

JACK McDEVITT and STANLEY SCHMIDT

GOOD INTENTIONS

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN UFOS?"

No, dammit. I don't believe in anything that hasn't been parked in my driveway so I could kick the tires and check the gearshift. So don't ask again. Just because I'm a science fiction writer doesn't mean I'm demented. I have no time for crop circles, telepathy, alien abductions, power centers, spontaneous combustion, or ancient astronauts. Loch Ness is empty, Atlantis is bunk, and I'll sleep in any haunted house in the world for five hundred bucks plus expenses. Okay?

I mention this up front because I attended a seminar this past summer during which I may have touched the infinite. And I know how that sounds. But I want to avoid your saying well, after all this is Jake Cobblemere, he writes all those stories about nine travelers and rubber dimensions, so what do you expect? If you want to believe I've lost it, that's okay; but don't conclude all this just bubbled up out of my workday habits. Because that isn't what happened.

Not at all.

Last spring I got a call from Sam Wynn inviting me to participate as an advisor at the Baranov Seminar, which is conducted annually at the Skyhawk Conference Center in upstate New York. You might have heard of it. The participants refer to themselves as Baranovians. They're science fiction enthusiasts who meet for a few days every summer to renew old acquaintances and do the SF equivalent of a mystery weekend. They bring in a writer and maybe an outside expert to put together a simulation for them. The previous summer, for example, they converted Skyhawk into Moonbase and staged a murder. One of the guests was the New York City medical examiner. (The murderer, by the way, turned out to be the computer, a la Hal.)

The seminars have been running since 1971, when Abraham Baranov personally launched them, discovered how engaging they were, and stayed with them until his death. It was, I need not tell you, a signal honor to be asked to step briefly into the great man's shoes.

"This year they want to do a Martian dig," Sam told me. He explained that the group decides each summer what sort of program they'll do the following year. "We've got Marsbase up and running. We've been there for a while, taking soil samples and whatnot, and we discover some artifacts."

"Artifacts?" I said. "What sort of artifacts!"

"That's up to you, Jake."

"But Mars is dead. Has been for a couple of billion years, except maybe for the microbes. How could there be artifacts?"

"Your problem, Jake. Come up with something. And listen, we're giving you a professional archaeologist to work with."

"Okay," I said, warming to the idea. "Does the archaeologist write science fiction?"

"She doesn't like science fiction. But she's a friend of mine, she's available, and she offered to come no charge."

"What am I supposed to do with an archaeologist?"

"They want to do an actual dig. She knows how."

"I thought this would be a simulation."

"Oh, no. There'll be a real dig site. We've set aside some ground. You're going to bury the artifacts, and the team will dig them up and try to solve the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"Invent one."

The archaeologist was Maureen Coverdale. She worked out of Penn, and I lived in Indianapolis, so we did all the planning on-line. She surprised me. I guess I'd expected that she would treat the whole thing more or less as an excuse to get a free vacation, but she took it all very seriously. She kept after me, pointing out that Martian artifacts could not be produced at the last minute, and that we had a clear obligation to make sure the Baranovians got their money's worth.

She turned out to be twenty years younger than I'd expected, darkeyed, trim, a woman who looked as if she'd be more at home among soft blue lights than digging up broken pots. But I dreamed up a story line and we agreed on what we needed to do. She took charge of manufacturing the stuff we needed. She showed up two days before the program was to start, supervised the Skyhawk earthmover, buried everything, and was waiting (with Sam Wynn) to shake my hand when I arrived late, having underestimated the driving time on a series of winding roads.

We retired to The Hawk's Nest and reviewed our plans over rum and Coke. Then we walked out to the dig site, which was located about a quarter mile from Harper Hall. (Harper would serve as the team's mobile field station.) The site was about sixteen feet on a side, shielded by a canvas awning.

"Are the Baranovians here yet?" I asked.

"Some are," said Sam. "Most of them will straggle in during the night." He consulted a clipboard. "Altogether, we'll have twenty-four."

Skyhawk is located in deep forest on the shores of a glacial lake. Green-carpeted mountains rise on all sides. On that first night there was a brilliant full moon, the wind was loud in the spruce, and the woods smelled of mint and cold water. A half-dozen lights lined the far shore. Nothing could have been farther from Mars.

Warren Hatch was glad to get off his hands and knees, and give his place to Judy Conroy. "I never knew archaeology was so mind-numbing," he told Maureen. A dozen or so members of the team were working meticulously over the site, removing the crumbly Martian soil a half-inch at a time, brushing it off rocks, turning it over to others who strained it to ensure nothing was being overlooked. "Whatever happened to Indiana Jones?" he asked. "To buried temples? Secret doors? That sort of thing?"

Maureen smiled. "Real archaeology would make a slow movie," she said.

Warren looked out past the dig site, through the plasteel shell that shielded them from the near-vacuum. Low red hills rose in the north, and he could see a dune buggy moving across the horizon.

"Got something here." Patti Kubik's voice. She brushed the object and held it up. It was a knife. Long and slightly curved, it had a metal blade and handle, and was still in good condition.

"No telling how old it is," said Cobblemere. "It could have been in the ground for centuries without showing any real deterioration."

They noted where the knife had been found, recorded the coordinates on a chart, and placed it beside the two urns they'd recovered earlier.

"Here. Look at this." Eddie Edwards, short, squat, barrel-shaped, bent close to the ground. He was on his knees, rear end stuck up, face red with effort, working with brush and fingers to clear a rectangular tablet about the size of a dinner plate. "It's got a picture on it," he said. That brought a crowd.

The tablet depicted a vaguely reptilian-looking creature with long teeth and crocodilian eyes. The stuff of bad science fiction films. For all that, it maintained an aspect that seemed almost pious. It wore a robe, and it seemed to have just dropped an object that might have been a stone or a crumpled piece of paper. A jagged line resembling a lightning bolt was drawn through the dropped object. A string of exotic characters lined the top and right side of the tablet.

"This can't be right," said Jason Kelly, the team's senior member in terms of age and service. Kelly was almost seventy, but he was a physical fitness freak and he could probably have run most of his associates into the ground. He claimed to be the world's lone exobiologist. "It's a hoax. Has to be."

"Why?" asked Warren.

"If this is supposed to be a Martian, it's all wrong. Martians couldn't possibly look like this. These creatures would have evolved in a swampy environment."

"Here's another." Murray Fineberg, this time. Murray was middle-aged, overweight, a man who looked as if he would have been more at home running a publishing business than kneeling in Martian silt. His tablet revealed the same sort of crocodilian creature, this time bowing before a pyramid from which lines of light seemed to emanate.

"It just doesn't figure," said Jason. "We know surface conditions were never adequate to support anything more complicated than a bacterium."

"Then why," asked Patti Kubik, "are we out here in the first place?" Patti was middle-aged, prematurely gray, possibly the most personable individual on Mars. Among a group of people who considered one another egomaniacs, she managed to maintain a good-humored humility. "We're all idiots much of the time," she'd told Warren once. "If you recognize that, it explains a lot."

Sam Wynn was wearing a headset. He was tall, thoughtful, deliberate, dressed in an ivory-colored jacket with an Oakland Raiders logo. His brows drew suddenly together and he pressed both earphones. After a moment he nodded and then called for attention. "I've got some news," he said. "The Delta team just found two metal disks on the North Ridge. They're approximately five meters in diameter, and they're mounted on cradles that permit both lateral and horizontal movement."

"Sounds like satellite dishes," said Bryan Trahan. Bryan was among the younger members of the team. He was in his early twenties, a seven-footer, quiet, ungainly, with clear handsome features and bright green eyes.

"That's what Clan coy thinks," said Sam. Clancey was the leader of Delta team.

"So where are the satellites?" asked Patti.

"Negative," said Sam. "No satellites. We know that for a fact."

Eddie pushed his thick fingers into the soil and nodded to himself. "Another tablet," he said.

There was more: pots, cups, primitive tools. More tablets. Beads. Jewelry. A paperweight-sized pyramid that might have been made of diamond. (The diamond, if indeed that's what it was, had a scarlet tinge in its depths.) And a long metallic rod with markings, not unlike a gauge. They also dug up a strip of cable that appeared to be made of plastic. Odd.

At the edge of the excavation, they found the remains of a wall. The wall was a high-tech alloy, and must once have enclosed the site, even as their own plasteel dome now sealed it off.

Sam was listening to his earphones again. He was frowning. "Okay," he said into the mike. "We've got something else." He raised his voice so all could hear. "CNN reports that somebody blew up Union Station in Chicago. During rush hour. They've got several hundred dead. Almost a thousand people hurt." It was the latest in a wave of terrorist attacks by all kinds of disgruntled groups. Anybody with a grudge and enough money to buy a bombmaker could now make his irritation felt. (His was the correct usage, because to date no women had been charged.)

"Mars is starting to look good." Judy Conroy was from Chicago. She was diminutive, with classic features and dark brown hair, cropped in a pageboy. Her blue eyes, which were usually bright and penetrating, smoldered.

"Crazies everywhere," said Warren. Two weeks earlier, one group had bombed a nuclear power plant upwind of New York City in an unsuccessful effort to cause a meltdown.

"What's this?" asked Murray. He was brushing soil away from a long, smooth stone surface.

"Careful," said Maureen.

It was roughly one by three meters. Maureen took over direction, and within an hour they'd uncovered a table with a solid base about a meter and a half deep.

"You know what it looks like?" said Bryan.

"Yeah." Murray rubbed his hand across his balding scalp. "It looks like an altar."

Warren knelt down to examine it. It was stained.

"I think we're off to a good start," said Maureen. She sliced a strip off her steak, tasted it, and nodded her approval. We'd secured a corner table, away from the Baranovians. Down on the beach, a few die-hard bathers were still in the water, even though the evening was turning cool.

"We should be," I said. Her artifacts had been damned good. "How long did it take you to bury the stuff?"

She looked out across the open field at the awning that marked the dig site. The ground was muddy. Unfortunately, the dome that held back the Martian vacuum could not keep out a terrestrial rainstorm. They'd all got drenched, and some had even retreated back to the dining hall or their individual quarters. (An outdoor wedding had also taken a hit that afternoon.) But a half-dozen of the hardier Baranovians had hung on, cutting down through the soil until the urns and tools and gadgets had been recovered and recorded. And until the altar lay exposed.

There'd been visitors. Neighbors of Skyhawk, and guests from the wedding party,

all curious as to why these people were digging a large hole in the lawn, had gathered outside the perimeter. Sam had set himself to intercept them, to keep them at a distance. He'd answered their questions as best he could. Some had seemed interested; others had smiled and retreated.

"The blood on the altar," Sam said. "That's a great idea. Where are we going with this?"

Only Maureen and I knew the scenario. "You think it's blood?" I asked innocently.

"Sure," he said. "What else? I've seen your work, Jake. You never miss a chance to spill blood."

I was hurt by the comment, and I was trying to think how to respond when Bryan joined us. His plate was heaped high with roast beef and mashed potatoes. "Interesting afternoon," he said from his height up near the ceiling. "Do you expect we'll be able to finish with the dig tomorrow?"

Maureen was slow to respond, and it occurred to me she liked Bryan. She was trying not to show it, but her eyes grew luminous and her color changed. "Yes," she said finally. "If we were doing this in realtime, this kind of excavation might take weeks. But we'll wrap it up about noon."

"Then what?"

She glanced at me. "Then," I said, "we'll withdraw into the field station and try to see what we have."

Bryan was wearing a T-shirt with a silhouette of Abraham Baranov, the dates of the seminar, and the motto Mars or Bust. Several of the participants had them by now. He nodded, tried the roast beef, stirred some sweetener into his iced tea, and buttered a roll. "When do we get to the AI?" he asked.

Startled, I looked suspiciously at Maureen. She shook her head no. She hadn't told him. But nobody else knew the scenario.

"Bryan, what makes you think there's an AI?"

"Well," he said, "I don't see where else you could go with all this. Anyway, I've read your work." He shrugged.

I was insulted again. But I hid my feelings behind a casual smile. "There are all kinds of possibilities," I said.

When Maureen and I were alone again, a half hour later, she let her dismay show. "What do we do?" she asked.

I'd been thinking about little else. "It's too late to change the scenario. We'll stay with it."

But I didn't sleep well that night. Sam had suggested I was predictable. Bryan had demonstrated it.

The field station consisted of dormitory-style sleeping quarters for eight, a lab, a maintenance shack, a kitchen and dining room, a communication center, and a rec room. Additional support modules had been established outside. Their domes gleamed in the ruddy sunlight.

In the morning, there was fresh news: preliminary analysis of the North Ridge disks suggested they had been electrically powered. Two more had been found; and they were all in a straight line, approximately fifty meters apart.

Sam, manning the radio console, picked up a series of UPI Worldline bulletins that suggested the Earthside situation was deteriorating. President Martin had declared a national emergency, promised a war on terrorists, and mobilized the entire array of federal agencies in the effort. In a related development, the Congress passed a joint resolution calling for a mandatory death penalty for anyone convicted of a terror crime, or for any accessories in a terror crime. The President, vacationing at the Tampa White House, was quoted as saying he might consider calling for a suspension of habeas corpus until calm had been restored.

That all seemed far away. Warren thought how well distance lends perspective. The home world was a violent, angry place. And somehow, against the eternally placid stars, its virulence was more apparent. And less real.

Meantime, the team had spent the morning at the site, where they'd unearthed several more tablets, some with images, some without. All had inscriptions. The characters were unlike anything Warren had seen before, little more than squiggles and dots. But Judy said she thought they had enough to attempt a translation.

"How do we even begin?" asked Warren.

"Actually," she said, "it might be fairly easy. We should be able to assume the text is connected to the images. So first we try to figure out what the images are about."

There were eleven tablets. Eight had images; all had inscriptions. The reptilian figure was portrayed in various poses: it gazed contemplatively past the observer's shoulder; it walked casually through a corridor; it drank from a flagon, through which a lightning strike passed; it even leaned casually against a wall, as if waiting for a bus. (In the latter depiction, the lightning was again present, this time a bolt drawn diagonally across the lizard itself.)

"Hey," said Sam, pulling his earphones down around his neck. "They took out the Holland Tunnel."

"Blew it up?"

"Yeah. During rush hour. They've got a couple thousand casualties."

They stood around for a time in stunned silence, the curious Martians forgotten. "I wonder," said Jason, "if they ever knew what kind of neighbors they had."

A half hour later, Sam announced that a lab report had come back on the altar stains. "There's DNA," he said, "and plasma, oxygen, fructose, proteins, urea --"

"Blood," said Patti.

Sam shook his head. "They're saying there are some differences, but it's a decent approximation."

Meantime, Murray thought he had the meaning of one of the tablets -- the one with the creature leaning against the wall. "No loitering" he said. "And this one, no littering."

Somebody laughed. Snorted. But every image with a lightning bolt contained the same cluster of characters at the beginning. Do not -- ? Warren knew instinctively that Murray was right. But he was disappointed that the first other-worldly translation would be so prosaic. No littering. My God.

Toward the end of the afternoon, they heard that Congress had voted President Martin broad emergency powers.

They worked through dinner, reading increasingly ominous bulletins, which Sam was now posting. The FBI were rounding up suspects. The National Guard had been placed on standby. The President, promising action against "cowards," made good on his threat to suspend habeas corpus. The ACLU warned against overreacting.

Meantime, Mars Central reported that the North Ridge disks had moved! Three had rotated and now seemed to be tracking the sun. (The fourth was apparently not functional.) Warren had just begun to digest the implications when another bulletin arrived: electrical power was being collected by the disks and relayed below ground.

"What's down there?" asked Judy.

"They've finally got around to ordering a radar survey," said Sam, pressing one earphone down.

Murray's team produced an alphabet for the alien script, and constructed a model syntax. Warren worked with them for a while, but they were too quick for him. Anyway, there was something else he wanted to look at.

"This," he told Judy, indicating the pyramid tablet. "The pyramid has to be something special. It puts off light rays. And look at the Martian's attitude."

"It's almost religious," she said. Judy's group had been cataloging and analyzing the other artifacts.

"That might be a leap," said Bryan. "After all, these are alien icons. I think we should go slow trying to read nonverbal cues."

Judy picked up the pyramid and compared it to the one in the image. "It's the same object."

"I think you're right," said Warren.

She held it at eye level and stared at it. "What are you?" she asked.

It was getting late. "We'll pick it up from there tomorrow," I told them. "But I want to congratulate you. We didn't think anybody was going to be able to translate the language."

Murray drummed his fingers on the table and glanced around at the five people who had been working with him on the tablets. "We thought we'd stay on awhile," he said. "We're close to a breakthrough."

But I didn't want anyone getting ahead of the program. "Let it go, folks. We'll get back at it in the morning."

They grumbled and picked up some notes and I knew damned well they were going to find a place and keep working. But I wasn't brought in to police these people, and they couldn't take the tablets with them, so there was a limit to how much progress they could make.

Skyhawk maintained The Hawk's Nest, a bar and recreation lounge next door to Harper Hall, which filled quickly with the Baranovians. They drifted by and talked about books they'd recently read, or about recent advances in one area or another, or just how good (or poor) the drinks were. They made it a point to avoid talking about the exercise with us. "It's not considered kosher," Sam said. "Not after hours." I wondered how Bryan had missed it.

After a while Maureen and I withdrew to talk about the next day's scenario.

I have to make a confession of sorts here. Maureen had caught my eye right at the start. By the end of the second day I felt positioned to try to implement some dishonorable intentions, so when she started toward the office we'd been using in the Long Elm Building, I steered us instead toward the lake-front.

She looked surprised but said nothing. We congratulated each other on the good job we were doing. The wind was loud in the trees and somewhere a radio was playing. Exactly the right sort of music for a moonlit night and a beautiful woman. "You have lovely eyes, Maureen," I told her.

Her lips curved into a smile. "I thought science fiction writers were above this sort of thing."

The comment threw me off stride. The truth was that I couldn't even see her eyes in the shadows. I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. Something witty. If you can make a woman laugh, I'd always noticed, everything else becomes a lot easier. But she'd turned away from me and was looking out toward the lake. Along the shoreline, there were a couple of docks and a boathouse and a few benches. Someone was sitting on one of the benches.

"It's Bryan," she said. "What's he doing out there by himself?"

I shrugged. "I guess he wants some time alone."

"I guess," she said. "But the whole point of coming here's to party, isn't it? Especially for a guy his age."

There was something disconsolate in his appearance, a distortion in the geometry of body to bench to moonlight. I could see that Maureen felt it too, and a cold wind blew suddenly off the lake. We looked at one another, and I read the unasked question in her face, whether we should go over; and I saw the answer in her eyes. If he wanted company he'd be in the Nest. Best let it be.

We passed on, chilled, and strolled among the bungalows that served as living quarters. Gradually we got back to laying plans for the morning. The mood of the evening had changed, and I knew that an advance on my part would not be welcomed.

An hour later, we returned past the shore front. Bryan was still there.

Four characters had been written across the face of the flip chart. "It's the god's name," said Murray. "It's from the tablet with the pyramid."

"What does the inscription say?" asked Judy.

"In [the god's name] are all things made possible. Speak, and he will reply." There was of course no way to know how the name had been pronounced, or indeed how any of the Martian language had sounded.

"We have two kinds of inscriptions," Murray explained. "One set advises visitors about behavior. No loud talking. No shouting or laughing. That sort of thing. The other's devotional. 'Know that in the hour of most peril I am with you.'"

Warren was puzzled. "So we have a society in a place where no one could have lived during the last three billion years or so. Some of the artifacts, drums, religious symbols, and whatnot, seem primitive. But they were able to put up solar power units." It gave him a headache. "How long has this stuff been here? Have we established that?" He looked toward Sam.

Sam nodded. "The lab thinks the altar, the urns, the more primitive stuff, is about eleven thousand years old. The cable, the coils, the pyramid, one item that seems to be a gauge, are all older. By about a thousand years."

"Older?" said Eddie.

"Yes. The high-tech equipment came first." Sam paused. "This is off the subject, but it's something you should know. During the night, a lot happened back home. We have reports of widespread arrests across the United States. They've got massive riots, and the rioters are on both sides of the issue. The National Guard was called out, and in some places they refused to fire on the rioters. Martin's expected to declare a national emergency and there's even talk of his suspending the Constitution. On top of all that, Broadwell says he's not doing enough."

"Broadwell?" asked Judy.

"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs," said Bryan.

They stared at one another. Warren thought about his kids, four of them, all in their twenties and trying to get started. He didn't like what he was hearing. "I need to get to the commcenter," he said.

Sam nodded. "We're making provisions for anyone who wants to call home. Make a list of people you're worried about and we'll try to get through. But Harvey asked me to tell you that lines are jammed in some places and down in others so he can't promise anything."

"Best thing for us," said Jason, "is to just continue what we're doing and let things play themselves out. There's nothing we can do from here."

Sam touched one earphone, the way he always did when a message was coming in. A moment later he nodded and punched a button to activate the speakers.

"-- and gentlemen." It was the Director. His voice, usually rich and full and authoritarian, sounded shaky. "I have to announce," he said, "there's been a coup."

There was a rush of conversation and shushing.

"President Martin has stepped down. A government statement says that his retirement has been caused by ill health. It's no longer clear whether the Constitution remains in effect. The military has announced that Broadwell is taking over until they get things sorted out. Congress is reported to have approved the step."

"A coup?" said Jason. "In the United States?"

"We'll keep you informed as the situation warrants." The Director seemed to be having trouble breathing. "Our only course is to recognize that we're two hundred million miles away, and we should simply concentrate on doing our jobs. Thank you for your attention."

"They can't do that," stammered Murray. "They don't have the authority."

"Where's the President?" asked Judy.

Sam was still pressing his earphones. "The Tampa White House, apparently. Worldwide says he's asking everybody to support Broadwell for the duration."

Beyond the plasteel, the low red hills stretched to the horizon. Nobody said much. It struck Warren that perhaps the void between the worlds, black and deep and empty, could twist reality, could spirit away the mundane and insinuate shadows and phantoms. This Broadwell, for example. Warren had never heard of him. And now he was running the country?

Judy shook it away, as if she too sensed that the sandscape invited illusion. She smiled at Warren, suggesting it would all be okay.

The pyramid and the pyramid tablet had been set side by side on a work table. She sat down in front of them. She looked first at the tablet, on which the crocodylian Martian lifted the glowing pyramid, its head bowed. And then at the pyramid itself, cool and remote. But something was different about the pyramid.

"Warren," she said, "look at this."

Warren looked. "It's redder than it was."

"It is, isn't it?" Now that was unsettling. "O god of the pyramid," she said. "I'd be delighted if you'd speak to us."

Later, Warren would recall with a smile that it wasn't exactly a formulation to conjure up other-worldly powers. But the lights dimmed and the pyramid brightened. And a quivering singsong cacophony erupted inside the dome.

The voice, if indeed it was a voice, was pitched high. Warren glanced up at the speakers, but Sam shook his head. The sound wasn't coming from them.

"The pyramid." Judy almost fell out of her chair, getting away from it. The others circled the table, but kept a discreet distance.

"Why don't we button up?" suggested Abu Hassam. Abu's background was medical -- he was a physician -- but his specialty was math. He'd worked with Murray's group on the translation.

Sam closed the shields, which shut off the sunlight, and turned off the lamps. Warren stared at the pyramid, stared into the pyramid. Deep in its interior, a ruby glow pulsed in time to Warren's own heartbeat.

The ventilators were loud.

"Is someone there?" asked Judy.

"Yes." The voice sounded disembodied, spectral, inhuman. It chilled Warren.

"Who are you?" asked Murray.

"I've already told you my name."

Warren glanced at Sam, who was shaking his head and muttering no no no.

Out in the hills, at the edge of vision, a buggy was crawling over the lip of a crater.

"You're the god --" Her voice went off the top of the scale and she had to pull back and start again. "You're the god of this place?"

"I'm the Administrator."

"Where are you?" asked Patti hesitantly. "Are you located inside the pyramid?"

"The 'pyramid' is a communication device." Warren could hear the quotation marks. "You are from the third planet." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," said Murray. "Are you alive?"

"Define the term. My grasp of your language is tenuous. I don't even know its name."

"English," said Charlie Kepper, an archaeologist who had done most of his previous digging around North American Native mounds.

"Keep it simple," said Jill. "Are you aware of your own existence?"

It chuckled. "How would you reply ill asked you that question?"

"Okay," said Murray. "You said you're the Administrator. What did you administrate?"

"Mostly transportation among the five cities. I had other responsibilities as well. But nothing demanding."

"What five cities? There are no cities out there."

"Well, of course you can't see them. How did you people manage to cross the void from the third world?"

"The cities are buried," said Eddie.

"Very good. I always thought the monkeys -- do I have the right word? --had possibilities."

That stunned everybody. Patti broke the long silence that followed. "You're

familiar with Earth?"

"The third world? The People were familiar with it, and I through them."

"The People?" said Patti. "You mean the Martians?"

"The People were not native to this world."

Warren finally found his voice. "You're talking about them in the past tense. Are they dead?"

"Extinct, yes. Dead."

"How long ago?" asked Jill.

"This world has completed its orbit six thousand seventeen times since the last of them died. But they forgot who they were long before that."

"And who were they?"

"A race of great accomplishment and much promise. But the very qualities that drove their energies betrayed them."

"In what way?"

"They questioned everything. Disputed everything. And if they were thereby enabled to uncover the deepest secrets of the cosmos, they were also unable to achieve long-term political stability. Those who came here were refugees."

"Where did they come from?"

"I am unable to think how I might show you. Let me say only that, if their home star were a hundred times closer, it would still not be visible, I suspect, to your unaided eyes."

"And they came to Mars." Murray looked out at the sterile landscape. "Why not Earth?"

"It was too crowded with predators. And life. The gravity index was too high. Practical matters aside, they considered this world more beautiful."

"Why did they die off?" asked Bryan Trahan, who had been observing quietly. "What happened to them?"

"After we had settled, after a period of great achievement, they began again to disagree. Sometimes on form of government. Sometimes on the ethics of certain medical procedures. Sometimes on the value of literary works. Their quarrels splintered them into smaller and more hostile fragments. We could have removed the part of them that resisted socialization. Could have tamed it. But that issue itself became divisive. They loved combat.

"Eventually they became subject to their own technology, lost the knowledge without which reason is only of limited use. And they retreated into their own barbaric past."

Jason picked up one of the tablets.

"Yes. That is exactly right. They forgot who I was. Who they were. They converted the surface villas, which were designed to allow appreciation of the vistas of this world, into places of worship."

"And you," said Bryan, "became the resident deity."

It laughed. The sound was bone-chilling. "Yes. Toward the end, they were killing one another to curry my favor."

"Why didn't you stop them?" asked Judy, her voice cold.

"It was not my prerogative to interfere, but only to help."

"My God," said Warren. "It sounds like one of the laws of robotics."

"What?" asked Bryan.

Warren was surprised that anyone in that group would not have heard of the three laws of robotics. "A robot must obey a human," he said.

"I am not a robot."

Patti stared at the pyramid.

"And they did this while you watched?" asked Murray.

There was no answer. As the silence stretched out, they glanced uncomfortably at each other.

"Do you have a moral sense?" asked Eddie.

"That's an impertinent question, Edwards."

"You know who I am."

"I know who all of you are."

"You," said Bryan, "are able to tell us their whole history. Right?"

"Yes."

"Not only here, but on the home world."

"I do not have all that in my memory, but I can make it available."

"How?"

"It is stored in the ships."

Murray's face clouded. "The ships," he said. "The vehicles they used to cross the stars."

"Yes."

"What kind of vehicles?" asked Eddie. "How fast were they?"

"They traveled at multiples of light speed."

"My God," said Judy. "You can give us FTL."

"There is little that the People did not understand about the mechanics of the universe. That which is allowed, they were capable of performing. I suspect you do not have antigravity?"

"No."

"Temporal manipulation?"

"Probably not."

"Quantum power?"

"Not to speak of. But you can make all this available to us?"

"If you wish. You might want to consider whether you have the wisdom to control the capabilities I can provide."

"Where are the ships?" asked Abu.

"In the asteroid belt. I will give you their location if you will do something for me."

"I thought," said Judy, "there'd be something."

Murray looked puzzled. "What could you possibly want from us?"

"I've been here a long time. I want you to disengage my circuits. Give me peace."

"You mean kill you?" asked Patti, shocked.

"I mean terminate my existence."

"We can't do that," said Bryan. "We can't kill a sentient creature."

"I'm a machine."

Abu shook his head. "You said you weren't a robot."

"It is my request. You have an obligation to honor it."

"We're not bound to honor someone else's code of conduct," said Jason, lowering himself into a chair. "Listen, I understand you've been alone for centuries. But you'll never be alone again. Someone will always be here." He looked up at Murray. "Won't we, Murray?"

"I don't think you understand. I don't wish to give offense, but you're not appropriate companions for me. There's hope for you, but you still lack the subtlety of an advanced intellect."

Eddie sighed. "Advanced intellect? You used to run subways."

"Good. I'm pleased to see you have a sense of humor. If the behavior exhibited on the reports coming in from your home world is typical, I can understand why."

IT WAS TIME TO BREAK OFF. "We'll deal with it tomorrow," I told them. "We'll discuss the issue in the morning, and when we know what we want to do, we'll recall the Administrator and give him our answer."

Technically, when the program had ended for the day, the Baranovians were expected to get away from it. They were supposed to go boating or play shuffleboard or just sit around in The Hawk's Nest. But Sam explained to me that these people took the game very seriously. I'd already seen some evidence of that tendency when Murray's team stayed up wrestling with the translations. On this third night, they could be found in groups all over Skyhawk, in conference rooms, along the benches, out on the terrace behind the dining room, debating the choice that had been laid before them.

Could they comply with the wish of a sentient being and, in effect, kill it? After all, Patti argued to a small group outside the boathouse, there's nothing physically wrong with it. It's only depressed. Killing it would be murder.

Warren Hatch and Eddie Edwards almost came to blows. Warren also thought it would be murder. But Eddie explained that he'd kept a cancer-ridden sister alive against her will. When he described the experience, his eyes grew wet. "Never again," he said. "If this thing wants to be terminated, then I think we should comply."

Warren shook his head. "Even if you have to violate your own moral code to do so?"

Maureen and I felt so good about what we were seeing that we left the grounds and went downtown to celebrate. There was a small college town nearby with a

hotel featuring a sidewalk restaurant. The evening was pleasant, there were no insects, and the moonlight was serene. We started with BLT's, and finished with gin tonics. "I think we can relax now," she said. "The program's going to be fine."

We'd both been worried. Neither of us had participated in anything like this previously, and we hadn't been sure what to expect. Sam had warned us how last year the Baranovians had solved the Moonbase murder mystery too quickly and simply taken the program away from the advisors. We'd built elements into the Martian scenario to ensure that didn't happen again. But you never knew.

"Thanks," I said.

She squeezed my hand. "What interests me is that they've got so involved in the ethical dilemma that they haven't yet seen the political implications."

Each evening, I'd prepared the set of bulletins that would come in the following day from Worldwide News and Mars Central. I'd written a complete set before coming, but quickly discovered it was impossible to predict what the program would need. Although I could keep the flow of action within parameters, I could not determine in advance what might need to be emphasized here, or redefined there. For example, Maureen was right: the Baranovians needed to think about the world beyond their dome. And we were going to see to that first thing tomorrow.

And in case you're wondering, no, I didn't score. Not then and not later. I think she liked my mind.

Sam was listening to the earphones again. "Things are going downhill," he said. He pushed a button. Explosions and gun shots rattled out of the speakers. And screams.

"-- Show no sign of backing off, Howard." Warren recognized the speaker as Christine Talley, a correspondent for Worldwide. "I can see three, possibly four, people down in the street. All civilians. The soldiers now are trying to go house to house. But there are snipers in the upper apartments. We're getting reports that it's like this all over Atlanta." They could hear the sound of an approaching helicopter. "We're still hearing rumors of summary executions. But the Army won't comment." She was shouting now to be heard over the roar of the aircraft. "Okay, you can see what's happening, Howard. The gunships are positioning themselves directly over the houses where most of the shooting has been coming from. The troops are keeping their distance." (Long pause. Then:) "We've got company."

Another voice: "You'll have to leave, ma'am. For your own safety."

After that, everything dissolved into confusion: shouts, protests, the sounds of a brief scuffle. Then Howard Kilminster from the Worldwide desk: "We've encountered technical difficulties for the moment with Christine Talley in Atlanta. We'll get back to her as soon as we're able. Meanwhile, the Pentagon has confirmed that two Regimental Combat Teams in the Chicago area have fired on

other U.S. troops --"

Somebody said, "Turn it off." Sam complied and the room got very quiet.

"Not sure what we're going to have to go home to," said Judy.

Warren wondered about his two kids living with his first wife in Philadelphia, and about his sister in Ardmore. Were they in danger? What was really happening?

Murray Fineberg had been standing staring out at the bleak red sky. "Something we need to think about," he said. "We may be about to come into possession of some very high-level technology."

Warren understood immediately where that was going.

"Do we really want to turn quantum power, whatever that is, over to a military dictatorship?" asked Abu.

"It's not a military dictatorship," said Jason hotly.

"I think," said Warren, "it would be prudent to assume the worst."

Al Finley, a newspaper editor from Toronto, suggested they divide into two teams to address each of the issues they now faced: Do they terminate the Administrator? Do they accept the advanced technology, knowing it will end up in the hands of the government?

But everyone had things to say on both topics, so they stayed together. And it became apparent that no one had settled anything the previous evening. On the issue of euthanasia, several had gone through personal experiences with dying relatives and friends that they had no intention of repeating. Honor its wishes, they said.

Others maintained they were being asked to participate in the moral equivalent of murder. "Maybe worse," said Patti Kubik. "If this thing really is a higher life form than we are, as it would like us to believe, then killing it is that much more reprehensible. I won't have anything to do with it. And I'm not sure I'll allow anyone else to shut it down."

They ended in deadlock. The debate over accepting high-tech capabilities went easier. All had reservations, but almost everyone thought the risk was worth it. "We get starships," said Judy Conroy. "How can we walk away from that?"

Only Al Finley held out. "You get starships. And you also get 1984. It's the prime directive in reverse. Technology without a corresponding social maturity is potentially deadly. I don't think we should touch it. Tell the Administrator to get on the radio, if it can, and send the ships to Alpha Centauri. Maybe by the time we can follow them we'll be able to handle the stuff."

But no one supported him.

They voted on the euthanasia issue, and decided by a majority of one to comply with the Administrator's wishes. The losing side wanted to reopen the discussion, but lake Cobblemere intervened. "It's over," he said. "We terminate."

That produced some grumbling and three people walked out in protest, announcing their intention to return to Central rather than participate in murder. Warren was tempted to join them, but he'd listened to the arguments and was no longer sure in his own mind what was right.

The pyramid rested serenely on the worktable.

"Administrator," said Judy.

"I've been listening."

"Then you know what we've decided."

"I know."

"You will have to explain what we need to do to shut off your power."

"That will not be necessary."

"Why? I don't understand."

"I no longer have much ability to maintain my own systems. The darkness is very close. I would, in fact, have allowed myself to pass out of existence almost a century ago, your time. Except that I detected radio signals. I knew you were coming."

"And you held on?"

"Yes."

"Why did you lie? About wanting us to terminate you?"

"The technology of the People lies waiting to be claimed. But it is hard to judge the morality of a species by its radio broadcasts. I know you share their unfortunate tendencies toward political disunion. But I needed a better method to grasp your moral inclinations before I turned this over to you. I wanted to look you in the eye, so to speak."

"And you will give us the ships?" asked Judy. They held their breath.

"Yes," he said. "I will give you the ships."

"I don't believe it," said Patti. "We vote to commit murder, and you give us credit for a moral code. I have to tell you I have some doubts about yours."

"Patti," it said, "I did not mean to imply that your course of action was the correct one. I was only concerned that you not find the decision an easy one to make."

"It's a copout," said Bryan. "These plots that build up to a conclusion in which we discover it's a test of some sort are really weak. But that's not the point."

We were in the dining hall. I'd finished off a pretty good meat-loaf with mashed potatoes, corn and muffins, and I'd gone heavy on the butter, which is a delicacy I seldom allow myself anymore. But I was feeling good because the program had gone well, or at least I'd thought it had until Bryan came after me.

"What is the point?" I asked him. We'd filled three tables, as we did every evening, and the entire twenty-odd Baranovians, who a moment before had been planning the festivities for this final evening, gave us their undivided attention.

"The AI says that the conclusion isn't important. That the only thing that matters is that we had to struggle to come to it. But what kind of response is that? We still don't know what, given the circumstances, the appropriate course of action is. And neither do you, or you'd have had an answer."

I'd played the AI, of course. And Bryan was right: I had no more clue about the eternal verities than anybody else did. How was I supposed to say what was right and what wrong? "It might be," I said, "that some situations are so morally hazy that no clear-cut course of action can be found. This situation, for example, seems to be a case of choosing the lesser evil."

"But which is the lesser evil?" He sounded almost desperate.

"Bryan, I'm not able to answer that for other people. I think we need to keep a little perspective about all this. Maybe even indulge our sense of humor. You do have one, right? I mean, this thing does have its comic aspect."

Tears stood in his eyes. "Damn you, Jake," he said. He said it low, but he'd already drawn the attention of everybody at all three tables. He looked around at the others, heaved a loud discouraged sigh, and walked out into the failing sunlight. I watched him stride down the concrete walkway and turn left toward the bungalows. The path curves into the trees and disappears behind a conference hall. He never looked back.

"What was that all about?" asked Sam.

"I don't know," said Maureen. She looked puzzled.

"You okay?" I said.

"You notice his eyes?"

"Yes. Teary."

"More than that."

"What?"

"I don't know. Different."

"How different?"

"The man has secrets," she said.

The Baranovians did reconvene later that evening, but somehow their festivities weren't as festive as I'd expected. Bryan wasn't there, in body, but I felt his presence just over my shoulder and had no idea what to do about it. Though nobody said a word, I think everyone else felt it, too, mentally replaying his last scene and trying to figure out what to make of it.

So we went through the motions, voting on a topic for next year's seminar and then adjourning to the lakeshore for a spirited enactment of the Martian ceremonies depicted on our tablets. The centerpiece was a roaring bonfire around which bizarrely costumed Baranovians feasted on "sacred marshmallows" and sacrificed a stuffed Barney. The script was even sillier than it sounds, and it could have made for a great party, but our hearts weren't in it. At least mine wasn't.

I found myself drifting off to where Maureen stood in the shadows, staring pensively into the flames. "You thinking about him, too?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "Looking back, there were a lot of little things..." She turned toward Sam, who was just a few feet away. "Sam, how long has Bryan been coming to the seminars?"

"I think this was his second," he said. "Yes. You've noticed how quiet he is --"

"Except when he's coming after me," I said.

"Well, yes. I guess so. But on the whole he doesn't say much. He was so quiet last year I remember wondering why he'd bothered to come. Then the last day -- at this point in the proceedings -- he finally started talking."

"About what?" asked Maureen.

Sam frowned. "I think it was during the discussion over what we would do this year. I think he was the one who suggested the archaeology on Mars scenario."

"You think?"

"I'm sure," he said. "He suggested it, and he pushed hard for it. Got his way, as it turned out."

Something nagged me about that. Quiet stranger shows up, takes little part in the current game but campaigns hard for a specific scenario for next time. Gets his wish -- and ends up in a funk when it doesn't reach the resolution he'd hoped for.

What resolution had he wanted?

"Should we try to find him?" I asked Sam. "See if there's anything we can do?"

Sam thought awhile before he answered. "No. No, I don't think so. He's a big boy, Jake." He smiled at the joke.

But he didn't sound very sure.

I didn't sleep well that night, even though the seminar had gone well and I should have felt proud and contented.

Next morning everyone said their goodbyes at breakfast -- everyone except Bryan, who wasn't there. Nobody, including the desk clerk, had seen him leave -- but his account was paid. I asked to see his room and found it made up, even though the maids hadn't started their morning rounds. Had he done it himself?

* * *

Questions unanswered, I tossed two small bags into the back of my Honda, checked out, and started the long, lonely drive home to Indianapolis. It was a good day for it, a huge dome of high pressure keeping the scenery crisp and the driving easy most of the way, though I did run into a couple of late afternoon thunderstorms.

I could have made the whole trip in one day, but that would have been too long and grueling for my tastes. I had a vague idea about stopping somewhere around Toledo for the night, which would give me a moderate day today and an easy one tomorrow. With lots of solo time on my hands, I "read" half a book on the car's tape player.

Eventually, saturation set in and I switched it off as I pulled into a rest area somewhere on the Ohio Turnpike. Something must have been gradually gnawing its way up out of my subconscious, because when I returned to the car after a visit to the facilities and a stroll around the grounds, I found myself reaching for the trunk key instead of the ignition. I watched curiously as my hand opened one of my bags and pulled out the list Sam had passed out last night with the names and addresses of all the Baranovians.

Bryan's address, as my subconscious must have already noted, was an apartment somewhere in northwestern Ohio. I didn't recognize the name of the town, but a check of the map showed that it wasn't that far out of my way.

Two exits later, I left the Turnpike, threading my way through vast expanses of

tall corn and soybeans on a neat lattice of arrow-straight roads.

It was almost dark when I got there -- late enough that common sense said I should nail down a room before I did anything else. But then, common sense wouldn't have advised this detour in the first place. So I went directly to Bryan's address, near the edge of a sleepy little college town.

His apartment was the attic of an old house on a quiet, tree-lined street still slick from the afternoon's showers. The whole house was dark, except that I thought I could see a faint flickering light through a dormer window near the back upstairs. I sat in the car for a few minutes, thinking. Then I walked across the street and up Bryan's outside stairway.

Paint was peeling from the door. I knocked.

No answer. I knocked again. "Bryan?" I called softly, not wishing to attract attention from neighbors.

Still no answer. There was no glass in the door, and I couldn't lean out far enough from the steep stairs to see in the window -- but there was definitely light in there, flickering and changing color.

I knocked still again and began trying to think up a story to get the landlord to let me in. Hell, how would I even find out who the landlord was?

Did I have time to waste trying? I had no concrete reason to believe Bryan was in danger, but the way he'd been acting, who could tell what was going on? And I felt vaguely responsible. It was clear that, if it was possible to bring suit against science fiction writers for malpractice, he would have come after me.

I fell back on the obvious and got lucky. The door was unlocked.

Carelessness? Or did he want me -- or somebody -- to find it that way?

THE ROOM TASTED WEIRD. I know how that sounds, but I stood in the dark and felt the hair on my scalp rise. The flickering I'd seen came from a computer in one corner, its screen filled with a screen saver like none I'd ever seen. It made me think of those pictures of the star nursery that the Hubble sent back a couple of years ago, but animated, suggesting the way those colorful gas clouds might look if you were flying through them. I felt oddly light, as if gravity were less in here than outside. It might have been a hypnotic effect induced by the screen saver. At least, that's what I thought. What I told myself.

I switched on the room light, a bare bulb in the ceiling, but the giddy sensation didn't go away. I looked around.

The room looked abandoned. A narrow bed stood unmade in one corner. I saw no other furniture except a rickety chair in front of the computer -- which, with the lights on, was a perfectly ordinary Macintosh. I wondered why it had been left on.

The room whispered clearly that its occupant had left in a hurry and wasn't coming back. Like most young bachelors, he hadn't dusted all that often, and he hadn't cleaned up after he removed the few things he'd taken with him. A couple of clean rectangles on the floor, with rows of dust bunnies along the baseboard behind them, said there had been other furnishings, but precious few beyond what remained.

One other item caught my eye and drew it irresistibly: a picture on the far wall. It was hardly surprising that a Baranovian would decorate with science fiction art, but even from here, this was one of the most realistic portraits of an unearthly landscape I had ever seen. Three crystal towers of varying heights and slightly different aspect rose against a background of pink and blue mountains. The towers gleamed in double sunlight. In the foreground, a broad river rolled through a purple forest. Something I couldn't quite make out soared above the water on giant butterfly wings.

It was, I thought, one of those computerized productions that are virtually indistinguishable from photography -- or, in this case, the best holography I'd ever seen. It looked utterly three-dimensional, and when I put my face close to the glass I could see way out to the sides.

I shivered. Who are you, Bryan?

A photo and a computer.

Not a photo, I reminded myself.

I sat down at the computer, clicked the mouse, and the screen saver dissolved to several rows of curious symbols. It was no script I knew, and I can recognize a lot of scripts even if I can't read them.

I tried changing it to every font in the menu, but all I got was gibberish. I went through the other menus, and among the desk accessories I found two unfamiliar icons with labels that looked like that same script. I tried one of them and got nothing. But the other...

The screen melted into a greeting:

HELLO JAKE

The chair was on rollers and I backed away a foot or so, and almost fell off.

YOUR PROBLEM IS THAT YOU CONFUSE GOOD WILL WITH ANALYSIS, EMOTION WITH VIRTUE.
IT IS BOTH YOUR STRENGTH AND YOUR WEAKNESS.

What the hell was he talking about? Did he mean me?

I could see into the kitchen, where two pots had been left atop a battered

range. Somewhere outside, a garage door banged down.

GOOD INTENTIONS DON'T COUNT FOR MUCH, JAKE. SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO GET IT RIGHT.

I'D HOPED FOR A SOLUTION. INSTEAD, I SUSPECT YOU'VE INHERITED A PROBLEM.

I stared at it, trying to understand. What problem had I inherited? What were we talking about?

SORRY.

It ended there.

Heart hammering, I went through all the right motions, saving the document, printing a copy, and exiting from word processing. When the menu appeared onscreen, I turned off the room lights and went to stand by the window, looking out. The sky had cleared behind the storms and there were few street lights.

My first thought was: it was a hoax. In fact, that's the answer I'd prefer. It's the answer I could sleep with. But I know it's not so. I knew it wasn't so the moment I shut down the Macintosh, and felt my weight flow back.

It didn't take me long to figure out what kind of problem he'd handed me. I guess he'd intended it as a gift. Or maybe it was just to prove he had a sense of humor. I disconnected the computer, carried it outside and put it in my trunk.

Poor Bryan.

I wish him well, wherever he is and whatever he might choose to do. I know so little about just what kind of fix he was in or what kind of pressure he was under. I don't know how directly the Seminar applied to it. But I do know that, for him, it wasn't just a game -- and that he was looking to us for help we couldn't quite give him.

I'm more conscious of the presence of Mars in the night sky than I used to be. While I'm writing this, it's visible through my window, over Kegan's tool shed.

We've got an easier way to get there now. It's out in my garage, covered by a tarp. But I wonder what a truly three-dimensional society, utterly released from the demands of gravity and friction, might be like.

Bryan's right. I can't analyze what changes it might bring. But I can sure feel them.

The authors are grateful to the organizers of and participants in The Asimov Seminar for accepting us as their own, and for inspiring this story. For further information, contact The Asimov Seminar, PO Box 54, Rensselaerville, NY 12147. E-mail address: info@asisem.org. The Asimov Seminar also has a website at

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