

WILLIAM D. SHUNN

CELESTIAL MECHANICS

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In the months since D. William Shunn sold us this story, he has moved from his native Utah -- first to Seattle, and then to New York City. He has just finished an sf novel titled *The Revivalist*, and is working on a farcical, semi-autobiographical mainstream novel based on his lovelife, to be called *The Normal Guy*.

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He writes that "Celestial Mechanics" is dedicated to "my pals and former colleagues (two sets that actually intersect in places) at Folio Corporation, and to anyone who has ever worked on my car."

Neuwirthrapped loudly on the marble counter. "Hey, can we get a little service over here?" he called, unfurling his wings in what he hoped was a threatening manner.

A man in white coveralls, with the name "Spike" stitched on the breast in powder-blue thread, gestured for quiet as he spoke into the telephone receiver cradled under his chin. "Listen, we're not a towing service," the man said, "and we don't do sector calls. If you can get the system in here to us, we'll take a look at it and give you an estimate." He rolled his eyes at Neuwirth and made a jerking-off motion with his left hand.

"What does he mean by that?" asked Salahuddin, Neuwirth's new trainee.

"Never mind," Neuwirth said, kneading the bridge of his nose with one hand. The sounds of loud voices mixed with the raucous clatter of machinery poured in from the adjacent service bays, while grungy rock-and-roll squirted from a tinny loudspeaker overhead. "Good grief, I think I'm getting one of my migraines."

"Yeah, well, same to you, buddy!" Spike shouted into the telephone receiver. "Saints be praised and all that." He slammed the phone down behind the counter, then sauntered over to Neuwirth and Salahuddin. His hair was thinning and slicked back, and he could have done with a good shave. "Now, what can I do for you gents?"

Neuwirth shook his head, eyes closed. "We're here to pick up the Jordanelle system," he said with exaggerated patience. "It was supposed to be finished a hundred microns ago."

"Jordanelle, Jordanelle," Spike said, leafing through a stack of ragged three-by-five cards. "Now, lessee."

"Oh, come on! This is the third time we've had it in!"

The phone rang, and Spike held up a finger. "'Scuse me just a minute."

Neuwirth turned to Salahuddin. "I can't believe this," he said, gritting his teeth.

"Surely it can't always be like this," said Salahuddin, who was several inches shorter and several pounds heavier than his trainer, and whose wings barely cleared the top of his head. "I would have thought --"

"Well, you would have been wrong!" Neuwirth barked, much more harshly than he had intended. A shooting pain arced through his head, and he covered his face with a penitent hand. "Oh, stars above, this noise is going to drive me out of my gourd."

"All right, all right," Spike was saying into the phone as he scribbled on a pad of sticky notes. "So the fourth planet's moons are losing about a day on every orbit. Sounds to me like you've got a slow gravity leak somewhere, maybe a little black hole floating around where there shouldn't be one, but you'll have to bring it in to be sure. Yeah, we'll just throw it up on the lift and run some diagnostics. Let me check our schedule here. Hmm, how about a week from this Wednesday? How'd that work?"

An impish-looking young man with a ridiculously large pompadour hairdo wandered in through the door from the service bays, wiping his hands on a fuzzy, snow-white rag. "'Scuse me a moment," said Spike, then covered the receiver with his hand. "Hey, Biff, wanna take care of Mr. Neuwirth? He's here for the Jordanelle system."

"Sure, sure," Biff said. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a white ceramic percolator behind the counter, then strolled around to where Neuwirth and Salahuddin were waiting. "Been running tests on Jordanelle all morning. Think we've finally pinpointed the problem."

"Uh-huh, sure," said Neuwirth with an exasperated shiver of his wings. "I've heard that story before."

Biff raised his eyebrows, looking wounded, and smoothed back his pompadour. "No, no, really. I don't know how we could have missed it the first two times. Looks like that sun of yours has been losing power because of an imbalance in the hydrogen-helium mix."

"An imbalance? Well, of course there's an imbalance, you --"

"Hey, hey, Pops, just cool your jets for a micron," Biff said, holding up a hand. "We've got a handle on the problem, and it looks like we'll have you out of here in another . . . oh, say, fifty microns or so. We've just got to refit the --"

"Spare me the details," Neuwirth said wearily. "Just make sure it works this time."

Biff flashed a twisted grin. "Hey, no prob, Pops. We're the best there are, you know." He took a long sip of his coffee.

"What about the estimate you gave us earlier?"

"I'm afraid we've had to revise both the time estimate and the bill." He shrugged without much evidence of apology. "We're going to have to replace the subspace regulator valve, and those don't come cheap. Now, if you'd just have a seat over there in the waiting area . . . "

Neuwirth blew out a frustrated breath. "Oh, come on, Salahuddin. Let's let these bloodsuckers get back to work."

Salahuddin trotted after Neuwirth as they returned to the marble-tiled waiting area. "Are we really going to allow them to treat us like that, Mr. Neuwirth, sir? We have a lot to do. There's that comet going out of control in the Dandrite system, and --"

Neuwirth spread his wings helplessly as he seated himself in a chair upholstered in cracked white vinyl. "We really don't have any choice, I'm afraid."

"We could take our business somewhere else," said Salahuddin.

Neuwirth picked up a popular physics magazine from the end table beside him and leafed through it without much interest. "It's like young Biff told us," he said. "These men are the best mechanics there are. Why else do you think they ended up here?"

"But -- but how can we stand by and allow them to gouge us like this?"

Neuwirth set aside the magazine and fixed his trainee with a serious stare. "So what do you propose we do, Mr. Salahuddin? That sun needs fixing and we certainly can't do it ourselves."

"Sue," Salahuddin said firmly. "We can hire ourselves a lawyer, and --"

Neuwirth stared at Salahuddin in surprise, then barked out a short and bitter laugh. "Talk about gouging." He shook his head. "You certainly have a lot to learn, my friend." Neuwirth arched his back, stretched his wings, and picked up his magazine again, immersing himself in an article about the best ways to eradicate unwanted wormholes from planetary orbits.

For several minutes, the only sound was the music of Nirvana grinding out from the overhead loudspeaker. Then Salahuddin spoke again. "Mr. Neuwirth, sir . . .

I have a question."

Neuwirth raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

Salahuddin seemed a little hesitant. "What I am wondering is . . . well, I hope you won't be offended, sir, but is this heaven or is it hell?"

Neuwirth kept his attention on the magazine. "Ah, so you've finally decided to ask a meaningful question," he said, robbing his aching temples. "Answer me this, my little friend. Would you still go for that M.B.A. if you could do it

over again? Eh?"

There was no answer. Neuwirth had expected none.