – not so I could remember it. This time it was so clear – more clear than reality itself. Tomorrow I must go to the palace."

"But tell me. What did you dream?"

"I was on a low pallet in a rocky field. I was surrounded by horse lichen. It was tall and lush. It grew up over me, curling, roughening, closing in on me. It grew up over my womb, scraping, tightening –" She was sobbing. "I must go to the palace. The child cannot be birthed."

The house was clean. It had never been so clean. Even the cellar was pristine. He was amazed. It had only taken three days. It wasn't really so hard. Boxes were unpacked and broken down for recycling. Things were put in their proper places – even things that didn't have a proper place before he started. He felt good. Susan would never have believed him capable of such a degree of organization – or June either. In fact, neither of them could have done so thorough a job. June often mentioned that she hated housework, and Susan, while never tolerating his tendency toward cluttered chaos, praised what she called the "lived in look" when it applied to her own space. Of course she always considered his version of lived in an unconscionable mess.

Even his new work space was orderly – ready. Some might have considered the placement of the desk, in the corner of the room so close to the wardrobe, a bit unorthodox, but it made it easy to reach things. Besides, he felt as if something large and substantial – something heavy with physical mass and reality ought to occupy that space.

He felt ready to go out. He was going to need a few groceries and a few office supplies in order to begin his new career as a writer. Anything that had or hadn't happened while he was recovering from the shock of actually getting fired was now behind him. It had to be behind him, there was no other place for such goings on.

Mir was summoned before the Mother. The room was sparse and unpretentious. The walls were bare. The only furniture was a simple table and three unpadded wooden chairs. The lighting was dimly comforting through the single lamp's blue globe.

The attendants left her alone with the Mother. The Mother nodded for her to sit in the closest chair.

"Welcome, Sister. You must not be nervous. You have done well, very well."

"Mother, the dream – I am certain that the dream reveals the truth. Surely they have told you what happened this morning when real horse lichen was placed over my womb. There can be no doubt –"

"Yes, I've been told. And, yes, I have discussed your dream with the members of the Council. No one disagrees with you. The child you carry is real even though it was not fathered in this 'permutation'. We also feel the child you will birth will grow into an equivocator – quite probably The Equivocator – the first of all the others. We don't understand how such a paradox can be possible, but we believe it is."

"The child I will birth – but –"

"Yes, Mir, the child you will birth."

"But the mission –"

"Perhaps the mission was ill conceived. Perhaps it was not. Our decision is that the child is too precious to deny life. We will raise him here in the palace. If our teaching can make a difference then perhaps the greatest paradox of all will be a profound change in all our lives. If not perhaps the change has already taken place. The child will live. You have done well."

"And the note I signed with the equivocator? He was pledged my next born, freshly weaned and unschooled."

"We will send a courier. Whoever seeks to claim the child must come to the palace to do so. He will not leave. He will know this before he comes. If he chooses to come anyway and has not yet learnt that the ways of the equivocators are ineffective here, then we are blameless. The equivocators may choose to ignore our laws when our laws do not suit their purposes, but they are not exempt."

"But the chit?"

"A bargain falsely made does not carry the weight of law."

"But was it not we – yes, of course, Mother."

He chose to ignore the doorbell. He was just getting started on an article dealing with high level, symbolic communication in the absence of complex language and wasn't about to interrupt the flow in order to tell some kid he didn't need any magazines or chocolate covered almonds or whatever. "Of course what if it was something from a publisher. Go on you idiot. Go down and check. It'll only take a minute."

There was no one there. He opened the door and checked the mailbox. It was empty. He was about to curse himself for not answering the ring in the first place when he noticed the roll of paper pinned to the door with a small ice pick like dagger.

"Cute. Real cute. Something tells me I might not want to read this." He pulled hard to remove the knife. "I wonder where they would have stuck it if I'd answered the door." The paper was crisp and shiny, like a diploma.

The script was ornate and scratchy – hard to make out and not exactly English. Blodgett's biology nerds or whoever was responsible had gone to a lot of trouble. The illusion, the girl – a welcome diversion to be sure – and now, months later, an artfully done parchment message pinned to the door with a convincingly theatrical dirk.

"Sorry, guys, but it's non-human intelligence that turns my crank, not non-intelligent humans. I appreciated the female companionship at a time when I was feeling kind of lonely and sorry for myself – if, in fact any of that was real – but I'm afraid I'm too busy with more important stuff now to go diving off into alternate realities. Besides, kids are too noisy – messy too."

Somehow he wasn't particularly surprised when he got back up to his study to find that it was there again. The flame. The "portal." It wasn't exactly the same spot, the spot now occupied by his desk – more toward the middle of the room this time – but it was definitely the same pseudo phenomenon that had almost fooled him before.

"Sorry, guys, but like I said, I've got more important things on the go these days." He tossed the parchment and the knife into the illusion. They both disappeared without a trace. As he walked around the portal it shimmered and maybe even flickered. "I really do have more important things to do, but I sure as

hell would like to know how you manage that portal trick."

By the time Charlie Fendick got back to the studio with his vacuum cleaner the Equivocator's portal was gone.

SCHRÖDINGER'S KEYS

Charlie Fendick enters his study. The mound on the floor in the centre of the room continues to grow, imparting an increasing sense of chaos to the room, to his life. Cards and letters from friends, former students and associates, or even mere acquaintances from all over the world feed the mound. He hasn't opened the more recent ones and has no plans to do so. It isn't necessary. Not one of his recent rash of correspondents has had the guts to come right out and say it: "Dear Charlie, heard you were dying and knew I'd feel guilty if I didn't make the cut-off, so I thought I'd write while there's still time," but they all hover around that theme.

The real chaos, the ornately carved box under the mound of paper, will also remain unopened.

He takes up the cane – once an affectation, but as the pain weakens the leg, more of a necessity. He'll need the umbrella against the rain. He fits the key into the door that leads directly to the lane-way. Clutching the umbrella in the same hand with the key and bracing against the cane with the other, he turns the key awkwardly.

As usual, Mr. Branch's old Volvo obstructs the lane-way. Branch never washes his car. Its paint is dull and chalky. Little flowerettes of rust blossom through its film. It could be a good car with a little proper care. It's a pity an old fart like him –

He snaps out of it and pulls back. His face has come within a mere breath of the fender. Lost. Falling into a deviously placed rust mandala.

Professor Charles A. Fendick has got to get a firm grip on himself. He has things to do today. The car will be there another time.

Back around at the street, Charlie pauses to take stock. In an effort to touch base with reality, he exhales forcefully through pursed lips. He steels himself and strides up the walk toward the bus stop. His heart stops.

The ornate box under the mound in the study stirs. The man approaching him is dark-skinned, short, broad, flat, chiseled face Charlie has come to think of as Mayan.

"One hook up, one hook down." The stranger traces a long, thin finger (surprisingly long for so short a man) along down the shaft of the umbrella to the hook of its handle and then along the hook of the cane. "The old folks say hooks like that are supposed to make good luck. What do you think, Charlie Fendick?" The accent is not exactly Aboriginal, not exactly Hispanic – not exactly anything. The hand attached to the tracing finger opens to reveal a key that is pressed into Charlie's hand, the one holding the umbrella.

Charlie already knows the key will fit the back door to his study; the one that leads directly into the lane-way where Old Man Branch parks his abused old Volvo; the door that hasn't been used for nearly two years – since he lost his key case on a trip. The room will contain the box. The box will contain...

"I'm back."

"How did it go?"

"Nothing new."

"Charlie, tell me how it went. What did he say?"

"June, it's not digitally timed. There is no countdown, dammit. What? Every time I see the doctor do you think he's going to say, 'Well, Charlie, you're down to two weeks, six hours and forty seven minutes – don't bother making an appointment for next month, you'll be dead?'"

"I'm sorry, Charlie. Really, I'm sorry – I'm so sorry—" The tears are gathering in her eyes again. She gives his arm a compassionate squeeze. She's been getting a lot of practise at compassionate squeezing. She's getting much too good at it.

"Hey, come on, look at it this way, everybody dies eventually, I just face less uncertainty about when it's going to happen than most people. I, uh, bought a new lamp for the upstairs hall."

"I wish you hadn't."

"Hadn't what?"

"Charlie—" She cuts herself short and then sighs and drops her head, shaking it slowly from side to side. "Are you going into that room again?" She forces the words around the lump in her throat.

"My study? Yes."

"What do you keep in there?"

"You'll find out when I'm dead."

"Dammit, Charlie!" She is beginning to cry in earnest – the angry tears, not the sorrowful ones, not the frustrated ones. The angry tears are smaller, their crying silent.

There is no way he can not do this. He takes up the cane as the pain returns to the leg. He fumbles with the ridiculous old skeleton key in the lock. He

makes a lunging grab for the umbrella as he leaves. He can't forget the umbrella. He makes his way down the lane-way, taking care not to rub against Branch's filthy old rust bucket. The paint almost sighs, resigned to neglect, dull and chalky. Little flowerettes of rust blossom through the grimy film....

"That's good, those hooks like that – they say they're supposed to mean good luck..."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. Really, I'm sorry—" the tears were forming in her eyes, pooling at the lower lids, waiting to spill over and run down her cheeks. She gave his arm a compassionate squeeze.

"Everybody dies eventually..."

"I wish you hadn't."

"Hadn't what? Oh, the lamp. Shit, I forgot the lamp..."

"Charlie – I know—"

The pain forced its way into his chest. "What? What do you know?"

"I know about your job, about the doctor, about the man with the keys. I don't understand any of it, Charlie, but I know."

"It's not raining today."

"Charlie, don't change the subject."

"You don't understand. It won't work. There's no point in taking the umbrella. It wouldn't make sense."

"Where do you go? I know you don't go to the university. I know they eliminated your grant and closed down the Institute. And I know you don't go to Dr. Vernon's – so where?"

"I don't know." His head drops. He has to get into the study. It's not raining. He has to figure this out.

"The cancer? Is that a lie too? Why, Charlie?"

"It's not cancer. I never said it was cancer. But I am dying – June – try to understand – I have to go in – I –"

"I'm going to move back to my own place, Charlie. This just isn't working out. I know I'll feel guilty as hell about abandoning you if it turns out you really

are dying, but it just isn't working – besides, I'm not doing you any good here even if you really are–"

"I don't think it's a good idea to change anything – I – I have to get into the study – I can't–"

"Damn you, Charlie Fendick!"

The pain is calling him. He has to go in. The week's mail, added to the mound, caused an avalanche, exposing the box. This is wrong – all wrong. He takes up the cane as the pain gathers force and moves down into his leg. It isn't raining....

"Only one hook today. Turned down. That's not good – turned down – all the luck runs out, Charlie Fendick–"

"That's not the right key – that key won't fit–"

"You think I don't know my own keys? You take the key I give you and don't complain. You take that one. Now go."

The growth along the trail is closing in. It's too thick. He can hardly find the way. This is all wrong – the air is hot and dry. His lungs are sore from the effort – drawing breath after searing breath. The clearing is visible now – only a little farther. And in the clearing is the mound. And in the mound the door. And behind the door will be June and another door and, of course the box. But she isn't there. There isn't another door. Only a box. A rough but beautifully carved box.

"She was right. This isn't working out. Everything is wrong. Nothing fits."

He looks at the key in his knotted palm. The box should be locked. The key should open it.

Charlie Fendick answers the door. He half expects it to be June. He's been planning to call her anyway—"You didn't come today. The pain must be getting pretty bad by now."

"No. I can stand – the pain – yes, the pain I can stand.... How did you get here without me?"

"I've got your key."

"No. No keys. I'm through. I don't understand what's happening here, but it has got to stop. I don't care anymore. I'd rather just get it over with and die. If I could just have a couple of days to straighten out a few things. Just two days. Hell, I'll settle for one—"

"Come now, Charlie Fendick, you have to go to the forest now. Not in two days, Charlie, now."

The growth along the trail closes in – too thick – very nearly impassable. His lungs are constricted – burning from the effort of drawing breath after searing breath. The clearing is only a little farther. And in the clearing, the mound. Or – it's a pyramid. No box. At the top, not inside, is an ornately carved – altar.

"She was right. This isn't working out." He is stretched out on the altar, not bound, but held nonetheless. The man – priest? – short, dark, broad, chiseled face – uses the knife to open Charlie's shirt. He draws the blade lightly across Charlie's chest, seeking out his heart.

"This is not an easy thing, Charlie Fendick." He runs the index finger of his left hand over the first, glistening incision as he raises his right hand, the one with the beautifully gilded knife, high over his head.

As the blood seeps out, releasing the pain, Charlie rolls out of the knife's arc. In the same fluid motion, his fist is thrust, by a force he doesn't control, into the priest's solar plexus. He lurches down off the altar. He feels heat. He feels the muscle tissue in his thigh part. He feels the pain as it flies free. A hand pressed to the thigh comes away red, wet, hot. This, of course, cannot be happening.

Somewhere in the distance he is caught up in a struggle for the knife. He shudders as he feels it slide so easily between the ribs of the smaller man.

He runs, drawing hot, wet, heavy breath after heavy, sodden breath. His lungs ache, throb. He runs until he can run no longer, collapsing – the door just beyond his reach.

The pain in his leg is severe as he fumbles with the lock. It is raining. The pain is forcing its way up into his chest. He goes back inside for the umbrella. The box is already under his arm. The – priest – is waiting, weak, bleeding propped up against Branch's Volvo. "Here, take your damn box."

"The key. Take the key. Open it–"

"Open it yourself. I'm through with this–"

"Open the box."

Charlie's leg is throbbing – the vise tightening around his chest. The pain is literally killing him. "Open the box, Charlie Fendick. Take the heart into your hands." But it is too late.

He is gone.

He sits down heavily at his desk and rubs his hands along the arms of his chair, his desk – the comforting coolness of the telephone receiver.

He dials June's number.

"Hi, June? This is Charlie. No, the leg's not feeling too bad. They never did figure out what was the problem, but who cares if it's going away on its own? Yeah, the ticker's fine too. That was actually a false alarm. Look, June, I know this is kind of short notice, but now that Susan's gone I've got all kinds of room here and I figure screw the dean and the faculty senate too – screw the whole lot of them. They can kill the Institute – I guess they already did kill it – but I don't see any reason I can start up an independent Centre for the Study of Non-human Intelligence. Well, I might not be able to pay you much for a while, but I was wondering if you might – this afternoon would be great. You should see the stack of mail here."

PICTURES IN A FRANE

Ollie Frane was a throwback. The kind of guy you used to see working on a dock or in a warehouse. His face bristled with what we used to call 5 o'clock shadow back before it was fashionable. He had a belly that bulged out over the waistband of his pants, somewhat accentuated by the way his shoulders slouched forward. His arms looked disproportionately long, as did his barrel-chested torso, and his legs maybe a little too short. Not surprisingly, his clothes were as ill-fitting as he was in the lobby of an upscale hotel, carrying only a faded gym bag printed with the logo of the long-defunct Montreal Expos. I would have noticed him even if he didn't fit the description of the man I had been instructed to meet there.

"Mr. Frane?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm Ollie Frane. You Fendick?"

"I am, indeed, Dr. Charlie Fendick."

"They didn't say you were a doctor. I ain't sick as far as I know unless you count my bum shoulder."

"I'm not a medical doctor, Mr. Frane. It's the Ph. D. sort of doctor – like a professor, or, in my case, a former professor. I'm more of a freelance researcher these days."

"So what? You gonna turn me into some kind of lab rat?"

"Have you checked in yet? I'd prefer to discuss this arrangement someplace a bit more private like your hotel room."

"I just got here. I kind of figured to find out what's what before I got myself beholding to your Mr. Winestain."

"I think I can assure you that your room here is already paid for, with no obligation on your part, whatever the outcome of our discussions. Mr. Weinstein was more than prepared to bring you here and cover the cost of your accommodation and incidentals as well as my consulting fee whether or not you decide to accept his proposition."

"Yeah, whatever you say. But if it's all the same to you, how about we find the bar in this place and talk this proposition thing out over a beer before I

make up my mind about checking in?"

Before I relate our discussion in the lounge of the Four Seasons a little background is in order.

Before my dismissal I held an untenured faculty position at a major North American university I would prefer not to name. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I was the Director of the Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence, which Institute was shut down by the aforementioned university at the same time as my dismissal. My interest in that particular area, was primarily directed to the investigation of the use of language, complex forms of social organization, and other behaviours which might be taken to indicate intelligence among otherwise unremarkable terrestrial life forms. That, in and of itself, as long as I demonstrated an inclination to err on the side of scepticism, was generally tolerated by the academic community. It was the rare occasion when overwhelming evidence goaded me over the line into what most regard as paranormal phenomena, incursions from other worlds, and what my assistant, June, liked to lump together under the label of gonzo science, that the academic ice on which I stood became perilously thin and eventually gave way leaving my career, my personal life and, for a time, my mental stability in a shambles.

After the requisite period of self-pity, which included a brief, but terrifying side-trip into one or more alternate realities, and one or more possible brushes with death, I decided to reinvent myself as an author and freelance investigator and the director of the Centre for the Study of Non-human Intelligence. Initially the Centre was run on a shoestring budget out of my former wife's former "studio" in my suburban Toronto home.

Enter the nearly stereotypical eccentric with more money than ways to spend it, Harry Weinstein who cared very little about the language or social structure of cetaceans or insects which employed tools and demonstrated systems for educating their young, but had a real thing for gonzo science.

That more or less gets me to the lobby of the Four Seasons on that particular afternoon. As for Ollie Frane, I'm not sure how he came to Harry's attention but I do know that Harry believed him to be:

- a) neither hoax nor con artist (Harry had other specialists far more skilled than I to investigate of that side of things) and
- b) well worth investigating.

Ollie's claim to fame – actually, he had demonstrated a strong inclination to flee from rather than seek out the weekly supermarket tabloid spotlight – was that some as yet undetermined but presumably non-human intelligence was attempting to communicate with or through him. This came to light when one

such attempt at communication was involved in the construction accident which presumably resulted in the "bum shoulder" he referred to when we first met. Said accident also resulted in two deaths, the loss of some rather expensive heavy equipment and a six week delay in the reopening of a bridge in Cleveland. As far as everyone except the tabloids and Harry were concerned, Ollie was put on compensation and then laid off as unfit for work after being medicated for a bipolar disorder and the matter quickly faded from the public eye.

I spent nearly an hour on the phone with Harry trying to convince him that Ollie wasn't my kind of case before he spoke in serious dollar signs and followed up with a hefty email attachment and a direct deposit into my rapidly dwindling bank account. I might mention that, although Susan, my ex, wasn't interested in the house, she didn't manage to ravage our joint account before I got myself together enough to deal with such mundane matters.

Which brings us back to a corner booth in the lounge of the Four Seasons hotel in a Western Canadian city with a half drained pint of beer in front of Ollie and an as yet untouched highball glass of single malt scotch, neat in front of me.

"Canadians do a pretty decent job with beer. I like a beer with a little heft to it. But I didn't quite get why your Winestain guy wanted to fly me all the way up here. You from around here? You don't exactly sound like it."

"No, not exactly. I've recently been working out of Vancouver on the west coast of Canada, but I actually live in Toronto. But Mr. Frane –"

"Call me Ollie."

"Ollie, then, I'd like to get right to the point if you don't mind."

"I guess Winestain's people already told you that I don't exactly like talking about this stuff."

"Yes, but they also told me that you weren't completely adverse to the figure Mr. Weinstein quoted when he asked you to cooperate with his investigations."

"Like I had much choice in the matter."

"So, if I could summarize, you were involved in a workplace accident which at least partially resulted from you hearing voices in your head."

"Not exactly. In the first place, I didn't hear no voices – at least not when the crane wrecked the bridge and ended up in the drink. It was more like pictures, and it wasn't in my head, it was kind of floating out there like a foot or so in front of my face. I couldn't see nothing else. I mean how was I supposed to see where the hopper was going?"

"Fine, now you were 46 at the time."

"Something like that."

"And that was, I believe, in 1975?"

"Something like that."

"And since it is now 2009, that would make you 82."

"83 actually."

"OK, but you don't look a year over 50 and yet you've had a pretty rough life since you lost your job."

"Not that rough. Unless you count being what you call institutionalized for 5 or 6 years and then trying to live off disability and Social Security rough."

"Rough enough. How do you explain your apparent youth?"

"I don't explain nothing anymore. As much as anything I try to forget about it."

"And yet you still see those pictures from time to time as well as hearing voices."

"It ain't voices. It's just one. Always the same. Yeah, well that stuff is kind of a pain in the ass. Like I can't work even if somebody would've hired me and I can't drive no more even if I could afford a car. I mean how can you do stuff like that when you don't know when some picture might come up and block your view or some tinny voice is gonna like block out your regular hearing?"

"I can see where that would present problems."

"Yeah, that and everybody I used to know, them that's still alive, any way, thinks I'm a nut case."

"I suspect a weaker man might well have committed suicide or ended up one of the anonymous homeless wandering the streets muttering to himself and accosting passers by for spare change. I don't mind telling you I wasn't too far from such a fate myself after being sacked by the university."

"Yeah well after they decided I was harmless and kicked me out of the bug house as long as I kept on my meds, which, by the way, never did nothing to stop the pictures or the voice, I took the first chance I got to get the hell out of Ohio and find myself a flophouse in Scranton where nobody knew me or paid much attention to me. I was there for the better part of 20 years before I kind of ran out of places to move to where people didn't start to notice things and get uncomfortable, so I packed up and moved up to Binghamton. Then a year or so ago your Winestain guy tracked me down and had that detective character, Waddell pay me a visit."

"What made you change your mind after you sent him away the first time."

"More like the first, second and third time. What made me change my mind? What do you think? Money. For one thing, they'd been cutting into my pension for a couple of years. And then I kind of had to move every few years because, like I said, people would start to notice things."

"Like the fact that you never seemed to age."

"Yeah, like that. I mean you can keep to yourself and all, but after a while – well, you know."

"Speaking of which, what do you do with yourself? Whatever diagnoses you may have had, you impress me as a sane man. How have you managed to occupy your time and maintain your equilibrium?"

"Yeah well, I get by. I read a lot. I watch television – mostly sports. I get into the odd poker game. I wish to hell that just once them pictures would show me something useful like what the other guy is holding."

"Do the pictures or voice often occur at an inopportune time, such as when you're in the middle of a poker game?"

"Can you think of a good time for something like that?"

"No, I suppose not." I paused to let our discussion percolate a bit and to heed the call of the single malt."

"Winestain good for another beer?"

"Of course. And I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you referred to him as Harry." Harry wasn't big on formalities and I was sure he would prefer a first name basis to being likened to a spot on a tablecloth. I signalled our server and, after ordering another round and finishing off my scotch, decided I'd achieved about as close to a rapport with Ollie as possible. At least he was seeming a bit more talkative than when we started off in the lobby. "So, Ollie, here's the deal. Harry is quite interested in finding out more about where these pictures and voice of yours might come from, and he's got more money than you or I can imagine, so he's prepared to put the two of us up in this hotel, which you have to admit is a pretty nice place, and cover all our expenses plus pay you \$200 a day for as long as it takes for us to do pretty much what we've been doing here, which is to say talk. That's all. No lab, no drugs, no mad scientist foolishness, just talk."

"Well the thing is, like I said, the way I've managed to keep what you call my what you call equilibrium is to pretty much forget about it when it's not right in my face. I mean I'm kind of worried that if we spend all day long talking about it – well, you know what I mean."

"It doesn't have to be all day. Hey, look, I'm getting paid by the day too. If it takes a month or even two at an hour or two a day before I think I've found out as much as I can, it's no skin off my teeth."

"Yeah, well maybe I should go back out there and get myself checked in and take the night to think it over."

"Sounds like a good idea. I'm in room 512 if you want to get in touch with me. Room service or anything you charge to your room is covered. If you decide this arrangement isn't for you, you just check out tomorrow and go back to Binghamton or wherever and you've had a decent paid holiday. If you decide to go ahead with it then let me know and we'll figure out when our next chat takes place."

"Yeah, well I'm not about to bugger off without at least saying good-bye. I mean you seem like a decent enough guy for a professor. How about we meet out the in the lobby tomorrow morning and find us some breakfast. Meantime, room service doesn't sound like a bad idea." It was the first hint of a smile I'd seen on his face. "Hey, Professor, you like my luggage? Got it at the thrift shop. I figured, what with coming to Canada and the Expos was a Canadian team and all."

"Perfect. And by the way, please call me Charlie. It's been several years since I could rightly claim the title of professor."

My phone call to Harry was typical. I told him I was intrigued and that I thought Ollie would agree to give it a try in spite of his reservations – partly for the money and partly because he was starved for companionship. I also warned him that it might take a while and that, even then, I wasn't at all sure that we'd come up with anything to justify the time or the money. "In short, Harry, this one is definitely a long shot. A fascinating long shot, but a long shot none the less."

"Charlie, is anything I ever ask you to look into ever anything but a long shot?"

"Probably not, but I thought we really had something with that girl in Argentina."

"Perhaps we did. We'll never know, will we? But I have to tell you that I'm still more than a little sceptical about time travel."

"But not about aliens communicating telepathically with a construction

worker who doesn't want to listen but they still manage to keep eternally middle aged just in case he decides to pay attention at some point down the road? Or maybe the communication is coming across time instead of space. Would that mean you'd lose interest?"

"Not necessarily. And I don't recall suggesting anything about aliens in any of my previous communications. Why don't we maintain open minds and see where this takes us before we do too much hypothesizing."

"Sure. Just as long as you understand that time travel probably means human intelligence, which takes it outside my area of expertise."

"You're not in academia and more, Charlie. My boundaries tend to be a bit more flexible, as should yours."

"Sure thing, Harry. I'll talk to you in a day or two."

"I don't see why you're so all fired interested in the voice. As far as I'm concerned it's just noise. The big deal is the pictures. The docs at the funny farm were all hot and bothered about the voice, but that's because they figure they know all about voices."

"Oh, believe me, Ollie, I'm quite interested in pictures, but I'd like to get the facts straight about the voice."

"Whatever you say. It don't mean much to me 'cause it ain't English. I don't know what it is – maybe Russian or Arabian or something like that. And it has a tinny sound to it like an old crystal radio if you know what they sounded like."

"I'm sorry to have to ask this, but I'm sure Harry will want to know. Do you think it sounds like a human voice?"

"What do you mean? You mean like is it a robot? How the hell would I know? Are robots supposed to sound like humans?"

"Never mind for now. Let's talk about the pictures..."

Ollie was quite reluctant to try to draw anything he'd seen in the pictures, which actually turned out to be more like video clips. It took several days and a couple of frustrating attempts with pencil and paper, but he eventually agreed to let me bring in a student I found at the local art college to try and interpret his descriptions on paper.

The bulk of the sketches turned out to be diagrams of some sort which he would apparently see plotted out while he watched, with scenes of people or buildings either overlaying them or sometimes in the background "like the maze things were being drawn on a window or something."

After we took the sketching as far as it was likely to go, I scanned in the most representative of the lot and sent them off to Harry.

He had a group of his experts go over them pretty thoroughly, but, other than a general consensus that they were possibly an attempt at some manner of schematics or diagrams, nobody knew what to make of them any more than Ollie Frane.

Harry had me press him about how accurate the art student's representations were, but all he could say was, "What kind of boneheaded question is that? I mean you've got a retired construction worker trying to describe some technical looking stuff that he ain't got have a clue about to some artist kid that probably wouldn't know a blueprint from a wiring diagram from a puzzle book. Maybe you want to put the artist kid up in the Four Seasons too so the next time I see something I can run and tell him what to draw while I'm still seeing it?"

"Well, now that you mention it, that might not be a bad idea. When was the last time it happened?"

"Like I told you, it was about a month before I came up here. But sometimes there's nothing for months or maybe it'll happen two or three times in the same day."

"I don't know Harry, it's been over three weeks and I don't think we've made much progress since the first week. I mean the art student was a good idea, but that didn't really pan out and I don't think we're going to get much more useful information from Frane."

"I'd still like to give it another week with your art student on call."

"Well I can't really get the student on a 24/7 basis, but I've tracked down a temp agency that can get us a technical illustrator or draftsman, but you've got to realize that it'll probably be a colossal waste of money."

"It's my money to waste, Charlie."

"You're the boss, Harry"

We had a couple of days left on Harry's "one more week" when Ollie and I and Marissa, our technical illustrator were having breakfast at a little café a few blocks from our hotel.

Ollie was unusually talkative. Actually he'd become more chatty almost as soon as Marissa had entered the picture. "You know, I've been thinking, Charlie, maybe we should try hypnosis or something like that. Maybe if you hypnotized me I could maybe get the pictures back or something and describe what I'm seeing so Marissa can get it down on paper just right."

"I don't know, Ollie, for starters, I don't do hypnosis, and for another thing I'm not sure Harry would go for it. Sounds a little too much like a weak attempt to stretch out this gravy train for a little longer."

"Hey, it couldn't hurt to give him a call and –" He stopped abruptly and then began to mutter, "Oh shit – oh shit – better run back to the hotel and get your stuff Marissa –"

It was a case of horribly bad timing. I was right in the middle taking a drink of coffee. I spewed and spilled all over the place and started choking.

Marissa was already headed for the door. Ollie was pretty out of it, staring off into space like I wasn't there, waving his hand in front of his face like he was trying to swat at a fly, but something registered and he reached over and whacked me hard on the back.

It happened all at once. I stopped choking and caught my breath. Ollie stood up and waved both hands in front of his face and said, "Oh shit! It's gone."

"No, Ollie, it's not. Oh damn. Damn it all to hell!"

"I don't know what to tell you, Harry. Maybe it had something to do with him slapping me on the back. I don't know. It was like some kind of 3-D schematic. I was so dumbstruck I wasn't really taking it in."

"Don't you see, Charlie, this could be a major stroke of luck. If the phenomenon has transferred to you our chances of deciphering the code should be greatly improved."

"Not to mention my chances of going off the deep end. And I don't recall anybody ever saying anything about a code. Besides, what's to say it's been transferred. More likely it's just some kind of temporary short circuit."

"I'm not sure what makes that more likely. And there's always a code. I don't care whether you call it a code or not. I refuse to believe that this is a random manifestation. There has to be an underlying meaning or message and there has to be a way to decipher it. Either way it's unfortunate that you didn't have the presence of mind to put your illustrator to work. I have a great deal of confidence in your observational and descriptive abilities. I'm sure that you, combined with a more skilled illustrator should be able to give us something more accurate and meaningful to work with."

"Yeah, well, Harry, tell you what, why don't you come up here and I'll whack you on the back and see what kind of 'presence of mind' you have when your gasping for breath is interrupted by what looks like a holographic projection that's real enough to touch. It may not totally obscure your vision, but the way it grabs your attention it might as well. Anyway, presence of mind or not, by the time Marissa got back Ollie was so stunned about his pictures disappearing so abruptly that he didn't even clue into what happened to me. And I was so stunned that I couldn't have put together a coherent thought, let alone a sentence. We were back in the hotel a couple of hours later before we got it all sorted out."

"Well I'd like you to keep Ollie and the girl around for at least another week to see what develops."

"It's your money, but if this goes on much more than another week I'm going to have to get back to Toronto for at least a day or two to make alternate arrangements for my cat and my plants."

It didn't take a whole week. I was shaving three days later when it happened again. It was like a blip and then there it was, clear and sharp as an HD 3-Dmovie pretty much filling up my field of vision about an arm's length in front of my face. I managed to grab a towel and wipe the shaving cream off my face and put on a robe. I'm not sure how I managed to dial Marissa's room, but I did and she showed up about five minutes later with Ollie in tow. I figured he'd be relieved that it looked like the picture phenomenon had transferred to me, but he wasn't. He actually seemed a little pissed off.

I told him we could talk about it later and got to work with Marissa. It

was tough work. I tried to kind of trace what I was seeing and then guide her as she tried to generate something more accurate with her tablet and 3-D rendering software. We ended up with something that looked like a mash up or a wiring diagram and one of those old 3-D pipes screen savers with the skyline of some kind of metropolis with pyramids in the background.

When I sent the finished product off to Harry so he could turn his experts loose on it I included a message that I would call him a little later to discuss what to do next.

He didn't wait. The phone rang when I was in the middle of trying to convince Ollie that there was no reason to go away mad.

"Sorry, Charlie, but I've got things to do later this afternoon and I didn't want to miss you."

"Well I've got my hands pretty full right now, Harry. Ollie is here, carrying on about me stealing his pictures."

"Tell him I said to go back to his room and I'll call him as soon as we're finished. You can assure him that I'm willing to arrange a very generous settlement."

I passed the essence of the message on to Frane and he went sputtering out of the room. I then turned my attention back to Harry. "I think it's time to wrap things up here, Harry. I've got to get back, and I think you've got as good as you're going to get."

"We don't necessarily know that it's the same every time. And unless you've neglected to mention something to me, you haven't yet heard the voice. The voice might convey important data."

"I'm going home, Harry. If you want to send your best AutoCAD genius to Toronto to hang around in case I get a different picture, that's your call. I'll even stay on the case as long as you want, but I've got to get back to my plants and cat and my whale study. There's way to much just sitting around waiting for things to happen here to suit me."

We reached a slightly strained but mostly amicable agreement, and, apparently Harry was able to settle things to Ollie's satisfaction, because when I got us checked out and we were sharing a cab to the airport he was a whole lot less surly than he had been for several days and there was even a trace of a grin on his less than photogenic mug.

Once I got back home and life returned to what counts for normal in my universe, not much happened for about a month. With things squared away at home and no indication of further visions, I headed back for Vancouver and my

whale study. It probably goes without saying that the next time I was treated to a holographic vision was at a less than convenient moment. I was out on a small research craft in choppy seas trying to record Orca vocalisations. It also goes without saying that the CAD genius Harry had hired to shadow me had stayed ashore, pleading a tendency to seasickness, so we didn't get anything. The bad news was that it was pretty obvious that it was a different picture – both foreground and background, but there was a narration in a language I didn't recognize (definitely neither Russian or Arabic). The best I could come up with was that I had the impression that it was a list of some kind. When I spoke to Harry about it I promised that the next time, if there was a next time, I'd do my best to write down or even record if I could, a phonetic representation of what was said. The good news was that I somehow managed not to fall overboard. I managed to almost convince my pilot that my odd behaviour could be explained by a bout of vertigo.

Over the next couple of months we did manage to get three more decent renderings and I made a digital recording of my best attempt to replicate most of the narration to go with one of them – made a bit easier when I realized that the voice kept repeating the same "list" over again as the diagram unfolded.

Anything we got was diligently forwarded off to Harry and turned over to his experts, but as far as I heard, they remained as stumped as they were intrigued.

The long and short of it is that I don't have the patience or perseverance of an Ollie Frane. Of course Ollie put up with it for 36 years before he knew there might be a way to rid himself of it. It was one evening a little over four months ago when I was sitting in my living room with the sounds of vintage Moe Koffman mellowing my aural environment and my cat, Schrödinger, purring in my lap. When my vision – not that I was really reading the monograph on termite culture – was obscured and Moe's flute was drowned out by the now familiar synthetic sounding voice, I didn't call Harry's CAD artist or reach for my digital recorder. The thought that I might be passing up agelessness never entered my mind. I tried stroking Schrödinger, and when that didn't produce the desired results, I voiced an apology and cuffed him. He snarled and leapt from my lap and spent the next ten minutes of so lurching and pouncing around the room swatting the empty space in front of him like the kitten he hadn't been for several years. I felt bad about saddling poor Schrödinger with my adopted albatross, but not bad enough to regret having rid myself of it. As far as Harry is concerned it's been long enough since I last experienced a "manifestation" that it doesn't make sense to continue to retain the CAD guy. He's probably got enough material to keep his crew baffled for a long time to come without me supplying more. He has lately postulated that the original transfer from Ollie to me may have destabilized the phenomenon. I'm not about to disabuse him.

As far as Schrödinger is concerned, every now and then he experiences a youthful injection of holographic play. He doesn't seem to be nearly as disturbed by it as he was the first time, and, for some strange reason, he seems to experience it way more often than either Ollie or I did. Somehow, I don't think he considers it the same sort of intrusion or handicap that either of us did. I learned some time ago that it is far better to be the investigator of this kind of thing than to be the subject of the investigations. Besides, who knows, if he gets tired of it at some point maybe he can pass it on to a mouse or an alley cat.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

"Checking out?"

"Yes, please. Fendick, room 414."

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry, sir, would you mind returning to your room? It seems you've left something behind."

"I don't think so –"

"Please, sir, I'll have your statement prepared when you return."

Charlie Fendick was sure he hadn't left anything behind. His long practised habit of doing a thorough room check before leaving had saved him the countless hours and dollars he used to spend replacing toothbrushes, razors, umbrellas and numerous other items left behind in hotel rooms. Besides, he couldn't have been out of the room more than five minutes. Surely the cleaning staff of this just slightly on the respectable side of decrepit facility couldn't be that efficient.

Of course most of the hotels he stayed in didn't employ witches. Surely the squat, lumpy, wrinkled old woman standing there when he opened the door wasn't your run of the mill chamber maid.

"I've found your database. You can't leave it here. It's not safe."

"I beg your pardon."

"Beg all you want. A pardon to you is not mine to give, Dr. Charles A. Fendick, Ph. D. Take your database and go."

He looked down – even allowing for her stoop, she might have been all of four and a half feet tall stretched to her full height – at the pebble in her extended palm. "Database? That looks like a bit of gravel to me."

"You should know better than most that not all things are truly as they seem."

"Well, be that as it may, it's not mine. I might have tracked it in on my shoe, but beyond that I have no connection with it."

"It says otherwise."

"How's that?"

She rolled it between her thumb and forefinger and what could have been a faint holographic image appeared when she fully opened her hand again. When he shifted so he could get a clearer view he saw what might have been the header of a spreadsheet with his name, or the name of some other Dr. Charles A. Fendick, Ph. D. clearly glowing at him in muted green bold letters.

"OK, sure. I'm not in the habit of storing information in magic pebbles, but that does appear to be my name. I have no explanation as to how my name came to be there. Since I didn't bring my cat along on this trip and I've never seen your pebble before –"

As she passed the pebble to him she enfolded his hand in her own surprisingly large hands and then reached up to touch two fingers to the centre of his forehead. "Be very careful, Charlie. This is not some game to be taken lightly."

"Who are you?" But she was gone. Had she opened the door?

When he was in the cab on the way to the train station he took the pebble out of his pocket. When he held it in his left hand and rolled it around with the forefinger of his right, nothing happened. He tried rolling it between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand as he had seen her do, but still nothing happened. Probably just as well. It might not do to have the cabbie glance back in his rear view mirror and see a holographic projection.

"It has to have light to charge it up first." The driver was looking at him in the mirror.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not mine to give. I was saying that you had it in your pocket. You have to leave it out in the light for a while to charge it up."

"What is this, some kind of conspiracy? You work with the old lady?"

"I work for Yellow Line Taxi. Granny Hamlich is her own woman."

"So is there anything else I need to know?" He was trying to get a read on the face in the mirror – vaguely Latino. The old woman could have been Hispanic as well, but with the weathered skin and lumpy features she had been harder to place, and Hamlich certainly didn't sound Hispanic.

"I'm sure there is. There is always a great deal we all need to know, but we often don't know that we need to know it until we need to know it."

"Huh?"

"Here's the station."

Charlie Fendick was used to weird. Even in the four years since the university had closed down the Institute for the Study on Non-human Intelligence and sacked him, weird continued to have a way of finding him, if anything, without the academic firewall to insulate him from the more extreme nut cases, his life as a freelance author, investigator and lecturer was even more steeped in weirdness than before. Maybe it was a prank. Just because he was no longer subjected to the slings and arrows of his university colleagues, engineering students and their ilk, didn't mean there weren't plenty of people out there who might get a charge out of having him on or even discrediting him. Maybe some sceptic who had attended his lecture the night before or a tabloid "reporter" trying to snooker him into lending credibility to yet another aliens among us hoax.

Of course there was also the fact that something like one in every hundred or so cases brought to his attention was more than a hoax or wishful thinking. He had a rule about never dismissing weirdness out of hand just because it didn't fit neatly into a pre-packaged, microwaveable explanation. As he had pointed out in his lecture, just because whales didn't have a technological society doesn't mean they aren't capable of abstract thought or complex communication. Just because humans only move freely through three dimensions and do most of their communicating via small portions of the electromagnetic spectrum and vibrations in the air doesn't mean the same has to be true for other forms of intelligence. But whether the pebble in his pocket was a hoax, a breakthrough or a mere curiosity it could wait until he made it to the next city and checked into the next hotel and maybe even indulged himself in dinner and a sip or two of single malt. This particular weirdness didn't seem to be an emergency.

A couple hours and a short cab ride later, he left the desk lamp on and the pebble directly under it as he left the latest in a tiresome series of hotel rooms on his current lecture cum book promotion tour in search of scotch and sustenance.

When he returned he had to field a phone message from the woman who called herself his agent. The message informed him enthusiastically that she had managed to book him on a radio phone in show. Mercifully, she didn't answer when he called back. His message informed her that he was investigating an intriguing new case and would be unable to make a 7:30 a.m. appointment at a studio across town from where he was staying.

That little chore out of the way, he unpacked the necessary research equipment – his laptop and a bottle of 18 year old Glen Livet – picked up the pebble and prepared himself to be intrigued.

The phone rang almost immediately.

"Bonnie, I thought I was pretty clear in my message."

"Dr. Charles A. Fendick, Ph. D.?"

"You're not Bonnie. Well then who are you and how did you get this number."

"Both questions are completely irrelevant. What is important is the data crystal which has recently come into your possession."

"It's more of a pebble, actually, and apparently it belongs to me. At least it seems to have my name on it."

"Soak it in water for a few minutes."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's a crystal. If you soak it in water its true appearance will become apparent. But that, too, is beside the point. As for your name being recorded, I am well aware of the fact that it is there. I put it there to forestall any protestations that it had nothing to do with you."

"So this was all a set up to get me to examine the thing? What is it? Some kind of new information storage technology you want to pass off as alien in origin?"

"Hardly. Dr. Fendick, I can't maintain this line for much longer, so I'm going to ask you to suspend both your disbelief and your questions long enough for me to convey some essential information."

"Suspend my disbelief? Now that wouldn't make me much of an investigator, would it?"

"The data crystal is a type of information matrix which will become quite common roughly a century and a half future to your current subjective time locus."

"Okay, then, future instead of alien. It's usually alien, future or parallel dimension –"

"The purpose for this specific type of data crystal is to receive data through what you can think of as a psycho-energetic link and then apply a series of sorting and analytical algorithms to create a relational information matrix. Think of it a means of almost instantaneously inputting discrete disparate units of thought, memory – both conscious and sub-conscious – into what you might think of as an inconceivably powerful super computer.

"Once you interface with the device you will find that it contains no facts, experiences, impressions – absolutely nothing that you didn't already know. However, it is hoped that the use of the crystal will lead you in significant new directions."

"Which, don't tell me, could result in important discoveries which will

change or save or something the future?"

"I asked you to suspend your questions and scepticism."

"Not in my nature."

"Don't concern yourself, at your present time, with why I have made the crystal available to you, although I can assure you that it has nothing to do with anything so blatantly pulp fiction as preserving or manipulating your future –"

"My future? What about your future? Or somebody else's?"

"Just give it –"

The line went dead, followed by a dial tone.

"A try? He was going to say just give it a try – a chance? – a whirl?"

"Nice try," he thought. "Speaking of pulp fictionish – don't have much time – shut up and listen while I just barely manage to lay out the plot and then cut myself off in mid-sentence to give credence to the short of time claim – even though the sense of that sentence is abundantly clear. And, come to think of it, if this guy is some kind of time lord, communicating from the future, how could he be short of time? Isn't that kind of self-contradictory?"

"I think I liked it better when it was just a mysterious holographic pebble without all this message from the future foolishness."

The phone rang again.

"So if you control time how can you –"

"Charlie?"

"Oh, Bonnie, it's you. I thought it was the time lord calling back."

"What are you on about now? Never mind, I probably don't want to know. Listen, there are a few things you need to consider before you blow off this radio appearance. First, it pays. Not a lot, but it does pay."

"Are we talking free coffee? At 7:30 A.M. across town that hardly counts as paying."

"\$230 and I'm sure they'll provide coffee too. More importantly, these shows can be a big boost for lecture attendance and book sales. You can reach a lot of people with one of these shows and a phone in show means as much as 20 minutes of air time."

"And more nut cases than you can shake a stick at."

"Charlie, you know and I know that you're a master at handling nut cases. Your quick, acid wit will put them in their place and win you fans among the

more normal people listening in their cars on the way to work."

"Why can it be a noon hour call in show?"

"Smaller audience."

"I'm not convinced."

"You don't have to be. Your publisher set it up and it's in your contract."

"I'm Ches 'Crazy Chester' Marshall and you're listening to 'Morning Madness.' With me this morning is Professor Charles Fendick, former Director of the Institute for the Investigation of Non-Human Intelligence and author of the just released book, *Investigating Possible Impossibilities*. Welcome to 'Morning Madness,' Professor Fendick."

"Thanks, Ches. Actually, it's just Charlie these days, or, if you prefer, Dr. Fendick – that's Dr. as in Ph. D., not as in what can I do about my persistent migraines. The professor thing kind of went out the window when the University closed down the Institute and sacked me. By the way, Ches, while I am, indeed, the former Director of the former Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence, I'm also the current Director of the current Centre for –"

"Sorry to hear about the getting sacked thing, Charlie, but I guess, given your line of work, that probably didn't come as a big surprise."

"Well, actually, Ches, it did. I've yet to come across any compelling evidence for effective prognostication, so I didn't see it coming that way, if that's what you're implying. As for my line of work, I've always been a teacher first and researcher second, and, as I explain in my book, the bulk of my research was pretty firmly entrenched in mainstream science – primarily focusing on animal intelligence. I guess the problem was that I never shied away from taking a look at the unconventional as well. The unconventional tends to get sensationalized and, with sensationalization, consigned to the fringes of serious science. I guess the Institute or me and some of those forays into the unconventional got mentioned in one too many tabloids and the University got worried about guilt by association."

"So you've become an author, a lecturer and sort of an occult detective."

"I don't know about occult –"

"Well, if not occult, then certainly paranormal."

"Well, the problem is that it's not too easy to come up with funding to research termite or even whale intelligence without the backing of a major university, but there always seems to be somebody willing to fund the whacky stuff – most of which, I hasten to add, turns out to be pure and unadulterated nonsense."

"Most, but not all."

"Indeed. Otherwise it would have been a pretty short book: 'Chapter 1: It's all a load of crap.' Instead the first chapter is called 'It's mostly a load of crap, but...'"

"Yes, well, I see the lines are all lit up like the bridge of the USS Enterprise, so why don't we go to the phones?"

"All I'm saying, Charlie, is that it wouldn't have hurt you to be a little less antagonistic."

"Really? I thought I was pretty mild mannered under the circumstances. He was a first class twit who revelled in his twitness, and tried to goad those few of his callers who weren't also twits into twitness."

"Well, at least there's no such thing as bad publicity, but do try to be a good boy at tomorrow's book signing."

"That's the one at the 'Crystal Chalice' bookstore?"

"Don't say it in that tone."

"Bonnie, you should know better than to book me into a haven, or is that coven, of New Age nonsense. Can't you get it into your head that I'm a scientist, not an action hero on some Sci-Fi channel series."

"For your information, that particular haven of New Age nonsense leads the city in sales of your book, so just try to be nice. Now what's this about a new case? Is there some angle there I should know about."

"No angle. No case. It's just something somebody gave me back in Moncton. I haven't really had time to pay much attention to it," he lied, "But, look, I haven't eaten all day, so if you don't want me to faint on stage tonight, you're going to have to let me go."

He could tell from the way the facets seemed to stand out – was there a faint luminescence? – that the crystal was probably fully charged. Why did it

have to be a crystal? Why not an onyx or obsidian cube? He poured a scotch, took a sip, stretched out on the bed and picked up – interfaced with – the device. After just a couple of sessions, he was already learning to disassociate and let his mind wander, trying to play the role of third party observer as random thoughts, memories and impressions drifted by. Nothing particularly earth shattering or even unusual had happened, and, in fact whatever did happen when he picked up the crystal could have been no more than the power of suggestion playing on his mind. Of course, power of suggestion or power of the crystal, he had already filled several pages with random notes of things he must have noticed but hadn't percolated to the surface at the time. Or was his imagination embellishing real memories of real perceptions? Or, along somewhat more sinister lines, was some unknown technology subtly guiding him with false memories?

What he really wanted was to delve more deeply into the matter of the woman, Mir and the Equivocators and the case that probably led to his being fired, the case he referred to as Schrödinger's Keys. He still hadn't managed to sort out the real from the not real or other-real or whatever in that affair. But even though he had noted down some additional "details" on both cases, he kept coming back to the whales. The people at the various ocean research institutes he had contacted had been inclined to dismiss his evidence in support of the possibility that the whales had been acting in consort, communicating across vast distances. He hadn't even ruled out that possibility of telepathy (not that he'd ever mentioned that possibility to anyone) but he'd never been able to get funding to set up experiments to confirm actual long distance communications and whether or not any communication which might or might not occur could be explained by things like sound waves. His graduate assistant at the time had suggested some kind of organic two way radio transmission, but Charlie had had the distinct feeling that the whales were also communicating directly with him – mind to mind. Again, not something he wrote about in the book or ever mentioned in either polite or academic conversation. So let's see, the explanation had something to do with how everything is, in the final analysis, energy – matter being nothing more than tightly packed energy, and, energy being all connected up, making mind to mind communication perfectly reasonable – just something that most human minds haven't caught on to.

Some how, that all made sense. Way more sense that he remembered it making back when he may or may not have been in direct communication with a pod of cetacean environmentalist guerrillas. If it really did make sense in the broad light of day without the effects of single malt induced synaptic short circuits, the possibility of a crystal linking with known and unknown regions of his brain might also make a certain bizarre sort of sense.

A knock on the door reminded him that he wasn't expecting anyone.

Halfway between the bed and the door (halfway being roughly two and a half steps) it also occurred to him that it might not be a bad idea to put on his pants before opening the door.

A second, somewhat more insistent knock. "Room service?" He asked, doing up his belt.

"Dr. Fendick, I really must speak with you."

"Ah, crackpot," he muttered to himself. And then, of course, opened the door.

"I'm so glad to see you're making progress." He couldn't quite be sure what, but he somehow suspected that the tall, skinny man of indeterminate age was the same person as the shrivelled old crone two cities back.

"Book tours are like that, although I'm not sure that moving from city to city really counts as progress."

"Your interface with the crystal is beginning to bear fruit. You are making connections."

"What is it that you want?"

"I want to shake your hand."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A pardon for whatever you may have done is not mine to give." He extended his right hand expectantly. Charlie just stared at it.

The thin man took a step and grabbed Charlie's right hand in his own and clapped him on the back with his left. The room wobbled and spun a bit and then it was gone, replaced by what, to all appearances, might have been the inside of a very large vacuum thermos bottle.

"Uh, right – maybe you can tell me what just happened?"

"Concentrate, Charlie. You already know what happened."

"Oh, right, yeah. You just shook my hand and kidnapped me into a giant thermos bottle – presumably a different time as well as place."

"Close enough. We'll need the data crystal back now. And, of course, your brain."

"My brain."

"The crystal is obviously tuned to it. I don't really have anyone here capable of operating it."

"It must have been the whales."

"That was our opinion. The crystal is, after all, cetacean technology."

"Whales have technology?"

"Quite. You didn't really believe all that bosh about the future, did you."

"Oh, no, no more than I believe that teleportation stunt you just pulled off. What the hell is going on here? And, come to think of it, where is here?"

"This is rather awkward. You were meant to pass out."

"Sorry, not enough scotch for that."

They were back in the hotel room. The thin guy had peeled something from the back of Charlie's shirt. "Perceptual field generator," he said, "It usually does the trick. I don't suppose I could convince you to simply accompany me?"

"Why, so you can collect the crystal and my brain? I've grown kind of attached to the former and, while the latter might be underutilized, it is handy to have around."

The thin man took a cigarette out of a pocket and put it to his lips.

"This is a non-smoking room –"

"I suppose there's always the tranq dart to fall back on..."

He was obviously in his hotel room and, judging from the fact that a check in the mirror suggested that the head ache he was experiencing had nothing to do with surgery, he probably still had his brain, but what the hell was that noise?

Ah, the phone. "Yes?"

"Charlie where the hell are you?"

"OK, wait, Bonnie, I'm a scientist. Let's reason this through. You phone my damned hotel room and I answered, ergo –"

"Are you drunk, or just you just forget about your lecture?"

"Oh shit!"

"Oh shit is right. How long will it take you to get down there? I have to call them back and make some sort of excuse for your late arrival. Are you at least sober enough to give your talk?"

"I couldn't be drunk. If I late for the lecture, I've been passed out too long to be drunk...."

"Yes, well that's a good question, but I'm not sure I have a good answer. In spite of the large number of cases I've studied and the fact that maybe as many as a dozen can't be adequately explained in terms of conventional science, most of them simply can't be explained at all. What I'm trying to say here, and maybe the whole point of my book is that I have encountered some truly weird stuff, but none of it definitively proves alien intervention, parallel realities, time travel, or anything else. We depend heavily on perception and perception is a tricky thing –"

"But, Dr. Fendick, what do you think it will take for the world to wake up to the fact that all that weirdness has to add up to something?"

"Another good question. And I wish I knew the answer. If I did, my Centre might be better funded and I might be able to spend more time there and less time doing lectures and book tours."

The host for the evening took that as a cue to wrap things up before they took a hostile turn.

She thanked him, he thanked her and then tried to disappear back stage but she "reminded" him about the book signing table out in the lobby.

He had almost come to the end of his obligatory 30 minute stint at the blather, sign and be polite table and the crowd was thinning out when he looked up at the next person in line to see a moderately attractive woman in her mid-thirties dressed more professionally than the majority of the new-age and sci-fi fan crowd.

"So tell me, Dr. Fendick," she started, as she slid her newly purchased copy to his book across the table, "what about the whales?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why, have you done something worthy of a pardon?"

"You're one of them –"

"Them who, Dr. Fendick?"

"Never mind. You mentioned whales."

"I did, but I also noticed that you didn't."

"My whale study is not yet concluded. I prefer not to draw conclusions prematurely. Uh, you didn't mention your name."

"I know."

"To whom should I address the inscription?"

"How about 'To whom it may concern?'"

"That seems so impersonal."

"Doesn't it though? Perhaps you would be willing to hold off on the inscription and meet me in the lounge for a drink when you're finished here. I understand they have an 18 year old Glenmorangie available."

"So, Miss – ?"

"Moriata. We were about to discuss you as yet inconclusive whale research."

"I'm not sure that we were. What is your interest in whale. As you a marine biologist?"

"You suggested that there is no proof for alien intervention, parallel realities, time travel or anything else, and you mentioned problems dealing with perception, but you didn't mention whales or telepathy or telepathic manipulation of perceptions."

"Sorry," he said as the glass nearly slipped from his hand, "the glass is a bit sweaty – the water really should be cold, you know. It would be a shame to waste good scotch."

"The whales, Dr. Fendick?"

"Why are you so interested in my seriously under-funded whale study?"

"Why are you so suspicious?"

"And, by the way, what was all that about the crystal and my brain."

"I'm not at all sure we're on the same wave length here."

"Oh, I'm quite sure we're not. Look, Miss Moriata, it looks like we're both going to ask more questions than we're going to answer, so maybe we'd better call it a night."

"You haven't finished your scotch. And I know you're not going to gulp it down."

"Very well. I'll trade you an answer for an answer. You go first."

"No one did anything with your brain."

"That's it? That's all I get? Besides, if you downloaded my brain into the crystal why do you even need to ask about the whales?"

"That's another question, not an answer."

"I suppose it is, but I've finished my scotch – oh shit – no the giant thermos again. I thought you needed to stick on of those things on my shirt?"

"It's not me. It's the whales. What do you know know about the whales?"

"Apparently a lot less than you do. Are you even human?"

"That's another question."

"I'm a researcher. Questions are what I'm good at."

"Look, Charlie this is getting really expensive in energy terms. Can we just cut the crap and go back to your room."

"No the sort of thing attractive young women usually say to me, but, sure."

"...So the best working theory I've come up with thus far is that certain species are capable of communication over a very significant distances. Proof is a very expensive thing and my sole financial backer at the moment is far more interested in spending money to send me off on wild goose chases after weirdness than funding any kind of serious research. I haven't been able to rule out this mind to mind stuff you refer to, but it would be very difficult to prove."

"Maybe if you played the weirdness card a little more effectively your backers would be more interested." She wasn't exactly "she" any more – more of an it – more or less humanoid in a fishy sort of way – vaguely reminiscent of that admiral character in the Star Wars movies. Charlie was amazed at his ability to take this all in stride and a little disappointed that there was a fishy looking creature sprawled across his hotel bed in place of the woman who a=had accompanied him to his room a couple of hours ago.

"Right, I'm sure Harry Weinstein actually would empty his bank account if I introduced him to you and told him you were a trans-dimensional being interested in research that would – how did you put it?"

"OK, let's back up a bit. For starters, we're not trans-dimensional. Being able to communicate and produce physical representations across vast distances doesn't make us trans-dimensional."

"Why the fish form instead of the lovely Miss Moriata?"

"Less energy expenditure to manifest something closer to my true form."

"And the interest in my research?"

"At present we are able to employ whale brains as sort of amplifiers."

"So you're saying they're not really non-human intelligences? And while we're at it, how do they feel about being amplifiers?"

"Oh, they do have a rather rudimentary intelligence and they actually seem to enjoy our collaboration. We're quite helpful with things like locating food, avoiding the worst pollution and Japanese whalers and that sort of thing. Besides, don't look so disappointed. You get me in the bargain. I think I should meet your criteria for non-human intelligence."

"Just once I'd like to get more intelligence and less weird. Something like that could do wonders for rehabilitating an academic career."

"You have an opportunity here to be in the forefront of human – extraterrestrial relations and collaborative research and you're worried about academic respectability?"

"So what is it you want from me?"

"Look, Charlie, I'm sorry, but I'm way over budget here and I'm going to have to wrap this up fast. We need you to get serious about the whale project. Find out how their mind to mind process works and whether it can be adapted to allow us to directly interface with humans."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Sorry –"

"Oh, damn! I just hate it when extraterrestrial entities dematerialize in the middle of a conversation. Especially when it's before we get to the part about funding. Harry Weinstein's broad minded, but there's no way he's going to buy into this. And there's no number of lecture tours or book sales that would be able to bankroll the kind of resources required to do what she-he-it is looking for."

LONG DISTANCE PLAN

The intermittent stream of headlights below, slashed out in vain against profound darkness – blurred into a surreal extraterrestrial force. Somehow this comforted him, mesmerizing him, deepening the hold of the spell that had drawn him to the ledge above the highway. He wore dark denim, invisible to the drivers and passengers below. He wasn't going to jump. Maybe he had made the difficult climb in the dark to test himself, but now he was sure. He wasn't going to jump. He could fix this. He hadn't done anything wrong – unless you counted playing fast and loose with the second law of thermodynamics. This was fixable, but he'd have to get back – possibly quite a ways back – and it might take a few tries.

#

"I'm sure you did spend good money on it but unfortunately my company doesn't service that equipment. You should have said it was one of those Miracle Phones when you made the call."

It wasn't the old lady's fault. She was just another sucker – the third one this week. Doreen had seen the TV ads. She drove by one of their electronic billboards almost every day on her way home: "Dial 1-866-MIRACLE to place your order for the Amazing MIRACLE PHONE." She had even tried it herself. She called for information. The cost was on the high end of reasonable, although there was a special discount for senior citizens; but even then it was nearly double the cost of even a high-end cordless unit. The next address on her call sheet turned out to be another one.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not authorized to service these. As you know, our company doesn't sell them."

"It's supposed to have some sort of warranty, but when I called the number I got a recording. Said it was only guaranteed for one call. Well I never did nothing with it except hook it up. It don't work for regular calls. There's no dial. Just the one button. I never even made a call. There's no dial or nothing. There can't be that much to fixing it if you know how to do that kind of thing."

She felt kind of sorry for the old guy. More than anything else he was

probably just lonely. He probably didn't make a call because he didn't know what to ask for.

"I never came across a lady telephone repairman before. You really know how to fix them?"

"Regular phones. There happen to be six of us 'lady telephone repairmen' working for Tele-Tech. Look, I'll tell you what, I'm not supposed to do this, but I'm as curious about these things as everybody else. If you let me take the thing back to the shop for a couple of days I'll see what I can do."

"What'll it cost me? I already sunk too much money into the fool thing."

"How about if I do the service on my own time for free. I'll let you know if I need money for parts."

#

She was expecting a call from Glen, a fellow Tele-Tech field service rep. "I'll call you tonight," he'd said over the radio – something about a new Tex-Mex place. By seven she decided he could go to hell and turned off the ring on her phone. She took an unlabeled container from the freezer and threw it in the microwave – leftover potluck. She programmed her stereo for a mix of old Janis Joplin and Tom Waits cuts, switching to FM when the discs ran out. Then she set up an impromptu shop on the kitchen table and prepared to open up the old man's god-phone. It turned out to be a sealed unit –cheaply made, and not intended to be opened for repair. She decided on a sharp knife followed up by cyanoacrylate, but the microwave went off before she made the cut. She ate what turned out to be three-week old spinach lasagna.

"Tough luck Glen, your Tex-Mex eatery and 'folk revival revival' concert have been pre-empted by lasagna from the archives and a busted phone," she informed the flashing call light on her silenced wall unit. "Shit." It wasn't a deep cut, just one more annoyance in what was turning out to be a less than auspicious start to another weekend. After she patched her thumb she decided the funny-phone could wait. She stretched out on the sofa with the headphones, vintage Joplin, and a company bulletin on the latest generation of video-phones. "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV..."

Hours later she awoke and checked the clock. Just short of three a.m. – time for bed, but instead she decided to have another shot at the phone on the kitchen table. This time she got out her precision multi-tool and fitted it with a small diamond saw. The shell opened without further resistance. It was a cheaply made Brazilian special. The large blobs on the printed circuit board marked it as

hand soldered in a sweatshop. A quick examination turned up the problem – the only thing she could find – was a bent contact on the single dialing button. It looked worn. Either the set had been heavily tested (unlikely) or the old man had lied about not using it– or maybe he had bought it second hand. But she couldn't see any reason why it should stop working after one call. It didn't make sense to glue it back together without testing it first. She disconnected her regular set and plugged in the god phone. When she pressed the dial button the tones were kind of wild – it was definitely programmed to a non-standard long distance call. Nothing happened for several seconds. She almost hung up. Then came a single ring, followed by a click and a deep, resonant voice.

"This is the Miracle Phone Network. All of our operators are occupied. You may either wait for an operator or leave your request at the sound of the tone after two minutes of music on hold. This recorded message will not repeat." She wasn't sure why, but she waited to – strains of "Nearer My God to Thee" for 1001 strings and maudlin baritone. The music had just oozed into "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" when the voice cut in again. This time it was live.

"So, um, is this God?"

He rolled off a gentle chuckle, "No, I'm sorry, God isn't directly involved in this service, but I think you'll find us quite effective. If you'd care to leave a message concerning the nature of your problem or request, one of our staff will get back to you as soon as possible. "Oh, right – uh my cat is at the vet's – she was hit by a car this morning and she's probably going to have to be put down...."

#

How did she have him listed? M for "Magic?" or "Max?" P for "Preston?" She didn't see or call him very often any more. The "Magic" came from his reputation as an electronic savant. He went from high school dropout freelance hacker, to AT&T security consultant, FBI consultant and freelance telecommunications security consultant and then, as far as she knew, just plain idly rich. Lately he was best known for his parties at his estate on the shores of Lake Erie. She had grown weary with the party scene, and hadn't been for a while.

"Max? This is Doreen –"

"Hey, Dor. How are you doing? Are you coming around next week?"

"You're having another 'do' next week?"

"Small and intimate – I've posted maybe seventy or eighty invites –"

private messages. You can't be reading your email much."

"I usually check on Sunday mornings. Anyway, that's not what I'm calling about. What do you know about this Miracle Phone business?"

"I'm not involved."

"I didn't mean that –"

"Yeah, well, the cops – in every permutation – seem to think it's got to be me."

"The thought never crossed my mind. It's not your style."

"I appreciate the thought. Anyway, what with the heat and all, I've kept quite a distance from the whole thing. Haven't even torn into one."

"I have. Cheap sweatshop electronics, a single pre-programmed dial button – freaky tones. Do you think you could trace something like that?"

"I probably could, I'm just not sure I should."

"Of course you should. Look, we can advise the cops– you know, tell them you're tired of the heat and want to find out what's going on so you can get them off your back. You must still know somebody at the FBI."

"I'll think about it. Tell you what, bring your toy to the party next week. We'll see what happens."

#

She didn't wait. Max was not exactly pleased. "I know what you said, but the phone belongs to an old man and I can't stall him until next week. Look, we'll plug it in and make one call. If you can get a fix on the call, great, if not I'll drop it. What do you say?"

"You still coming to my party?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Plug the silly thing into the panel in the study and I'll crank up my system. Maybe you could make a pot of tea while I scrounge around for a couple of programs I might need."

She was still in the kitchen when she heard the phone warble.

"Hey, Dor, it's for you."

"You're kidding. Just a second, I'll bring in the tea.

"Is this a regular call or, uh –"

He shrugged.

"Are you ready?"

He shook his head, "See if you can stretch it out awhile."

"Doreen, this is Francis from the Miracle Phone Network, I am returning your call about your cat."

"But I'm not even at home –"

"Perhaps, but you wisely carried your Miracle Phone with you."

"Right. Uh, so, what happens now?"

"I just wanted to let you know that your call has been heard and we'll see what we can do. Your cat must mean quite a lot to you."

"Oh, yes – but you couldn't possibly –"

"I'm sorry, Doreen, but I have so many calls to respond to. I just wanted to let you know that your call has been received and we'll do our best. Good-bye, Doreen." He was gone. The line was dead –not even a dial tone.

"It must have some kind of individual code or something – one call to a customer. The call is keyed to the phone wherever it's plugged in. I wonder how they do that. Shit. I've used up the old man's call."

"Maybe we can reprogram it."

"So tell me it wasn't a waste. Tell me you got it."

"Got it? I still haven't remembered what I called the program I'm looking for. You'll have to call again when I'm ready."

"I can't call again, it's dead. Unless, of course, you really can reprogram it."

"Listen, Dor – I'm sure the cops are already on this one, why bother."

"Come on, Max – even you must have a miracle you want."

"Dor, this is a scam, remember?"

"Aren't you at least curious?"

"Leave the thing here for a couple of days. I'll see what I can do."

#

She checked the answering machine. The log reported five calls. She downed an instant milk shake while she played them back. Service call list for tomorrow. Heavy breather desperate to chew on her underwear. Direct dial return service call – the man with the God Phone. The vet's office – the message said her cat was ready to go home. She grabbed her coat and headed for the van without resetting the machine or listening to the message from Max.

#

His was a face that contradicted itself. The lines converging at his eyes and mouth charted a difficult life with many twists, switchbacks and convolutions, and yet the mouth and eyes themselves settled easily into a comfortable, familiar look of serenity, even through an animated phone discussion.

"I don't really think you know what you're asking, Leroy."

"I'm asking for a better deal. Look, when I got you started I had no idea _"

"Yes, I know. You thought I was a loony old man ripe for the fleecing. You didn't believe a word of what I said. I offered you a better deal, but you turned it down. You weren't sure I could pay, and besides, the 'humble and fair' routine was part of your scam. I don't carry a grudge, Leroy. I'm quite appreciative, even though I'm a little disappointed with the way things have turned out. Oh, everything works, but the results are not quite what I had in mind. But none of that is not your fault. You did your job quite well."

"Exactly. I did my job. Everything works according to specs. So now I'm asking for a performance bonus."

"Leroy, I can't rearrange another person's life just to suit you. And I can't teach you either. I wouldn't if I could. Think about the profound loneliness of a man that has something no one else has – something almost everyone else thinks he wants. Think of the fear that someone might find you and force you to do something truly terrible – or that something unspeakable submerged in your own psyche might get control...."

#

The boarded up gas station had been a false lead. Even with its high tech control center and its macho, honey-voiced operator it wasn't what they were looking for. It hadn't been easy, but Max's gadgets and ingenuity eventually landed them in a seedy little motel in a wide spot in the road called Bethel, New Brunswick, Canada.

"Hey, stop complaining. At least it's not snowing."

"I can see the tabloids. 'Electronic genius, aided by Tele-Tech field service rep finds God in cold Canadian phone booth – mega-mystery ends in Bethel, New Brunswick.' So are your gadgets and geegaws ready or what? Let's get this over and go eat lobster."

"Hey, whose curiosity started this whole thing anyway?"

"Yeah, and who gave up most of her accumulated vacation time to chase this particular wild Canadian goose? Why couldn't you trace it to Jamaica?"

"It's ringing.... Hi, uh, this is Maxwell Preston, you may remember me from a call I made last week – hey, don't hang up – yeah, well you can tell God or whomever it is that we're closing in on this scam. Got that? Yeah, well we want to talk – face to face – and I'll tell you another thing, pal, we're a lot closer to him than you are. Does Bethel, New Brunswick mean anything to you? You just pass the message to your boss and keep your comments to yourself."

"There wasn't a whole lot to do in Bethel, New Brunswick, and the weather was rotten, so they passed the time playing motel sports. Predictably, the return call came at a rather awkward moment."

"Hello, Mr. Preston?"

"What the – this had better be good – hey, wait, this isn't golden throat – God I presume?"

"I'm definitely not God, but I am the person you've been inquiring after."

"Okay – sorry there, God, could you just hold on for a minute – Dor – this is it. It's him – only he say she's not God."

"Surprise, surprise –"

"I understand that you wanted to pay me a personal visit?"

"You've got it. Just name the time and place."

"Would this evening suit you? If you want to get something to write on

I'll explain how you can find me."

As soon as he put down the phone he threw on his clothes and grabbed the car keys.

"Come on Dor, let's go – get into some clothes while I get the car started."

"What's the big hurry? Why rush out in a storm when we can stay right here in a warm bed? Presumably God intends to be around for a while."

"This is our chance. He's expecting us. Come on. I'll see you out at the car."

The storm was fierce and the route was little more than a muddy, rutted logging road. They came to a tree down across the road. Max got out into the rain to take a look. It happened too fast. First the flash – pure light where reality has been ripped wide open. There was a sharp, sizzling sound slashing through the relentless hammering of the rain. Then the resounding, tooth jarring crash.

Through the second, more distant deathly white strobing she saw Max draped over the downed tree. Then the came pounding waves of thunder.

Later, thinking back, she would probably be quite disappointed in herself, but she screamed. She scrambled behind the wheel, rammed the transmission into reverse and popped the clutch. The car couldn't have moved more than ten feet before the thud. She pushed open the door and fought her way out into the wind and rain. She screamed for the second time in less than a minute. It was a man. Or it looked like a man. A small old man. "Oh my God!"

He got up. "No – no, really – I'm not God – never wanted to be –" His voice was surprisingly strong –clearly audible over the rain and wind. "Don't worry, I'm not hurt. It was just a little bump. I think maybe we all should get inside the car. Help me with your friend."

She was cold, wet, and frightened. She just sat there behind the wheel and shook. He – the old man who wasn't god – got out, walked around to her side of the car, and pulled open the door. He gave her a gentle nudge, and climbed in behind the wheel. "I think maybe I should drive. It's not far."

He took them back to a very small two room cottage overlooking the river. It wasn't easy getting Max inside and installed on the small cot in the corner of the backroom. "I'm sure your friend will be fine. He's not burned. The lightning didn't actually hit him. We should just keep him warm and let him rest. You're still shivering. I'll turn up the heat and make a pot of tea."

There was a knock at the door. "Ah, yes, you must be Dr. Fendick. Quite the coincidence, don't you think that after all these years you all track me down and end up at my humble abode on the very seem evening?"

Doreen still hadn't spoken. Phone lines to God.... Miracles for the asking.... A command center in Scranton.... A plot to catch Him red handed.... Max's call.... His call.... The storm.... The car.... Max.... The lightning.... And who was this Dr. Fendick? Apparently she and Max weren't the only ones on the God trail. It was all just too much.

"I don't mind telling you all that this God business is just a lot of foolishness. I may have offered miracles, but I have never claimed to have anything to do with any god. I'm really just a lonely old man. You know – I used to spend a lot of time sitting here alone, reading – almost anything – I got on quite a philosophy kick a while back – Locke, Hume, Kant, Descartes, Hegel, Norman Vincent Peale – I'm entirely self-taught – well I had three months of formal schooling back in 1915. Do you have difficulty believing I could be that old? Of course not. You probably wouldn't expect me to look my age. Here we are, your tea is ready. Cream or sugar? Yes, it's all quite amazing what a well tuned human mind can manage...."

She kept looking toward the door to the back room, just slightly ajar.

"So I assume you've both come to expose what you suppose to be a dastardly confidence game. It's all really quite innocent. What I get paid for the phone sets doesn't even begin to cover my expenses. There aren't many employees, but the operation down in Pennsylvania is really quite costly. And as you can see, I live quite humbly. Besides, anything I might need I can arrange. I have no need to cheat anyone."

"And Max – can you arrange for him to recover –just like you arranged him into the condition he's in now?"

"There's nothing to arrange."

"Actually Mr. – I don't think I got your name."

"Oh, I'm quite certain you didn't, Dr. Fendick. I didn't offer it."

"Well whoever you are, I didn't come here with any agenda about exposing you. You seem to know something about me, some I suspect that you know that I spend most of my time researching what, you might call unusual –"

"Yes, yes, I'm quite familiar with your Centre for the Study of Non-human Intelligence, and I can assure you that I am quite human. Just because I have

cultivated some abilities that most humans ignore doesn't make me a candidate for your Centre. But as long as you're here you might as well stay for a cup of tea."

Doreen looked back to the back room door. Max stood up, rubbing the back of his head. "Damn. That was quite a thump I took back there when I slipped."

"Max – you didn't slip. It was the lightning."

"Well, sure, it startled me, it was quite close, but I slipped and clonked my head. I've got the lumps to show for it too."

"How do you take your tea, Mr. Preston?"

"God I presume?"

"Hardly. But I am the evil mind behind the mystery you and your friend and this rather distinguished looking gentleman have been investigating. Max Preston, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Charles Fendick, Ph. D."

"Call me Charlie."

"Yeah, hi Charlie. So tell me, not-God, I suppose you whipped up those phones in that shed out back?"

"Of course not –"

"And the satellite uplink?"

"I'm sorry, did you say one sugar or two?"

"He didn't say. Max doesn't take sugar in his tea."

"Well I don't buy this little old man in a humble shack bit for one minute. If you're the brains of the operation maybe you can explain how it all works –"

"I'm afraid I can't explain the technical details. For one thing we have to maintain some degree of mystery. But the main reason is that I don't know how it works. Someone else took care of the technical details for me."

As if on cue – too many things were happening on cue to suit Doreen – the door flew open. And despite the storm, the tall, thin, rain soaked man who entered didn't seem to be in any hurry to close it behind him.

"Leroy – how fortuitous – come in, come in – have some tea. I can't remember the last time I had so many guests at the same time."

The wind came up hard and sucked the doorknob out of Leroy's grasp. The door slammed shut.

Max turned from the newcomer to the old man. "You did that, didn't you? Just like you did the lightning. Like Dor's cat. Like a whole lot of other things. How? What else can you do?"

It was Leroy who answered, "Yeah. The old guy can do a lot – and he's going to do a lot for me. I set this whole thing in motion for him. And what do I get out of it? A few lousy bucks. Now my wife takes off on me while I'm off fixing his gear and old Frank, here, claims he can't do anything about it. Well now he's going to have to come up with something even bigger if he wants to keep me quiet. I can blow the whole deal one phone call. I report that pirate uplink and you're out of business. God's work right down the old toilet, huh Frank?."

"I don't understand all the fuss here. I'm just a well meaning lonely old man – and God, even assuming that He or She might actually exist, has absolutely nothing to do with it. Why must everyone assume that deities have a monopoly on miracles?"

Doreen almost choked, "Right, a lonely old man with TV ads, giant electronic billboards, a high-tech command center, hundreds of thousands dollars worth of custom phone sets, and here you sit in a grubby little shack in Canada dispensing miracles? I don't know what you are, but you sure as hell are more than –"

"Easy, Dor, no need to get him steamed – besides, we're not here to fight this punk's fights."

"Yeah, well wait your turn, smart guy." Leroy slipped a small revolver from his pocket.

"Leroy, Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"For me, Frank, it's the only idea. For you – it all depends on what you do next."

What he did next was not apparent to the other occupants of the small cottage.

He turned his senses inward, withdrawing from time. feeling his way carefully along the fabric of reality, immersing his identity, trying to merge with the pattern, struggling with what had to be.... back.... back.... down along the line.... swept across the folds.... along the wave – one coarse thread persisting.... a

possibility.... a snip, a splice....

"So then, Leroy, you think you might be able to tune us to a different satellite and still deliver the same basic service?"

Leroy looked at the three strangers. "The technical side of things can probably be straightened out."

"Yes of course, Leroy. You anticipate other problems – less technical in nature. Maybe you're right."

"Maybe you could just refund all the money?"

"That would be an awful lot of money. I never had anything but the best of intentions. I just wanted to give people a window of hope.... Surely there must be some way I can convince you not to call the authorities?"

He retreats again – familiar territory – but difficult to negotiate while still fully conscious – under the pressure of immediate, personal need.... the currents are strong – almost too strong....

"I can't speak for Doreen and Max, but I certainly didn't come here to give you a hard time or turn you in. I don't even think you should necessarily scrap this thing. How about you Doreen? Max? It's just that if this power is real, shouldn't you be doing more than this trivial three wishes stuff? What about the real problems? What about nuclear weapons – world hunger –"

"Actually it's just one wish. As for what you call 'the real problems,' I'm afraid you're asking too much of one poor old soul. I tinker with the little day to day things – you're talking about re-engineering massive, complex machinery. And there's not much point in fixing the machinery if the systems don't exist to maintain it. You're talking about eternally recurring themes. These problems can't be eliminated by rearranging a few accidents of history –"

"But surely you can –"

"I am not God. The human will is a little too big for me to tackle young lady."

She shakes her head and turns to Max. "So what do you think?"

"I don't know about the rest of it, but I think the phone thing is a mistake. The power is yours. You have to decide if you're going to use it, and how, but this miracle phone bit is wrong. You shouldn't play with peoples' emotions like that –"

He tries once again – blanking his mind, drifting on currents of needs, desires, possibilities.... surrendering to intuition.... a few select fibers draw him in.... he combs them, coaxes them into a more harmonious alignment....simplifying patterns.... another insistent, but less meddlesome current....

"I think it's the horizontal hold, Leroy. I know it's not a problem with the V.C.R. or the tape, Max says it worked fine when they played it in the motel."

"Were you having trouble with the set before?"

"I don't really know. I can't remember the last time I had it on. I wouldn't care about it now if it weren't for Max and Doreen's tape of their wedding. Ah, and that must be Charlie at the door. Come on in, Charlie. The door's open and the kettle's on. You remember Max and Doreen, don't you? They were a big help in getting the Project on a solid footing...."

SPECIES J0H-9FK-4JE

What appears to be the dominant species exhibits a very limited form of intelligence, although probably a surprisingly high degree of self awareness.

They hatch in vast numbers with absolutely no capacity to extend their awareness or intentionality beyond their corporeal limits. Even upon maturity they require "tools," physical devices separate from themselves to aid them in manipulating their surroundings or to traverse the very limited spatial dimensions which make up their range.

Their physical manifestations are bound by gravity, and, lacking rotifers, move about on hinged tentacles, common to most of the terrestrial species inhabiting their planet of origin.

They are, in a sense, captive to low energy or "physical" states and appear to be capable of a rather limited form of communication by a complex series of wave form manipulations. In close spatial proximity they modulate atmospheric waves which are picked up by "sound" receptors. At greater spatial distances they employ tools to manipulate waves in the electromagnetic spectrum as a means of communication. They are incapable of communicating across temporal or N-Space distances, which is to say that they demonstrate no knowledge of the 0-C energy states or the methods for transiting between them.

Even more remarkable is the fact that, like the lower life forms that inhabit their immediate surroundings, they are only able to navigate temporal dimensions in a single linear direction and therefore experience a finite "beginning" and "end" to their consciousness.

More detailed study of this fascinating species is recommended but challenging due to their extremely limited perceptive capabilities and their lack of any identifiable means of direct communication.

Our preliminary report requires supplemental input due to discoveries which are attributed to Phethrol Prime 6G. The Prime reasoned, correctly, that so

purely physical a species might employ physical means of communication similar to the manipulation of electromagnetic energy and other physical wave forms employed by other more basic species found on the surface of and in the vicinity of planetary masses existing primarily in a solid energy state.

Supplemental study required the researcher to assume a gross physical form approximating that of the subject species in order to effect interaction and communication in forms accessible to them. Although the inherent limitations of the resulting observations cannot be underestimated, the evidence for the possibility of a conscious and self-aware life form whose existence is limited to purely physical energy states is too significant to dismiss solely on the basis of the necessity of employing non-standard investigatory methodologies.

A joint investigative approach is proposed with one member retaining a trans-state communication link with the partner member who will assume the constrained "solid matter" state. This link is recommended in order to ensure the safety of the participatory member as well as to facilitate the documentation of the project. Experimentation is currently under way to determine the preferred methods of physical manifestation as well as establishing and maintaining the trans-state communication link. A second team is investigating the development of a database for use by the participatory member by means of non-interactive co-consciousness with the corporeally constrained beings.

Headaches. Hallucinations. How long before Control would pull him in?
"No, Control, I'm not aware of any other physical symptoms."

"Ben, this is Dr. Rice."

"Hi Peg. How's it going?"

"Right now I'm more concerned with how it's going with you, Ben. Other than those spikes in your blood pressure, we aren't getting anything anomalous in our readings. It would be different if we had some indication of what's happening, but, given the lack of any conclusive diagnostic evidence, I'm afraid I'm going to have to recommend that we scrub the mission and bring your back."

"I was afraid one of you guys was going to say that."

"We knew a solo mission was risky when –"

"And I accepted those risks. It would be kind of a waste to –"

"Whoa! Ben, what the hell was that. Our readings just went completely

haywire!"

"Uh, Control, I know how this is going to sound, but – I swear I'm not hallucinating – I don't think this is a solo mission any more."

"Say again."

"Control, I've got company."

"Sorry, Ben, but how is that possible."

"I'm sure it's not, but I'm equally sure that when I look to my right – it's almost like looking in a mirror, Control, except that the guy I'm looking at over there looks a little – well I guess you'd have to say fuzzy around the edges – whoa!"

"Ben? Sorry, sir, but we seem to have lost communications."

"What the hell is happening up there? Has our man flipped out?"

"I don't know sir. No comms or monitor readings. Everything is, er dead."

"Let's hope that's just a poor choice of words, Doctor."

"Okay, who or what are you, and what have you done with my comm link?"

Is this an acceptable means of communication? I'm afraid we haven't yet mastered your physical apparatus for manipulating atmospheric wave forms for communication. We are more accustomed to spontaneous interaction by means of cognitive energy.

"Cognitive energy? Well, look, I'd just as soon speak if it's all the same to you."

Of course. Your cognition is more focused when you "speak."

"You know, there are a lot of people dirtside freaking out right now. I really need the comms back up so they know I'm okay – relatively speaking, of course. I mean, you can't be real, can you?"

Your concept of "real" is unclear. We have some difficulty maintaining a corporeal manifestation in what you would consider a fixed position in space-time, but we don't believe that that, alone would lead you to perceive us as not real. We believe it may be the energy concentration required for corporeal

manifestation which is responsible for disrupting your wave form communication system.

"So, accepting for the moment, the possibility that you might be real, is there anything you can do about it? And while we're at it, what brings you to this neck of the woods?"

We have not encountered corporeal based consciousness and wish to learn more. Perhaps, if you would accept our possibility, it would facilitate matters if we were to dis-incorporate and maintain cognitive contact.

"He's still sedated, sir."

"Well we're going to have to bring him around. And get Dr. Rice and the shrink in here. We're going to have to start letting some news out pretty soon. The rumour mill is already churning out obituaries and conspiracy theories."

"Well I've always figured that the best cure for rumours is the truth – in carefully measured doses, of course."

"That would be fine if we could figure out what the hell the truth is."

"That we've got us on stark raving bonkers astronaut?"

"Hardly, gentlemen."

"Ah, Dr. Rice. Dr. Uh –"

"Krishnamurti. Dr. Allan Krishnamurti."

"You're the shrink?"

"Psychologist."

"And you've reviewed our man's file and his telemetry?"

"I've also reviewed the transcripts of his sessions with Dr. Rice and Dr. Behrmann."

"And?"

"He may have experienced a brief psychotic episode having something to do with the stresses related to the unexplained energy surge."

"And what do you think, Dr. Rice? You're the one that wanted him sedated."

"Physically there's nothing wrong with him. In fact, if anything, he's in far

better shape than we'd expect after the normal rigours of space flight, let alone what he's been through. However, Ben still believes himself to be in contact with what he describes as a 'non-corporeal' consciousness."

"And is he?"

"Is he what?"

"You're the doctors. Is there any evidence that he might, in fact be in contact with a non-little, non-green man or creature or non-creature, or whatever? Frankly, I'd hate to tell the press that he cracked under pressure and send him off to the funny farm only to find out that he really does have E.T. In his head."

"I'm not sure what would constitute evidence of a non-corporeal consciousness."

"Can't you do an EEG or something like that? Dr. Krishna?"

"Krishnamurti. His EEG is definitely what I would call anomalous, but I'm not sure what that proves. I'm afraid we are totally lacking in comparative data. Is there anything to suggest a more standard diagnosis like bipolar disorder? No. Does his EEG match other instances where the subject believed him or herself to be in contact with a non-corporeal consciousness? I'm afraid I have been unable to find such comparative data that is not associated with a definitive bi-polar diagnosis. I would like to conduct further tests, of course."

"Of course."

"So you're what, another shrink or psychologist or what?"

"Actually, I'm not that kind of doctor. My Ph. D. is in neuro-linguistics, but these days I'm the Director of the Centre for the Study of Non-human Intelligence. There used to be an academic institute until the University pulled the plug, but that's neither here nor there. I met your Dr. Rice a while back and she thought I should talk to you."

"Non-human intelligence? So does that mean somebody might actually think I'm not crazy?"

"Some might say that anybody associated with me is automatically assumed to be certifiably insane, but, no, Major Hicks, I don't think you're crazy. I think you'll find me to be rather broad minded when it comes to unconventional explanations for unusual phenomena."

"Well then, Doc, what can I tell you? I've answered all their questions, and submitted to all their tests, but they don't seem to like the answers. Maybe you can cook up an explanation that they'll buy so we can all get out of here. Peg says I'm a picture of health physically – in fact, if anything, she thinks I may be a little too healthy. Apparently my old ACL injury is gone. Hey, maybe that proves something. I mean, if my silent partner seems to be capable of repair work like that –"

"I'm not here to fabricate an explanation, Major Hicks, and I'm not sure I can do or say anything to get you out of here, but I do sincerely wish to understand the phenomenon your are experiencing."

"I like that term for it: phenomenon – nicely non-committal. Doesn't suggest objective or subjective reality, just that something's going on."

"Yes, well, why don't you tell me a little more about this 'silent partner' of yours. What about a name. How do you refer to it when you communicate."

"I don't think they use names. It's kind of hard to explain. They're consciousnesses with some degree of individuality, but they can also – I don't know, it's sort of like reconfiguring into different combinations or entities. I'm not sure we really have the words for it."

"General Bryan remains sceptical, but he also in quite interested to know if it or they, assuming they actually exist, represent any kind of threat."

"Of course he is. We've got nothing they need. Their only interest is to learn about us. Until they made contact with me they didn't really believe it was possible for physical objects to have consciousness. They considered gross matter to be a lower, non-sentient form of energy. In fact, I kind of think they're having a hard time convincing their authorities – that's not really the right word, but it'll have to do – that this investigation is worth while. It'd be kind of like you applying for a grant to study the use of language by rocks."

"Of telepathy in whales."

"Whatever."

"So it is quite possible that they might be recalled, so to speak? That they might decide to disengage? To let you return to normal."

"Now, see, Doc, I still don't think you get it. They have a completely different way of understanding things – like time. Our contact simply is – no future or past. If they were to bugger off that would imply that we were in contact in the past but no longer are. It's not like that. Besides, if I had to get used to not participating with them I think I might actually go bonkers."

"And yet, before your mission you weren't in contact with them –"

"Before – after – it's kind of irrelevant. I have existed in a non-contact state and now I exist in a state of contact."

"You used the word 'now.' Doesn't that imply a past and present."

"Now, see, I hate that. It's like you're trying to catch me up in some kind of semantic trap. Our language isn't up to the task. It's not a time thing. It's more like an evolution of states of consciousness thing. In a 'previous' or lower state 'I' wasn't aware of the possibility of connecting with 'other' consciousnesses. Hell, at some point in my evolution, I wasn't aware at all. Now I am."

"You've mentioned that before."

"Maybe you should meet them."

"I'm sorry?"

"Well here's the thing, our investigations are somewhat hampered by –"

"You said 'our investigations.' Are you including yourself with them?"

"You still don't get it, do you?"

"I'm trying."

"Yeah, well I guess I should be thankful for small favours. Dr. K. was trying too, but in a different sense of the word. OK, here's the thing, the energy concentration for physical manifestation would definitely knock all this equipment for a loop, but if you could disconnect me maybe we could go for a walk outside. We don't think any further progress is possible until you have what you would consider tangible evidence. I mean, hell, if the clear manipulation of your EEG readings didn't satisfy you doctor types and the brass, how about if we give you physical evidence?"

"Energy cost, eh? Have they made any mention of whales?"

"Huh? Whales? I doubt they know anything about whales. They're really only interested in consciousness. So what about trying for physical evidence?"

"Right. Well I suppose I could see if Dr. Rice could get the necessary clearance to allow us to leave the compound or at least the building, but I'm pretty sure some sort of military escort would be required and probably Dr. Rice and Dr. Krisnamurti as well."

"The more the merrier."

"To summarize, gentlemen, I was unable to conclusively determine whether or not Major Benjamin Hicks was, in fact in contact with, to use his terminology, 'a non-corporeal consciousness' or was merely suffering from a not previously encountered delusional state initiated during his space flight. I found no evidence to suggest that neither Major Hicks nor any being or beings with which he may have been in contact represented any threat to either himself or to continental security. Prior to the events of yesterday I might have said, if pressed to assign a diagnostic label, he was probably suffering from a new form of post-traumatic stress disorder. However, I can offer no explanation for his apparent disappearance or, if you will, his dis-incorporation while in the presence of myself, Doctors Rice and Fendick and four security officers, but I expect that any such explanation is really more the province of physicists.

"As I am quite sure the statements of the aforementioned security officers will corroborate, we were simply walking across the parking lot when, in response to what I took to be quite an innocent question from me about whether or not he was still 'in contact,' he said, and I quote, 'Oh, screw it, Doc,' and simply was no longer there. There was no sound, no flash of light, puff of smoke or other physical phenomenon, he was simply gone. Were it not for the corroboration of the others present at the time, I might have doubted my own grasp on reality, and, of course I can't entirely rule out the possibility that all of us might have experienced some manner of consensual hallucination, but we are still left with the fact that Major Hicks is no longer in the compound and yet there is no evidence of his having left."

"Thank you, Dr. Krishnamurti. Do you have anything to add, Dr. Fendick?"

"Well, let's see, we have seven eye-witness accounts and the video evidence – and yes, I'm aware of the static disruption - but whatever the forensic investigation of the video evidence reveals, Major Hicks did, in fact, appear to simply disappear. I think you may have to face up to the possibility that he has or had some sort of connection or encounter with a non-human and non-corporeal entity. As unlikely or inconceivable as that might be, is it really any more inconceivable than the possibility of Dr. Krishnamurti's consensual hallucination being corroborated by digital video evidence? Reality, gentlemen, can be a tough thing to pin down at the best of times. Belief is another thing completely. What I or Dr. Krishnamurti or any of the other witnesses happen to believe isn't really the point. You folks are going to believe whatever you chose to believe or maybe whatever explanation you think you can sell to your superiors. It has been my experience that, over time, the so-called objective facts have a tendency to adapt themselves to whatever one chooses to believe, so I wouldn't worry about it too much."

WORDS WORTH

"No, son, 'table' is what you call it, not what it is. Don't you see that there is more to Word than communication."

"Words. You said 'more to word,' I think you meant 'words' with an s."

"Word! I meant exactly what I said and said exactly what I meant."

"'Table' is the sound agreed upon by everyone who speaks the English language to represent the object your coffee mug is sitting on."

"And my real word is the pattern of vibration, at a completely different level, agreed upon between those who are able to perceive such things and the object itself. The real Word is far more powerful than a mere sound used to communicate between two creatures that have no real connection with the object. Think about it, boy! Why do you think that almost every language on earth has a different word for the same object but the object itself has but one?"

"Says you."

"You call me Granddad or William Gerard MacTell, but those are only labels. They have no relation to my true name. My true name, which your father never learned because he let himself get distracted from his true legacy, is, well, I still have hope for you, boy. I still have hope that my true name will not die with me and that you will one day embrace the bardic tradition that has come down to you through the generations of MacTells."

There may have been a certain degree of inevitability that when Winston MacTell, Ph. D., professor of English Literature, had a son, he would argue strenuously in favour of a literary name. While his wife leaned toward Peter, the poor infant was burdened with the weight of Byron Wordsworth MacTell. But by the time he was a candidate for a Masters of Science in Psychology he preferred to go by Ron, although his first published paper was attributed to B. W. MacTell.

Professor Waterson, his thesis adviser, had suggested he meet unofficially with former (according to some the accurate word was "disgraced") Professor Charles Fendick, who had a Ph. D. In Neuro-linguistics, to discuss his research work mapping the communication centres of the brain. He'd turned up some interesting results with the chimp he'd been working with and, according to Dr. Waterson, whatever crackpot ideas might have been ascribed to Dr. Fendick, he was an expert in non-human intelligence.

Ron had made an appointment, so he was somewhat taken aback when he arrived at Dr. Fendick's front porch. The house appeared to be dark and he was still waiting at least two full minutes after ringing the bell. He was about to try his cell phone when the porch light came on and the door buzzed like one of the remote locks in a campus residence building.

"Sorry, Mr. MacTell – it is Mr. MacTell, isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Let yourself in and make yourself comfortable in the living room to the left of the foyer. I'll be down in just a couple of minutes. I'm just finishing up with something in my office."

"Of course, sir."

The living room was a bit of a jumble. Maybe a step up from the chaos of an undergraduate dorm room, but not exactly what one would expect on the rural fringe of the upscale suburb where Dr. Fendick's house was located.

Ron moved a stack of journals, another of binders and a third of loose manuscript pages to a coffee table and sat down on what had probably once been an expensive leather sofa.

Dr. Fendick appeared on the stairs, "Mr. MacTell. Could I get you a beer? Scotch? Coffee?"

"Uh, thank you, sir, a glass of water would be fine."

Dr. Fendick turned down the hall into what was presumably the kitchen. "If you don't mind, I prefer Charlie to sir. How about you? Byron, is it?"

"Just Ron, sir – er, Charlie."

He re-emerged with a glass of water and what was probably the aforementioned scotch for himself. "Sorry if that makes you uncomfortable, but I more or less dropped all the sir, professor and doctor business not long after the University gave me the boot."

"Oh, not uncomfortable really, it's just that, as a grad student you get kind of used to the use of titles."

"So what do you call Waterson? Doug? Doctor?"

"Doug outside academic settings, but otherwise it's Doctor or Professor."

"Well, you know people have a tendency to underestimate the power of the spoken word, especially how we allow ourselves to be called. With a given name like Byron and what I assume to be a Scots surname, I assume you might be familiar with the bardic tradition?"

"Not in any detail. I suppose something had to rub off from my father. He was a professor of English literature. And, of course there's my grandfather. Even my father considered him something of a throwback."

His hope that this encounter wasn't going to turn out to be a waste of time was already diminishing. It was apparently going to be a bit of a chore to steer the conversation to the reason he'd come. "Charlie" had a reputation of being a brilliant man, if a bit of a kook, but so far he was proving to be an unshaven middle aged man with a tall drink of undiluted scotch and a tendency to wander off topic like his grandfather. Not necessarily the best of omens.

"Don't be too deferential, Ron. I can see you'd like to get to the point."

"Sorry, was I that obvious?"

"Not really, but when you study non-human intelligence you learn that, no matter how powerful the spoken word may be to our species, there is lot more unspoken communication going on in any conversation than the words convey. You learn to watch, listen and even smell, touch and taste for anything which might represent an attempt to share or project conscious or even non-conscious thought."

"Of course."

"So Doug's email said that you're doing some interesting stuff with chimps and language?"

"Well, yes, it is interesting. It has to do with which areas of the brain fire when humans think about an object and then speak the word for the object. You're probably aware of the work with chimps learning to sign?"

"Washoe."

"Well, yes, but there are others, and I've been able to work with one. The interesting thing is that, as near as we can tell, and this is, of course, only preliminary, when a chimp looks at an object and, we suppose, thinks about it, the area of the brain that fires isn't the same as when he signs it. But we've recently noticed that he has his own patterns of sounds and/or gestures that seem to correlate with some objects or actions – words, I suppose – and when he makes those gestures or sounds, even if the object isn't present, the brain activity more

closely correlates to what we see when he looks at the object. It's more analogous to what we observe in humans." He was trying to maintain an academic bearing, but, even though his recent findings could change the direction of his research and force him to backtrack and rethink his thesis, it really was quite exciting.

"Well, I suppose there could be any one of a number of perfectly reasonable explanations, but I'm sure that you and Doug could come up with those on your own. I'm guessing he thought you should talk to me to consider possibilities of the more, shall we say, unconventional variety." He rubbed the stubble on his right cheek with his left hand and looked just the slightest bit smug.

Ron tried not to squirm. "Well I think it's more like we're interested in any ideas you might have."

"Bearing in mind, of course, that my research has ventured into some pretty wacky territory lately when it comes to both animal and even less conventional areas of non-human intelligence. And that, in addition to investigating incidents that, according to your university's vice-president of academics, has more business in the tabloids than the university, I assume that our conversation falls into the 'leave no stone unturned' category, and I don't have to worry about being cited, quoted or blamed for destroying your academic career."

"Oh course, sir – Charlie."

"MacTell. You know, I did a little research of my own after Doug called me. I mentioned the bardic tradition earlier –"

"Well, that's always been my grandfathers big thing. My father was more interested in literature. I suppose that's how he ended up as a professor of English Lit. But my grandfather – he's still alive, you know – well, he was a bricklayer, but he also considered himself the family bard. It still doesn't take much more than a couple of drinks to get him off into his tales, family stories and ones going much farther back than anyone else can remember, and, of course, the poems. Most of those I don't understand. They're in what he calls the original language of the bards. Old Erse, I think it is."

"Of course. But you know there is far more to the bardic tradition than tales and poems. Some would have it that the ancient bards were wizards of a sort, capable of wielding the power of the Word as a weapon."

"Oh, believe me, I've heard all about it."

"Well I doubt that you've heard all about it, but that's neither here nor there. I might also mention that there are similar traditions in other cultures. I wonder what your grandfather would have to say if you were to discuss your research with him?"

"I doubt that he'd get past asking me when I was going to be finished with school and get on with real life." He wasn't sure what Waterson had expected him to get out of meeting with Fendick, but it was looking like a waste of time.

"Well if that's true, it's too bad, but I can see you're getting impatient, so, if you'll permit me a refill – more water or something stronger for you? – I promise I'll cut to the chase and tell you what I think."

"Maybe I will have a beer if it's not too much trouble."

"I hope family resentments won't prevent you from enjoying a MacEwan's? I don't think I have any Bud." He could hear him in the kitchen popping the lid without waiting for an answer.

"MacEwan's would be fine."

"There you go. So here's what I think you should investigate. You can't rule out the possibility that the act of signing requires such a degree of concentration that the brain activity you observe there has more to do with the action of forming the sign than any connection between the sign and what it represents, but I'm sure you've already considered that."

"Of course."

"However, what you may not have considered is that signing, much like modern speech is all about symbols and that the symbols represent the idea of an object more than the object itself. Perhaps, in addition to chimps and undergraduates you should study more primitive folk – those with both their own traditional spoken language but a modern language as well. For instance the Torres Strait Islanders – their traditional, pre-literate language hasn't changed as much as – but I digress – probably an annoying tendency...."

"No problem."

"What I was getting at is that before the written word reshaped language, a word was not a symbol for an object or an action or idea, a word was the capturing of the essence of that object, act or idea. To speak of the true name of what we call a tree was to connect with it."

"So I've heard. That's pretty much my grandfather's shtick."

"I'm sure, but – and I've had a bit of experience in this area – not, mind you, with the bardic tradition of the Scots, but I have mentioned that there are similar threads in other cultures. A while back I had an encounter with a, well, you already consider me a crackpot, so I may as well go ahead and say it, trans-dimensional representative of a Mayan-related culture. I nearly died before I got the hang of the whole multi-verse thing, but I also learned a few things along the way. Maybe a demonstration is in order. Could you grab that piece of shale from

that corner over there."

"This?" Things were going completely off the rails. The old fool was going to do some sort of magic trick!

"That's it, the one with the glyphs on it. No, no, don't give it to me. Just hold onto it. Keep it level. Now, do you have a coin or some other small object in your pocket?"

"Here's a quarter."

"Now, not surprisingly, if I say 'the coin falls through the shale,' it doesn't, does it?"

"Of course not."

"Quite. The words 'shale' and 'coin' are just symbols. They're fine for you knowing what I mean when I ask you to fetch one or the other, but no power other than descriptive. The same is true for 'fall' and 'though.'"

"Of course."

"However, if I rephrase that statement, using words which have absolutely no meaning to you, and which can't be written down because they're older than any alphabet, '*** *** **,' what happens?"

The sounds he made were vaguely disturbing – more guttural than his grandfather's Old Erse – but what caused him to drop the stone was the fact that the quarter did, indeed, appear to have dropped through the book sized slab of shale and land on the hardwood floor with an audible clink.

"Nice trick," Although he wasn't entirely sure if could be a trick.

"Trick is it? Maybe, maybe not. I could assure you that there was no slight of hand or other deception involved, but I doubt it would make any difference."

"I – I don't really know what to say –"

"Always better not to say anything when that's the case. At any rate, feel free to finish your beer, and if you'd like to take the stone and check it out in your lab, by all means feel free, although I would like it back. I picked it up because of those interesting markings. Unfortunately, I really do have to an article to finish and I'm sure you've had quite enough of my foolishness by now. I doubt there's anything more to be said here anyway. If you wouldn't mind showing yourself out. Don't worry about the door. Just pull it behind you. It will lock as you leave."

MAYUK

He waited in the small cabin. As he waited, he watched the young woman. Her fluid hands seemed to drift above her work. She remained oblivious to his presence as she made one small bundle after another. He couldn't see what she was wrapping, but the covering she used appeared to be some sort of crudely tanned animal hide. Such things were not his speciality.

"You never told me your name."

"That's true." She didn't look up from her work. "My name is not something to be given up as freely as you have given up yours, Dr. Charlie Fendick."

"Give it up? I was only wondering what I should call you."

She said nothing.

"Is it possible that you are Mayuk, the woman I am seeking? Is it possible that you are testing me?"

"Yes, Dr. Charlie Fendick, it is possible. Many things are possible." There was a long pause. Throughout the pause, as when she spoke, her hands continued working whether she looked at them or not – almost autonomous. Her narrow face remained motionless. Expressionless. Almost as if dead. "It is possible, but I can assure you that I am not the one you seek."

The empty face looked up from the work of its hands, but only to aim another pause at him. He wanted her to look down at her work. He wanted something to unite that blank, narrow face with those ethereal hands. "The woman you're looking for is an older woman. As I have already told you, the woman you seek left here three days ago on business. She is expected back soon. Before the fire is out. She said she would bring more wood before the fire burns out."

"What if she doesn't make it back in time? It's quite cold to be without fuel. What if she's delayed? Delays happen easily these days."

The young woman laughed, finally betraying some facsimile of emotion. Emotion, yes, but which one? Was she amused? Or was it scorn for his naiveté? "Mayuk is not like you, talkative one. She has no trouble with time. She straps no talisman to her wrist as protection against 'being late.' It is out of time, itself, that she comes to us." Another pause. "She said she would bring wood for the fire. She will."

"And you are not her? You are quite certain that you are not Mayuk."

She didn't answer. Why should she? And why should he think that she was actually Mayuk, trying to hide something from him, or trying to put him through some sort of test or ritual?

In the end, he accepted her silence. And she continued with her work. He was curious. He wanted a closer look at what she was doing but the single, dim oil lamp that provided the cabin's sole source of illumination was insufficient to satisfy his curiosity and he wasn't willing to risk getting closer.

He watched as she went to check the stove. It was a primitive affair like many found northern cabins. It was fashioned from a discarded oil drum left over from an earlier era. The rust was slowly claiming it. As she opened its door he could see that little remained of the fire except a few coals. The cabin was getting quite cold. "Soon, Dr. Fendick. She will be here soon."

He busied himself with his recorder. It was old, and the batteries had been recharged many times. Neither they, nor the recorder were fully dependable, but everything seemed to be in working order. Such a piece of equipment was no longer easy to come by, but an anthropologist friend had convinced him that it would be worth any trouble he might have to go through to acquire it.

"That's a voice machine."

"Yes, it's a recorder. Would you like a closer look?"

"Put it away. Mayuk will not want her voice trapped inside your machine."

"Oh, come now. The recorder is perfectly harmless. I'm sure you've seen cameras and photographs. Think of the recorder as a camera for sound. The process is quite different, but the result is similar."

"The voice is not like your shadow pictures. The voice moves. It is alive. It is not something to be given up to a machine. It is not something to be used apart from the person it belongs to."

"Perhaps if I show you how it works. Let me demonstrate - with my own voice, of course. It's really quite harmless. Here, come a bit closer so you can see."

She didn't move. "You southerns have no voice left to lose. Your people gave up your voices long ago. My people aren't interested in repeating your mistakes. There will be no voice machines here. There will be no southern charms here. Nothing is more dangerous than magic which grows beyond the powers of its maker. The time for southern machines and magic has passed."

"Is that so? Well let me tell you something, young lady, you had better hope you're wrong. If our scientific investigations – our magic as you call it – don't come up with a way to understand and respond to this calamitous climatological anomaly, I daresay that civilization as we know it will cease to exist before the passing of another generation."

"Don't expect me or my people to mourn the passing of what you call civilization."

"Perhaps not, but look at even this sparsely furnished cabin. Consider how dependent you are on the south and the products of southern manufacture. The nails that hold this ramshackle structure together, your cooking utensils, your knife, your axe, and even the oil drum from which your stove is made."

"You think we can't live without those things? Many before us have."

He shook his head and looked away. He had heard the same arguments before. The cities were nearly empty because of the young people – lacking even her heritage to fall back on – who were spreading across the country side to live the primitive life – "subsisters," they were calling themselves.

It was a trend which brought him easily to the brink of despair. This was no time for people to be turning their backs on civilization.

He became aware of the cold seeping in toward his bones. He rose and went to the stove. He touched his hand to its side. "Your stove is out. Cold. Where is she?"

"She will come." She riveted him where he stood with eyes of scorn and revulsion. "You think we would do as you have done? Trade our lives for a few conveniences? A few charms? We've seen what those charms mean. We've seen how they control you. And what good is wizardry, no matter how powerful if it serves only to cripple and destroy those who beget it? This Winter, which, to my people, is only a change of seasons, is to you, and your machines, a certain death."

Now put your voice machine and your foolish pride away and wait with your mouth shut."

He was uneasy, not because she had insulted him, surely as a professor, he had grown accustomed to such abuse from the young, but because he was beginning to suspect that the tenor of his interaction with this young woman augered ill for his eventual encounter with Mayuk. At any rate, he chose not to argue the point further. He would wait for Mayuk. She would surely be more worldly and less suspicious.

His wait was not long. A great clamour arose outside the cabin. There was the sound of dogs and of things crashing and banging into one another. There was a woman's voice shouting in a language he didn't understand. The young woman with the narrow eyes went to the door and shouted back in the same patois. He thought he heard her surround his own name with several meaningless syllables.

He rose as the young woman stepped aside and a new figure stood in the doorway, framed against the brilliance of a full moon on an endless expanse of snow. It was Mayuk – of that there could be no doubt. She was younger than he had expected, but, then, he had never been quite sure what to expect. He couldn't see her clearly, but he could tell that she wasn't the old crone of some of his imaginings. She was most definitely Mayuk. He had covered great distances and with even greater difficulty just for the chance to meet her.

She spoke once again to the younger woman without moving from the doorway, still using their common language. The young woman pointed to him and then said something in what might have been yet another incomprehensible language. Mayuk replied in a similar manner and took a step forward so he could see her grinning at him. She spoke yet again to the narrow-faced one, who then left the cabin through a second door at the back – a door which he had failed to notice earlier in the dim lamplight.

Finally Mayuk deigned to address him in a language he understood, English. It was a loud and boisterous English. "So you're the southern professor they say has been following me all over the place? Chasing after me, are you? Well, I knew my fame had spread far and wide. I knew my services are in great demand with you crazy southerns, but who would think a man like you would come so far and go to so much trouble just to spend a little time with me? I'm flattered, sir. That's just something!" Her laugh was raucous. It grated. Somehow, he had expected a woman of Mayuk's reputation to be more subtle and sage-like.

"I am deeply honoured to meet you."

"Honoured, is it? Well how about that! Now I'm really flattered. Oh, yes, and by the way, in case you had any doubts, I am Mayuk." Her grin had several teeth missing.

"Yes, I can see that."

"And you, the young one tells me, are Dr. Fendick. Dr. Charlie Fendick, come from all the way down south in Toronto, just for me." She shook her head and grinned again. "I just can't get over it." She threw off her anorak and practically pounced. She grabbed him by the ears, smeared a forceful kiss on his lips, and tumbled him to the cot he had been sitting on before she had entered. He fought his way free as she was trying to lower herself down onto him. He pushed her away with great difficulty.

"I – you – my God, woman! what the hell are you trying to do? I – I came here to – to talk, for God's sake – to ask questions – you didn't think I came here for – I'm, a professor, for God's sake!"

"What? Don't professors need sex just like everybody else? I thought that was monks!" She roared with laughter. "So it's questions, eh?" She gasped out her words between great waves of laughter. "Now here's a rare specimen, indeed, a southern man who would rather talk than fuck. All kinds, eh? Oh, you people are a weird bunch." Once she eventually got herself under control, she opened the door and called out in her own language. When the young one entered the cabin, Mayuk addressed her in English "It's talk he wants. Can you believe it? You should have told me – or maybe you should have told him." She turned suddenly serious. "Words don't come easy up here, Dr. Fendick. Better you should have come for sex."

He was absolutely stunned. He had no idea what to do or say next.

"Well, shit, man – sorry, professor. You really must forgive me. I guess I must have shocked you out of your shorts. I guess I'm not exactly what you expected, eh? My own damned fault, I suppose. Sometimes I get to thinking all you southerns are the same." She chuckled. "I should know better than that, eh? Sorry." She was still chuckling as she lit a home-made cigarette. "So, uh, Dr. Fendick, tell me, what is it that you wanted to talk about."

"I'm, um, I'm sorry about any misunderstanding. I, um –"

"Come on, now, speak up. You don't have to be shy with me. You've come too far to be shy. What is it that you want? You're a doctor – regular kind,

or a specialist?"

"Actually, I'm a professor. I teach – or at least I did teach –"

"That's right, how could I forget that. I don't know where I got the idea you were a doctor. Nothing wrong with being a teacher. What did you want to teach me?"

"Oh, no, I would never be so presumptuous –"

"Well then what the hell do you want?"

"I want – Mayuk, if I may call you that –"

"Call me anything you want."

"I've – you see, I have run out of answers. People look to teachers – especially science teachers like myself, for answers, for explanations. I was supposed to – well, I don't –"

"Now maybe it's me again, but you don't seem to be making a whole lot of sense. What's all this stuff about answers and questions?"

"What do you know about that – that thing they tried to take out of the mountain several years back? It wasn't far from here."

"You sure you wouldn't rather spent some time between the sheets? At least with sex I can give you all you want and still have it to give to somebody else."

"I'm afraid I don't – you don't – Mayuk, you can't possibly know how long, how hard I've worked for this. There has to be link. But that link is apparently outside even my frame of reference. Don't you see? I have gone to all the other fields. I still have no answers."

"I'm not surprised. You haven't even got the question yet."

"No, wait, I have to know. I have to know about that artifact. Don't do this to me. This is not a joke. That thing they tired to drag out of the mountain – what is it? It's a northern thing, so I came back to the north – I returned –"

"And did you bring it back with you?"

"It?"

"The artifact. The world tunnel you tore from the mountain."

"What did you call it?"

"Never mind, southern, the question is, did you return it?"

"I – As far as I know, they never actually recovered it after the disaster. And even if they did, I never had it. It certainly wasn't mine to return –"

"Nor to take." The laughter was definitely gone. Her voice had a cold, sharp edge to it.

"Every place I've asked, looking for clues, for legends, for anything that might tie in or even hint at an explanation, I drew a blank. But there was one theme – one name that turned up again and again. That name was Mayuk."

"Yeah, well, I get around. Those miners and me have had some good times together."

"That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it. They say – your own people say this – that you can move through time just like others of us can move across distance – that the years are like miles to you –"

"Did you say you teach history?"

"Neuro-linguistics, actually."

"I thought time was the business of history professors. I think I might have had a history teacher up here once. Send me a history teacher. It doesn't have to be the same one."

"I don't think you understand, I –" He remembered the recorder and started to switch it on. He didn't want to miss anything.

"No machines." It was the first English the younger woman had uttered to him since Mayuk's arrival.

"I think we should let Mayuk decide that. Mayuk, do you object to my recorder?" She didn't answer. He took the lack of any sign to the contrary for consent, but when he pressed the button to start the machine, nothing happened. He checked it over again, but could find nothing wrong. It simply wouldn't start. Maybe it was the batteries, but they had worked earlier. He looked at Mayuk. She grinned.

"I, um, don't have to use the recorder." She continued grinning and moved toward the door. "Wait, you're not leaving – please – the artifact – the cone-shaped object from the mountain – what did you call it? You seem to know something about it – you –"

"What's it worth to you?"

"Worth?"

"If you had wanted sex you would've had to pay. Why should it be any different with words? You want talk instead of sex, that's your business, but you still have to pay. I ain't Santa Claus, you know."

"Pay? I guess I hadn't really given any thought to that aspect of this sort of thing, but I don't see any problem. Name your price."

"Did I say something about money? What use do I have for that foolish stuff? Kind of obsolete, ain't it? Money? That was that weird southern magic that had most of the world fooled for quite a while – turn value into paper – some trick. The world is changing, Dr. Fendick. Look around you. No, sir, you'll have to come up with something better than money."

"I don't understand you. First you played naive and confused, now you're suddenly articulate and shrewd. Why do I feel that you're toying with me – getting a few kicks out of humbling a well-known southern professor?" He was growing impatient. Maybe he had used the wrong approach. Or maybe it was all just a big mistake. Whatever was the case, he intended to get something out of her soon. "Do you just want me to leave?"

She didn't answer. Her steady gaze ate deeply into his doubts. A single instant under that gaze felt like years. "Hey, listen, Doc, don't get snarky, eh? You're the one who came here looking for something. What do you want?" There was no hint of the rogue or trickster in her voice now. It was cold. Intense. Compelling.

"I told you before. I want answers – answers about that thing from the mountain. Answers."

"So what are the questions?"

"What is it? How did it get there? What does it have to do with the weather? With you? And what about all the tales about you or someone with the same name – about moving through time, about being present at the moment of creation?"

"The moment of creation, eh? Which one? How many times do you suppose this world has been created? Not nearly enough, from what I can see. You say you used to be a teacher, well I don't know about that, but I do know that whatever you were, now you're a fool. You'd never understand. Besides, what makes you think you really want to know all that?"

"You can't possibly understand what I've already given up for this – what it means for a man of my background, my training, my stature –"

"You? You wouldn't believe. You couldn't believe. You call yourself a scientist, but you're the sorcerer around here. You guys are always making up far-fetched explanations for everyday things – and time – creation – you know as much about them as I know about algebra. Pah!" She spat against the side of the stove and then turned to the young woman and said, with a trace of impatience, "The stove is cold. I've had that wood here for a long time now." The young woman scurried out to get the wood.

He wasn't quite ready to give up yet. "Perhaps you underestimate me. Very few of my colleagues would have –"

"I don't really give half a shit about your colleagues. You may be an exceptional man for a southern scientist. You may be quite open-minded, but an there are still things which even an exceptional blind man will never be able to see."

His patience was crumbling. In spite of all he had endured during the years since the mysterious conical object had first appeared, even he had his limit – there was only so much abuse and contempt he could or would take. Still, he was prepared to sacrifice even the remnants of his shredded pride before this enigmatic and abusive northern crone if he thought he might learn something. He understood that she had, no doubt, suffered a lifetime of ill treatment at the hands of white southerners such as himself, but the fact that he was prepared to listen to anything she had to say about the artifact or the long winter which had claimed most of the northern hemisphere for nearly a year didn't mean that he alone had to bear the brunt of her hatred for his race. But he could wait. Perhaps she would mellow. Perhaps patient waiting would convince her of his sincerity, of his desire to learn from her.

So he waited. He spent a full day and night in that small cabin. The two women moved around him, rarely speaking, and then, never in English, and never directly to him. They treated him like one more piece of crude furniture. Twice a day they deigned to share their rough, unappealing sustenance with him. If their treatment of him was intended to weaken his resolve, it worked.

Had he come for mere money or even fame, had it been another time, a time not obliterated by snow and ice, he would have given up long ago. He would have followed the example of most of his colleagues and abandoned such matters for the more pressing demands of surviving the long Winter. But something in him refused to believe that life had to be reduced to nothing more than an

animalistic struggle for survival. It was this conviction that had inspired his search in the early days. The massive conical artifact they had exhumed from a mine less than a hundred miles from Mayuk's cabin had steadfastly refused to yield its secrets to even the most sophisticated conventional methods. His own direct involvement in that phase of things had been minimal. But even the lack of answers from the physical scientists did not deter him. He turned to the anthropologists and ethnologists. Perhaps a clue to the artifact's origins and purposes lay buried in the cultures of the northern native peoples. I clearly predated any known human presence in the region. He gave up a dying career to pursue what those close to him considered an obsession. But miles and miles of increasingly difficult travel over eight months yielded very little which could be connected either to the climatological aberration or the conical artifact. There might have been something to the Tlingit Indian tale of the weather spirit, but even that seemed to have more ancient roots which seemed to reach back well before even dimly recalled oral history.

But there was a single thread which wove in and out of many of the most ancient tales. There was a vaguely remembered race which was ruled by a powerful matriarch with great magical powers. The matriarch was called Mayuk. Further probing had revealed that the name, and, by some accounts, the magic, if not the race, had survived, perhaps passed on from generation to generation. Then came hints and even assertions that the original matriarch survived. Claims that Mayuk walked the earth, leaving a trail of magical feats, both great and small.

Whatever one did or didn't believe about her origins, a picture emerged – one of an elusive trickster, appearing at unusual times and places, always known as Mayuk, manoeuvring, if believed the accounts, freely through time as well as space. As he gathered more reports and even sworn statements, the obsession grew. He was amazed at the number of people from diverse backgrounds who were willing to swear affidavits that they had witnessed the woman's wizardry. Some of it could be attributed to the impact of hard and baffling times and an increasing inclination to believe in the magical. Many people felt that science and technology had betrayed them. Some were ready to shift their belief to a more hopeful alternative.

But whether you required rational or magical explanations, a woman called Mayuk kept turning up in the strangest places and the strangest times – in different forms and at different ages, but always known as Mayuk. Fendick, himself, had been involved in at least two unsettling encounters.

He had followed a report to Lima, which, by then, like other southern cities, had become unbelievably gorged with refugees from the tightening grip of the Winter. Once there, he found the object of his search to be a girl of about

seven. He picked her out easily in one of many crowded outdoor markets. She was clearly of northern native extraction, but such features were no longer out of place there. She was playing tricks, slights of hand, perhaps, for anyone willing to reward her with a little loose change. She was, at least, a very clever little beggar. As he forced his way through the crowd to get closer, he lost sight of her. He tried to follow as she threaded her way through the mass of jostling bodies, but she eluded him. Was she aware of his pursuit? As she slipped away he was certain he heard someone call out after her – "Mayuk –" an unusual combination of syllables in Peru – hard to mistake.

Then there was the elderly northern woman in Mexico City. He heard about her by way of a letter from a former associate who had moved there. He went to the small, private nursing home where she was suppose to be living. He actually saw her – it had to be her – sitting in the shade on the stoop as his cab approached. He looked away only long enough to pay the driver, but when he looked back she was gone. When he went inside to ask about the northern woman called Mayuk in his awkward Spanish, he was told that she had been a troublesome old bitch who was always going AWOL. They said that no one's heart had broken when she had disappeared for once and for all three weeks earlier. He was also assured that there were no other northerns staying there, and that no one had been sitting out on the stoop that particular afternoon.

Then, as the extended Winter squeezed ever harder, paralysing the lingering vestiges of the transportation and communications systems that held his world together, he had gleaned stories from the last of the workers drifting south from the abandoned mining and construction camps in the north. But so much had to be set aside as the Winter delivered blow after devastating blow to the south. It was only after another year that his obsession began to speak to the fears of others. He was encouraged and even supported in small ways in his pursuit of a northern woman and any clues she might reveal – clues that might help save a threatened way of life. For the first time since the Winter had begun, he had some degree of sanction for what had become his life's work.

The preparations and then the travel had taken almost another entire year, but he had made it at last. He was in the cabin of a woman called Mayuk. He had spoken with her face to face. But the present encounter, although face to face, was not developing as he had dreamt. He was prepared to accept the possibility that she might not possess powers beyond those of normal humans. He had always maintained serious doubts, but he had not pursued the myth and the person for so long just to close his mind to her and dismiss her. He could be convinced. He could accept her as anything she claimed and demonstrated herself to be. But she was not, it appeared, prepared to accept him.

But he couldn't just give up and leave. He had to keep trying. "Are you a wizard? A magician? Are you able to control forces unknown to southern science?" He spoke to her for the first time all day as she placed a bowl of stew before him.

He was pleasantly surprised when she first spat at the stove and then answered him, stopping between sentences to pick at the few teeth remaining in her mouth. "A wizard? Me? I am Mayuk, nothing more, nothing less. There are many forces unknown to southern science. Southern science is dead, I am not."

"Why can't you give me a straight answer? I've said that I am prepared to pay – if not in money, then in some other medium. Just tell me what and how much."

"I thought we already went through that. I have no use for your money or for much of anything else you could give me. What I want most from you is to know why you came – for **you** to know why you came."

"I came to find an explanation. I came to learn. I came to believe. What will it take to convince you of that? Why must you lump all southerners together as non-believers?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a good lay? It would probably be easier on both of us." She turned away from him and went to check on what the other woman was doing with the stew. She tasted it and then added a handful of dried herbs from an open tin above the stove. She sent the young woman out to fetch wood from the shed at the back of the cabin. He watched and waited. The young woman filled the stove and then poured in a bit of lamp oil to make the coals flare up and catch the wood. She didn't shut the stove's door.

A tongue of flame lashed out across a distance of five feet to lick at his left hand. He jumped up and retreated. The hair on the back of his hand was completely singed off, but the flesh wasn't burned badly enough to blister.

The air in the small cabin took on a heavy smell. He held the injured hand in the other and stared.

"You don't want to understand anything, southern. You just want your world back the way it was."

"No. That's not true. I can accept the fact that the southerners screwed things up and that nothing can be the way it was. But I need to know –"

"Come over here and give me a kiss."

"What?"

"You said you'd pay. I want a kiss. Don't tell me you can't kiss a toothless old woman to save your world? Hey, now, that wasn't so bad, was it. See that, you almost turned me into a princess."

As he stepped back he saw that she looked years younger. "What – what happened here?"

"Wrong question, Dr. Charlie Fendick. You should be asking what **didn't** happen?"

"I don't understand."

"I don't think you ever will. It doesn't matter. Just go back to your world."

"I –"

"You don't even have to walk. But you'll have to take that car out back. I don't think there's enough snow out there for the skidoo."

He looked out through the grimy glass. He saw green. It was the first grass he'd seen in many, many months.

"And, hey, try to make sure you people don't go pushing worlds through funnels again. I've got better things to do than pulling worlds back out of mountains and turning them back right side out."

"Hi, June, it's Charlie. Listen, I'm flying in tonight from Edmonton. Could you pick me up at the airport?"

"No, I'm fine, but, hey, could you tell me how long I've been away?"

"Two weeks, eh? OK, well, listen, I'm thinking about taking some time off – maybe even mothballing the Centre for a while."

"Really? Weinstein? Did he say what it was about? Whales, eh? Yeah, well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give him a call after I get back...."