

The Calcium Efflux Conspiracy

By Joe Murphy

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Luna's fingers dig into the mattress in the lightless apartment. The sheets twist, damp and cold in her grip. A burning plastic stench fills the air. And gasoline, or maybe it's diesel fuel, she can't tell, but the smell thickens until it drags at her nostrils.

Burning plastic, diesel fuel, and now a sickening sweetness like spoiled barbecue or Pezman's one and only attempt at Ethiopian cuisine. Her stomach roils; the nail on her left little finger breaks to the quick as she clenches the mattress. No smoke, nothing is burning in the apartment. No fire alarms. No sirens outside, only that god-awful smell.

Pezman! Something's happening to his plane -- flight 23 out of JFK. Luna sees flames. She hears screams. A bomb? Something wrong with the engines? Luna doesn't know. Maybe it's even one of those weird fireballs the tabloids are wailing about.

But Pezman, the two-timing bastard, and Winter, his skanky whore -- both of them are dead. The stench tells her. Luna's experienced such olfactory visions before -- whenever something goes drastically wrong.

Luna whimpers and sits up. The smell grows stronger. The darkness wrinkles, as if she can see it. The air touching her naked skin feels oily and slick. She sways, and desperately puts her feet flat on the cold tile floor.

The apartment door thwacks open; heavy locks fly apart. Luna flinches, blinking as yellow light spills across the room. A long, gaunt silhouette enters. Hard-soled shoes clack over the tiles. The shadow looms over her.

Light falls across the hawkish face of an old man. Short gray hair, watery yet piercing eyes, remind her crazily of old Reverend Leland from the Baptist Church back home. Tufted eyebrows make her think of an old photo of the abolitionist John Brown that she still remembers from junior high.

"Drink this." He lifts a cup to her lips. Why's this guy wearing a crown? A tinfoil crown at that, with little doodads all over it. The cup smells awful, but not as bad as the terrible stench of Pezman's plane. "It'll help with the smells."

Luna gulps it down. Salty, ammonia maybe, she can't be sure; the taste makes her gag. She tries to push it away but he abruptly cups the back of her head and pours the nasty stuff into her mouth.

"Fuck you. . . ," Luna chokes out.

"The fireballs are coming," he whispers. "Despite overwhelming evidence that fluoride poisons the brain, our government continues to saturate the water supply. Do you know why?"

"Who are you?" Luna jerks away from his hand, batting the cup across the room. She glances at the phone, wondering if she can get help before he slices her up or rapes her.

"I smell old clothes and stale pizza. Garbage too, that should have been taken out. I can smell you as well. You really should improve your personal hygiene." The man stands, his shadow covering her as she draws back in the bed against the wall. "Now what do you smell?"

The question stops her. Luna sniffs. The terrible burning stench is gone. All she smells is her apartment, and a heartbreaking trace of Pezman's musky body from the sheets. She breathes a sigh of relief. Her mouth tastes like a toilet, but compared to the stench it's a relatively clean toilet.

"It's better." She stays against the wall. When the nutcase makes no move to touch her, she adds, "Everything smells normal again."

"There isn't much time." The man hurries to the door, peers out, nods, and closes it. "The voices behind the Illuminati have fallen silent. The New World Order has ceased its relentless quest for world domination. I predicted this; they're puppets, after all." He turns, a stark scarecrow of a man in a threadbare suit. His finger lashes out at her. "Puppets who have hidden from you the relationship between your own simple mind and a controlled calcium efflux."

"Please don't hurt me."

"Hurt you? I'm a doctor, Miss. I'm here to help. You and humanity." His heels click together and he bows. "Dr. Giovanni Von Hartbeef, at your service." He grins and winks at her. "My friends call me Von."

"Well, I'm fine now." Luna pulls the sheet up to her chin. "Would you please leave?"

"Absolutely." The doctor nods vigorously. "However, a conspiracy has enveloped us both. They'll find you now."

"Who is this they?"

"My dear, if I knew that, my theory would be complete." Dr. Hartbeef smiles.

"I'm not going anywhere with. . ."

Hartbeef reaches up, turns a knob on his crown, and addresses the air. "We'll be there soon, Volta."

"But. . ."

"I understand your skepticism. Having grown up in what you consider an orderly universe, it must be difficult to admit this is merely illusion. Yet I submit to you, Miss, that A: You've experienced a sniffing. B: I was able to find you because of it. C: If I can, so can this sinister They. And F: They killed your friend and will most likely kill you."

"What happened to D and E?"

"Consistency is the first illusion of an orderly universe." He winks at her.

Is she dreaming? No, her mouth couldn't taste this bad even in a dream. Pezman is dead, damn him. He not only took her money, which was bad enough, but also her dreams.

Dreams bigger than Texas. Stardom! Riches! A chance to break the mundane mold of her life for something more. Besides, how could she face her mother again? Had Daddy really filed theft charges over the pickup?

Now what? Get this tweaker out of the apartment, obviously. Ditch him on the street, but then? She doesn't know anyone else.

Hartbeef stares at her a moment, then folds his arms and turns his back. "I understand your need for privacy. Remember, however, I'm a doctor."

At least he isn't trying to grope her or anything. She gets out of bed, clinging to the sheet while searching for her clothes. She dresses hurriedly: the black skirt, the fashionably torn Korn T-shirt exposing her freshly pierced navel, and black boots. And she never goes anywhere without her leather jacket.

"I hope you're ready, miss."

"Where do you want to go?" Luna picks up her purse; she reaches inside, fingers the reassuring can of Mace she stole from her mother's handbag. Her knuckles brush a switchblade, but really it's only a comb.

"My laboratory, of course." Hartbeef heads for the door. He opens it, peers out, and waves her past.

"Of course." Luna hurries out before him, relieved when he makes no move to stop her. She'll ditch this freako on the street. It's well past midnight but New York never sleeps; she'll find a cop, maybe. Hartbeef must be in his seventies; she can outrun him, or use the Mace.

"Have you ever questioned the relationship between polyunsaturated fats and intelligence?" Hartbeef asks and follows her out.

Outside, the street appears deserted, long rows of parked cars glinting from distant streetlights. Luna lifts the side of her ankle-length skirt and tenses her legs. Her other hand clutches her purse.

"This way." Hartbeef starts for a double-parked black sedan.

"Sure," Luna answers. The doctor reaches the car and opens the passenger door. Luna spins around, sucking in a quick breath as she starts to run. The smell stops her.

Actually, it knocks her to her knees. A wet stench this time. Sorta like the ocean but not quite. Water and salt, reeking of fish and sun-bleached skies, but with a strangeness that tangs the roof of her mouth with a subtle familiarity.

Hartbeef notices. He moves in front of her, bends over, and produces a small flashlight, which he shines in her eyes. "Are you on drugs, miss?"

"Not any more. I smell something again. It's so strong. . ."

"The same as in your apartment?"

"Different this time. Ocean and. . ." Luna gasps for air. A million dead fish couldn't smell this bad. The saltwater stench thickens until it fills her mouth. Stranger odors lie beneath it, scents familiar yet unfamiliar that tweak at her memories.

"Melted crayons and rancid cheese?"

She'd been about to say cow shit, but his suggestion smells righter. "Yeah, maybe."

Hartbeef gently pulls her up. Luna keeps gasping; her head swims with the stench.

"What you smell is Time itself. A kind of carrier scent that means the ocean smell is of great age. Volta can tell you more." Hartbeef eases her toward the car.

"Shellfish?" It's hard to form the word; the smells get in the way of her tongue.

"That's a new one." Hartbeef folds her down on the crinkly front seat. Crinkly because it's covered in tinfoil, like the rest of the interior, everything but the gauges and windows. "You're not pregnant, are you? Sometimes a pregnant woman can smell what she craves across all eighteen dimensions."

"No way," she manages. But Hartbeef has already closed the door. Long legs carry him around and he gets into the driver's seat. Luna twists and fumbles with the seat belt. Damn it, why didn't she run? Stuck in the car with a crazy old fool. She reaches for the door handle.

A fireball comes down the street. At least that's what it looks like. A blue-white teardrop with hundreds of yellow flame tongues rippling like the legs of a millipede. The fireball stops at the traffic light, pauses until the light turns green. Then its stubby flame legs carry it towards them.

"As your physician, I advise you to remain extremely still," Hartbeef whispers, his hand frozen in mid-motion with the car key.

"Unh." The smell is worse than ever. Luna never cared that much for the beach, that was Pezman's thing. But she never disliked the smell; now she chokes on it.

The fireball crosses in front of them, oozing up on the sidewalk. It opens the door that leads to her apartment; two horn-like flames swivel furtively as if looking around before it creeps inside.

"Tinfoil is the most technically advanced substance mankind has ever invented." Hartbeef smoothes the foil-covered window visor. He starts the car and pulls onto the street. "I'm sorry, miss. But I have no more medicine to reduce these olfactory excitations you're experiencing. Once we reach the lab you'll feel better."

"Gak," Luna sputters. The drive takes them toward Manhattan, but the route is unfamiliar. Of course, she's only been in New York for six weeks, hardly time to get to know a city so much larger than Turkey, Texas.

Tenements, empty shops with busted windows, massive graffiti-strewn walls that go on forever. Thoroughly lost now, dizzy with the sea stench, she closes her eyes. Instead of the usual phosphene-speckled blackness, the space behind her eyelids is blue-green; a chitinous blur swims in the distance. The way its legs move reminds her of the fireball.

Hartbeef turns into an alley. A metal door rolls open at their approach. As they enter, Luna sees tinfoil plastered everywhere, covering the walls. Huge open spaces, the corners piled high with old televisions and electronic junk. Off to one side is a wooden corral. Two cows look up at them. Luna grins -- Santa Gertrudis, just like Daddy's.

A plump woman in a pink bathrobe, wearing a tinfoil crown like Hartbeef's, opens Luna's door. Cheery ringlet curls surround her pale cheeks. Glasses with pop bottle lenses blink at Luna.

"See to our guest, Volta." Hartbeef jumps from the car as the garage door closes. "I must check an experiment on the roof and update my journal. You know which medications to use. She's definitely a sniffer."

The door clatters shut and suddenly Luna can breathe. The sea stench with all its melted-crayon and rancid-cheese funkiness vanishes. Scents of cattle and cow shit make her feel right again.

"Hi, there." Volta pats her shoulder and smiles. "Can you get out okay, honey?"

"I think so." Luna fumbles with the seat belt.

"Come on then, let's get you fixed up." Volta takes her hand and guides Luna from the car. Her legs don't bend where she wants them to; Luna staggers until Volta steadies her.

"I'm okay now." Luna stiffens, shrugging off Volta's grip. The older woman beams, nods, and gestures toward a metal stairway that spirals up through a tinfoil-lined ceiling. The cows moo as they start past.

"What's up with these guys?" Luna stops and strokes a velvety muzzle.

"Dr. Von likes his calcium fresh." Volta chuckles. "You might have noticed he has

an interest in such things. He's quite a genius, puts milk in everything."

The stairs lead to a tinfoil-lined room. Red and blue foil plasters the wall in candy-cane stripes. A small fridge, table, chairs, computer -- the rest of the furnishings seem normal enough. Volta goes to the fridge and pours a yellowish liquid from a plastic pitcher into a blue cup. "Here, drink this, honey -- your nose will feel better for it."

Luna's nose wrinkles as she lifts the cup to her lips, the same stuff Hartbeef forced down her throat.

"Hold your breath, dear." Volta gives her a motherly smile. "It's easier that way." She pats Luna's shoulder. Luna does and manages to empty the cup in two swallows.

"Fuck, that's nasty." Her head shakes. "What the hell is it?"

"Mostly urine, but with a nice creamy calcium supplement." Volta giggles. "It's nature's way of balancing your body's electrical charge."

There's no place to puke so Luna decides to Mace the crazy bitch. But she's left her purse in Hartbeef's car. Before she can throw a punch, Volta moves to the table and picks up a bowl.

"Mint?" Volta asks. "I guess it's something of a dirty trick to spring that on you without a full disclosure. But Dr. Von believes it's vital to keep our bodies balanced at all times. I'm awfully glad to meet a fellow sniffer, you know. For the longest time we thought I was the only one."

"Are you nuts?" Luna stares back at the woman.

"I thought I was. But it was only the Illuminati's mind-control generators. They hide them in dentist drills, you know." Volta offers the bowl again. "Try one. It'll help your breath, too, dear. Then we can talk."

Luna shrugs, takes a mint, and drops the wrapper on the floor. "So what's a sniffer?"

Volta returns to the table and puts down the bowl. "Would you like something else to drink, dear?"

"Hell, no." Luna's fists clench. "And stop calling me 'dear.' My name is Luna

McMahon."

"Pleased to meet you, Luna." Volta plops into a plastic chair and motions her to sit. "I'm Volta Batangas."

Luna sits down across from her. "Now. What's a sniffer?"

"Remote sniffer, really." Volta folds her arms across an ample lap. "Maybe you've heard of the CIA's remote viewers? Psychics who see things through their mind? Well, you and I are like that. Only we smell things. It's the same principle, Dr. Von says, only olfactory."

"That's totally bogus."

"You think that because the New World Order has conditioned your mind through subliminal messages hidden in telephone dial tones. But it's how we found you. I'm sorry about your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

"On the plane, dear -- er, Luna. The flight that got hit by the fireball."

"That asshole." Luna stares at the table. "We were all going to go. Out to LA, you know, to make porno movies. Pezman says anything can happen in LA, it's not as boring as New York. I sold Daddy's pickup for our ticket money. But Pezman left without me, with Winter, that bitch."

"He died thinking of you," Volta says softly.

Luna jerks to her feet and stares at the woman.

"I was sniffing the plane because Dr. Von thought something was amiss. Your young man had an extremely good sense of smell. He might have been a sniffer too, because in his dying I smelled you out."

"Th-- that's impossible."

"Nothing smells quite like Queens." Volta shakes her head. "And no one wears musk and patchouli quite like you."

Like a sleepwalker waking, Luna finds herself back in the chair. Musk and

patchouli, her own special mix that she boosted from a local boutique. Volta couldn't have guessed, and Luna showered before going to bed. Is the scent still on her clothes? No, she decides, after sniffing her sleeve.

"Change is in the air." Volta takes her hand and pats it. "Dr. Von will need us both, you know. That is, if he's to save mankind."

"Save mankind from what?"

"He doesn't know yet. But his Calcium Efflux Theory should provide an answer." Volta leans forward, squeezing Luna's hand. "Won't you join us?"

"I just want out of here. You guys are fucking nuts."

"As your physician I must remind you that commands to think exactly that are beamed into your brain through police sirens." Hartbeef strides into the room, arms laden with photographs. He starts laying the photos on the table in orderly rows. "We're all creatures of conditioning -- habits, if you will, that we collect during a lifetime. Eventually these habits take over. Barely conscious, we survive out of habit, believe out of habit, live out of habit. But I have awoken to the truth, miss. And through the electromagnetic balancing of urine therapy, I've been able to awake Ms. Batangas as well. We're all on the verge of a transition, even yourself. But the garage isn't locked. Leave if you want -- or stay, and I promise every question will be answered."

"You've discovered who's behind it all?" Volta rises, leaning to peer at the pictures.

Luna starts to get up, legs ready to carry her to the door. She glances at the photos. Curiosity, like the shark in *Jaws*, drags her beneath the surface of sanity. These two are wacko, but what if they actually know something?

"I'll stay." She picks up a photo. "At least for a while."

"It's common knowledge that unseen forces control our lives through the interface of government." Hartbeef grins, hands flat on the table. "Some call this unseen force The Illuminati; others have suggested The Freemasons, The Cattlemen's Association, or even the Girl Scouts. They're all guilty, but one greater, more sinister power has risen to the top. At last, thanks to you, miss, I've discovered who they are."

"Who?" Luna and Volta ask in chorus.

Hartbeef triumphantly holds up a photo of something that looks like a cross between a roach and a shellfish. "Trilobites!"

"Amazing, Doctor!" Volta's voice is breathless.

"Uh, what?" Maybe it's still not too late to leave, Luna decides.

"Melted crayons and rancid cheese was the final clue." Hartbeef beams. "Great age, remember? Now, thousands of trilobite species dominated the Paleozoic era." His hand sweeps across the photos. "As you can see, they took many different shapes. Some grew spines for protection. Some lost their eyes to live in the mud of the sea floor. A pattern of relentless mutation is apparent, is it not? But note the shell. All retained a shell of some sort." His finger lashes out at Volta and then appears before Luna's nose. "Do you know what this shell is made of?"

"Melted crayons and rancid cheese?" Luna asks. Volta grins at her and nods agreement.

"Calcium!" Hartbeef shouts, lifting his hands to the heavens. "Calcium." He folds his arms and gazes at them serenely. "Calcium."

Volta picks up a photo of a spiny creature with horns like a steer. "You're suggesting they became capable of a Calcium Efflux Transition?"

"Exactly." Hartbeef nods. "And such a transition it must have been! Imagine, if you will, billions upon billions of trilobites simultaneously reaching a state of telepathic exaltation. All transporting themselves through time and space to the age of mankind, to our own time. Perhaps they fled predators; perhaps their environment grew too harsh. Powered by the calcium in their own shells, their neural synapses began to fire at an exponential rate, never tiring, never ceasing. They achieved a state of super being."

"Then, where are they now?" Luna asks.

Hartbeef smiles, reaches into his pocket, and takes out a folded newspaper. Luna sees the photo of a trilobite, held in the hand of a man in overalls.

"Ranch hand discovers colony of ancient creatures in stock pond," Hartbeef reads.

"They make that stuff up." Luna tries not to laugh. "It's tabloid trash."

"This time it's tabloid treasure." Hartbeef holds the paper before him like a crucifix. "We understand how they did it. But what is their relationship with these mysterious fireballs?"

Luna stares at the newspaper. She saw a fireball, all right. And it acted intelligently; running a red light in NYC was indeed dangerous. She remembers the way it sat at the light before proceeding, and how it opened the door of her apartment building rather than blasting through.

"With your permission, ladies, let us ascend the tower. It's time to put my theory to the test." Hartbeef heads for the doorway. Something in the urgency of his stride compels Luna to follow. Volta crowds behind her, grinning.

"I don't understand this calcium stuff," Luna grumbles. The stairwell goes on forever. Windowless, lit only by their candles, they climb until she's dizzy, her legs like rubber bands.

"The basis of telepathy, my dear." Hartbeef leads the way. "According to CIA projects like MK-ULTRA and Monarch, certain electromagnetic frequencies cause an effluxion of calcium ions in neural tissue. These ions resonate to the physical universe, allowing non-ordinary perceptions."

"Dr. Von has discovered ways of balancing the electromagnetic fields so that the efflux becomes continuous as long as the organism retains enough calcium." Volta puffs along beside her. "When that happens, telepathy occurs."

"I'm sure you've heard of the HAARP project in Alaska, and other atmospheric heaters, all based upon the work of Nikola Tesla and his amazing coils," Hartbeef says.

"I think so." Luna stops to scratch her head. "There's one in Dallas now. Near the stockyards."

"Precisely," Hartbeef says as Volta nods approvingly. "The purpose of these constructions, our government avows, is to improve communications. But the truth is far more sinister.

"These devices may have acted as beacons for the trilobite overmind and drawn them to our time. Or they may have been constructed under direction of the trilobites. At any rate, it wasn't until the West Australian facility started up that the fireballs appeared. Now the government's putting them everywhere."

"Which is why we have to drink piss?" Luna asks.

"It's a completely sterile, meticulously prepared formula from the bovines below and my own superior secretions. Professionally speaking, I assure you that calling it Calcium Efflux Conditioner improves the taste."

Cow piss! Luna doubles over with the need to puke. Hartbeef's long legs carry him ahead. Luna gasps. Even Volta has passed her now. The stairs flicker as a breeze makes a strobe light of her candle. Luna almost trips, and discovers a newspaper beneath her boot.

"Ranch hand finds ancient species. . ." Luna stares at the photo, then at the paper. "It's the Dallas Times Herald!" Hardly tabloid trash. Her father swears by it, in fact. She can't read more in the flickering candlelight. A wispy odor of urine floats down from above.

Gasping, Luna finally reaches the top of the stairs. Her breath catches in her throat, her stomach flip-flopping at the city below. The Trade Towers and the Empire State Building seem the only taller structures in the glittering night.

She stands in a cramped octagon, a room reminding her of the old Port Arthur Lighthouse. Her stomach twists as the building sways.

"Guys?"

Twin fireballs revolve steadily, a swirl of heatless color just outside the tower. A murky shape floats in the center of each. A segmented roach-like thingy that wavers and undulates to an invisible current.

"Trilobites," Luna whispers, ducking into the stairwell. The fireballs circle the tower, the distance between them growing with each revolution. At last they shoot away, becoming part of a V-formation of fireballs heading west.

"It's crazy." Had Hartbeef and Volta transformed? Had the path toward evolution become a convolution to the past instead of the future?

I won't ever know the truth now, she thinks. All I have is questions, and the memories of what I've just seen. That sucks, but oh well.

A stainless steel flask lies on the floor, a couple of mints nearby. She walks over and picks them up.

"Santa Gertrudis Candy Company, East New Jersey?" She stares at the mint's wrapper. One whiff of the flask is enough. More than enough. Luna drops it and yellow liquid spills over the floor. She eats another mint for good measure and

makes a face.

"This is bullshit." She turns and starts down the stairs. Screw New York. She didn't come to the city for some stupid cosmic truth. All her *important* questions could have been answered with a little excitement, a few new friends, and some damn hard partying.

Instead she's been dumped by another dreamer for a skanky whore, duped by a urine-drinking doctor of lunacy, and deserted by everyone.

"Who the hell needs it?" she says, down in the warehouse, gazing into the sympathetic brown eyes of a Santa Gertrudis heifer who reminds Luna of her first Four-H project, Gussie. "I guess I really belong in a mundane Texas world."

Gussie moos loudly and Luna fights back a sudden urge to cry. She hugs the cow. She finds a hay bale and feeds the animals, then fills their water trough.

She'll call the police from a bus stop and tell them about the abandoned livestock. Then she'll call her folks and beg money to come home. They'll be angry, as usual, and she'll cry and say she's sorry, as usual -- all will be right in her world.

She starts for the doctor's car. The smell stops her. Luna staggers with the odoriferous blast. Layer upon layer of scents, splayed out in her mind -- smells from the Trade Tower spires to the long forgotten sewers, and underlying it all, the heavy odor of melted crayons and rancid cheese, ripe with the city's past and future.

A map of secret scents that explains better than any lecture, any picture, the true nature of reality. Underlying it all, a cloying animal scent that forces her to turn.

The cows stand just outside their corral, the gate wide although Luna is certain she closed it. Gussie regards her with sinister, heavy-lashed eyes.

For a heartbeat the tableau remains unbroken. Abruptly the cows start for her, their hooves purposeful, the scent of hatred unmistakable.

Luna backs away, a hand fumbling over the tinfoil by the garage door. A smooth plastic button touches her fingers. Luna smiles what she hopes is a coy smile and presses it. The garage door rises.

"Just in time!" A sopping wet Volta strides into the garage, an equally wet

Hartbeef close behind. Volta raises a bazooka, upon which is duct-taped an industrial fire extinguisher.

"As your physician I urge you to step away from the cows." Hartbeef strides to her side.

"Way ahead of you." Luna grins.

"Why. . ." Volta steps closer and sniffs her. "She's evolved! She's experienced a Calcium Efflux Transition!"

"Which explains how she knew to let us in." Hartbeef nods.

"Exactly." Luna turns to them. "From scent alone I deduced that you didn't transform into fireballs. Instead you escaped a fireball attack by leaping from the tower. You landed in a vat containing rainwater and urine. . ."

"An experiment to discern if one-celled organisms are capable of the transition," Hartbeef continues. "Sadly, the experiment failed."

"But the vat saved our lives," Volta adds.

"Of course it failed," Luna continues, never taking her eyes from the bovines before her. "Pollution collected in the vat, and bound chemically to the calcium. But Doctor, I understand even more."

The cows start forward again, but Volta waves the bazooka at them. "Go on, dear."

"By themselves the trilobites lack enough calcium for a complete transition. Instead let us look to the queens of calcium themselves, animals in appearance, who have steadily evolved until they've mastered a controlled efflux." Luna's finger lashes out at a nervously cud-chewing Gussie. "You! You brought the trilobites here. You taught them how to evolve. They're your own private army to destroy mankind!"

The cows gasp. Gussie's cud grows still.

Hartbeef smacks his forehead. "How could I have missed it? It's so obvious!"

"You'll understand soon." She smiles at him. "Your own transition is almost upon you. I can smell it." Luna turns back to the heifers. "As your theoretical

veterinarian I now advise you to return peacefully to your corral."

The creatures, now suitably cowed, comply at once.

"There must be a way to stop them." Hartbeef hurries to slam the gate. "I'll begin my experiments immediately."

"I already know that, too," Luna says.

"You've an idea?" Hartbeef delightedly clasps his hands.

"We'll head for Texas, where this invasion began. Then we must fluoridate the grazing clover."

"Ingenious." Volta lowers her weapon.

"I'll say." Hartbeef begins to scribble in a notebook. "Bind up the calcium. Any cow that attempts a transition will also release a fatal dose of fluoride. We all know how poisonous that is."

"I'll start the car," Volta offers.

"No time." Hartbeef pulls from his pocket a folded piece of tinfoil. He offers it to Luna. "Well, my dear. I think you've earned this. Wear it with the shiny side out now, or you'll have weird thoughts."

"Thanks." Luna slips the crown on. "But I warn you both this is no easy task. The cattle behind the conspiracy will throw everything they can at us. We must remain ever vigilant, ever a step ahead. There should also be lots of sex, maybe even a film."

"Interesting." Volta rubs her chin.

"I can calculate the psychically most effective positions." Hartbeef lifts his hand to his crown.

"Let's go." Luna reaches up to touch one of the doodads stuck on her crown, the one with the scent of Hartbeef's microelectronics that will transport them instantaneously. The others do likewise. Together they vanish into a new, yet golden, age, one that reeks of urine.

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