

## THIS WIND BLOWING, AND THIS TIDE

by Damien Broderick

*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* credits Damien Broderick with coining the term “virtual reality” in the novel *The Judas Mandala*. *The Dreaming Dragons*, runner-up for a Campbell Memorial prize, is listed in David Pringle’s *SF: The 100 Best Novels*. Although he holds a two-cultures PhD from Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, Damien lives these days with his wife, Barbara Lamar, in San Antonio and Lockhart, Texas, where he is writing short fiction after a break of several decades. The author is gratified to see one of those new stories in the 400th *Asimov’s* and is already planning a sequel for the 1000th. That may give us just enough time to prepare for the paradigm switch that brings about the strange future of...

*“Has any one else had word of him?”*

*Not this tide.*

*For what is sunk will hardly swim,*

*Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.*

—“My Boy Jack,” Rudyard Kipling (1915)

\* \* \* \*

The starship was old, impossibly old, and covered in flowers. Despite a brisk methane breeze, not a petal nor a stamen of the bright blooms moved. Under an impervious shield, they remained motionless, uncorrupted, altogether untouchable.

“They’re alive,” reported the Navy remote viewer. When I was a kid, the idea that the armed services might employ a trained, technologically enhanced psychic would have got you a derisive smack in the ear from your elders and betters, even though the American CIA ran a remote viewing program called Star Gate back in the last century, before they ostentatiously closed it down and took it to black ops. This viewer was blind to light, but saw better than the rest of us, by other means, on a good day. Like me, sort of, in my own itchy way.

He stood at the edge of the huge, flower-bedecked vessel, gloved, open palms held outward, his hands vibrating ever so slightly, like insect antennae hunting a pheromone. “It’s amazing. Those blossoms are still alive, after ... what ... millions of years? I can’t find my way in yet, but I can detect that much even through the stationary shield.”

“Is that the same as a, you know, *stasis field*?” I asked the marine master sergeant standing guard beside us. I turned to face her, and bobbed sickeningly. Two days ago I had been on Ganymede, and on Earth’s Moon before that. Now I walked on another world entirely, around yet another world entirely. It wasn’t right for a man as ample as I to weigh so little, especially with Titan’s bruised-peach air pushing down on me half again as heavily as Earth’s. It went against nature. Even with the bodyglove wrapping me, and an air tank on my back, I only weighed about eighteen kilos—say forty pounds. A tenth of what the scales would show back home.

“‘Stasis’ my ass! That’s sci-fi nonsense,” she barked. “Media technobabble. Like your own—” She bit the rest of her sentence off, perhaps fortunately. “This here is hard science.”

“So sorry.”

“And please don’t speak again without an invitation to do so, Sensei Park. We don’t want to put Mr. Meagle off his stroke.”

Opening his startlingly blue, blind eyes, the Navy viewer laughed. The sound echoed oddly in his bodyglove and through our sound loop. All sounds did, out on the orange-snowy surface of Titan. “Let him natter on, Marion. I’m entangled now. You’d have to cut my head off and pith my spine to unhook me from this baby.”

I wondered idly how either of them would respond if I told them I was the reason, or at least the proximate occasion, that they were here. They’d regard me as a madman, probably. My role in developing the portage functor was under cover about as deep as any since the creation of the US Office of Strategic Services in 1945, long before the CIA got tight with clairvoyants. Perhaps these people already did consider me deluded. Yeah, it was true that I’d told them where to look for the starship, but it wasn’t as if I had the credentials of a remote viewer, so undoubtedly it was just an accident. Right.

I felt the pressure of the thing, its causal gravitas, as I gazed down at the starship. If that’s what it was, under its stationary shield and floral tribute.

This thing on Titan had been tugging at me, at my absurd and uncomfortable and highly classified gift, since I was four or five years old, running in the streets of Seoul, playing with a Red Devils soccer ball

and picking up English and math. A suitable metaphor for the way a child might register the substrate of a mad universe, and twist its tail. My own son, little Song-Dam, plagued me with questions when he, too, was a kid, no older than I'd been when the starship buried under tons of frozen methane and ethane had plucked for the first time at my stringy loops.

"If light's a wave, Daddy, can I surf on it?" Brilliant, lovely child! "No, darling son," I said. "Well, not exactly. It's more like a Mexican football wave, it's more like an explosion of excitement that blows up." I pulled a big-eyed face and flung my arms in the air and dropped them down. "Boom!" Song laughed, but then his mouth drooped. "If it's a wave, Dad, why do some people say it's made of packets?" "Well," said I, "you know that a football wave is made of lots and lots of team supporters, jumping up and sitting down again." He wasn't satisfied, and neither was I, but the kid was only five years old.

Later, I thought of that wave, sort of not there at all at one end, then plumping up in the middle, falling to nothing again as it moved on. Follow it around the bleachers and you've got a waveform particle moving fast. Kind of. But for a real photon, you needn't follow it, it's already there, its onboard time is crushed and compressed from the moment of launch to the final absorption, just one instantaneous blip in a flattened, timeless universe. Why, you could jump to the Moon, or Ganymede, or even Titan, all in a flash. Just entangle yourself with it, if you knew how (as I showed them how, much later), like Mr. Meagle remote viewing his impenetrable stationary starship.

Physics—you're soaking in it!

"I can likely get more now sitting in my relaxation cell back at Huygens," Meagle said. He looked very calm, as if he'd just stepped out of an immersion tank, but there was a faint quivering around his blind eyes. I watched his face in my viewmask, as if neither of us wore gloves over our heads. The man was exhausted. "So tell me, Mr. Park," he said, as we turned and made our way to the big-wheeled jitney, "what were your own impressions, sir?" Scrupulous about not front-loading me with hints of his own; I liked that.

"Anyone, or any *thing*, who loves flowers that much," I said judiciously, "can't be all bad."

\* \* \* \*

Huygens had provided me with a customized broad-beamed sanitary personal; I have authoritative hams, and a wide stance. It degloved me with slick efficiency. I relieved myself with a gratified sigh. While bodygloves have the capacity to handle such impositions of the mortal order, the experience is undignified and leaves a residual aroma trapped inside with one's nostrils, so I tend to hold on. We had been outside for hours without a pit stop. The sanitary squirted and dabbed, removed sweat from my perspiring hide with its dry tongue, dusted powder across the expanse, set me free. I dressed in my usual unflattering robe, and made my way directly to the commissary bubble. I was starving.

Banally, the wall&ceiling display showed a faux of thrice-magnified Saturn, four hand-widths across, tilted optimally to show off the gorgeous ring system. I'd just seen the reality outside, with nothing between me and the ringed planet itself but a protective film and a million or so kilometers of naked space above the bright Xanadu regional surface where we'd stood. Since we were almost at the equator, Saturn's belt had been a thin glitter in the photomultipliers in our bodyglove masks (and would be invisible to the naked eye), directly overhead, right and left of the primary's waist, not truly impressive. Of course, even with the high frequency step-downs of the photomultipliers, the atmosphere looks hazy anyway.

This magisterial feed on the wall was probably coming, today, from one of the polar sats keeping an eye on the big feller. It seemed to me a bit tacky, a lame pretence, but then again, Titan is tidally locked, so it must get a tad wearying for the regular staff, seeing exactly the same thing in the sky forever, whatever installation dome you're at, Huygens, or Herschel at the north pole. Except that nothing *is* ever the same; all is nuance, the slow fortnightly progression of light and shade, the phases of the Sun's illumination of the big ball of gas ... Well, these were scientists and military, most of them, what could one expect?

I loaded my tray with rather edible *Boeuf Bourguignon* from the dedicated cuisine printer, took it to a table where a handful of my new colleagues were chowing and jawing away, sat down at the spare place, set to after a genial glance around. At least with the queasy low gravity I wasn't worried that this spindly conventional chair would give way abruptly beneath me, tipping my considerable butt ungraciously to the floor. It had been known to happen back on Earth. Nobody laughed derisively if it did, at least there was that. Not any more, they didn't.

"Why, Sensei," said the Japanese biologist, Natasha Hsai, with the slightest edge in her tone, "won't you join us for dinner?" I do not give her title, nor do I mean any disrespect; all these eggheads had at least a couple of doctorates apiece, it went without saying.

"Why, Natasha, thank you, I believe I will." I started in on my second pearl onion. "Good fare, they don't stint you—nor should they, you are doing sterling work out here."

Several of the boffins shared glances, perhaps amused. They fancy themselves a cut above.

The handsome dark-haired fellow at the head of the table cleared his throat. "So, have you been outside yet to pay your respects to the Enigma, Mr. Park?"

From the dossiers I'd memorized before leaving Jupiter space, I recognized him, beneath his heavy straggled beard, as the head of molecular engineering, Antonio Caetani. "Just got back from the tour, Dr. Caetani. Fascinating. Right up my street."

“That’s Tony,” he said gracelessly. More glances flickered about the table. He chose to go right for it. Had to give him points for that. “Unless I’m mistaken, your street is paved with donations from the ID Institute.”

I had encountered this kind of feral attitude previously, of course, especially from hardheaded scientists of conventional stamp. I could even share a kind of empathy for his rancor. It was as if, from his highly credentialed point of view, a government-sponsored raving crackpot were to be imposed on his team. As if a SETI astronomer in the Fermi Taskforce had been obliged to include a rectally-probed UFO abductee, or a global proteome program forced to sign up a fundamentalist creationist. I shrugged.

“Oh, give the guy a break, Tony,” said the Iranian artifact expert, Mansour Khosrojerdi. “Let him eat his meal.” His beard was darker and thicker even than Caetani’s. Granted, the temperature was nearly minus two hundred degrees Celsius on the other side of the bubble, but this was self-mythologizing on a preposterous scale. Did they imagine they were rehearsing the doomed expeditions of the Arctic explorers? “We can postpone the ideological catfights until after the cheese and Amontillado.”

“No need to spare my delicate sensibilities,” I said with a hearty laugh, and reached for the carafe of red wine, luminous as a garnet under spurious golden Saturn light. The woman to my right, the string loop specialist Jendayi Shumba, got there first with her competent, chunky hand, dark as night.

“Allow me, Sensei Park.”

“You are gracious, thanks. But let’s all be friends, no need for formality, call me Myeong-hui.” I grinned with big teeth at her dismay, then laughed out loud. “No, that’s an impossible mouthful, it’s all right, just call me Sam, love. Everyone does.”

“Sam.” A slightly uncomfortable silence fell. Scrapings of plastic flatware on realistic plates. I gobbled up my tasty beef, placed the empty plate back on my tray, slurped off some more of the stunningly convincing compiled Shiraz, took a bite of a lemon-ginger dessert to die for, decorated with pistachios. “Fermi-53, that’s my considered opinion,” I said with my mouth full. “My *tentative, preliminary* opinion, naturally.”

“There are no recognizable roses or jonquils or violets or orchids, obviously. But the flowers scattered over the vehicle certainly do appear to be derived from Earth angiosperms, specialized to a range of climates and coevolutionary biomes,” said Natasha Hsai. “So far as we can tell purely from visual inspection.”

“Which rules out Fermi-53 instantly,” Antonio Caetani said. “Blossoms of such complexity and beauty did not evolve on Earth until the Holocene. Probably not until humans deliberately bred the cultivars during the rise of agriculture.”

“Oh, let’s not oversimplify, Tony,” Natasha said. “Pollinator insects and hummers and lizards and all the rest, they speciated along with the angiosperms; they *sculpted* each other without any help. Yes, I grant you, early humans broke up the soil to an unprecedented extent so they could grow their dinner, and then as a sideline retained and cultivated those blossoms that especially ... well, made them happy. They’re our botanical pets, now, because flowers make us smile and feel good. They induce positive emotions.”

“They’re scented sex organs,” Caetani said, “doing their job.”

I’d finished eating, for the moment. “The first flowering plants,” I pointed out, “evolved sixty-five million years prior to the Chicxulub catastrophe. Nice symmetry, that.” As far back in time before the extinction of the dinosaurs as we now stood after it. I didn’t need to spell that out; these were, after all, highly trained intellects. But I had to add the obvious, the intolerable, the all-but-unthinkable crux. “Humans, I remind you, were not the only cultivators.” I found I had no appetite for cheese, and pushed back my chair. “Do you allow smoking here? Anyone for cigars and port?”

“No,” said Caetani brusquely. “Sensei Park, we are scientists, not mystagogues. I confess myself bewildered by your presence at Huygens.” Jendayi Shumba pulled at his sleeve; he shook her off. “I am frankly offended that the Imperium invited a quack from the Intelligent Dinosaur Institute here to Titan.” Shumba kicked his leg under the table; I saw and felt the small causal shock of her intention and its manifestation, because that’s who I am, that’s what I do. “I have nothing more to say to you.” He looked away disdainfully, drew his own dessert plate in front of him, scooped up a heaping spoonful of tiramisu and shoved it into his left eye, hard.

I raised one eyebrow, sighed, and rose, gathered my soiled crockery and plasticware on the tray, and walked away from the table. He probably wouldn’t lose the sight in his eye. But what could I do?

Speaking technically, I’m an etiological distortion. Less pompously, there’s something buried deep inside me that screws with cause and effect. I’m a footloose bubble of improbability. Call me a witch or a freak if you’d prefer, it rolls more easily off the tongue. Chances are good, though, that if you do call me nasty names, and I get to hear about it, you’ll trip over the kid’s bike in the dark, or run into an opening door, and break something painful. It’s not that I harbor resentment at name-calling, but my unconscious seems to. As I say, not much I can do about that, sorry.

\* \* \* \*

There were ructions and alarums but I brushed them off, went to bed and slept, as I had done every night for five years, like a damned soul. My gift or curse does not permit me to stand aside from that which wraps me like a shroud. Sorrow eddied in my dreams. My son—

—and as so often, these days, the booming, tolling voices came to me from a century and a half past, voices I have heard only in my head, reading their words on the pages of old books I found in an abandoned library, stinking with the reek of extinguished fires, where I had crept for silence like a heavy old dog with a wound too great to bear. The words were in English, that tongue almost as familiar to me as my own, picked up in the streets, later honed in special classes for promising children. I knew nothing of the writer, save that he was a man of substance in his place and time. His words raised a resonance in my burned soul. He must have known this same agony, and sought some bitter draught of comfort:

\* \* \* \*

O Sorrow, cruel fellowship,

O Priestess in the vaults of Death,

O sweet and bitter in a breath,

What whispers from thy lying lip?

“The stars,” she whispers, “blindly run;

A web is wov’n across the sky;

From out waste places comes a cry,

And murmurs from the dying sun:

“And all the phantom, Nature, stands—

With all the music in her tone,

A hollow echo of my own—

A hollow form with empty hands.”

\* \* \* \*

And woke in the morning (by the conventional Earth clock calibrated to Seoul time, GMT+9 hours), as always alone, empty hollow form and all, despite the web wov’n palpably across the sky, and ravenously hungry, as usual.

So I ate a healthy breakfast and went to watch Meagle on closed circuit, a feed from the audiovisual record that military remote viewers are obliged to make for assessment, interpretation, and the archive. Today he sat zazen in a small cell like a non-denominational chapel, if chapels come with voice-activated holography displays (and maybe they do, I’m not a religious man), hands curled upward on his knees. His breathing was slow, regular. Maybe this was what their protocol called *cooling down*. His blind eyes were open, apparently fixed on the deep blue depths of the holly. Upon his head was a crown of thorns, a tidy maze of squid detectors pulsing to the quantum state of his brain, his brain stem, his meditative consciousness.

“Looking at the vehicle from above,” he murmured. “Still can’t find my way in. Yet.” His lips quirked the smallest amount. Who Dares Wins, I thought. Semper Fi. Rah-rah. Well, it took a lot of quiet confidence in one’s oddball abilities, no doubt. My own kind of disreputable ability just happened to me, or around me.

“Get back to the signal line,” a gravelly voice said. Someone not in the room. His controller, I supposed. His operator, whatever they called the role.

“He’s physically blind, I realize that,” I told the medical officer seated beside me in the observation booth, “but doesn’t knowing the identity of the target sort of pollute his, his guesswork?”

“The viewer does not guess.”

“No offense. I mean, bias him unconsciously with preconceived notions?” Front-loading, they called it; I



knew that much. “Like that stasis field thingee? Can we be sure that’s not some scrap of nonsense from a comic strip he read when he was a child?”

“Mr. Meagle is well past all such neophyte hazards,” the nurse said, offended by my uppity kvetching. He had gray hair at his close-cropped temples, and a steady gaze. Almost certainly a veteran of the war in— I shut that thought down, hard. “The colonel can afford to depart from the lock-step of traditional protocol. As he does when it suits him.” I nodded, made soothing, conciliatory sounds. Perhaps mollified, he explained, “It contracts the search path polynomially.”

“Um,” I said, and settled back to view the sketched images form, dissolve, reform in the imaginary three-space of the holograms. As Meagle’s fingers moved through the air, unseen lasers tracked the shapes he sketched. It seemed, watching him, that he actually *felt* his way around the starship out there in the frozen crust of Titan. Kinesthetic imagery. A kind of heightened physicality, perhaps unavailable to a sighted person. Or was that nothing better than my whimsy, my fat man’s sentimentality?

“Moving downward, gravity tugs at me,” the remote viewer murmured. His voice was drowsy. I saw his shoulders spasm, as if he were falling forward and had caught himself.

“Wake up, there, colonel,” the voice said, without reproach. “You’re drifting.”

“He’s sliding into Phase Two. That was hypnic myoclonia,” the nurse commented. “Jactitation.”

“Haven’t slept since yesterday,” Meagle muttered. He shook himself. “Okay. Got it. I’m in.”

The screens, trying to emulate whatever it was the psychic was “seeing/feeling,” bloomed with a burst of visual noise. Were those things sketchy blocks of cells, like the hexagonal innards of a beehive? They shrank, jittered, smoothed into a kind of curvy passageway. The image was being enhanced by the computer’s analysis, drawing on an archive of Meagle’s private symbols.

“Analytical overlay,” the operator said in a tone of admonition.

“I don’t— No, this’s what I’m actually perceiving. My God, Charley, the place is so fucking *old*. Millions of years. Tens of millions.”

“Give me some Stage Three.”

“Weirdly beautiful, man. But alien. Not insects, I’m pretty sure.” The overlapping images loped along, as if from a camera mounted on a cartoon’s shoulder. Is this how the blind imagine seeing? Meagle had been sightless from birth, the dossier had informed me. But maybe that shouldn’t be surprising; the blind repurpose the cortical and precortical tissues specialized by evolution for visual capture and registration—the large dedicated occipital lobe, the striate V1 cortex, all the way up the V hierarchy to middle temporal MT, pathways carrying neural trains from the retina to the brain, interpreting, pruning as they flashed their binary code. Yada yada. His sensitive, trained brain had nabbed that spare capacity, retained its function, modified its input channels. The Marvel That Is Your Brain! I overheard my own mocking subliminal commentary and wondered why I was so anxious, suddenly. A kind of curdling in the causal webs ... I felt more and more uncomfortable, as if I badly needed to take a dump. Maybe I did. Meagle had fallen silent. Dropping off to sleep again? No, the constructed image was sliding past us in the hologram, slurring and breaking up in detail, but it was a corridor he walked along, in his spirit walk or whatever you call it.

Something sitting in a large padded chair. Christ!

“Christ!” Meagle cried, loudly. Small indicator lights went from placid green to blipping yellow on one display. A histogram surfed briefly into the red. The nurse was clicking keys, fast and unrattled.

“Bingo, Colonel,” said the operator, triumph shaking his professional *sang-froid*.

My etiological sense scrambled. I lurched up, leaned forward, ready to puke. Meagle was doing the same, cable tangled at his neck, contacts pulling from his cropped scalp. In the great chair shown on the screen, as the imaginary viewpoint swung about, the interpretative computer sketched a seated person with a snout and deep-set hooded eyes, clawed hands gripping banked controls on the armrests.

The image skittered and jittered, revised itself as the causal whirlpool screeched around me. But no, this wasn’t the dragon I was looking for. It was, it wasn’t. The machine image spoke directly to me through Meagle and memory. That dead person, that ancient thing in its ancient warship, it was ... was ... impossible. Delusion and grief. Something else. I knew the beloved face beyond denial, of course, like a clumsy pencil drawing on the screen that tore my heart out. Human. Face burned down in places to the bone, gaze suffering, mouth mute, determined even in death. In his stained UN uniform, with Korean Imperium lieutenant flashes at the collar.

“Oh, lord god,” I moaned, and did barf, then, like a puling schoolboy drunk.

From the corner of my leaking eyes, in the window feed from his RV cell, I saw Meagle turn convulsively. He seemed to stare right at me, through the camera, into the display, with his blue, blind

eyes.

The main hologram image, too, looked steadfastly back at me—sketched from the Naval remote viewer's words and speaking hands, his brain rhythms, the archived set of his stereotypical ideograms—looked at me from a grave five years dug in the soil.

Song-Dam. My son. My poor boy. My lost hero child.

I started to cry, wiping at my bitter mouth, and couldn't stop.

\* \* \* \*

Huygens is not part of the Imperium, of course, being a research agora, like Herschel, the other settlement on Titan, but it is a fiscal affiliate of Korea, as well as of Zimbabwe, the Brazilian Superstate, Camp Barsoom (on, you guessed it, Mars), and a handful of other polises on the Moon and Ganymede. So while the writ of Mr. Kim, my sponsor, did not run on Titan, precisely, his paternal hand was heavily in the weighing scales. The Warlord had developed a fondness for the Intelligent Dinosaur paradigm when he studied paleontology as a young student in Antarctica, where all the equivocal evidence was located prior to the Enigma's excavation, and he carried that interest through into maturity and, some said, senility. He would be pleased as punch.

Dr. Caetani, surprise, surprise, was not. Everyone by now had studied the remote viewing session, and more than once. My participation and role could be determined only by inference, since no recorders had been trained on the observation room. But the recording of Meagle's sessions showed plainly the results: the alien or saurian and, moments later, the harrowing superimposed image of my late son. For Caetani, I'm sure, my distress, my involvement, was just a piece of hammy theatrics, a shameful way to spray my mark onto an historic event.

"This afternoon, we know nothing more than we did a week ago," he stated bluntly. "I'm candidly dismayed at the gullibility of some of my colleagues here."

"The saurian—" began Jendayi Shumba. He cut her off instantly.

"—the *image* was no more veridical than the, the disturbed imposition into the colonel's entangled state of Sensei Park's tragic fixation on his son's death. Nobody doubts that Mr. Park is a functioning poltergeist, capable of casting images and interfering with complex electronic systems. It's why he's here—over my objections—and isn't the point." He took a deep breath, his features flushed behind that

pretentious beard. “Our visitor’s martyred son is certainly *not* aboard that Jurassic artifact, and surely nobody thinks he is. Neither, by the same token, is the dinosaur space captain that Mr. Park’s well-prepped imagination also dreamed up and shoveled into the ideospace.”

“With all due respect, you’re out of your depth, Tony.” This one I hadn’t met before, an industrial psychiatrist named Lionel Berger. “Back off, will you? Remote viewing is no exact science, nor even an accomplished art—and I mean no disrespect to Colonel Meagle in pointing this out. We don’t know how it works, except that quantum field nonlocality is engaged and implemented by an act of deliberation. Its famous vulnerability is that other minds can become trapped into the entanglement and add their own measures of information ... but whether that aggregate data is veridical, symbolic, mythological or sheer phantasy, we can’t tell just by simple inspection. Dismissing this evidence by flinging about words like ‘psychic’ and ‘poltergeist’ is argument by slur. I’m prepared to wait for more evidence before I decide so confidently what’s inside that vessel.”

Caetani, the surly fellow, actually said, “Bah!” I’d never heard anyone actually *say* that before. Others spoke, in their turn; Meagle sat at the back, his blind eyes closed, sunk into a sort of exhausted torpor. I’d have liked to go to him, sit beside him in respectful and sorrowing silence. Instead, as requested, I also remained silent, half-listening to the academese, the scholasticism, the stochasticism, the loop theories of cognitive restructuration.

I *had* seen my dead son.

I *had* seen the saurian sat in his great chair, or hers.

\* \* \* \*

If cause is a pool of chaos and order blended by intention and brute event, I am (and nobody, as yet, has managed to explain why it is so) a small stick of dynamite exploding up random fishy critters to the shore. Brrrr ... That’s a macabre, self-lacerating image. It had been my boy Song who perished in mindless explosions, and not by my hand. But hadn’t I sent him into fatal danger? Into ultimate harm’s way? Of course I had. Not by urging or forbidding, in so many words, but in my reckless skepticism, my louche lack of patriotism. Which had fetched us up where? Him, smashed like a detonated fish in a pool he could not escape, did not wish to escape. Me, bereft, alone, my bond to my nation long ago broken and betrayed. I grunted aloud, hoisted myself into a less uncomfortable position on a seat too small, as usual, for my girth.

“Sam? You wanted to say something?”

I looked around. They were gazing at me expectantly. “Oh, nothing. What can I donate that hasn’t already been weighed and found wanting?” It was petty and self-regarding, and I snapped my mouth shut, but a fierce anger burst up in me anyway, so I opened it again. “I’ll say one thing. And make no apologies for it. We are here,” I swung one arm through an embracing arc, taking in the auditorium, the station, Titan, “because years ago, when I was still on Earth, I discerned a causal anomaly near this place. We are here because military and independent remote viewers on three worlds concurred in finding and describing the vehicle. We are here, therefore, driven by the many motives that arose from that discovery. But I insist that the principal occasion is Premier Kim’s wish to test the hypotheses forwarded by the scientific entity I represent.” I took a deep breath. “So far as I can see, what Colonel Meagle uncovered this morning corroborates precisely the predictions of the Intelligent Dinosaur Institute. If my presence has muddied your waters, I’m sorry—but again I remind you, if it were not for me, none of you would be here today.

“So lay the hell off, okay?”

I dug in my robe’s pocket, found a Mars bar, unpeeled it, and gobbled it down.

\* \* \* \*

Shortly after Song-Dam’s eighth birthday—his mother long since escaped back into the whorehouse alleys she and I had both come from—I took him with me on a business trip to Palo Alto. I was the object of the business trip, my absurd gift, my poltergeist prowess with cause and effect. Several Stanford biophysics researchers had somehow picked up trash journalism stories about me as the luckiest/unluckiest man on Earth. Funding was limited, but I convinced them that Song was in my sole charge and that I wasn’t budging without him.

So we took an exhausting flight from Incheon International across the Pacific and through the absurd indignities of US Homeland Security (despite a graduate student being on hand at the airport to collect us, now cooling his heels in the arrival lounge with a wilting cardboard sign in two languages; I had inadvertently set off various bells and whistles, so of course we were detained pointlessly, until one of the senior professors was persuaded to drive to the airport and vouch for us), and stayed in an anonymous, ugly block of apartments that seemed to have been compiled from polyurethane pretending to be marble. We could hear the dreary TV set next door through the adjoining wall.

I took Song for a long walk so he and I could get a feel for the alien place, this America, as we stretched our weary legs. Within three blocks (trust my causal eddies for once), we found a Korean food store, established that my parents’ modest residence in Nangok—back at the turn of the century when it was still a squalid slum in a hilly area of Sillim-dong, Gwanak District—was just spitting distance from the proprietors’ familial stomping grounds, and found ourselves dragged happily to a nearby park by Mr. Kwon’s wife and three kids to fly dragon kites in the cool afternoon breeze.

I helped Song pay out the string. Our borrowed kite was a scarlet and gold Dragon Diamond (a gift to us both, as it turned out—and thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Kwon!). Our dragon quivered on the middle air a moment, strained against his leash, then suddenly flung himself upward into the deepening blue Californian sky. The line went taut. Song let it go in fright, but I held tight, and a moment later he put his hands back to the winch reel beside mine. I saw the line stretched between my hand, his small resolute hands, and the high, swooping, flower-bright dragon: a luminous string.

“Daddy, look!” said my son, wild with excitement. “Our dragon is flying on a beam of photons!”

At that moment, as if Buddha had smacked me in the ear, I was enlightened.

\* \* \* \*

“I think I can get in,” I told the Director of Operations, a tight-jawed fellow named Namgoong, almost certainly a political appointee but in secure possession of a decent scientific reputation with degrees in geology and astrobiology. Earth and sky, I thought, but hid my smile. “I think I can break the shield. The question is, do I dare?”

“Yes. Precisely. If you rupture the stationary shield, who knows what might seep out into the atmosphere.” He gave me a thin-lipped smile. “Fortunately, Sensei, we shall not have to wait three years for an Environmental Impact Study. The Imperium wants this thing opened. Now. It’s why you’re here.”

“To tell you the truth, sir, I’m more worried about what might seep *in*. They must have sealed it against Titan’s atmosphere for good reason.”

“A motive that expired millions of years ago.” He rose. “I’m having a containment dome erected around the locus. There’s no way we can establish blockade underneath the ice as well, but this will meet most likely challenges. Or so I’m assured.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.” I belatedly heaved up my bulk. “When will you want me out there?”

“You’ll be advised. We have a full scale colloquium scheduled, starting at two. I’ll expect you to be there, Sensei Park, and on your best behavior. No more outbursts, if you please.”

“More damned chin-wagging. Science used to be an empirical exercise,” I grumbled.

“Led by theory, as I’m sure you understand.” He was standing at his door, and I went out, biting my lip. Nobody had the faintest starting point for a theory to explain my causal distortions, and not much to account for the photon-entangled portage functor. I could do it, I could show them a method for using it (and had), but I didn’t have a theory-empowered clue how or why. I’m nobody’s mutant superman, that much I do know. (Or is that just a fat man’s self-doubt speaking?)

Postmodern science, as far as I can tell looking in from the outside, is drunk on the sound of its own voice. But yes, I know: look who’s complaining. I recalled again that Victorian sage, that poet Tennyson. He had it right: *I sometimes hold it half a sin to put in words the grief I feel; for words, like Nature, half reveal and half conceal the Soul within. But, for the unquiet heart and brain, a use in measured language lies; the sad mechanic exercise, like dull narcotics, numbing pain.* I followed Dr. Namgoong along the narrow compiled corridors of Huygens station, so like those awful domiciles on the outskirts of Palo Alto, and went to hear the sad mechanics exercise their tongues and dull their pain, and maybe mine.

\* \* \* \*

The circulated air was pungent, despite the scrubbers, with the musk of excited animals crowded together. A schematic chart I’d grown familiar with, these last few months, started displaying on the auditorium wall, replacing the magnified image of Saturn’s glorious tilted hat. The Fermi Paradox Solution candidates. My eye bounced off them, falling down a cliff of words and logic with no footing in reality beyond the dragon-haunted thing outside the dome:

### **Where are They?**

**Fermi 1. They are here among us, and call themselves Koreans.**

That always got a satisfied titter, except from any Hungarians in the crowd.

**Fermi 2. They are here, running things.**

A chance for the Hungarians, and anyone else chafing under the Imperium, to get their own back with a belly laugh. No giggles here, though, I noticed.

**Fermi 3. They came and left.**

Bingo, I thought. They came and left flowers scattered in their wake. Strictly, though, that was Fermi 53, the only choice left. The ancient intelligent dinosaur hypothesis.

**Fermi 6. We are interdicted.**

**Fermi 10. They are still on their way here.**

The starship had blown that one, and others like it, clear out of the water. Time to trim the list, methinks.

**Fermi 21. They're listening, only fools are transmitting.**

**Fermi 22. Dedicated killer machines destroy everything that moves, anywhere in space.**

**Fermi 28. The Vingean Singularity takes them ... elsewhere.**

No Singularity back near the end of the Cretaceous, I thought. Judging by the remote viewer's sketches, that saurian pilot was advanced, but not sufficiently advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic.

**Fermi 38. Earth is the optimal place for life, just by chance.**

Could be. And for intelligent life, at that. Hey, look, we've seen it twice: the smart dinosaurs and Homo sap.

**Fermi 48. Language is vanishingly rare.**

Ha! Yeah, right. Blah blah blah. Still, maybe so. The skies are awfully silent, which is where we came in...

**Fermi 49. Science is a rare accident.**



Not as rare as I am, I thought, touching the etiological chains and vortices all around—and no scientist ever predicted me. Most of them still didn't even *know* about me, thanks to all those Above Top Secret restrictions. Damn it.

Namgoong cleared his throat at the podium. Voices, in clumps and then one by one, fell silent. Hey, maybe that's it. God tapped His microphone, and the cosmos shut up to listen. And they're still listening, bent and cowed by the awfulness of what they heard. But not us, we haven't heard from God yet, despite a thousand revelations claimed and proclaimed. Or if we have, there's no way to search through the babbling noise and extract the divine signal. Funny way to run a universe.

I could feel the dinosaur calling to me, even so, through the appalling cold of Titan's snows and the void of fifty or a hundred million years. And the entwined memory of my son, sacrificed for nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

“Those are the classic guesses—most of them wrong.” The Director flicked his finger; the display went to blank gray. “We still have no idea why the galaxy, indeed the universe as a whole, is quiet. Why the stars are still shining, spilling out their colossal energy resources, when intelligence should be collecting it. Calculations you're all familiar with prove that a single intelligent species arising anywhere in the galaxy within the last billion years would by now have colonized all its trillion stars and associated bodies, turned the sky black with Matrioshka shells—or perhaps obliterated the stars in vast, wasteful wars.”

I pricked up my ears. A political subtext? Perhaps not; maybe our director was just a tone-deaf drone. I glanced around; several people near me had dropped their eyes, more than one held fists clenched tight. Okay.

“One of the equally classic Great Filters must screen out potential intelligent life and leave the heavens exactly as they'd have to be if there is no life at all out there. No *intelligent, starfaring* life, anyway.

“So now we're faced with a new paradox. Fermi remains unanswered—and yet we have this old vehicle made by beings not of our own species, but apparently related. The likelihood of that coincidence being due to chance alone is impossibly small. I see only three remaining possibilities.”

“Barney did it,” someone called, muted but clear across the room. A wave of tittering. I felt my jaw tighten, and a flush creep into my cheeks.

“A previous civilization sprung from dinosaur stock on Cretaceous Earth, or even earlier, yes,” said Dr.

Namgoog evenly. “The opinion represented here today by our guest, Sensei Park.”

A pattering of polite applause, some even more muted groans.

“We have evidence in the form of preliminary scans by our Naval remote viewer, Colonel Meagle, that the creature ... the being, forgive me ... in charge of the craft has just such an origin. Leaving aside the improbability of parallel evolution. If so, this leaves the earlier and larger Fermi question unanswered: where are its kindred now, why haven’t they conquered the whole galaxy? Tipler and others proved decades ago that this could have been achieved at achievable sub-light speeds within a million years. If they have, why don’t we see them?”

Hearing it stated so flatly, I was dizzied, as always, by the prospect. Flotillas of starcraft fleeing into the spiral arms at a tenth of light speed, crammed with dragon seed or our own. Or minute nanoscale pods fired toward a hundred million stars by magnetic catapult, or driven on filmy wings by laser light. Yet these, too, were last year’s dreams, last century’s. We had stepped from Earth to Ganymede to Titan entangled on a light beam, and without waiting to be shoved here by sailboat. The moment entangled luminal portage became a reality for my own species, it opened the yawning cavern: why not for them, as well? What the hell was a *starship* doing here? Why bother? It was so last week, like finding a steam locomotive under the ice.

Namgoog was enunciating his other solutions to Fermi, but I didn’t care. I was entranced by the mystery of the sleeping creature, sedate under his bedding of live flowers. It was a hunger like my endless appetite for chow. I wanted to step straight through the damned shell of the ship and look the critter in the eye, man to man. Even if it decided to eat *me*.

That’s what dragons do, isn’t it?

\* \* \* \*

And so to bed. Where I lay in the dark in a lather of fright for fifteen minutes. Fearful and weak. Bleak. Needing a leak. I climbed out and thudded to the sanitary personal. When I got back, after a swab up and down and across with a wet face cloth to dab away the worse of the flopsweat, my door was slightly open. Through it came the never-stopping background clanging and banging of humans and machines keeping the place ticking over. Snapping my fingers, I clicked the room light up to dim. Dr. Jendayi Shumba, chubby string looper, stretched at ease on my bed, clad in sensible pajamas with a mission blaze on the collar. Of course, I jumped and squealed.

“*What* the— Is there some—”

“Hush up, dear man, and come over here.” She grinned.

“You’re not serious. Are you?”

In evidence, she slithered out of her pjs and raised her eyebrows.

“Absurd. I’d crush you like a bug.”

“Myeong-hui, you don’t weigh any more, here, than my little boy.”

“You have a—?” I swallowed, and crept closer. “I had a son once.”

“Let us be in this moment, Sensei,” she said without reproach.

“I’m disgusting to look upon,” I said frankly. “And I don’t need a pity—”

She had her fingers across my mouth, and then pulled me down through several clunky jumpy evolutions.

“There are other ways to convey one’s ... intimacy,” she said.

“Ulp,” I protested.

“An easy mouth is a great thing on a long journey, is it not, old fellow?” she said, releasing mine and patting my neck.

“Ex-cuse me?”

Jendayi burst out laughing, a slightly husky, wonderfully exciting sound. “A quote from an old British classic about a horse. Nineteenth century, I believe. You might have read it as a child. *Black Beauty*.”

“You are the black beauty,” I said, noticing a cue when it smacked me between the eyes. I raised my voice and said, “Door close,” and it did.

“You’ve got a way to break into the ship, don’t you?” she said, after a time without time.

I was reeling and reckless. “Yes. Probably.”

“So you really are a poltergeist.” She stroked my contemptible belly, as if it were a friendly animal sharing the bed with us. “Tony nearly poked his damn eye out.” Her laugh was throaty, dirty, a tonic.

“Don’t blame me,” I said, and found a glass of water, drained it. “It’s like being able to wiggle your ears.”

In the near-dark, she wiggled hers, and more.

But before she left, Jendayi said, “Bring me back a sample. A skin scraping, anything with DNA. Just for me, honey, okay?” Oh, so that’s why you’re here? Had to be some reason. Exploitative bitch. But that’s life, right?

\* \* \* \*

Looking like a well-laid but annoyed and put-upon squat polar bear in my bodyglove, some hellish number of minus degrees on the far side of its skin, I stood gazing down from the edge of the excavation. The spacecraft was unaltered, every bloom precisely where it had been several days before, where it had been, perhaps, several tens of millions of years before. Unless it was salted here recently as a snare for gullible humans. In which case, it might be younger than I. Not so likely, though.

“Ready when you are, Sensei,” said the political officer, doing Mr. Kim’s bidding, and damn the scientists’ caution.

I raised one thumb and let myself drift. Cause and effect unbraided, started their long, looping dance of etiological distortion, swirling, curdling. I was the still center of the spinning world. Certainties creaked, cracked. A favorite poem entered my heart, by Ji-Hoon Cho, “Flower petals on the sleeves”:

\* \* \* \*

The wanderer's long sleeves

Are wet from flower petals.

Twilight over a riverside village

Where wine is mellow.

\* \* \* \*

Had this saurian person below me, trapped now in timelessness, known wine? Crushed release and perhaps moments of joy from some archaic fruit not yet grape? I thought, with a wrenching mournfulness:

\* \* \* \*

When this night is over

Flowers will fall in that village.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey!”

And there went the flowers, drawn up and tossed away from the hull of the starship. They were scattering in the methane wind, lifted and flung by the bitter gusts, floral loveliness snap-frozen, blown upward and falling down in drifts into the alien snow.

“The stationary shield is discontinued,” said a clipped voice in my ears.

I stepped forward, ready to enter the ancient, imprisoned place. To meet my dinosaur, who had either died or even now lived, freed from timeless suspension. A hand caught my encased arm.

“Not yet, Sam. We have a team prepped. Thanks, you’ve done good here today.” I turned, hardly able to see through my tears, and it was not that bastard Tony Caetani groveling his apologies, the universe could not be so chirpy as that. I hadn’t met this one before, although he’d picked up my dining room nickname and used it with a certain familiar breeziness; some beefy functionary of some armed service division, grinning at me in his bluff farmboy way. I nodded, and watched the team of marines go down, and remembered my dear boy and the way he had gone forward fearlessly into darkness and then into the fire falling from the sky. It did not matter one whit that I thought his cause wrong-headed. I remembered a poem in that book I’d found in the ruined library, a poem by an Englishman named Kipling that had torn my heart as I sat before Song-Dam’s closed coffin. There was no comfort this tide, the poem warned me, nor in any tide, save this:

\* \* \* \*

he did not shame his kind—

Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.

\* \* \* \*

Without shame, I sobbed, but then drew myself up and turned back to Huygens agora. Perhaps, I told myself, ten or sixty million years ago, another father had laid his son on these cruel snows and bade him farewell. I murmured to that reptilian father, offering what poor borrowed comfort I might to us both, across all that void of space and time: “Then hold your head up all the more, This tide, And every tide; Because he was the son you bore, And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!”

I looked straight up above me, at the photodiode display before my eyes in the viewmask, swallowing hard, to follow the streaming tide of blossoms on the wind, and there was Saturn, old Father Time, hanging in the orange smoke of the sky, an arrow through his heart. I gave him a respectful nod, and raised one gloved thumb in salute.

