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FIRST FIRE

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"An unusual request indeed. Why should I fly you to Iran?"

"Because you have money and I don't," Emil wanted to say, but didn't. "Because I

can help you authenticate your discovery at Ebtacan," he said.

"What discovery?"

"The Flame of Zoroaster."

The Tycoon nodded his head. His knee had been nodding all along. He was the richest man in the world, and clearly one of the most impatient.

He wore Levis and a Gap T shirt under a linen sport coat. His legs were crossed

and his right foot was bobbing up and down as if he couldn't wait to get out of

the office.

Emil had gotten this appointment only by pulling every string and calling in every marker. He knew he had less than thirty seconds to make his case.

"There is a legend that the fire at Ebtacan is the same one Darius worshipped,"

he said.

"I know the legend," said the Tycoon. The Ebtacan dig was one of the few of his

many projects that he followed closely. Most of them he ran through one foundation or another, but his interest in archeology was genuine, and deep.

Emil knew that he had visited and even worked at the the dig several times.

"Archeology is not about legends," said the Tycoon. "It's about objects.

Small,

hard objects you find in the dirt."

"What if I told you fire was a hard object," said Emil.

The Tycoon narrowed his world-famous eyes. They were boyish only in photos.

"I'm

listening."

"I have developed a way to date fire. Not ashes, not charcoal, not the remnants

or evidences of fire, but the flame itself."

"I'm all ears."

"Using my device, which I call the spectrachronograph, I can date a flame to its

precise moment of ignition," said Emil. "With most fires that's only an hour or

two. In the case of, say, the Olympic flame, it may be decades. I won't bother

you with the technical details, but ..."

"Bother me with the technical details," said the Tycoon.

Emil explained how every flame has a unique spectragraphic signature, which is

altered over time at a steady rate, and lost altogether when the flame is extinguished. "Every new flame has a new signature," he said. "With a

spectrachronographic analysis I can date a flame's age to within fractions of a

second per century."

"You've dated flames that old?"

"Not yet," said Emil. "Which is why I want to go to Ebtacan. Legends aside, the

Flame of Zoroaster is likely to be hundreds of years old. Dating it will put my

spectrachronograph on the map."

"And my dig as well," said the Tycoon.

Emil was startled to realize that he had scored. He went for the extra point.

"If we found a candle that had been burning since the French revolution, I could

tell you exactly when the match itself was struck, within two seconds. I estimate my error factor at .8 seconds a century."

"I'll make it easy for you," the Tycoon said, opening his checkbook and writing

as he spoke. "Come back to my office in one week. On my secretary's desk you will find a candle burning. I want you to tell me to within one second when the

flame was lit. Pacific Standard Time."

He tore out the check and laid it on the desk to indicate that the interview was

over.

Emil's heart was pounding as he picked up the check.

It was for a hundred dollars.

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One week later Emil showed up at the Tycoon's office carrying what looked, to the secretary, like a water pistol.

"This is the one," she said, pointing to the candle burning on her desk.

Emil pointed his device at the flame and pulled the trigger until he heard a beep.

He released the trigger and read the display.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he said. "This flame was lighted less than three minutes ago."

"Sort of a joke," said the Tycoon, coming out of his inner office with a burning

candle in his hand. With two fingers he pinched out the candle on the desk, then

relighted it from the candle in his hand.

Emil pointed the spectrachronograph at the flame and pulled the trigger again until it beeped.

He read the display.

"I trust this is not another joke," he said. "This flame is almost forty years

old. 39.864, to be exact. I can translate into months ..."

"That's okay," said the Tycoon. He sat down on the desk beside the burning candle, legs crossed, right foot bobbing. "That's very good. It was lighted from

the Eternal Flame on JFK's grave at Arlington. Did you know it's illegal to carry an open flame on a commercial flight, even in first class? I had to send a

chartered jet to DC for your little test, but you passed it with flying colors."

Emil thought of the chartered jet; he thought of his hundred dollars.

The Tycoon was already writing out another check. "This is for expenses and R&D," he said. "My secretary will send you a plane ticket. We will see you in Ebtacan in ten days. But can I give you one piece of advice?"

The question was a courtesy only; the Tycoon didn't wait for an answer before continuing: "Don't call it a spectrachronograph. Too sci-fi. Just call it a time

gun."

He stood up and handed Emil the check, then pinched out the flame again and left

the room.

The check was for \$100,000.

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Emil had never flown first class before. For the first time he wished the Atlantic wider, the flight longer. The luxury ran out in Uzbekistan, however, and the last two legs were made on terrifying Aeroflot propjets.

Ebtacan was a tiny crossroads in a vast desert, scratches on mauve sand. Emil

had expected magnificent ruins, and all he found were mud huts with corrugated roofs, a petrol station that calculated by abacus, and a stalled Russian tank covered with indecipherable graffiti.

"Alexander leveled it all," said the site manager, a portly Wisconsin professor named Elliot, as they drove from the dirt airstrip to the tent city at the dig.

"The Macedonians razed the temples, raped the women, enslaved the men, butchered the children." He recounted this with an alarming glee. "Then Alexander personally snuffed out the sacred Flame of Zoroaster, which had burned, supposedly, for ten thousand years. But according to the legend, he was fooled.

The flame had already been spirited away by the priests. It's preserved in a small shrine about twenty miles north of here."

Twenty miles in northern Iran was like two hundred back in California. The next

morning, Emil found himself rattling across the black sands in a Toyota Land Cruiser expertly driven by a Wisconsin graduate assistant. Professor Elliot bounced around in the back seat.

"I've met him several times and he's all right with me," the graduate assistant said. "For one thing, he doesn't come on to every female. For another, he really

cares about archeology. He has values."

Her name was Kay. She was talking about the Tycoon, a Wisconsin alumnus. Sometimes Emil got the impression that the purpose of his worldwide business and

philanthropic activities was just so these conversations would be held.

"It's interesting that he is excavating this city that was sacked by Alexander,"

said Professor Elliot. "In many ways he is a modern Alexander. Nothing can stand

against him, or at least against the technology, the capital and the connections he commands."

The Flame of Zoroaster was in an artificial cave, carved out of a sandstone cliff. It was maintained and guarded by a small coterie of monks who were reluctant to show it to the non-faithful. But Zoroastrianism is an obsolete and

beleaguered faith, and it had been easy enough to convince local officials that

the shrine was, like Ecbatan, part of the "Heritage of Humankind."

The monks were under orders. They had already let in the professor several weeks

before. They did so again, graciously if reluctantly.

The flame burned in a large bowl of beaten gold. A young monk fed it twigs from

a pile against one wall. The twigs themselves were testimony to the diligence and ingenuity of the monks, since the desert was barren for miles around.

Emil

found out later that the wood was brought by the faithful from as far away as India.

Emil pointed his time gun at the flame and pulled the trigger until it beeped.

He looked at the display and let out a low whistle.

"What is it?" asked Professor Elliot.

"Just what they say," said Emil. He showed the professor and the student the display.

"Jesus!" said Kay.

"When this fire was built, Jesus was as far in their future as he is now in our past," said Emil.

The flame was 5,619.657 years old.

"So it's true," said Elliot, looking astonished.

Emil nodded. "Most of it. Certainly it's true that they've kept it burning since long before Alexander's time."

"Jesus," said Kay, again, shaking her head. Emil noticed that she was more attractive with her eyes wide and her lips parted. It softened her.

The monks looked pleased as they ushered their guests back out into the bright sunshine.

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That night Emil and Kay spent the night together, outside the tents, under the million stars. It was lonely on the dig, she explained, though she didn't really have to. She had a boy friend, but he was in Madison. They had an understanding.

Emil suspected that she and the Tycoon had shared the same view of the desert sky. Somehow he didn't mind. It was a memorable evening. Kay was a memorable girl, small-breasted, high-spirited, compact, practical, and resourceful. And Emil had never seen so many stars.

The next day he left for "the world," or at least New York. At the crude airstrip he was surprised to meet the Tycoon himself, helicoptering in. He was a

little reluctant to talk about what he was doing, but Emil found out eleven months later, when he was invited to the unveiling of the Flame of Zoroaster at the Metropolitan.

The Tycoon was more than generous in his praise of Emil and his time gun, as he

was careful to call it. And more than forthright in their short but substantial private discussion.

"I helped the government out with their debt, in exchange for the shrine. They

made their own deal with the Zoroastrians. The shrine has always been a bit of

an embarrassment to a fundamentalist government. Islam is a modern religion, you know. Post Christian."

"You bought it," said Emil.

"It's an artifact," said the Tycoon. "Now that you have authenticated it, it belongs to all humankind."

At the Met the flame was fed on natural gas. Emil couldn't help wondering what

had happened to the young monk who had fed it twigs. Was he a cabby now, in Cairo or in Queens? As well wonder what happened to a soldier from Darius's army. Alexander's destiny was to conquer the world, not to number its sparrows.

Professor Elliot was at the opening, but not Kay. Emil was disappointed. He had

entertained a fantasy of a rendezvous. He even mentioned her to the Tycoon, who

said dreamily, "Kay? I have so many projects ..."

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Emil was apparently on retainer, for once a year on the anniversary of his visit to Ebtacan he got a check for \$100,000. But never a call. That was all right; he preferred his independence. The Flame of Zoroaster had indeed put his time gun on the map, and in the next two years he authenticated (dated) the San Gabriel Mission hearth in California (221.052 years) and a coal seam blaze on Baffin Island (797.563 years). The time gun was an accepted archeological tool, but after the first flurry of interest, there wasn't much demand. How many flames need dating? Emil tried to interest astronomers, but the device didn't seem to work at a distance. The numbers came out all wrong. According to the time gun, the stars weren't as old as the Earth.

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Emil found out what had happened to Kay eighteen months later, when he got an e-mail suggesting a meeting at the Oak Room at the Plaza. She wasn't alone. "This is Claude," she said, introducing a young black man in jeans and a raw silk jacket. Claude had a rich French accent, which was later localized to Kinshasa and Paris. Emil didn't like him. His head was too big for his narrow shoulders. He smoked Galouises. They ordered drinks. Kay let it be known that the Tycoon was picking up the tab. "I've been working for him since I got my doctorate," she said. "Special projects." Had he really not remembered her? Emil wondered. Did Alexander remember every city he ravished? Claude was not a boy friend. Not even, strictly speaking, a colleague, but a divinity student from Yale. "Comparative religions. And I have discovered," he said, "the oldest religion in the world. I think. As well as one of the smallest. It's called Ger'abté, which means in Highland Wolof, first fire." "Remember the monks at Ebtacan?" said Kay, laying her hand on Emil's wrist. "This is the same deal. The entire purpose of the religion is guarding a fire." "I remember," said Emil. "Guarding a flame," said Claude. "I have interviewed one of the Ger'abté priests, a defrocké. A rebel, a runaway. I met him in Paris last year. He claims that the flame they call Ger'abté is the first flame ever lighted by man. It provides a chemin sans brisé, an unbroken link from the first humans to today. This flame is guarded and maintained by a secret priesthood high in the Ruwenzori." "The Mountains of the Moon," said Kay. "Overlooking the Rift Valley," mused Emil. "Exactemente," said Claude. "They have the location right. According to most anthropologists, this is the area where man first evolved." "Whatever that means," said Emil. "Speech, upright posture, tools ...". "Fire," said Claude. "Whatever else you think, fire is key. It separates man from beast." "You believe them, then." "Non, no, of course not." Claude lit another Galouise from his last. The cigarettes so far formed an unbroken chain, like the Flame of Zoroaster, or

Ger'abté.

"But I do wish to find out how old the fire is," said Claude. "If it is, in fact, several thousand years old, it changes our whole view of so-called "animist" African religions and their--how shall I say it?--their gravités." This man has a political agenda, thought Emil. But then who doesn't? They made plans over dinner. Later, Emil found himself in a Plaza hotel suite with Kay. She was, if anything, even more inventive and accomplished than before. A memorable lover. Love without possession or even the desire for possession--that was what it meant to share a woman with the richest man in the world. It was as if the Tycoon lay alongside them. Oddly, it added to Emil's pleasure.

"You know what he did with the Flame of Zoroaster?" Kay asked.

"Sure. He bought it and put it in the Met."

"He put it out first."

"What!?"

"He's a strange and driven man," Kay said "He feels this mystical connection with Alexander. He has this thing about history, about breaking with the past at

the same time that you are recognizing it."

"But the whole damn point was that the flame was authentic! As soon as it's dated again ..."

"Why would it be? Unless you do it. And you are on his payroll. So to speak." She held her small breasts, one in each hand, like pomagranates.

"Are you going to stay the, night?"

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The Ruwenzori from the air is a terrifying tangle of cloud and ice and stone. Emil had discovered in his two years with the time gun that he was unsuited for

serious field work. He didn't like small planes or short fields.

This trip had both.

Claude had been here once before. Kay and Emil hung back while he showed a letter and engaged a guide. The guide was not a Ger'abté initiate, but part of

the secret and presumably ancient network of believers who maintained the priests who maintained the flame.

Kay arranged the transportation. They took a helicopter to a small village on a

high shoulder of the range; a Land Rover (they hadn't yet been replaced here by

Toyotas) to a smaller village on a higher shoulder; and walked the rest of the way.

The Ruwenzori were wrapped in mist, like ghosts. The guide started up the trail,

a long ribbon of mud.

Claude put out his cigarette before following.

"We could have choppered in the entire way," he said. "But that might have offended the l'enfants."

"The children?" Emil.

"Oui, the Children. That's what they call themselves," Claude explained.

"It's

an interesting contrast to European priests, don't you think, who style themselves as Fathers? These priests, there are only three at any one time, call

themselves the Children of the First Fire, Ger'abté."

"Keeping alive the spirits of their ancestors," said Emil.

"Pas de tout!" Claude's reproach was sharp. "This is not simplistic ancestor worship d'afrique. They don't believe in gods or ghosts. Theirs is an anthropic

cosmology: man built a fire, then looked up and saw the stars, thus bringing into being the universe as we know it. Their job is to keep it going."
"The ritual acknowledgement of fire as the source, the origin of consciousness,"
said Kay.

"Non! A task, not a ritual," said Claude. "Maintaining the first fire. Ger'abté.

No more, no less."

What an arrogant fuck, thought Emil.

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The first of the Children met them late in the afternoon, and led them off the

trail through a narrow pass. The guide turned back. Their new guide was a wiry,

coal-black man of about fifty, wearing a faded blue hooded wool robe over bright

Nikes. Single file, they crossed a snowfield, skirted a tiny emerald lake, and

angled up a scree slope into clouds again.

As at Ebtacan, the shrine was a cave. The doorway was a perfect half circle, hollowed not out of sandstone but out of a polished granite that gleamed like marble.

Beside it waited a much older man, dressed in the same blue robe. He spoke to Claude in one language, and to his compatriot in another.

Claude gave each of the two a pack of Galouises. He hadn't smoked since the Land

Rover. They were at almost ten thousand feet and the air was thin and cold. The two Children led the three travelers into the cave. It was only twenty feet

deep, the size of a small garage.

A Persian rug was on the floor. Several plastic ten gallon drums were stacked near the door.

A tiny flame burned in a hollow in the rock, which was filled with oil. The wick

seemed to be twisted moss.

An old man, older than the other two, watched the flame, adding oil from an open

drum with a long dipper of bone or ivory.

Clever, thought Emil. The flame is kept small. They don't have to haul twigs up

the mountain. Just oil.

He wondered if he had spoken out loud. The old man answered him, but not directly.

"He says that in the temps perdu it was done with twigs," said Claude. "Then they learned to use fat."

"Ask them how old the fire is," Emil said as he took out the time gun. The Children's slight alarm turned to curiosity as they realized it wasn't a weapon.

"They don't have an answer in years," said Claude. "They say beaucoup. Many many many."

"Ask them about the first men," said Kay.

"They were women," said Claude. "They call them the Mothers. They used no speech, but kept the fire. For many generations, no words, only fire. Many many many."

"Habilis," said Emil.
"Erectus," corrected Claude.

"Not likely," said Kay. "Fire might have been used by Homo erectus. But they can't have been the ones to preserve it ritually."

"Why not?" Emil asked.

"Ritual implies language," said Kay. "Symbolic thinking. Consciousness. Even if

Homo erectus discovered and used fire, he couldn't have--"

"She," said Claude.

"She then," said Kay, who was unused to being corrected by men in matters of gender. "She wouldn't have constructed a myth. Couldn't have."

"I told you, it's not a myth" said Claude. "It's a simple task. We are the ones

who construct the myth. Sapiens. Homo sapiens sapiens."

"Whatever." Emil pointed the time gun at the tiny flame. He squeezed the trigger

until it beeped.

He read the display. Then he looked around the cave at the Children and his two

companions.

"Holy fucking shit," he said.

"Huh?" Kay. Claude.

"The flame is almost a million years old."

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That evening they sat around a small campfire outside the cave and shared an impressive brandy from the flask that Claude had brought with him, just in case.

"So it's true," he said, lighting his first Galouise since the Land Rover.

"More than true," said Emil. "It's positive."

"It seems impossible," said Kay. "Impossible and wonderful."

"I wanted to believe," said Claude, shaking his too-large head. "You hope.

And

you hope not. The real world devours your expectations."

There were big tears in his eyes. He'd had two drinks for every one of Emil's and Kay's. Emil was liking him more.

^ Kay was on the cell phone, punching in long strings of numbers. "I told him I

would call," she explained.

Behind them, in the darkness, the Children went about their business. Nothing in

their world had changed. They had known all along.

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That night Emil slept with Kay out by the fire. Claude had passed out in the tent, and the Children had slipped off to wherever it was that they stayed, perhaps in the cave with the flame.

Kay was as cool, as studied, as memorable as ever. They made love, then lay side

by side in separate bags under the strange equatorial stars, her small hand in

his. Not a single constellation was familiar.

It was after midnight when the chopper came in. It would have landed by the cave

if the Children hadn't waved it off frantically, the hoods of their robes flattened in the rotor's downdraft. The chopper set down at the base of the scree, a hundred yards away.

That hundred-yard climb was the Tycoon's offering to tradition. Emil, Claude and

Kay were waiting for him at the top of the slope.

"Hey, kid," he said to Kay and gave her a lingering

peck on the cheek. Emil was more flattered than jealous. How many men shared a

woman with an Emperor?

"And it's positive?" he asked Emil, studying the read-out, which had been

saved
into the time gun's memory.
Emil nodded. "This single flame has burned unbroken for 859,134.347 years."
He
liked saying it.
"Erectus," said the Tycoon.
"Oui," said Claude, who was still a little drunk. "Pre-human. Pre-speech.
This
changes everything we have ever imagined about hominid evolution. It means we
had, or rather they had, for they were an earlier species, the technology to
maintain and control fire long before they had speech or tools."
Last night's campfire was almost out. Claude's empty flask lay beside warm
ashes. Fog filled the valleys far below and a million stars blazed overhead.
"It means that there is an unbroken link between ourselves and our earliest
ancestors," said Kay. She surprised Emil by taking his hand. Then he saw that
she had already taken the Tycoon's. "An unbroken link between you and me and
the
first human who looked into a campfire."
"And into his own pensées," said Claude, taking Emil's other hand.
"Whatever," said the Tycoon, pulling free. "Let's go and have a look."
The Children, who had been waiting silently by the round doorway, led them
into
the stone cave.
The Tycoon stared into the tiny flame with bright, narrow eyes. "A million
years
of human culture," he whispered loudly. "And it is but a single page."
Emil was warmed by this reverence, as by a shot of brandy. Kay alone realized
what was about to happen. Even the Children were unprepared when the tycoon
reached out and, with two fingers, pinched out the flame.
"And now the page is turned."
"Mon Dieu!"
"Good God!" said Emil. He lunged, teeth bared, fists clenched, but the Tycoon
ran for the doorway, knocking over the oil drums. The Children fell to their
knees, wailing. Kay wailed with them.
Outside, Claude and Emil circled the Tycoon, who looked dazed but fierce.
Claude
picked up a stone.
Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out, one by one.
On the ground, no one noticed.
the end