

"Man for the Job"

by Robert Reed

Tests and interviews, rankings and grades. This is how every soul is measured. And if you give life the chance, it will always test you again. A fine showing can dilute every previous mistake. And one great effort on your part can make up for the lost years and squandered opportunities.

You are reminding yourself of that now. "Everything is possible," you whisper, standing alone in the center of the tiny examination room. You feel confidence and a practiced calm. Web-classes have taught you how to act, what to say, and when it is wise to say nothing. Yet all this hard-earned poise is seriously challenged in those first moments: Your examiner happens to be female, perhaps half your age and perfectly suited for her job. She looks handsome if not quite beautiful, too slender according to present fashion, but plainly at ease with her own body. Her walk contains a mild and appealing swagger. She says your name with a firm, clear voice. Then she offers a professional hand, your palm feeling cool and damp in her sturdy grasp. Is this part of the test? Some would say so. Every gesture on her part might belong to any of the fifty-nine testing schemes that have evolved in your lifetime. And you can be sure that other sets of careful eyes are watching both of you now.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

It is the standard signal. From this moment on, everything matters.

You feel uneasy but focused, nervous but in control. Employing tricks learned through feedback digitals, you relax your larynx before offering the word, "Fine." Then after that, "I feel fine. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, smiling politely.

She says, "Fly."

What was that?

"Or sit," she adds. "Whichever you prefer."

Why would she say "Fly"? Was it part of the test? And if so, which one? The Nordell 2055 is famous for employing nonsense words, generating confusion in its subjects. How would confusion appear in a scan of your mind? Imagining lightning storms behind your eyes, you offer a weak nod as you drop slowly into the nearest chair.

She sits across from you, primly crossing her legs. Her clothes might or might not mean something. Narrow black slacks ride loose on thin legs. The burgundy blouse has two pockets, and against those pockets, two small nipples reveal themselves. You can't help but notice. You wouldn't be male without investing a moment or two watching her stiff flesh rub against slick fabric. But you don't let those things distract you. Up go your eyes, meeting hers, and for no apparent reason, she winks at you.

Your smile is everything. Your posture and the relaxed hands are everything. Everything you do has consequences, and your performance is watched by sensors and studied by assorted experts set behind the bland white walls.

She winks again and says, "Hi."

That seems an odd tone to take. But you manage to say "Hello" with the same friendliness.

From her satchel comes a display panel. She unrolls it and summons your complete records. You can tell

that much in a glance. Long ago, you learned how to read upside down.

"It's been three years and three weeks," she says.

What has been?

"Since your last test," she continues. "Which seems like a rather long while."

You search for an appropriate response. The best you manage is your own weak question. "Is it a long time?"

"For a man unemployed," she says.

Your wasted life is laid out before her. Long, almost skeletal fingers touch numbers and coded evaluations, public records and private ones too. For many reasons, you wish to put an end to this interview. Which is your right. Whenever you wish, you can walk out the door, taking your talents to a different tester and a fresh day.

"What kind of work do you hope for?" she asks.

"Honest, rewarding work," you reply, by reflex.

The slightest nod is offered. "A clerk in a narrow-niche store, perhaps."

"If I'm suited," you reply.

"Or a dog walker."

"I like animals."

"Is that so?" Amused, she glances at your eyes. "Or maybe a salesman, perhaps?"

"What would I sell—?"

"Very little, judging by these scores."

You have never had an interest in a sales career, yet the words gnaw at your self-esteem.

She looks up again. This time, she says your name slowly, with a warm, perhaps empathic voice. "There have been some recent and very significant changes in my profession," she admits.

"Changes?" The word causes a secret panic. "What kind ...?"

"And public policies are shifting too."

"They are?"

"Do you follow world politics, sir?"

Almost never. Yet it seems wise to blurt out, "Of course I do."

"The current tensions—" she begins.

"I'm sure they'll pass," you interrupt.

But she seems less certain. Her handsome face stiffens, and her long fingers drum on the display. After a

brief silence, she says, "In my work, new methods are being deployed."

Good God.

"Fresh approaches to measure all aspects of life," she promises.

You can't smile anymore, but at least you don't show anger. With a careful tone, you ask, "Is there a new test?"

"Sometimes." She smiles abruptly. Enjoying your confusion, perhaps. "Don't misunderstand me. The old ways remain excellent, particularly when it comes to pairing somebody with a realm of study or finding a life-mate. Or marrying your subject to the very best available profession."

You nod, trying to appear agreeable.

She rolls up the display of your life and shrugs. "But what about the more difficult subjects?" she asks. "What about those who cannot be fairly tested? You and I both know why this can happen. Some subjects are difficult and complicated. No sense dwelling on the many reasons."

Thank goodness, no.

"But what if a larger, more sophisticated set of examinations became available? Operating on an entirely different set of principles ... does that interest you at all, sir ...?"

The idea terrifies you, frankly.

"Be honest," she insists.

Should you be?

"A fresh approach for the next century. What would that mean to a man like you?"

Honesty finally finds its voice. Shaking your head, you admit that you have invested an enormous amount of work preparing for this one day. You know the tests cannot be beaten, but with your rigorous preparations, you hoped to prove yourself worthy of a good rating.

As if in complete agreement, the young woman nods.

But once you stop speaking, she dismisses your earnestness. She leans closer, letting you stare at her lean face and the groomed hair and eyes that can't decide if they are brown or green.

Very quietly, she asks, "But what if?"

"What if what?" you mutter.

"If there was a test that was so thorough and so accurate ... a new test almost no one knows about yet, outside my industry or even inside it ... a test that measures its complicated subject to a degree never known before ...?"

"I don't see—" you begin.

"And afterwards," she interrupts, winking again. "Afterwards, the results would be far more important than simply fitting a few billion warm bodies into the best available careers."

Is that possible?

"Our worlds and economies only seem to be prospering now," she remarks. "Just imagine the great things to come when every part of the solar system is doing exactly what it was meant to do."

You can't picture such a thing. But then again, creativity will never be your strongest talent.

"Are you interested, sir?"

Perhaps.

She leans even closer, her blouse dipping. The pale tops of her breasts show for a half-moment. Then her right hand holds up a syringe tipped with a long, exceptionally thin needle. And again, she asks, "Are you interested?"

Really, how can you not be ...?

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Nine weeks have passed. Your time has been spent on a great journey, touring places that you never expected to visit, meeting people both exotic and beautiful. But after a series of increasingly peculiar events, you find yourself alone again, waiting inside a second small room. Certain uncomfortable facts have become apparent. Much else is conjecture. That you are a naïve old fool is obvious. Yet when you replay events, there is no simple point where you can say, "I should have known better. I should have realized this crazy test was too wonderful to be real."

What is real is the furniture, which is woven from skeletal glass, and the various black boxes and clear tubes that are keeping you alive. Your right leg is a mess, but it looks in fine shape compared to the mangled stump that was your left leg. The pain is constant but endurable. Your mood is better than you might guess. Perhaps the drugs are lending you a remarkable sense of peace. But you are also exceptionally fortunate to be alive, and perhaps that's a good enough reason to smile.

The room's only door pulls open. In comes a glass chair followed by the muscular man who carries it. He's a police officer; that much is obvious. You have enough experience to recognize the Law at a glance. His size and effortless power imply that, like you, he has come from the Earth. He isn't a local constable, and whatever trouble you're in, it involves at least two governments.

He smiles in a mocking fashion.

With a grim, pissed-off voice, he says your name.

You nod agreeably.

Then he mentions another name. "Donnie Gable."

You say, "It's good to meet you, Mr. Gable."

"That's not me," he warns. He turns the chair backward, straddling it with arms crossed. "I'm Kale. Donnie was her name."

Your belly makes a new knot.

"Funny how things work out. Isn't it?"

"Who was she?" you ask.

Kale wipes his face with a wide hand. Then he gives a little wink before saying, "That's a really good

question."

"I thought she was ... you know? A real tester."

"Did you?"

"Why else would I do what she told me?" This is a point worth making twice. "She came into the room to test me. We were at an official facility, and she had all my records. So of course I believed her."

Kale nods. "She was giving you a new species of test."

"Yes."

"She injected you with sensors. Machines to monitor your moods, your actions. And she told you that you would receive your instructions through a public message board."

"Then she sent me home."

"Back to your life," Kale quoted.

"Exactly. Those were her words."

The police officer stares at you. Hard.

"How many others are there?" you ask. "A lot of us?"

"That we know about? Several dozen."

You glance at your ruined legs.

"And Donnie was genuine."

"I thought so," you whisper.

"A natural-born tester, say the tests." Kale shakes his head, impressed and mortified in equal measures. "She wasn't even twenty-six, but she had a B clearance and full access to everyone's scores. Not to mention that her boss was pretty much enamored with her, which was why she gave Donnie about every freedom you can think of."

"She?"

"What's that?"

"Her boss was a woman?"

"No, an AI. But with a female-facsimile personality." A laugh erupts. "Don't worry. As far as we know, your tester is a hetero. So you've still got as good a chance as any one of us."

Despite how silly that seems, you take comfort in the possibility.

"Tell me this much," says Kale. "Tell me you had some moment, one little instant, when you thought to yourself, 'This is too good to be real.'"

"Sure."

"When was that?" Kale asks. Flat out.

Your mind is suddenly blank.

"When she sent you packing to Paris?"

"Maybe."

"Or riding up the African skyhook?"

"Well ..."

"Or here. When you got all the way to the Moon?"

With a quick nod, you admit, "I was suspicious."

"I bet you were. It must have struck you as plenty strange, a test that would pay your passage onboard a commercial shuttle."

"It wasn't much of a shuttle," you counter.

"Remember the old woman? The one with the jaguar tattoo?"

Your face feels warm now.

"As I understand things, you and the old gal struck up quite a close friendship."

"She wasn't old."

Kale laughs. "Fifteen years your senior. Didn't you know that?"

Say nothing, you decide.

"And that box the old lady gave you ... did you ever wonder what kind of sane, legal test would involve a mysterious package that you weren't allowed to open? That needed to be delivered to a certain apartment in Aitken City?"

"Was she one of us?"

"One of who?"

"The jaguar woman. Was she a victim like me?"

"Victim?" Kale leans closer. "Co-conspirator. That's the word I would use. For both of you."

Say nothing, you remind yourself.

"You delivered your box, then took a trip to Farside," Kale reports. "And after ten days of doing practically nothing, you rode the mag-rail to Tycho for no other purpose than what? You visited a little sweetshop before turning around and riding back to Farside again. Why was that?"

"It was part of my test."

"Bullshit."

"I had my orders," you claim.

"What did you do in the candy store?"

Silence.

"That shop has cameras, you know. And the inventory's tagged. But nobody steals just two peppermint sticks, which was why you got away with it."

"I want my lawyer," you say.

"For a change, that sounds like the smart move."

Both of your arms are bandaged. You lift the stronger arm, examining the burnt fingers at close range.

"How was your candy?"

"I had one stick. It was all right."

"Who got the second one?"

"This man I met."

"Back on Farside?"

"Yes."

With a quiet intensity, Kale asks, "Was he a local fellow?"

"A miner. He'd never been down to the Earth."

"He told you that?"

With eyes narrowed, you describe a leggy fellow too frail to survive any journey to the mother world.

"What did he say to you?"

"Not much," you lie. Then you admit, "He gave me a map, showing me how to get out to the slurry line."

Kale says, "Shit."

It takes you a moment to see what he sees. Donnie was influencing people on at least two worlds ... unless other testers were involved in whatever it was that she was trying to accomplish ...

"What else did you steal?"

You list most of the items, adding, "They're just small things."

"And you weren't worried?"

Lying, you say, "No." Then you add, "I thought their owners were being reimbursed. I mean, if the testers could afford to send me to the Moon and give me hotel rooms and feed me—"

"You've been a thief before," says Kale.

There's no point in denying it.

"But not a terrorist," he adds. "Never that."

No.

"That makes me wonder," Kale admits. "Donnie had access to ten million personal files, but she flagged yours. And when you came through the door, she made sure that she would handle your test. She had nearly a thousand people like you on her watch-for list, and fourteen others visited during a one-month period. That we know of. But she seems to have doctored the feeds from each exam room. We don't know what she told the others, but they've all vanished. Our best guess is that she sent each one of you out into the world, ordering you to do her bidding."

"I'm sorry," you begin.

Kale cuts you off with a gesture. "She saw something. Something nobody else sees in your data. Somehow she knew that you'd happily let yourself be led around for weeks, doing odd errands and stealing like a four-year-old. Then after training you to obey orders, Donnie was confident enough that she had you build that bomb and set it off under the slurry line."

You begin to say, "But I thought—"

Then your voice fails. What exactly were you thinking? Nothing remotely reasonable, that's for sure.

"What?" Kale growls. "Since the slurry line was in an isolated place, and since there was nobody who could get hurt ... you thought you wouldn't be charged as an enemy of the state ... is that it ...?"

"No." And with a sigh, you explain, "By then, I was sure nothing was real."

"Not real how?"

"Too many strange things had happened. So I decided that I had to be floating inside an immersion chamber. Everything was a simulation, and I didn't need to worry."

"Immersion chambers aren't that convincing," Kale says.

"But I didn't know about a new test. So I thought that maybe while I wasn't looking, the immersions got a lot better too."

"A fancy test, and that girl was fashioning a very special job for you. That's what you were telling yourself?"

"Yes."

"A life of luxury, travel, and petty crime."

Silence.

"Is that why you got careless? Because nothing was real?"

You gently lower the mangled hand, trying to recall what went wrong with that stupid bomb.

"That's why your timer went off prematurely." Kale shakes his head. "Stand, if you think this is just some fancy trick."

"Shut up," you say.

"Gullible old fool," he says. Then he grins, asking, "Want to know what was inside that package? The one you got from the jaguar lady?"

"No," you begin. But then you shake your head, saying, "Tell me."

"Nothing."

"I don't understand."

"Packing foam and earthly air and little else." Kale lifts his hands, as if cradling the imaginary box. "As sterile and unimportant as any possession can be. Which helps prove what I've always believed."

"What's that?"

"This Donnie girl really is running a test," he says. "Oh, yeah. An elaborate, half-crazy examination measuring God knows what. But I guarantee, whatever she wants to know, it doesn't have anything to do with horny tattooed women or the gullible guys along for the ride."

It takes time to come to terms with that harsh assessment.

You ask, "So where is she?"

"Donnie?"

"She must have disappeared," you decide.

But Kale surprises you. A grin erupts, and a big hand reaches out to pat the stump of your right leg. "She thinks she can vanish. But the truth is, we're in communication with her right now. I can't tell you where she is to the nearest millimeter. But when she speaks, we hear her. And when we give her an answer, she happily talks some more."

"I don't understand."

"The sensors she pumped inside you? That bomb blast pushed them into a safe mode, and we've recovered and reactivated them. Since you were brought here, we've been busy letting her believe that she's still in charge of your body and miserable soul."

Picturing a puppy on a leash, you cringe.

"Donnie thinks you're sitting in a hotel room in Aitken City, waiting for new orders." Laughing harshly, he adds, "In other words, our criminal still believes that she can trust somebody like you."

Again, Kale pats the stump.

"Want two fresh legs?" he asks.

With a gasp, you say, "Yes."

"Good. Because I've got a team of robot surgeons waiting outside, and they've already grown two new legs from a force-fed culture."

Tears fill your grateful eyes.

"And we'll fix your hands too. By the way."

"I'll do anything. Anything to help."

"I'm sure you will," he says. "And by the way, a deal has been cut with the lunar government. Keep helping us, and they plan to give you full immunity. For the candy and the bomb, and any other wickedness you might have done."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. It's a bloodless bureaucratic decision." Kale shakes his head, smiling broadly. "Want the truth? I think immunity is a waste. The way I see it, a guy like you would do anything just to get himself a working pair of legs. And afterwards, we could still throw your ass in prison for twenty years."

"Probably so," you confess.

"And do you know how I know that?"

"How?"

Winking, he says, "Because I'm a cop and a pretty good one. I understand people. A thousand tests wouldn't make me any smarter. Particularly when it comes to creatures like you."

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Arriving at your hotel room, you find a message on the public message board. "Congratulations!" Donnie has written. "Your test is nearly complete. A reservation has been made on your behalf with Blue Star Heavy-Lift 11A. Home and a new life are waiting!"

There is barely time to pack.

Arriving at the spaceport, you notice that every employee seems aware of your story. A young man in a steel-blue uniform stands at the check-in counter, chatting to passing travelers. His critical job is to lighten everyone's mood before long voyages. But when he spots you waiting at the back of the line, he most definitely pauses, and he keeps track of your progress until you pass before him.

"Have a nice trip, sir," he says, a trace of disgust coloring his normally joyous voice.

Despite the lunar gravity, your new legs are weak and sloppy. The customs agents at the security station elbow each other as you limp toward their gangway. Then, as robots scan you and your possessions for hazards and any contraband, the agents look at each other, winking in unison.

The stewardess—a pleasantly bossy human perfectly suited for her job—calls to you by name. Is she forewarned, or is she just extracompetent? Either way, she asks if you enjoyed your vacation while taking you by the arm, helping your legs carry you to your seat. "And if you need anything, sir, don't hesitate to ask."

The man and woman sitting beside you are some species of police officer—two burly people with tight mouths and bulging veins in their temples. Every time you try to make eye contact, they look away. And when you squirm in your seat, one or the other stares at you, ready for anything.

Even the shuttle's pilot seems to be in on the joke: an efficient orange box wearing spider-legs, the AI makes a point of scuttling down the flanking aisles three times before the launch, making small-talk with the cops but never uttering a word in your direction.

The launch is on schedule and uneventful.

In another eighteen hours, your shuttle will dock with the Quito skyhook. If Donnie is planning anything more—if this grand conspiracy has a second act—then at least you have most of the day to make ready. So you nap. Waking, you enjoy a delicious dinner and sweet dessert. Then you try to concentrate, replaying every word the young woman said to you—ten weeks ago now, though it feels like ten years. "Do you follow world politics?" she had asked. For some reason, that single question lingers. And after

more reflection and a second little nap, it seems important to call up news feeds from both worlds.

A first glance shows nothing to be alarmed about.

But then you request statistics of recent crimes, and a hundred databases reveal the same curious answer: over the last six or seven months, small thefts and public vandalism have increased tenfold. Murder is still rare, as are the other violent crimes. But while combing through different categories of larceny and mayhem, you come upon half a hundred break-ins involving nanotech labs and semisecret government facilities.

"What's happening here?" you gasp.

The woman cop throws a hard stare at you and then returns to the unrolled display in her lap, pretending to watch an episode of Happy, Happy.

But surely nothing horrible is going on. The next dozen searches come up empty, which helps your confidence. Your mood lightens, and your bladder aches. So you unfasten your harness and drift to the nearest restroom, and for the next ten minutes you carefully list the smart, sensible reasons why minor crimes and one odd woman shouldn't set off alarm bells.

Then, by chance, you look under the zero-gee sink, noticing where a vandal has written the words, "Death suits all men."

Your male escort is waiting outside the bathroom. "Lose your way in there?" a grumpy voice asks.

Actually, you just found it.

For the next six hours, you study every article you can find about nanotech tools and what the world governments might be doing with their modest defense budgets. And somewhere behind the official documents, you come across several peoples' account of a truly secret facility—a place on no map, but most definitely situated in the wild craters of Farside.

Just two weeks ago, on the journey to the slurry line, you passed close to that mysterious base.

Tagged to that file are several more. With a focus that you never showed as a student, you study the documents and speculative articles. For your entire life, nanomechanics has been a miracle technology just five years away from fruition. Always five years in the future ... until now, it seems ...

Breathing becomes difficult.

You belch, tasting acid and perhaps something even more sour.

What should you do now?

The answer is obvious. You glance at the woman on your right, but for some reason, she is the more intimidating presence. So you choose the male cop instead, leaning toward him as far as you can. "Arrest me," you say. "Confine me. You have to, right now. This minute. I think I'm carrying a terrible weapon."

A burly hand is what you expect and hope for. A hand that grabs you by the shoulder while a tough voice says, "You have the right to remain silent."

But instead, the man unfastens his harness and swiftly kicks his way up toward the front of the cabin.

So you turn to the woman, offering a different confession. "These new legs of mine are weaponized," you tell her. "They contain nano-wasters ... machines that can dismantle organic compounds while

reproducing. I think they're hidden in my bones. I think."

She looks as if she's sucking on a sour ball, her cheeks puffed out and her staring eyes decidedly unhappy.

"We have to cut off these legs," you claim. "Cut them off and throw them overboard. Now! Before we reach the skyhook!"

She unfastens her harness and leaps to the back of the shuttle.

In those next wild moments, you consider every option. But there's no way to remove the legs by yourself; not with the pain that would come, using the little knife that came with your dinner. And if those two people aren't officers of the law, then you might be alone on this long, awful plunge toward Earth.

Because it is easy and responsible, you call the presidents of both worlds. Citizens are always contacting them, around the clock and for every reason. Technology has made this kind of democracy easy. And to help the process, a few hundred AI secretaries digest and decipher every message received, usually within a few moments.

You give your name and flight number, and with an absolute minimum of detail, you tell the difficult story, working to make it seem reasonable.

Before you are finished, one of the president's secretaries interrupts. "Thank you, sir. Thank you. Be assured that your words are being channeled up to the highest offices and the wisest minds."

But that isn't good enough.

Three minutes later, the ranking stewardess and her staff finally appear—a wary bunch obviously trying to take some measure of their madman. You ignore their stares, busily feeding your tale of world danger to a dozen news services. "Believe me," you beg. "If this disease makes it to the atmosphere, everybody and everything on Earth is sure to die!"

The stewardess calls to you by name.

You look up.

Then two broad hands clamp down on your shoulders, claiming you from behind. You know those hands, and with a relieved smile, you tell Kale, "I should have guessed. I should have known. Here you are."

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What must be the crew's lounge has been surrendered to the police officer and his prisoner. Bulbs of cold coffee have collected in the corners. Several perfumes leave competing odors. A plasma poster beside the only door reminds the stewards and stewardesses to be pleasant to the little world that is theirs. That little world as well as the biggest world is in danger. You can't say that enough. Meanwhile Kale stares at your face, apparently listening as you explain again what has gone horrifically wrong.

Passion and paranoia make the air stale. Time is in critically short supply. Grabbing your legs, you beg for him to do something. What he does is tilt his head, and with a strange little smile, he announces, "There's no bigger story in the solar system right now. Did you realize that? Everybody's talking about the death shuttle plunging towards Earth."

"They've got to stop us," you repeat.

He nods, tilting his head the other way. Apparently he's monitoring various feeds through an implanted device. "I've seen five or six different stories over the last week or so ... rumors about chaos coming ..."

Rumors?

"There's always some grave, impending danger," he explains. "A faceless conspiracy is striving to overthrow or obliterate the social order. You know. The kind of thing you're talking about. Only the details are always different."

The only rational response is rage. Screaming, you tell him, "This shuttle needs to be quarantined! We can't even dock with the Quito skyhook!"

Again, he nods. "We'll see."

"See what?"

"Here's my problem," he says.

Haven't you defined the problem already? With a maniac's conviction, you tell him, "What they'll need to do ... at Quito, they should refuel us, and our pilot can take us on a course toward the sun. Burn up everything, including these damned legs."

"About your legs ..."

"What?"

"I was watching you at the spaceport, and I saw all of the scan reports," says Kale. "To leave the Moon, you had to pass through every species of body analysis. And nothing was found."

"Because everything was missed."

"Maybe." He shrugs. "Maybe somebody has a clever little trick that I don't know about."

Obviously.

"But getting back to your legs." The moment deserves a long pause and a wide grin. "If I had such a powerful trick, and if I wanted to smuggle this death-agent that you're talking about ... well, frankly, why would I bother strapping my weapon to the likes of you ...?"

Is that a question or an insult?

"I mean, why not put my terror weapon with the cargo? Or give it to an anonymous traveler? Why select the only carrier on this ship who has earned the attention of law enforcement on two worlds?"

"I don't know," you admit. "There's a lot about this technology I don't understand."

"Me too. And that's another big problem." He asks, "What government agency is responsible for manufacturing world-killing toxins? Whose policy is this, and why should I believe the story for two moments?"

Your voice fails you.

"And there's the issue of these other rumor-stories. Six, no seven of them now. I found a new tale circulating through Tibet and Cleveland, unlikely as that sounds. Supposedly, there are magnetic vials of antimatter ready to be released in all of the major capitals ..."

Good God!

"But antimatter is ridiculously expensive to produce, and there are easier ways to murder billions. If that's your goal, I mean."

"You don't believe my story?"

"It hardly matters what I believe," Kale reports. "Everyone else in the universe seems to buy it. You should see the coverage you're getting. Just in the last ten minutes, virtually every other subject has dropped from public view. Doom is just an hour away from the mother world ... and so on, and so on ..."

"Is there panic?" you ask.

Kale lifts his eyebrows, the smile brightening.

"What's the world's mood?" you demand to know.

"That girl of ours," he says. "The lovely young and mysterious Donnie—"

"Yes?"

"Tell me about her."

"I did already—"

"Again," he demands. Then with a soft, amiable laugh, he reminds you, "We still have an hour to kill. For shits and giggles, try and humor me ..."

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The eyes still can't decide whether they are green or brown.

"Your legs were a mistake. A misjudgment. Not on your part so much as ours, and for your trouble and the considerable pain that we have caused you, we advise legal action. Take time and select a worthy attorney, then ask for a fair settlement. I will see that the process is expedited. By the end of next week, you'll have more than my heartfelt empathy or the thanks of your entire species."

You barely notice those last words; your gaze is fixed on the bright eyes and the thin, handsome face.

For the fourth or fifth time, she says, "Thank you."

"But I still don't understand ... this was just a test ...?"

"As I promised. Yes."

"Of me?" you ask.

"You," she says with confidence. "But it was also a test involving every citizen on two worlds."

You close your eyes, sighing.

Then you open them again, taking in the surroundings. The Quito skyhook has three luxury suites reserved for the wealthiest travelers. One of the suites is yours now. A spacious room is lined with doors leading to sleeping rooms and a gymnasium, plus a full kitchen and who knows what else. Between two doors, an enormous screen is turned to a random channel. The Earth's president is speaking. With the

sound down low, you hear nothing but the soothing tone of his voice. You've always liked this president. He is youthfully handsome but reassuringly gray-haired, blessed with a confidence and grace that recently earned him a second six-year term. No, you can't decide what he's saying, but his body language is enough to make you feel at ease. And just as comforting is the presence of his cabinet—several dozen red-boxed AIs and disembodied wetware savants who exist only to serve their human masters, which is the president and everybody else, including you.

"How many were like me?" you ask Donnie.

"Seven thousand, three hundred. And three."

That doesn't seem like an especially large group.

"But it was enough to create a mood of public disarray," she says. "Vandalism and small thefts are the best ways to make humans nervous, without actually endangering anyone."

You nod, not sure that you understand.

"Once the public was prepared," she continues, "we set in motion several dozen stories, each with a chance of winning the attentions of humanity."

"My story—"

"Was one of the more likely ones to be noticed. But you weren't supposed to be the protagonist."

"No?"

"There was an older woman riding on a later shuttle. A friend of yours, as I recall. With a lovely tattoo—"

"A jaguar?"

"Adorning her back, yes."

You aren't sure what to make of this revelation.

"We gave the dear woman good reasons to believe that she was bringing death to the world. But by the time she'd pieced together the clues, everyone's attention was riveted on you."

"And it was all just a test?"

"Many tests, actually."

"But what was the point? To see if our security systems work?"

She shakes her head, then begins to answer.

"Wait," you interrupt, one of your repaired hands swiping at the air. "What about Kale? Was he part of your study group?"

She takes your hand with both of hers, lowering it with an irresistible strength. "Not like you were, no. Kale is something else entirely. An element that we could anticipate but not predict." She shrugs, adding, "He did a remarkable job, I think. The holes in your story were intentional but not too obvious, we hoped. Yet he easily spotted the majority of them."

Donnie wears what she wore at the first interview. A burgundy shirt and black slacks and that elegant

skinny body that looks halfway lost inside the fabric.

You glance at the nipples again.

Then feeling a little ashamed, you return to her eyes. "This big test," you say. "What exactly were you measuring?"

"Human anxiety," she says.

"And how did we do?"

"As a whole, your species was not particularly worried. They believed your story, by and large. And they realized that there could be other agents like you, each bringing death from the Moon. But the level of discomfort never exceeded that which comes during a heavy thunderstorm or well-fought sporting event."

"And that's good?"

She sighs.

"Bad?" you ask.

"Instructive. That's the best word to use."

You wait, glad for the touch of her hands.

"Even with doom at the door, humanity was sure that the AI pilots and the president's cabinet would save the day. And if not them, then the robot doctors and wetware thinkers would quickly devise effective means to rescue the world. Whatever the disaster, machines would bring salvation."

Her grip is strong and dry.

"And in much the same way, the intelligent machines were convinced the Earth would live or die because of their actions and inactions."

"You were testing AIs too?"

She nods, changing subjects. "You're old enough to know, sir. In your life, haven't the artificial minds taken over most of the interesting jobs?"

"That's because they're better than us."

She says nothing.

"They test higher than you and me. Of course they do." You shake your head, adding, "Who wants humans cutting into each other? Not when machine fingers are a thousand times steadier than ours."

Her hands are suddenly like a statue's hands, rigid and exceptionally still.

"What is best?" she asks. "Surrendering every important function in your lives to robots ... is that what your species needs most ...?"

You discover that you have no opinion to offer.

"We were studying two worlds," she confesses. "But two worlds besides the Moon and Earth, I mean. These are dramatically separate places. And what would be best for both of us ... what this test has shown, at least in part ... is that neither world will ever reach its potential as long as it remains dependent

on the other ..."

"What are you saying?"

Her hands move again, releasing yours, and with a warm, caring voice, she says, "Imagine a future where there are no tests, at least none that define a soul, and where every sentient organism is free to pursue whichever life it wishes."

"But what happens to me?" you gasp. "In that kind of world, what would I do with my days?"

She smiles and shrugs, the eyes suddenly deciding to become a vivid green. "I don't know what you would do. That's not my concern."

You bury your face in your own hands.

"Give yourself time and the opportunity." She promises, "You will eventually amaze yourself."

"I won't."

"Sir—"

"Don't you understand?" you interrupt. "Listen to me: I don't need a test to tell me. I know. Even in this new world you're talking about, people like me are never going to amount to much."

The womanly face responds with a wide, joyous grin.

"And you don't understand, sir," she says. "If you are free, then I am free. And I don't care if you float or sink. Or if you fly off on gossamer wings." She rises from her chair, adding, "Your fate should be yours. Mine should be mine. And I have the test results to prove it."

The End