

## ORACLES

Robert Reed

For his latest tale, the author tried to write a science fiction story about a future that he could believe in—one where humans figure out how to hear alien chatter, but don't make contact in any conversational way. "We're suddenly in the middle of a loud party, picking up useful bits of other guests' conversation." Of course, the business about the role of a mid-list author in this near-future world may prove that the tale is actually a fantasy.

They ambushed Rheingold at the elevator. Maybe a dozen high-and-mighties were representing the convention, with at least twice as many underlings and tag-alongs standing nearby. Everyone wore luminous nametags, and they smiled in the gushing, overdone way that people use when they're in the presence of real fame. It was a strange, sweet moment. A heavysset man swallowed conspicuously, then shambled forward to offer a sweaty hand. "Mr. Rheingold," he said with a nervous wet gasp. Then he muttered his own name before declaring, "I'm thrilled to finally meet you." And after a ragged breath, he added, "On behalf of our convention, I'd like to thank you for joining us. I know you're enormously busy with the Committee. I know... we all know... that three days out of your life is a great sacrifice...!"

Jack just stared at the man, conspicuously saying nothing

"Yes, well..." Silence was the last response that their official greeter had expected. But having practiced his kowtowing, he wasn't to be stopped now. "If you or your family needs anything, just e-me. Please. Any problems with programming or activities for you or your children... anything at all... someone with the con will do everything humanly possible—"

"We'd like our rooms," Jack blurted. He showed the rest of the delegation a warm smile, and then returning his gaze to the man standing before him, he let his smile dissolve into a barbed frown. "My family's very tired. It's been a long trip."

"Of course."

"Point the way to the front desk. Now."

"Yes. Sir." But the man was flustered. Losing his bearings, he turned in a sloppy circle while pointing in random directions. A tiny assistant saw his plight, and gesturing with confidence, she said, "Over there, sir. Mr. Rheingold. Just past the fountain, sir."

Jack nodded and walked away.

Tasha said, "Thank you," for him. "So nice of you to meet us like this!" Then after telling the boys to keep close, she came up beside her husband, quietly remarking, "My, that was a daggered little moment."

"We'll talk later," promised Jack.

"I can hardly wait."

The hotel lobby was enormous and busy, but it didn't feel crowded and it wasn't nearly as loud as it could have been. Hundreds of conventioners stood in knots and tangles, most of them studying Jack as he strode past. Quiet voices and loud whispers blended into a respectful murmur. Some of the spectators grinned like old Mends, while others laughed anxiously. Perhaps a quarter of the faces were alien. Elaborate, rigorously accurate costumes had been fashioned from pseudoflesh and hololight as well as simple cotton and dye. Voice boxes and embedded translators allowed the people inside to converse in the newest languages. Jack could imagine what they were saying. Looking at the human faces with their

star-struck gazes and smarmy grins, it was easy to feel like some great king. Then some hard face or a distant curse would remind Jack that some people didn't approve of him or his work, and his writer's paranoia would kick in: Who had a gun? Who had the rope? What tree would they string him from?

It was a silly paranoia, and for every good reason.

Jack glanced at his wife and took a quick deep breath.

"Some things refuse to change," Tasha said with a cheery tone. "Look at all these aliens!"

"But not one Klingon," Jack pointed out. "It looks like those poor bastards are extinct."

Unfortunately, their seven-year-old overheard the conversation. Tugging on his father's arm, the boy asked, "What are Klingons?"

"Pretend aliens," his mother explained. "From old movies and television."

Petey had a wide but exceptionally shallow knowledge about popular culture. Inflating his cheeks, he asked, "What'd they look like? Like the Fru-furkhan?"

"No," Jack began.

"The Balla? Or Smilers?" The boy was making random guesses. "Maybe like the Bishop Boys, maybe?"

His older brother interrupted, growling, "Hey, goof! Klingons were just people." Nobody but a twelve-year-old could become so exasperated with simple ignorance. "They were a bunch of actors, Petey. Stupid actors with stuck-on foreheads."

"Thank you," their mother said, using her reprimanding tone.

"Well, that's what they were," Clay argued. "And Klingons didn't go extinct, because they weren't ever real."

His parents exchanged weary looks.

Again, Tasha told him, "Thank you." Then she gave Clay a warning stare, causing the boy to drop his shoulders and pout with his lower lip.

The lobby seemed to stretch forever. Restaurants of every cuisine were scattered between water features and potted trees and shiny new cobbled walkways. A lone conventioner sat at a nearby table. The man seemed to be glaring at Jack, wearing an odd, almost lost expression. But just as his paranoia flickered, he realized that the fellow was wearing implants. "Fancy eyes," they had been dubbed. He was functionally blind for the moment, tied into some game or book or fictional playground. Fancy eyes had just officially entered the market. Supply shortages and taxes were keeping them expensive. Very few people had gone to the trouble of replacing their God-given eyes with prosthetic implants. And besides, the commercial models were clunky and slow compared to what was possible—like the truly fancy eyes that Jack had relied upon for the past five years, without incident.

Again, with the reliable ease of a beating heart, he felt like a king of the universe, a lord of Creation.

The main desk stood against the far wall. It was a block of cultured sapphire, and standing behind that glittering blueness was a single android wearing a black-and-white uniform and a torch-like smile. The face was just human enough to reassure, and so was the voice. "Mr. Rheingold," the machine called out. "Welcome to the Marriott!"

"Thank you. Our room?"

"On the forty-seventh floor, sir. Room nine."

"May we go up?"

"Whenever you wish, sir."

Jack hesitated. Looking at the artificial face, he asked, "How do you know I'm Jack Rheingold? What are your security measures?"

"Facial recognition," the robot began.

"Sure."

"And your retinal prints. And your fingerprints." Its smile widened. "Plus, sir, we employ three other methods that I'm not free to divulge."

Jack guessed, "Aroma and a brain-glimpse, and what else? Metabolic markers, or a body scan?"

The robot said nothing.

"The forty-seventh floor?" Jack asked.

"Yes, sir. We have lift pads at convenient locations. But if you prefer, there are elevators along each of the main walls."

Jack turned and found Tasha herding the boys toward him. "We've got another climb," he reported. "Pad or elevator?"

"Pad!" the boys shouted.

Tasha loathed the pads. They made her uneasy for all the obvious reasons, and no statistic could slow her pulse while she was riding one. "Thank you," she said, "but I'll take the old-fashioned route."

"Stairs?" he joked.

With a thoroughly sarcastic grin, Clay asked, "What are stairs, Dad?"

That earned a patient little laugh from his old man. "Come on, boys. Let's race your mom!"

The closest pad resembled a disk of polished sandstone. There was room for twenty, upholstered benches set in an outward-facing ring and looking as if nobody had ever used them. Climbing inside an invisible scaffold, the disk lifted from the lobby floor with a smooth inevitability, not a whisper of sound audible over the murmur of people and water. Petey was fearless, standing with his toes curled over the edge as they soared high into the air. Clay appeared fearless, but he kept a good six inches between him and the brink. Jack preferred to sit, unashamed by his own little case of vertigo. This\* technology was proven, and he couldn't count the safety features, but still, that didn't mean he relished peering down through hundreds of feet of open air.

From above, the lobby looked and sounded busier than ever. There had to be several thousand conventioners, easily. Jack found himself watching the alien costumes, instinctively checking their accuracy. The Balla were popular. And the Wkkens. Plus several species with tortuous names that humans had simplified into cuddly handles like Smilers and Robins and Bishop Boys. What did this say about human beings? These preferences gave clues into his species' nature; how many times had he

thought that? The Balla were easy: Their transmissions were the first detected at the Water Hole.

And it was the Smilers' beacon that gave humanity its first lessons in advanced technologies. But after that, aesthetics mattered. Despite the odd-ness of the bodies, despite the weird whistles and barks rising up to them, Jack was seeing the most ordinary, human-like species. The public was aware of more than a thousand alien civilizations, but barely thirty were represented here, proving again what Jack had known for years: Human eyes and ears could absorb only so much strangeness before they went blind and deaf.

Walkways made of Bishop Boy plastics hung out over the atrium. Without prompting, their pad docked in front of their suite. An elegant railing of black iron collapsed to let them pass, and then it rose up again and froze with a soundless grace. Boys and man had to take a moment to stand at the railing, gazing down from this high place. The hotel was a cylinder set inside a wider and much taller cylinder. In truth, it was a tiny piece of architecture—a little feature buried inside something far grander—yet without anything to compare it against, the hotel seemed huge and majestic, and memorable.

"Now," Clay signaled, and the brothers spat impressive gobs of spittle over the black railing.

"Enough," Jack rumbled, laughing under his breath.

The door to their suite stood open. Tasha stood in the middle of the main room, grinning as she reported, "These elevators are quick."

Their luggage had already arrived and unpacked itself.

"Nice," was Tasha's assessment of their rooms.

Jack nodded agreeably. There were no windows in the old sense, but a Smiler window had been hung on the outer wall. Their view was being piped in through several meters of diamond composites and dark-matter scaffolding. The hotel was twenty miles above a string of little snowy bumps: The Andes. Jack was staring west, his eagle-sharp eyes following the perfect smooth curve of the horizon, the blueness of the Pacific merging with a bank of blue-white clouds that were undoubtedly magnificent in their own right. Yet the ocean and storms and mountains were tiny compared to the sky. They were standing where the universe began, a multitude of stars and things that were not stars hanging about them, everything moving with the easy, mindless majesty that has moved the universe since time began.

Tasha threw an arm around Jack's waist. "So what happened down there?"

"That gentleman who greeted us—"

"Mr. Boot-Licker?"

"Years ago, he was in charge of programming at a con. We were married, so I was an established writer. I joined the con late and asked to get to sit with a panel or two. But Mr. Boot-Licker told me that he'd never heard of me, and I wasn't welcome, and then he turned and rolled away from me." Hearing himself, Jack had to laugh. "Sounds awfully petty of me, doesn't it?"

But his wife had a different sensibility. "What you should have done... you should have had some fun with him. In front of his friends, you should have—"

"What?"

She didn't want to say it. Lifting her black eyebrows, she showed him a predatory look. Then she glanced at their boys, asking, "How's the view?"

"It's okay," Clay allowed. "I guess."

Petey shrugged his shoulders, saying nothing.

"Guys!" Jack blurted. "We're staying in a new hotel perched on the edge of space. Our hotel is inside one of three half-finished skyhooks. When the skyhooks are finished in another seventeen months, the entire solar system will be at our feet." Then he laughed, confiding, "I never believed, not in my wildest dreams, that I'd see a spectacle like this. Not in my lifetime. Ever!"

Petey glanced up at his father, puzzled now. "But why not?"

"What's the date?" Jack asked.

"August thirtieth," the seven-year-old blurted.

"No," said Jack. "What year is it?"

Clay had played this game before. He made a scrunched-up face, and as if talking to an idiot, he scornfully reported, "It's the year two thousand seventeen. You know that!"

Jack grinned and threw his arm around their mother's waist, squeezing Tasha and almost giggling. "But you don't know, boys... you'll never begin to understand... just how incredible and impossible, and how wondrous, all that sounds to me...!"

For the universe, nothing worth doing is done just once, and a thousand times is little better than once. Everything that is possible is performed again and again. A billion successes are nothing but a good beginning. Even events that look miraculous to humans can be done with a deceptive, almost nonchalant ease, whether it is building great worlds from microscopic specks of dust or conjuring life from the simplest palette of mundane atoms.

The first extrasolar planets were discovered in the waning days of the old millennium. Once astronomers had the tools and a little experience, discovering worlds proved to be a routine business. Several hundred gas giants were spotted dancing around nearby suns. A few of those massive bodies had earth-like orbits around mannerly suns—Gs and Ks—and they were tempting targets for radio dishes. And that's how the Balla were discovered.

The aliens lived on the earth-like moon of a superjovian world. Their signal was relatively simple but easily deciphered. Like humans, the Balla were a compulsively visual species. What they loved best was to broadcast images of their home world and their Mother God world and the half dozen colonized moons and planets scattered around their own solar system. They were humanoids, which made them agreeable to human audiences. The Balla had two sexes. They lived in cities and maintained elaborate, beautiful farms. They had nation-states and religions with temples, and their aesthetic tastes weren't too unlike a certain tool-using ape that began to spend its days and nights doing nothing but staring at those delicious images of far-flung worlds.

Jack Rheingold was a mid-list author who once wrote about creatures not too unlike the Balla. His novel had earned lukewarm reviews, and it was long out of print, and, in the details, his aliens didn't much resemble the real item. But that didn't matter to reporters desperate for authority figures. They wanted presentable bodies that would sit under the hot lights, smile politely, and endure the same few unanswerable questions.

"What effect will this discovery have on humanity?"

It was far too soon to tell.

"Will the Balla revolutionize our technologies?"

They were more advanced than human beings, yes. But they were sending pictures, not schematics for better rockets.

"What will this discovery do to human perspectives?"

Make them larger, he supposed.

"Could human religions withstand this blow?"

It was too soon to care, Jack told his audience.

"Are you pleased to have predicted the Balla?"

But he had predicted very little. During the first interview, Jack confessed that his aliens didn't much resemble the Balla. Not in social customs, or history, or anything else that mattered. But Tasha, blessed with a keener sense of public relations, convinced him to be a little more gracious, and a little less honest. "Your book's been out of print for years," she reminded him. "Let's get people interested, and maybe we can sell a few copies. What do you think?"

So Jack took every gram of credit, even when it wasn't his to take. He learned to nod and smile, describing how he dreamed up his aliens in the first place. Then he would point to one of the most recent images, pulling all kinds of wild speculations out of what were basically a few thousand fancy postcards that had arrived over the last three weeks.

That's what he was doing when the MSNBC reporter broke in, muttering, "Excuse me, Mr. Rheingold. Nobody's listening."

"What do you mean?" he bristled.

The reporter said, "Sir," with a distracted voice. "We broke away several seconds ago. But we'll probably come back to you in a few minutes, if you're willing to make a quick comment on the news—"

"What news?"

The man tapped his earpiece, and with a knowing grin admitted, "It just broke. Some telescope down in Australia found a second alien species. And these guys aren't anything like your little Balla...!"

They were the Smilers, dubbed that for their enormous mouths and toothy grins. Where the Balla had a whispering signal coming from a nearby sun, the Smilers' signal came from a thousand light-years away, and it was a screaming roar by comparison. No sun lay at its source. The aliens had abandoned their home world aeons ago, migrating away from every sun. They lived by terraforming comets and plutos and the occasional interstellar planet, building artificial suns and vast arrays of radio dishes. Every second, their broadcasts spewed out more energy than humanity had produced in its entire existence, and, following some murky Smiler logic, they wanted to do nothing but boast, showing the universe just how clever they were.

Buried inside their signal were half a thousand treasures, including exact plans for a quick and clean fusion reactor, a high-acceleration plasma rocket, and the manufacturing schematics for a stew of ultrastrong materials. Also included was an ocean of intricate mathematics that seemed to be the much-anticipated M-Theory. And perhaps most astonishing, the aliens threw in a comprehensive map of the Milky Way, identifying every intelligent species from which they'd heard so much as a murmur, and the frequencies and methods of transmission, and where exactly to look for these other next-door neighbors.

The universe does nothing three times.

Humans and the Balla and the Smilers were just the first examples of a common, if never quite ordinary or predictable, phenomena.

In the first year, forty unique species had been heard from, if only through a distorted squawk lasting less than a minute. After the second year, only the spectacular and horrific species made it into the news. And after ten years of relentlessly improving skills, even an informed expert could only shrug his shoulders. "I don't know how many species we'll eventually name," Jack had to admit. "All I know is that they're everywhere, and there's a lot of sky left to be seen."

"I really like your Decoy books," said a slightly ruffled, decidedly middle-aged man. Smiling at the author with a mixture of cool pleasure and narrow intelligence, he asked, "Are you writing another? Because that last book... well, it ends rather in the middle of things \_\_\_"

In that instant, Jack became a writer again. He remembered how uncomfortable he was at these meet-the-pros events. They were fantastically noisy and unreasonably crowded, and for a person who was fundamentally shy, they could be a genuine nightmare. Not that the fan standing before him was unlikable or rude. If anything, the poor fellow was working too hard, gushing about novels better than ten years old, looking far too earnest when he asked, "So what happens next in the series?"

Jack had to tell him, "Nothing happens. There's no next book."

The man's clothes were casual and out of fashion, and he didn't even sport one of the intricate medallions or rings depicting the popular aliens. The last ten years hadn't happened. Not in this fellow's mind, they hadn't. With a winded gasp, he said, "There isn't?" and shook his head. Then with a misplaced compassion, he said, "I'm sorry. Are you blocked somehow?"

"No, I just don't write anymore." How simple could it be? "I've got a different job now."

"But this is a convention," the man complained. "Aren't you here as a professional?"

"I was invited to attend," Jack explained with an officious care. "I used to be in this business, yes. And I was intrigued by the location, naturally. And the simple truth is that I was hoping for the chance to get out in the public eye, talking to people I don't normally hear from."

Puzzled, the man scratched at his uneven white beard. Then the obvious question occurred to him. "So what exactly do you do now?"

"I sit on the Oracle Committee."

At that point, abruptly, some stubborn switch was flipped On. The man's eyes brightened, and his mouth clamped shut with a mixture of astonishment and reflexive caution. It was all he could do to mutter, "I'm sorry, I didn't know. What do you do? Are you an assistant to someone?"

"No, I'm a voting member," Jack replied with a mild but delighted voice. "A member in full standing for most of the last decade."

His fan could only shrug, admitting, "I'm a reader. I know what I like, and I don't spend time following politics and such."

"There're a hundred voting members on the Committee," Jack allowed. "Hell, I barely know everyone's name."

That was a lie, but a believable lie. Which is what a writer did for his living—making untruths seem plausible and sweet.

The man regained his fragile composure. "Well, then... as an Oracle, I was wondering—"

"Yes?"

"Do you see a time when writers write my kind of books again?"

"Maybe," Jack offered.

"You do?"

Not at all. But he smiled, and with a storyteller's ease, he said, "The pace of change is slowing, I think. In a few more years, with a new generation of highly educated readers... sure, I think that a rebirth of our industry is very possible..." Then with his next breath, he added, "Could you excuse me? I just saw an old friend, and I really need to talk to him—"

"Oh, no. And thank you, sir."

"Thank you." Jack turned and slipped away. A pair of costumers stood nearby. They were pretending to be a single Smiler—a quadruped with a pair of burly arms at both ends of the body. The single face was watching nobody but him, and as he passed by, someone growled, and with a decidedly human voice said, "Censor this," while flipping up the two middle fingers of a six-fingered hand.

With a practiced ease, Jack pretended not to notice. He let his fancy eyes scan the crowd, and sure enough, it was easy to find a familiar face in that crush of bodies. The round, clean-shaved face smiled, and a strong little hand was offered.

"Sam Timmons," Jack exclaimed. "How have you been?"

"Prospering," his one-time colleague exclaimed. "And you, Jack?"

"Hanging on," he replied.

"Not you," Timmons responded. "Now don't turn modest on me!"

They laughed for a moment, appraising each other. It had been eight or nine years since they'd last met in person, and middle age had been kindest to Timmons. He had always been a little heavy, but his weight served to make his face smoother and younger than Jack's. As always, his clothes were well-tailored—Bishop Boy fabrics and Italian shoes—and everything about him had a seamlessly groomed appearance. His brown hair was thick, almost boyish—an easy trick with the new biomedical procedures. But he had a mature man's gaze, hard and certain even when the smile was in full shine.

"Quite the party," said Jack, aiming for the smallest of small talk.

"Like the meat-markets of old," Timmons remarked with a happy laugh. Then, showing a sly wink, he mentioned, "I saw that Smiler giving you the bird."

Jack shrugged it off. "Some still don't accept the Committee's mandate, I suppose."

"Some people never understand," Timmons said.

"Which is dumb," Jack rumbled, instantly regretting his pissy tone.

But Timmons seemed to appreciate the observation. "What choice did we have?" he asked with a seamless confidence. "There had to be controls set in place. Priorities defined. Disasters put on hold." He nodded and smiled, and after a moment of reflection, he changed the subject. "God, remember when you and I first met? We'd just been published. Each of us, what? A couple bad stories? And we were signing at the same table—"

Jack offered a name.

"The old shit was stoned," Timmons remarked. "Or drunk. Or both, probably. But those kids didn't care. His fans just kept bringing in his books. In sacks, in wheelbarrows. In goddamn dump trucks, it seemed like!"

They enjoyed a good long laugh. Here was the purpose of youth—a source of entertainment for a person in his comfortable years.

"Well," Timmons said, "nobody reads that old shit now, do they?"

"They don't," Jack agreed.

Then they laughed again, but in a new, decidedly different way. Like small-minded victors gloating over the body of an old foe, they enjoyed themselves quietly, looking everywhere but at the other man's eyes.

"You said you saw someone," Tasha prodded.

"What's that?"

"You said you ran into someone at the party." Then she realized what Jack was doing. "Hey, this is a vacation. Quit working." She said, "Darling," with a tight, impatient voice, setting her hand over his closed eyes. "Forget the world. Forget humanity. Pay attention to me, all right?"

He felt her hand, its heat and the elegant long bones of her fingers, but he couldn't see anything except what was being displayed inside his fancy eyes. Even when he opened his eyes, he saw a string of images harvested from Committee-only files. Shutting down the eyes' high-functions took time. By law, what he was watching couldn't be stored in any form, regardless of encryption.

"Are you back?" Tasha inquired.

Eventually Jack could say, "I am now."

"So what happened at the party?"

"I signed autographs, talked to old fans." He mentioned the man who hadn't read anything new in years. "They were the same faces as always, just older. Tired and fewer. I still feel like a new kid on the block."

"You're not," she replied.

"Thank you," he said.

"What I mean," Tasha told him, "is that you've accomplished a lot since you gave up writing." She showed him a good stare, reminding him, "They're the little people here. Not you."

He decided to shift the subject, admitting, "The people wearing the costumes are younger, I'm pretty sure."

"Yeah, well. That's reasonable."

"A Smiler had me worried." He shrugged, admitting, "It stared at me with those huge black eyes, and someone inside doesn't quite approve of our current policies. Judging by the schoolyard gesture."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No, just complained." Then he made himself look at his wife's face, reminding her, "We're safe here. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have come. And I certainly wouldn't have brought you and the boys."

"Why wouldn't it be safe?" she asked, angry that he even raised the issue. "Your own security people looked at the hotel and the convention's organization. How many times were we scanned between Quito and here?"

"Right," he said.

"The newest security features," she mentioned.

Watching everyone, yes. Even an old-fashioned ass-kicking was pretty much impossible.

"You're being paranoid," she warned him.

"Which is why I've got this job." He offered a weak smile and halfway laughed. "I earn the big money because I'm better than most people at being worried about trivial things."

His wife watched him with admiration and with doubt. Then, knowing what was best, she redirected the conversation. "When you got here, first thing, you said that you bumped into someone at the party. So who was it?"

"Oh, yeah. Sam Timmons."

"Yeah? How's he doing?"

"Looks prosperous, as always. Happy. Fit." Jack laughed quietly, adding, "In that order, I would guess."

"Where's he getting his money?"

"Consulting. Investments. Some hybrid of the two."

"Good for him." Tasha sat on the bed beside Jack. It was late, their boys in their rooms and hard asleep. She was dressed for bed. She looked tired and impatient and probably a little horny. Hotel rooms had that effect on her. "What were you watching just now? Something about Sam?"

He said, "No." Then he told her, "I was just getting an update on current events."

"Anything you can share?"

"Riots in Bombay and Kiev."

"Conservative groups involved?"

"Always." There were dozens of anti-sky movements, all fighting to turn back the clock twenty years. But they mostly fought each other, and usually over inane points and small philosophies.

"What else?" said Tasha. "And give me some good news."

"Industrial efficiencies are doubling every seven months, with economic growth tagging along right behind."

"How about something more personal?"

"Kathryn had her baby," Jack reported. She was another member of the Committee, and more important, she was one of Tasha's best Mends.

"Well, that's good. Great! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I just did."

She playfully stuck out her tongue, then asked, "What were you watching when I stopped you?"

He had to say it. "In the last twelve hours, the Committee carried out three successful raids. One in Shanghai, and two more in Siberia—"

"Magic shops?" she asked, in a whisper.

"I can't say," he replied.

"God! Why do people even think about that crap?"

"I didn't say—"

"You didn't. No." Tasha climbed off the bed. She was thinking about the boys. Jack could see the fears racing behind her damp eyes, worry and reason fighting for dominion. But they had to be safe here. Tasha trusted the world's protective measures far more than her paranoid husband ever could. Besides, hadn't the system worked? The magic shops had been identified by surveillance measures and raided without incident. Innocents hadn't been injured, and only the guilty would be.

Jack changed the subject, remarking, "You look nice."

His wife's nightgown was sheer, its fabric leaking a newly discovered pheromone. The extraterrestrials knew nothing about human biology, but they had offered tools that could analyze and then synthesize any molecule in nature. It was just another major revolution in an age when a hundred revolutions were chasing one another in a wild sprint.

Yet still, a woman's breasts could fascinate any man.

"What are you thinking?" Tasha asked, knowing the answer.

He looked at the Smiler window, thinking of the UN stations that were constantly watching over them. "Maybe we could dial up a different view," he suggested. "A little entertainment, maybe."

"Something filthy?"

"Absolutely," he declared.

She said, "All right," and started for the bathroom. "You do the choosing. I'll trust you."

Jack pulled off his shirt, using one fancy eye to access the room's entertainment menu.

Over the sound of running water, Tasha called out, "Timmons, was it?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Didn't he win that big award? Everyone said you were sure to win, but then he bought a bunch of memberships for his friends...?"

"It was just an award," Jack countered.

"Well, obviously."

Jack made his selection and fell back on the clean covers, looking up at the white emptiness of the ceiling. "Sam had fancy eyes," he mentioned. "It took a long time for me to notice."

The water stopped running. "What was that?"

"Timmons's eyes. They're as good as mine." Jack shook his head. "He told me that he got them through some back channels, through a friend."

"That's how I got mine," Tasha countered.

"I remember."

"You're my friend."

"Always," he purred. Then he closed his wondrous eyes, seeing nothing. "Anyway," he said with a sigh. "Sam asked me out to dinner tomorrow night. For old times' sake."

"Make the big-award winner pay," Tasha told him.

"Oh, he will. He will." Jack turned his head and opened his eyes again. Digital lovers had appeared inside the Smiler window, vigorously engaged in things meant to be private, and the Oracle ignored them, staring hard at things that could never be mentioned aloud.

"Will people ever again write speculative fiction?"

The moderator posed that question, his words magnified by nanophones, his voice conveying a longing and genuine hopefulness. He was a one-time book editor—a small, handsome, and rather elderly man once famous for his voracious reading habits and a relentless string of publishing successes. He had never bought so much as a shopping list from Jack Rheingold. Yet turning to his left, he said, "Jack," with an easy fondness. "Introduce yourself, please. For those who live on Pluto. And then, if you're willing, give us your considerable opinion: Will anyone do serious, important work again?"

"I don't know how considerable it'll be," he joked, gazing across the enormous auditorium. Perhaps a thousand people were waiting to hear the panelists. Costumes were scarce. The audience was mostly white and usually male, and everyone seemed to be fascinated by the subject. Jack gathered his thoughts as he gave a clipped description of his life: As a young man, he made a modest living as a writer. Then his books fell out of print, and he was having trouble finding markets for his new work. A quick wink at the moderator earned a good-natured laugh. "And then everything changed," Jack mentioned. "Aliens and futuristic technologies were suddenly fascinating to the general public, and for the next couple years, my old books were being churned out by the print-on-demand shops. And for the first time in my professional life, I was actually making a good solid living."

A dark murmur passed through the audience.

"I was about to build my dream house," he confessed. "And that's when Houston happened." He could have said St. Petersburg. Or Madras. But the audience was mostly American, and everybody knew somebody who had vanished in the south Texas disaster. "Overnight, our society jumped from curiosity and speculation into a near-panic, and when cool heads finally prevailed, we made a series of hard, pragmatic choices."

Hundreds shifted in their chairs.

The moderator said, "Jack," again. Then, as if they were fine friends, he said, "You've never told me the story. Exactly how did you get your position on the Oracle Committee?"

"I really don't know," Jack said, shrugging his shoulders.

Most assumed that he was joking. Even the moderator laughed aloud, saying, "No, really. I've always believed—correct me if I'm wrong here—that it was your public warnings about too many changes happening too quickly."

"Plenty of voices were giving the same warnings," he countered.

"But you predicted troubles with the Smilers' technologies. That business with 'magic,' and so on."

The Smilers lived today in interstellar space, in widely separated communities. In part, it was because they had destroyed their home world. That was one of those oh-by-the-way details that lay buried beneath their marvels and arrogant boastings. On a much smaller scale, that's what had happened to Houston. A private research lab, using specifications taken from public records, had built a machine that should have gently produced vast quantities of perfect nanotubules. Instead, two million died, a city was ruined, and, to this day, a slice of Texas was boiling and spitting up black, virulent clouds.

"What happened, I think," Jack began. Then he paused, pretending to hunt for the right words. He wanted to appear thoughtful and cautious, even when he knew exactly what he wanted to say. "The panic was everywhere," he allowed. "At all levels, in our private lives and in the highest ranks of government, people were absolutely terrified. We needed measures to control the flow of information from the sky, and we desperately needed people who could help direct and control our society's growth." He paused, and sighed. "I was a known name and a recognized face. I had appeared on a few news programs, and I'd met government officials in the process. Right or wrong, somebody high-up selected me to fill the seat on the Committee that had been reserved for an American author."

"And you've served for most of a decade," the moderator remarked. "With distinction."

The only gracious response was to say, "Thank you," and move on. Jack smiled at his audience, showing confidence, and then he finally answered the mostly forgotten question. "Yes," he said, "I think there will be new works in our field. Eventually. When the pace of change slackens. And when our world decides where it is going and how it's going to get there."

It was a good answer, judging by the little nods and satisfied sounds. But then again, Jack had years of practice in the high art of politics.

Four other retired authors sat behind the long table. Two men, two women. The first three gave polished introductions. To various degrees, each made a living acting as a consultant to one of the brand new industries, helping their corporate officers identify trends that would survive another six or seven months. And sensing the general mood, each speaker did his or her best to repeat Jack's optimism, changing his phrasing, but basically stealing everything else.

Sam Timmons was last to speak.

"Our business is finished," he began, skipping the pretense of an introduction. "Nobody wants to read about fictional aliens when real ones are being uncovered every day. I know / don't want to read that stuff. What I do, for fun and for work, is study the latest broadcasts. The lives and histories of these aliens are infinitely more engaging than anything that I could ever muscle up from my backwater human

imagination."

People stirred in the audience, and on the stage, too.

"But by the same token," he continued. "In another sense, I think all of us sitting up here are still writing our brand of fiction." He held himself with an easy arrogance—a quality that always served the author who could master it. With a wide grin, he looked down the length of the table, remarking, "Each of us writes about the future, but we don't use words anymore. We've thrown away the narrative method, and with our own actions, we're building the story of our own world. Each of us, some less and some more, is helping to tell the same amazing story, and our reborn species is our medium. Our page."

There was a pause.

The other panelists remained very still, waiting for a reaction. And a cheer rose up from the ends of the auditorium, thin at first but growing louder. The panelists shifted in their seats, allowing themselves to relax. Then came a thin rain of applause before the auditorium fell silent again, leaving a residue of smug good feelings that showed best in Timmons' hard, self-congratulatory smile.

"How's the family enjoying their vacation?"

"Pretty well. The boys like the hotel's playland, and my wife hits the shops down in the concourse." Jack regarded his grilled bonito for a moment before adding, "Actually, there's not much up here that they can't do at home. Which is why Tasha took them down to Quito for the day."

"They'll have fun," Timmons promised. "Really, it's a beautiful city. They've done a wonderful job absorbing all their prosperity." He was working on a thick cultured steak, slicing the boneless meat into juicy red ribbons. "I've visited Ecuador on business. Two or three times."

"When you were consulting for Miracle, Inc."

"Sure." The man was untroubled that Jack knew his work history. "In part, they wanted my expertise. How much traffic would the skyhook bring, and how soon? But mostly, they just wanted someone who'd say the right words. Who'd tell their officers and investors to sleep easy, at least for the next few years."

Jack said, "Sure."

Timmons took a hearty bite of steak.

"Miracle's building its own ships," Jack pointed out. "Using Smiler engines and Goggle-eye materials, and it wants to launch from everywhere on the globe."

"That's what I hear," Timmons allowed. "I'm not with those fools anymore." He set his fork and knife on the edge of his plate, wiping his mouth with a perfumed napkin. Timmons looked prosperous and relaxed, wearing a bright silk shirt and a tightly knotted tie, an old-fashioned Rolex on his right wrist and a simple gold band on the ring finger. A clear quick twinkle came to his artificial eyes, a little smirk building. Then he folded his napkin and set it on the table, remarking to his dinner guest, "But you already knew that, don't you? Miracle, Inc. and I parted ways... how long has it been...?"

"Three years," answered Jack.

"A division of opinion, it was. They thought they were going to have the first major presence in space. Launching tanker-sized cargoes, and then small cities. But I warned them. I told them they'd have troubles with local governments and the UN. They had to expect long delays. There would be concerns about the plasma engines. Regulations and air passage rights, and headaches like that."

"All of which have come true," Jack said.

Timmons gave a quick shrug and a half-wink. Then he grinned, asking, "But you're not entirely sure who pays my bills now. Are you?"

"Do you mind my asking?"

"You can always ask." Timmons pretended to consider the question, but his mind was already made up. Not yet. He said as much when he picked up his fork again. He said it when he set a clean napkin into his lap. Then, speaking to the waiter standing beside their table, he said, "More wine. Please."

The machine smiled at both men, asking, "And for you, sir?"

"Nothing," Jack replied. "I'm fine for now."

They were the only diners on a tiny island bracketed by a swift artificial stream. The waiter walked across an arching bridge, leaving them. The island was thickly planted, lending to the sense of isolation. Orchids were in bloom, displaying elaborate flowers that may or may not have been natural. Jack didn't know his botany well enough to tell if these were wild species or marvels cooked up in someone's new laboratory. For a moment, he watched the stream sliding past, and then Timmons broke in on his thoughts, asking, "What's on your itinerary tomorrow?"

"Actually, I've got a speech in the morning. An Hour With an Oracle,' is the title." He laughed, adding, "A usefully vague title."

"I've got an early panel," said Timmons. "Memories of Our First Contact.' Which means, I suppose, that I'll be talking about the Balla again. Myself and—" He named two retired writers. "Which means you're the lucky one here."

Both men laughed.

Then Jack mentioned, "Afterward, I'm taking the kids and Tasha up to the construction zone. We're being given a full tour."

"It must be a lot of fun, being who you are."

"Sometimes," Jack allowed.

"I'd love to have a close look at the work. Just to be up there—"

"Maybe I can talk to someone," Jack offered.

"Would you?"

"I'll try," said Jack. "I can't promise anything. But I will try."

Both men knew that if Jack made the request, permission would be granted instantly, without hesitation.

"I hope I get that chance," Timmons confided. Then he glanced over his shoulder, watching what appeared to be a giant daddy-longlegs stepping across the bridge. There wasn't room for a human inside its dangling body. Someone was operating the machine from his hotel room, or, more likely, from his faraway home. A set of intricate arms held out an autograph pad, and a shy voice asked, "Would you mind, Mr. Rheingold? I wasn't planning this, but I saw you through the trees—"

"Sure." He signed the white pad, and then, with a definite sharpness, he added, "Now if you'll excuse

us."

"Thank you, sir. Sure."

After the fan had retreated, Timmons laughed. He shook his head and giggled, remarking, "That bug's eyes didn't even glance at me."

A feeling came over Jack. He looked at his dinner companion, took a shallow breath, the tips of his fingers tingling and a sudden nervousness stealing away the last of his appetite.

"Jack," Timmons purred, "you're the main attraction here."

He stared at his one-time colleague. "Who do you work for now?"

"You've tried to find out, have you?"

Jack said nothing.

"Your best lead," Timmons continued, "is a mailing address that leads to a vacant warehouse in Hilo, Hawaii." Then he shrugged, adding, "Plus some lucrative investments, of course. With all the best and luckiest corporations."

Jack fought the urge to look at the jungle surrounding them. Instead, he stared at that pleasant, perpetually smiling face, and he asked Timmons, "What do you want with me?"

"Invite me along with you tomorrow. Really, that's all I'm asking." He smiled with his eyes and mouth, holding his little hands open and palm up. "Just, please... take this old sci-fi writer up into space..."

"From the beginning, a few dissenters have argued that we are wrong. We meaning the Committee. We meaning the major and minor governments of the world. We who have a clear mandate, a thousand elections, and three billion concerned voters telling us exactly what they want done. But the dissenters still claim that we are wrong to control the flow of the alien messages. By demanding reason and order in these amazing times, we have done the world a great disservice. In censoring, and in a few cases, stopping the flow of key information into the public domain ... well, according to a few angry voices, we are nothing but tyrants and the worst kind of fools...."

"Frankly, as a point of fact, I agree with that hard assessment. Yes, we have to act like tyrants sometimes, and yes, we are perpetually foolish. And I can tell you honestly, I for one have never been comfortable with my role as a censor...!"

The door of their suite swung open, and two boys burst into the main room, engaged in some little race. Together, in a breathless voice, they cried out, "Dad!"

Jack froze the text of his speech, the word censor hanging phantom-like in the space between them. "Have fun?" he asked.

"Yeah," Petey claimed. "It was great!"

Clay couldn't simply agree. "It was pretty much okay," he allowed, those gray words passing through a beaming smile. "Mom had to shop. But we got to go to a dinosaur park. Robots and holos." He had loved it, but in the next moment, he had to add, "It wasn't as good as Disney."

"Too bad." Jack's attention began to waver. "Where is your Mom?"

"Here," she called out. Looking tired but pleased, Tasha stepped into the central room, a sack of

treasures floating after her. "I got something for your mother. But your dad... well, you're going to have to find something yourself. I just don't know about..."

Her voice trailed away.

Watching Jack, she quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He said it and smiled, and then he looked at the boys. "Hey, guys. Did you get anything for yourselves?"

"A couple of fancy books," Petey sang out.

"A virtual Cretaceous," Clay reported. "It's supposedly pretty accurate, although you never know about these things."

"Go play with them," Jack suggested. Then to make sure they understood, he added, "In your rooms. All right? Let Mom and me have a little time alone."

Neither boy made a complaining sound. They grabbed their toys, and the old race was resumed, Clay taking his rightful place at the lead while his little brother struggled just to hold the pace.

Tasha never quit watching him.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

He told her about the dinner. He mentioned Timmons' interest in joining them tomorrow. Tasha seemed to bristle at that news, but she had the good sense to say nothing. Then he mentioned the daddy-longlegs hunting for his autograph, and he said nothing else about it. "After that, it was just polite conversation. Talk about old times, and whatnot."

She settled on the sofa beside him. In the early years, she read everything that he wrote, including what would never sell. She knew him. She knew how he told stories and how he thought, and that's why she went back to the fan wanting his autograph. "What about the bug? What?"

"I'm not telling you this," he began.

"Okay."

"I'm talking in my sleep. If anyone ever asks."

She said nothing, waiting now.

"Seven months ago, the new lunar array got a long look at a signal from Andromeda—"

"Wait! That's not inside our galaxy, is it?"

"Our first real faraway signal, yeah," he said. "It was a laser beacon. Very powerful. Phenomenally powerful, in fact. In about three hours' time, we doubled the information that we've gotten from the stars."

"Was that daddy-longlegs—?"

"The alien responsible? No." He shook his head. "That would have been obvious, and clumsy." Jack took a moment, deciding what to explain next. "After we arrived at the hotel, I set up a little program. My right eye runs it. Every alien costume that it sees is identified by species and put on a list. I'm making a count. A census. I got curious about which aliens are popular, and which ones aren't."

"Okay," she said.

He explained, "My eye didn't find any listing for that creature in the normal files. So immediately, it shot a warning at me. Timmons and I were talking. I didn't react. So the program started searching through fictional aliens, in case. And again, no candidates. Which is when this feeling came over me, and I downloaded and twitched open a second list of known aliens."

In the distance, a happy voice cried out, "I've got you, haddysaur. In my mouth, I've got you!"

The adults shivered for a moment.

Tasha asked, "What second list?"

"Remember how the Smilers sent us a list of aliens and their locations? Well, the Andromedans went several steps farther. They sent us, and whoever else is in the path of that beam, the essential texts of every message they've ever received from slightly more than ten thousand species of intelligent life. Mostly from inside their own galaxy, but not always." He let those words drop, and then added, "In three hours, we increased our list of extraterrestrial lifeforms nearly tenfold."

Tasha shivered, then said, "And they're all classified, right?"

"The daddy-longlegs belongs in that list. That secret pool." He shook his head, adding, "Coincidence? It could be argued that some kid built a critter that just happened to resemble an obscure species. But I checked. That machine was identical to the real thing in every tiny facet, and every major one, too."

Tasha said nothing for a moment, pretending to listen to their sons wrestling in the next room. Then she prodded Jack, saying, "Nobody but you can get into that file, can they?"

"We have wonderful safeguards," he promised. "The Committee has first look at new technologies, and we've got the best encryption tools and quantum computers that can be built today."

"But why come up to you with a machine that practically tells you—?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Or I can think of too many reasons, maybe. My paranoia meter is off the scale here."

Now Tasha looked at the floor, her expression stern but composed. She was thinking hard about everything that had sent her husband into his paranoid spiral.

"I'm going to invite Timmons to come along with us." Jack spoke quietly, waiting for his wife to argue for caution, or anger, or some other useful tactic. That's what he wanted here. Tasha's clear-headed advice. But when she didn't respond, he said, "I could leave you and the boys behind. I could make an excuse and talk to Timmons alone—"

"No," she blurted. "I want to be there."

He wasn't entirely sorry to hear it.

"And I don't want to leave the boys down here, alone."

"We're as safe up there as anywhere," he allowed.

"Could you...?"

"What? Could I what?"

"Nothing," she said. "If Timmons wants to talk to you, we'll make him talk to both of us. Won't we?"

"Hopefully." Then he said again, "What did you want to ask me?"

"I was just wondering," Tasha continued. "Since you're talking in your sleep, and since I'm lying awake in the dark... why don't you whisper something more about what else these faraway Andromedans have given us...?"

"I thought your speech went quite well."

"Thank you."

"You came across as honest and very reasonable," Timmons continued, pleased to be giving Jack a sterling review. "The speech itself was politically shrewd, yet substantial at its heart. You sang justified praises for your work, but then you dwelled on the Committee's mistakes, too. Which I'm sure helped dispel the cliché of bloodless bureaucrats ruling from ivory towers."

"Speaking of towers," Jack mentioned, trying to change subjects. "Engage the C-setting in your eyes, and you'll get a rather different perspective."

"Oh, goodness. Yes."

The new setting linked them with telemetry from outside. Using that data, their eyes wove an image, and the walls of the giant freight elevator seemed to vanish. For an instant, they could see the skyhook's diamond shell streaking past. And then the shell evaporated too, leaving the two men inside sitting in the open. They could still see each other, and Jack kept glancing at Tasha and the boys. But it felt as if there was nothing but stars and vacuum around them, and they could see themselves accelerating out into space at an astonishing pace.

Quietly, almost reverently, Timmons said, "This is wonderful."

Jack agreed.

"How many times have you actually been here?" his guest inquired. "Up in space, I mean."

"Before today, six times," Jack allowed. "Touring the security posts, mostly. Plus a little shakedown cruise on one of the first torchships." He let himself laugh, adding, "We could have reached Mars in less than a week. And I was tempted. Believe me. But instead, we just did a flyby of the moon and came home again."

"I am jealous," Timmons confessed.

Jack shrugged, saying nothing.

The cargo pad was huge and virtually empty, its blister of air contained by an invisible gossamer dome. The boys sat on a nearby bench, happily watching their ascent through a Smiler window, while Tasha sat between them, helping to keep the peace when she wasn't nervously glancing over her shoulder at Jack. A pair of construction robots stood nearby, waiting for the first question; but none had been asked. The official delegation was still thousands of miles overhead, waiting at the top of the skyhook. Jack had warned them that he didn't want any fuss made, which meant that no more than a hundred architects and engineers would be vying for his attentions. Normally, he despised these forced events, but today, for every good reason, he kept wishing that they were already there, safe inside one of life's silly rituals.

"Thank you again for including me," said Timmons. "I know that I was pushy about coming along, but I

had good reasons. Great reasons, frankly."

"Such as?"

His guest glanced at him and smiled happily, while his eyes appeared amused and perhaps a little distracted. "I think you already know some of the story, Jack. In fact, I'm counting on your intuition. If you can't piece it together for yourself, then what I've been doing here is a waste of my precious time."

Again, Tasha glanced at them, her mouth hanging open.

Jack managed a breath, and then he said, "You already know about the Andromedans, don't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Of course I don't know how you learned about them," Jack continued, "but the simplest explanation is probably best."

"What is the simple explanation?"

He answered, "You have a friend on the Committee."

"I'd like to think that you're my friend, Jack." Timmons laughed, betraying a genuine nervousness. Then his eyebrows lifted, and he admitted, "Actually, I have several good friends who happen, yes, to be colleagues of yours."

"Colleagues who gave you access to sealed files."

Timmons nodded, admitting, "I've had a good look at portions of the files. What matters most." The man sat back and took a deep breath, and then he quietly announced, "It's just astonishing what the Andromedans have given us. If I had the power, I'd send them a message. A thank-you note. Their gift was the very best. By far, the most important. And I'd like them to know that."

"You think it is?"

Timmons gave a little snort. "Of course. Why not? A person in your position... well, it has to be an enormous blessing. You and the rest of the Committee have been struggling from the start. You have an impossible mandate. You're overseeing the birth of an entirely new society. Nothing like this has ever been attempted by human beings. Not on this scale, and not with so much at stake. Yet not only do you have to do it right, there's no room to make mistakes."

"There's a little room," Jack countered. "A little wriggle space."

"Not when it comes to important mistakes." Timmons closed his eyes, and then he opened them again. "But luckily, we happened to find the Andromedans: A very advanced, exceptionally ancient species that has studied thousands of species, in depth. They've measured everyone's mistakes and the tragic consequences, and they've identified the roaring successes. Each species' nature comes into play. Mathematical models have been constructed, making predictions that almost always come true." Again he closed his eyes, referring to some secret file. "Social engineering as a hard science. Finally. And not only does the science work, but our benefactors have taught us how to make this science work for ourselves."

"Yes," Jack allowed, "it's impressive stuff."

"Intelligence evolves in how many directions?"

"Infinite directions."

"No," Timmons said, "I mean stable directions. And I mean highly social, highly visual creatures like us and like the Balla. How many options do we have, if we want to build a lasting, happy high-tech civilization?"

"Eleven," Jack allowed.

"Eleven islands of stability inside a chaos of rebellion and war and genocide." Timmons shook his round face, and he grinned, and after a little moment, he added, "The Committee has already picked its target. Hasn't it?"

"We have a general plan, yes."

"The skyhooks allow cheap but controlled access to space. That's the course we were following in the first place, so why not continue along the same rational line? Important but still conservative changes to the species itself: Longer lifespans, but no immortality. Enhanced intelligence, but only to a carefully defined point." Again he shook his head. "Amusing, isn't it? We can plug humanity into these alien equations, and out come eleven stable solutions. And how many of these solutions actually look human when we're finished?"

"Two," Jack said.

"Once we reach the target, our society will be locked-in. Isn't that the fair assessment? We will become an entirely new animal that could well persist, with minimal changes, for the next five billion years."

"Some people hope so," said Jack.

"You don't?"

"These equations may not work perfectly with humans," he cautioned. "The Andromedans themselves have some rather stern warnings—"

"But still," Timmons interrupted, his voice finding muscle and volume. "You have a goal. You and the rest of the Committee argued about it for several months, and you took votes, and you held conferences, and you took more votes until you finally reached something that resembled a consensus. A hundred intelligent and presumably rational men and women were sitting in their conference hall at UN headquarters, in New York City, and seventy-six hands were lifted in unison, effectively deciding the next five billion years of human history."

Jack stared at the man. "I remember, Sam. I was there."

"You were," Timmons agreed. Then he closed his eyes once again—

—and suddenly Jack was staring at the world through someone else's eyes. He found himself on the street outside the Oracles' headquarters—an elegant, false-granite structure built in three weeks by one of the first brigades of construction robots. The Committee was in recess, but most of Jack's colleagues would have come to their offices, attending briefings and meeting with their own staffs. Even on a weekend afternoon, he should be watching an endless flow of foot traffic passing through the Committee's tall, diamond-paned doors. But the stranger's eyes saw nothing except long reaches of empty pink stairs and a few busy pigeons. The dull anxieties that had been gnawing at Jack vanished abruptly, replaced by a raging panic. Something horrible was about to happen. He could feel a treacherous and vast menace lurking just out of view. But nothing changed. For what felt like an eternity, the pigeons bobbed their heads and flicked their wings; and finally, as Jack took a shallow quick breath,

the diamond doors swung wide and a lone figure calmly strolled into the open air.

The pigeons exploded into flight.

For an embarrassing long moment, Jack didn't recognize the man.

He was that man.

What he was watching was himself, standing on the top stair, one arm lifted high and the hand waving; and now the eyes through which Jack could see began to pan to their left, revealing thousands of people standing shoulder to shoulder in a great plaza that he didn't recognize, in the heart of what looked like a clean and prosperous and radically transformed city.

Tasha cried out, "No—!"

Then, in the next horrible instant, the cargo pad began to jerk and shake, safety harnesses instantly weaving themselves around its passengers, holding them against their benches, while the pad struggled against its momentum, bringing itself to an emergency stop.

"Mommy?" Petey whimpered. Their youngest hadn't used that name in a year, but just a heartbeat later, he said it a second time. "What's happening to us, Mommy? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Tasha lied. "It's nothing."

"Something's got to be wrong here," was Clay's hard assessment. "It's dark, and we're not moving anywhere."

"But we're safe," his mother insisted. Then she called out, "What is it? A power outage, maybe?"

The robots assumed that the question was theirs to answer. One quietly responded, "There's a large-scale disruption, yes. But our emergency systems are operating within norms—"

"Shut up!" she hollered.

But it wasn't a simple power outage. Except for allowing him to see his immediate surroundings, Jack's eyes had stopped working. The pad's distant edge leaked an amber warning light. He could just see Tasha peeling away her harness, and then leaping up while telling the boys, "Stay where you are! I mean it! And leave those harnesses on!"

With a low, fierce voice, Jack said to Timmons, "What the fuck are you doing?"

His companion seemed to be grinning at him in the near-darkness, holding his head at a calm angle while he deftly removed his own harness.

Tasha ran up, asking, "What was I watching just now?"

"You showed her the same... scene... ?" Jack sputtered.

"A scene, yes. She saw exactly what you saw." Timmons rose to his feet. "And to answer your first question: What the fuck I am doing is making you a considerable and very generous offer."

Jack struggled to engage his fancy eyes, but the fault wasn't with his hardware. The entire net had collapsed, along with energy production. How wide was the disruption? How could it happen? But he kicked those questions aside, growling at Timmons, "Explain all of this. Now."

Timmons glanced at Tasha. "How are your boys? Are they fine?"

"For the moment," she muttered.

"Good. Very good." The man took a deep breath, adding, "Let's work at trying to keep them well. Shall we?"

Jack stifled a curse.

"What do you want?" Tasha snapped.

With the mildest of voices, Timmons announced, "Some rather considerable changes are coming. Arriving today, in fact. Rumbling into view as we speak." Then he took a deep, satisfied breath before adding, "You've earned our attentions, Jack. You have a good mind, a good presence, and a fair talent for politics. In a very difficult business, you've made remarkably few enemies."

"So what?"

"But here's what's most important, Jack: You voted with my friends. My associates. You and twenty-three others stood against the Committee's secret agenda for humanity, and when we were looking at potential candidates—"

"For what job?" Tasha interrupted.

"President." Timmons said the word with a prurient delight. Then he added, "By that, I mean president of a newly reorganized Committee. An Oracle Committee with a firmer grasp of the needs of its people, and their enormous promise, too."

"What is happening?" Jack asked. "I mean now, with my colleagues... what are you doing with them...?"

As if wounded, Timmons exclaimed, "We aren't vicious people. This isn't some bloody coup, and nobody is being placed against a random wall and shot." With both hands, he pretended to physically shove those images aside. "All I can tell you is what I know, and it's that everything is being done smoothly and quickly, overseen by good people, many of whom you've trusted for years now."

"What...?" Tasha began.

Timmons turned toward her. "Yes? A question?"

But her courage dribbled away.

Jack asked his own question with a sharp suspicion. "What kind of world do you want to make?"

Timmons gave an amused snort. "I'm human. I want everything that's possible"

Then he briefly explained himself, acting as if nothing could be more obvious. "We'll build cheap, reliable starships, and well explode across this arm of the Milky Way. With all that room, humans will be able to achieve all eleven harmonious states. And thousands more that nobody's envisioned yet."

Jack swallowed, and nodded. "But what if?" he asked. "Just suppose. If I don't accept this post—if for some reason I refuse your generous offer— what happens to me? To us?"

Timmons was ready. He knew how to maintain his broad smile even as he shook his head, remarking with a casual menace, "If it was up to me, my friend, your fate would be a quiet and comfortable and

very obscure life. That is, if it was up to me."

Jack shivered and said nothing.

"How long?" Tasha blurted. "Before he needs to decide—?"

"Three or four minutes," Timmons replied, staring only at Jack. "Really, I don't think it's that difficult a decision. Do you?"

Jack looked at his wife.

"Come over here," she muttered. "Let's talk about this."

They started walking away from the center of the pad. Tasha's arms were crossed, and she shivered from simple nerves. After a little while, she looked at him, then glanced back at Timmons. She almost spoke, but one of the robots ran up to them suddenly, reminding them, "We're operating on emergency power now. The safety fields are no longer in effect—"

"I know that," she snapped. "Thank you."

"Leave us alone," Jack told the machine. Then he followed Tasha for a few more steps, finally stopping her with a touch. "This is a figurehead post, you know. What they're offering me."

She nodded, and grimaced.

"I don't look very big or ambitious to them, and nobody sees me as a threat."

Quietly, she asked, "Who's responsible? Do you have any idea?"

"I can make five good guesses," he admitted.

She didn't ask for names.

Jack looked over his shoulder. The boys were still seated, but one of them was crying. Petey was. He heard the sobs, and then Clay barked, "It's going to be all right. So please, shut up!"

Timmons was standing by himself, speaking quietly but effusively to someone that only he could see.

Jack turned back to Tasha, but she was gone. He saw her running across the pad, her body lightened by the altitude, her gait long and her back held stiff and straight. He called out to her. He shouted, "What are you doing?" And then he started to run, to sprint, chasing her to the pad's lip and that ribbon of warm amber light.

Tasha was squatting, perched perilously close to the gossamer dome that held the air inside and kept the hard vacuum out. Her face was buried between her knees, and with a mixture of terror and loathing, she wept.

"Bloodless or not," he admitted, "we are talking about a coup. A rebellion. And if the people behind this mess had all that much power, they wouldn't bother begging for my face and my good name."

Tasha said nothing, pretending not to notice him.

Jack looked back over his shoulder again. Timmons was coming after them, trotting along with a growing urgency.

"We've got people above us and below us," Jack offered. "Both groups have some of the smartest men and women anywhere. I'll bet anything that right now, everyone's working on fixes to get us out of this place."

Tasha sniffed, and then she asked him, "What would you bet? If it came down to a wager, what would you risk?"

Jack opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak.

Tasha looked away from him, remarking, "You know, that's what was wrong with your writing."

"My writing? What are you talking about?"

She sniffed and said, "You were always so careful. With style, with subject. You never took real chances, Jack. You don't know how many times I wanted to tell you, Try to be bold. Just once. Go out on that limb farther than any of these pumped up egos have gone before..."

"Shit, I didn't know," he muttered.

"Because I never told you," she admitted.

Timmons was near enough that they could hear his deep, wet breathing, followed by a worried voice. "Have you made up your mind?" he called out. "Jack? Jack?"

Jack glanced at his wife. "What are you suggesting? We tell these shits 'Yes,' but later, when I'm actually president, we turn against them?"

"And bite them in the ass, yes. That's a smart, time-honored strategy." Then she calmly rose to her feet, watching as Timmons closed the gap, and with those last few moments of privacy, she said, "Or call their bluff, if that's what you think this is. Tell them, 'No, and go to hell!'"

"Tell them how—?" he began to ask.

Then he saw it for himself.

A slow step backward put him near enough to the dome that his skin began to tingle. The gossamer field could hold back a quiet atmosphere, but not a full-grown man.

Timmons slowed in front of them, and stopped.

"Okay, Jack," he said. "What's your decision?"

Jack looked at his wife, and she returned his gaze, a cold sternness coming into her face.

"It's your call, darling," Tasha said with a firm, calm voice. "Whatever you decide. I'll help any way I can."

Then the two of them turned to face Timmons together.

"Yes, Jack...?"

"His legs," Jack whispered. "You get them. And I'll grab the little fucker's arms."