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THE THREE DESCENTS OF JEREMY BAKER I

Jeremy Baker was the only survivor when the Raven's Warton-Purg drive delivered the vessel to the vicinity of a black hole. Its tidal forces immediately did their stuff. The hull groaned and cracked as indicators screamed the ship's situation and listed its problems. Jeremy, who had been somewhat bored, had been in the possibly enviable position of testing his powerful extravehicular survival suit at the time of the disaster. He had on everything but the helmet, which he promptly donned. Then he hurried to the control station with the intention of activating the Warton-Purg drive again in hopes of fleeing through extracurricular space -- though under the circumstances it was more likely to cause the Raven to explode. But then the Raven was exploding anyway and it was worth a shot.

He never made it.

The vessel came apart about him. He thought he glimpsed the jumpsuited figure of one of his crewmates spinning amid the debris, but he could not be certain.

Suddenly, he was alone. Pieces of the Raven drifted away from him. He took a sip of the suit's water, wondering when he would feel a great heaviness in his feet as they were drawn down the gravity well faster than the rest of him -- or perhaps it would be his head. He was uncertain as to his orientation. Still half in shock, he scanned the sky, peering into a star-occluding blackness. There. It would be his right arm where the stretching would begin. At least it would be an interesting way to die, he reflected. Not too many people had gotten to try it, though there had been a lot of colorful speculation.

He seemed to drift for a long while, musing on final splendors, without detecting any unusual sensations other than occasionally glimpsing what seemed a small, local patch of flickering light. He could not be certain as to its source. After a time, he felt an uncontrollable drowsiness and he slept.

"That's better," a voice seemed to be saying to him a bit later. "Seems to be working fine."

"Who -- What are you?" Jeremy asked.

"I'm a Fleep," came the answer. "I'm that flickering patch of light you were wondering about a while back."

"You live around here?"

"I have for a long while, Jeremy. It's easy if you're an energy being with a

lot  
of psi powers."

"That's how we're conversing?"

"Yes. I installed a telepathic function in your mind while I had you unconscious."

"Why aren't I being stretched into miles of spaghetti right now?"

"I created an antigravity field between you and the black hole. They cancel."

"Why'd you help me?"

"It's good to have someone new to talk to. Sometimes I get bored with my fellow  
Fleep."

"Oh, there's a whole colony of you?"

"Sure. This is a great place to study physics, and we're all into such pursuits."

"It doesn't seem an environment where life would develop."

"True. We were once a race of material beings but we were sufficiently evolved that when we saw our sun was going to go supernova we elected to transform ourselves into this state and study it rather than flee. In fact, that black hole used to be our sun. Makes a great lab. Come on, I'll show you. You can see  
more than you used to because I fiddled with your senses, too. I increased their  
range. For one thing, you should be able to detect a halo of Hawking radiation above the event horizon."

"Yes. Lavender, violet, purple. . . . It's rather lovely. If I kept going and passed through the event horizon would my image really be captured there forever? Could I come back and see myself frozen at that moment?"

"Yes, and no. Yes, you would clutter up the view with your arrested light. No, you couldn't come back and see yourself doing it. There's no way out once you go  
in."

"I phrased it poorly. Say, if there are other Fleep, there must be something special to call you to distinguish you."

"Call me Nik," the other said.

"Okay, Nik. What are those pinpoints of fire ahead? And the huge dark masses about them?"

"Those are my people, performing an experiment. I've been moving us at a very high velocity."

"I've noticed that the hole covers a lot more of the sky now. What sort of experiment?"

"Those great dark masses are the remnants of tens of thousands of suns and planets we've transported here. You only see the ones in space proper. We pull

them out as we need them. We're shooting them into the hole."

"Why?"

"To increase its rate of rotation."

"Uh -- To what end?"

"The creation of closed timelike curves."

"You've got me on that one."

"Time loops, To permit us to run backward through the past."

"Any successes so far?"

"Yes. A few."

"Have you got anything that might permit me to get back to the Raven before the explosion?"

"That's pushing it. But it's one of the things I wanted to check."

They matched velocities with the flickering congregation, and Nik took him into the vicinity of the largest of these beings. The conversation that followed resembled heat lightning.

"Vik says there's one that might do it," Nik told him after a time.

"Let me use it. Please."

"You should also have strength of mind sufficient to alter your velocity by thought alone," Nik said. "Come this way."

Jeremy followed him by willing it until, abruptly, he faced a mass of lines which resembled a computer design suddenly generated in free space.

"I did that just to make you conscious of it," Nik said. "Enter the trapezoid to your left."

"If this works I may not see you again. I'd better say thanks now."

"Noted with pleasure, though I'd like to have kept you longer, for full conversations. I understand your state of mind, however. Go."

Jeremy entered the trapezoid.

In an instant, everything changed. He was back aboard the Raven, standing wearing his suit, helmet in hand. Immediately, he rushed toward the control station, donning his helmet as he went. He felt the familiar drop into space proper. The tidal forces took hold of the Raven, and it began to groan and creak.

He could see the switches for the Warton-Purg drive and he extended his arm, reaching. Then the ship came apart and he was drawn away from the controls. He glimpsed a jumpsuited human form, turning and turning.

Later, drifting he met a Nik who did not recall him but who quickly understood his explanation as to what had occurred.

"Am I still in the dosed timelike curve?" Jeremy asked.

'Oh, yes. I know of no way of departing a CTC till it's run its course," Nik replied. "In fact, theoretically, if you could do it you'd wind up inside the black hole."

"Guess things get to run their course then. But listen, this time around it was a little different than the first time."

"Yes. Your classical physics is deterministic, but this isn't classical physics."

"I actually got close to the Raven's controls. I wonder. . . ."

"What?"

"You've installed a form of telepathy in my mind. Could you also teach me something -- telekinetic, perhaps -- that would give me the ability to hold a bubble of air around my head for a minute or two. I'm convinced that slowing to put on the helmet was what kept me from reaching the controls."

"We'll see what we can do. Take a nap."

When Jeremy awoke he had the ability to move small objects with his mind. He tested this by removing units from his tool kit, having them orbit his arms, his legs, his head, and returning them without touching them physically.

"I think I've got it, Nik. Thanks."

"You're an interesting study, Jeremy."

This time when he entered the trapezoid he had his mind flexed, and he gathered the bubble of air to him as he rushed toward the control station.

He waited, his hand hovering above the appropriate bank of lights, for the Warton-Purg drive to drop the Raven into space proper. The lights went out. Immediately, he ran his hand across the row, illuminating them again.

Simultaneous with the clutch of the tidal forces, he felt the explosion from the rear of the vessel. The manual had been right. Reactivating the drive immediately following shut down was hazardous to the health. He pulled on his helmet as a sheet of flame flashed toward him. The suit's insulation protected him from the heat as the Raven came apart. This time he did not see the jumpsuited figure.

Again, he drifted.

When Nik rescued him, he told him the story.

". . . So, either way I lose," he concluded.

"So it would seem," Nik said.

When the CTC ran its course and Nik went off to report the results of the latest trip to Vik, Jeremy looked toward the event horizon with his enhanced senses.

He was aware of his antigrav field now, could even manipulate it with his mind.

He was certain that he could control it sufficiently to keep himself unstretched or unsquashed at least between here and the layer beneath the violet band.

"What the hell," he said.

He wondered what sort of final image he would leave for eternity. II.

He descended quickly toward the devouring sphere, and soon it was as if he fled among the curtains of an Aurora Borealis. At one point it seemed that Nik might

have called after him, but he could not be certain. Not that it mattered. What had he left of life even with the kindly Fleep? His suit's oxygen, water, and nutrients would dwindle toward an unpleasant end and there was no chance of anyone coming to his rescue. Best to pass in this blaze of glory seeing what no

man had seen before, leaving his small signature upon the universe.

As the waves rose to embrace him, the colors darkened, darkened, were gone. He was alone in a black place and without sensation. Had he actually penetrated the

black hole and survived, or was this but his final, drawn-out thought in a time-distorting field?

"The former," Nik said from a place that seemed nearby.

"Nik! You're here with me!"

"Indeed. I decided to follow you and give what assistance I could.

"As you entered did you see the image I left behind on the event horizon?"

"Sorry, I didn't look."

"Are we into the singularity?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I've never been this way before. The process may be one of infinite infall."

"But I thought that all information was destroyed once it entered a black hole."

"Well, there is more than one school of thought on that. Information is necessarily bound up with energy, and one notion is that it might remain coherent in here but simply become totally inaccessible to the outside world. The information cannot exist independently from the energy, and this way of considering it has the advantage of preserving energy conservation."

"Then it must be so."

"On the other hand, when your body was destroyed as we entered here I was able to mn you quickly through the process by which I became an immortal energy

being. Thought you might appreciate it."

"Immortal? You mean I might be an infinitely infalling consciousness here for the effective life of the universe? I don't think I could bear it."

"Oh, you'd go mad before too long and it wouldn't make any difference."

"Shit!" Jeremy said.

There was a long silence, then a chuckle from Nik.

"I remember what that is," he finally said.

"And we're in it without paddles," Jeremy noted. III.

"There is another factor in our case," Nik said after an eternity or a few minutes, whichever came first.

"What is that?" Jeremy asked.

"When I talked to Vik he mentioned that we've messed so much with this black hole and its rotation that we might have provoked an unusual situation."

"What's that?"

"It's theoretically possible for a black hole to explode. He thought that this one was about to. Seeing it happen is son of a once-in-a-lifetime affair."

"What goes on when it blows?"

"I'm not sure and neither was Vik. The cornucopion hypothesis would seem most in keeping with our present situation, though."

"Better tell me about it so it won't come as a complete surprise."

"It holds that when it blows it leaves behind a horn-shaped remnant smaller than an atom, weighing about a hundred-thousandth of a gram. Its volume would be unlimited, though, and it would contain all of the information that ever fell into the black hole. That, of course, would include us."

"Would it be any easier to get out of a cornucopion than out of a black hole?"

"Not here it wouldn't be. Once our information leaves our universe it stays gone."

"What do you mean 'not here'? Is there a loophole if it gets moved someplace else?"

"Well, if it could be bounced past the Big Crunch and the next Big Bang and wind up in our successor universe its contents might be accessible. We only know for sure that they're barred from release in this universe."

"Sounds like a long wait."

"You never know what time will be doing in a place like that, though. Or this."

"It's been interesting knowing you, Nik. I'll give you that."

"You, too, Jeremy. Now I don't know whether to tell you to open your sensory channels to the fullest or to shut them down as far as you can."

"Why? Or why not?"

"I can feel the explosion coming on."

There followed an intense sensation of white light which seemed to go on and on and on until Jeremy felt himself slipping away. He straggled to retain his coherency, hoped he was succeeding.

Slowly, he became aware that he inhabited a vast library, bookshelves sweeping off in either direction, periodically pierced by cross-corridors.

"Where are we?" he finally asked.

"I was able to create a compelling metaphor, allowing you to coordinate your situation," Nik replied. "This is the cornucopion within which all of the information is stored. We inhabit a bookshelf ourselves. I gave you a nice blue leather cover, embossed, hubbed spine."

"Thanks. What do we do now, to pass the time?"

"I think we should be able to establish contact with the others. We can start reading them."

"I'll try. I hope they're interesting. How do we know whether we've made it into the next universe and freedom?"

"Hopefully, somebody will stop by to check us out."

Jeremy extended his consciousness to a smart red volume across the way.

"Hello," he said. "You are ...?"

"History," the other stated. "And yourself?"

"Autobiography," Jeremy replied. "You know, we're going to need a catalogue, so we can leave a Recommended Reading List on top."

"What's that?"

"I'll write it myself," he said. "Let's get acquainted."