

Firehorn

by Robert Reed

Our switch to a bimonthly schedule has led some readers to wonder if it means Robert Reed's amazing prolificity will be affected (now that he won't be able to publish a story with us every month). No need to worry, folks—Mr. Reed reports that in addition to several new stories, he's also working away on three different novels. We expect that you'll have plenty of new fiction from Mr. Reed, both here and elsewhere.

His latest *F&SF* contribution is another indication of why he's so popular. He makes it look so easy...

There were ten or twelve of us, or more than twenty, depending on the specific year and who was in charge of the counting. Ages varied, but there was this demographic bump just a few years younger than me. Practically every kid in town belonged to our club at one time or always, and although I'm certain we had fights and long-simmering feuds, I can't recall any of that now. Time washes. Memory filters. The mind knows what it wants to cherish, and what I remember best is a group of youngsters who mirrored their town as a whole: a small community proud of its tolerance and personal freedoms. And as a result, my life seemed slathered with an effortless, unremarkable happiness.

I can't imagine a better place for a boy to dream up monsters.

On the state map, our home was a barely named dot hugging a minor line snaking its way across an enormous, mostly uninhabited desert. We were nobody's destination, but there was gasoline and cold drinks at the all-night BP. Travelers often asked us about nuclear tests and secret government installations, but the boring truth is that we weren't especially close to the ancient blast sites, and the nearest airbase was abandoned before I was born. And yet our town could have sat comfortably inside half of the horror movies produced over the past century. The bleak desert set a mood, and the infinite skies helped enlarge the sense of profound isolation. If a flying saucer plunged to Earth, it had to crash behind my garage. Whenever a giant scorpion woke from its million-year sleep, it was obligated to crawl out into our astonishingly starry night. And if an army of zombies ever murdered the rest of the world, it would be the solemn duty of my little community to fill potato sacks with sand and barricade the highway, every adult and grim-faced child shouldering rifles, slaughtering the scourge until all was made safe again.

Our town park was decorated with steel shelters and the kinds of playground equipment popular when my folks were children. Our

K-through-twelve school sported a grassless football field and a pair of intact basketball poles. But for most of us, the center of the universe was a rough little mountain standing beside the highway—a pile of ancient geology covered with modern desert scrub; a wonderland just large enough and complicated enough that it would never be known completely.

I loved that ground.

Fifty years later, I still adore it.

We always had a clubhouse hiding on those slopes—an official gathering place tucked inside a shaded, deeply secret hole. That's where we converged after school or in the morning before the summer heat turned brutal. As I mentioned, there were about a dozen of us usually. More if you counted baby brothers and sisters tagging along. I don't remember the historic date, but I know it was early June, right after breakfast. I was thirteen. Alone, I climbed a rocky slope that had always felt steep and challenging. But my body was growing bigger, stronger. Against my wishes, I could feel the child leaving me. And maybe that's why on that particular morning the usual games didn't intrigue me. Building forts, exploring dark holes, and hunting lizards while avoiding the feared, rarely seen rattlesnakes: Those grand adventures sounded boring. What I wanted was fresh fun, and just short of the clubhouse, a terrific idea found me.

Three youngsters were waiting inside. I remember which ones, though that doesn't matter anymore. What counts is that they were eight and nine years old, and in their eyes, I was the worldly, far wiser entity, expert in quite a lot about matters still mysterious to them.

At the doorway, I put on a fake face. Then I kneeled down and said the password, crawling into a mound of scrap planks and old tarps that comprised our seat of government.

To the best of my ability, I looked scared.

"What's wrong?" one of the boys asked.

I took a big breath, probably overplaying my hand. But nobody saw the performance for what it was. In a whisper, I announced, "I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"On the trail," I said. "It was standing in the open."

My audience was curious, even thrilled. No trace of doubt, only a deep hunger for explanations. But I was still working out the details of my lie. I wasn't sure what to say next. I just kept gasping quietly while glancing back over my shoulder, fearful of something that had to be quite awful.

And that's when Morgan arrived.

She was the oldest of us, and for the last few years, even when she wasn't the oldest, Morgan served as our self-appointed leader. She was a Chinese girl. Her good-hearted, rather elderly parents had adopted her as a baby. Then later, having convinced themselves that the world was about to blow up, they moved into our piece of nowhere. The far side of the moon wasn't available, but in a pinch, we had seemed like an isolated, worthy refuge.

Morgan was, and remains, exceptionally pretty. The first time I saw the girl, I realized that we would fall in love and marry. It wasn't that I felt any obligation to the institution of wedlock. I didn't, and I don't. But she was lovely and smart, and besides, I have this pragmatic streak that appreciated having one of life's great puzzles answered for me.

Morgan and I were always partners and co-conspirators. I was relieved to hear her voice saying the password, and then she crawled inside, needing only a glance at me to know something was up.

"What's wrong, Gabe?"

"He saw *it*," one boy whispered.

"Out on the trail," added his slightly older brother.

With a small dose of subtlety, I threw a wink at my future fiancée.

Morgan smiled, just a little. "What did you see, Gabe?"

"The monster," I said.

That earned respectful silence from our spellbound audience.

Then the little girl asked, "What monster?" As if there were several to choose from.

One of Morgan's gifts has always been her capacity to select names. Without delay—seemingly without any thought whatsoever—she told us, "It's

called the Firehorn.”

Four mouths silently repeated the made-up name.

Then the love of my life placed her hand on top of mine, and with a flair for acting that I couldn't hope to duplicate, she asked, “Did you really see the Firehorn, Gabe? Just now?” Then after her own wink, she added, “I'm sort of jealous. But tell the truth ... weren't you *terrified*?”

* * * *

A good childhood brings toothless hazards: smiling ghosts and playful monsters, above-average grades and nothing worse than insults during recess. The world shouldn't turn dangerous until you've grown old and a little bit wise. Although as the years pass, I have to wonder if any of us ever really learns what the real monsters are and what else is just shadow.

Fifty years later, I felt entitled to my various fears. Old age and money were growing concerns. Several years had passed since my third marriage quietly crumbled, and I wasn't employed or even employable—a human creature passing through an increasingly bizarre Earth, a world ruled by a new species he barely understood and could never wholly trust.

“Mr. Tanbridge?”

I looked at the machine, trying to decide which surface was its face.

“Are you Gabriel Tanbridge?”

“You know I am,” I pointed out.

Three arms gestured in a rather human fashion, as if to say, “Point taken.” Then a voice that sounded male quietly said, “Your friends call you Gabe. But I'll refer to you as Mr. Tanbridge.”

“Good choice.”

We were standing on the walk in front of my apartment building. It was a warm, steamy evening in December, and I hadn't been outside for three days. A service delivers my food and bottled water, and by my own choice, my electronic ties to the world are heavily filtered. A small second-hand VR chamber lets me travel on those rare occasions when I feel the need. Having learned to live without sunshine, I often spend weeks at a time inside my three-room home. Which made

me wonder how long this AI had been standing out here, and how much longer it was prepared to wait for my appearance.

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

“Advice,” the machine allowed. “You see, I have an interest in—”

“The Firehorn,” I interrupted.

Again, the jointed limbs made agreeable motions.

“I’ve told everybody everything,” I warned. “My history is all very public. Believe whatever you want, but I don’t have anything new to add.”

“I agree, Mr. Tanbridge. You have been quite forthcoming.”

There were codes, laws. If I ordered this machine to leave, it would have no choice but to obey. Yet I couldn’t find an excuse. It had been almost two years since anyone, human or otherwise, took the trouble to contact me physically, and a tiny sliver of curiosity wouldn’t let me end this scene with a binding order.

“I’ve made a full study of your testimonies, Mr. Tanbridge. I believe I have a clear sense of your role in the ongoing story.”

“Well, then,” I muttered.

“But there has been a new development.”

“Another sighting?” I laughed. “We used to get ten every day, from all around the world. There could be more now, but I gave up counting.”

“This is not a routine sighting, sir.”

And with that, the machine projected a photograph into the air between us. I studied the image as best I could. What looked at first glance to be a rubbish pile wasn’t. Wreckage lay strewn across a rocky slope that looked a little familiar, and after twenty seconds, I reached the point where I could finally see what would have been obvious to anybody younger than I.

The picture showed a desert mountainside and the corpses of at least three dismantled, deceased AIs.

“What did this?” I finally asked.

With a silent command, a string of images were played for me. A nearby camera showed three thinking machines. The machines were apparently doing nothing but climbing the slope, taking in the sights. Then the feed suddenly turned grainy. Some kind of interference was at work. For maybe fifteen seconds, a blurring shape emerged from a nearby hole and pounced on its victims. I thought of a dust devil. I thought of a cartoon marsupial. Then the blur vanished and the machines were obliterated, and without a trace of doubt, the machine standing before me announced, "That was the Firehorn."

I said, "No."

"Yes," it assured me. "The evidence is compelling, sir. We've mapped each frame, in detail. We have made enhancements and biomechanical studies. Without doubt, we believe that the Firehorn is beginning to kill."

In truth, the law remains divided about artificial minds and what constitutes death. But I attacked what to me was the more vulnerable point. "There's no such thing as a Firehorn. And there never has been."

"Of course, sir."

"I dreamed it up, way back at the beginning of time, and through almost no fault of my own, the stupid world decided to believe in it."

"As you say," it replied.

I took a step backwards.

"Nonetheless, I'm here as a representative," the machine continued. "I belong to a mission, Mr. Tanbridge. An expedition, if you will. It is our intention to find the entity that did this to our brothers."

"But why me?" I asked. "I don't have anything to offer. I've done what I can to diffuse this mess, and I'm finished with monsters, and that's the simple, boring truth."

"I'm sorry, sir. I am truly sorry. But my dear wife holds a rather different interpretation of the Firehorn's history. And more to the point, she believes that you have a very important role to play in our mutual futures."

"Your wife?"

“Yes, sir.”

I could have collapsed.

“By any chance,” I muttered softly, “are you a Copernicus?”

“I am.”

All lineages often took their names from human geniuses.

“And your wife...?” I began.

“You know the woman well.” Every limb moved with apologetic flourishes. “Morgan promises that you can and will help us. She claims you aren’t the selfish bigot you pretend to be.” Copernicus paused for a moment, allowing my soggy human brain to deal with that thunderbolt. Then it continued, saying, “We are a team of believers, Mr. Tanbridge. Our mission is to identify this monster, and God willing, stop it before it harms again.”

* * * *

The “monster” was my inspiration, but it was Morgan’s elaboration. Yet the Firehorn wouldn’t have existed if there hadn’t been a ready-made audience. And by audience, I don’t mean our little-kid club. Eight- and nine-year-olds don’t have the power or the stubborn will necessary to turn harmless fun into a humorless, life-consuming pursuit. Adults were what we needed—proud voters and drivers who considered themselves responsible, average, and wise.

Some kids immediately saw the joke for what it was. But that didn’t stop them from playing along. Over the course of a single fertile morning, Morgan and I hammered out the Firehorn’s essentials. The creature had to be quick and smart, we decided. And seeing it at all was extremely unusual. Like any self-respecting monster, it was nocturnal. And of course it had to be a meat-eater, since what kind of terror eats roots and berries?

“What kind of meat?” asked the little bodies jammed into our stuffy, overheated clubhouse.

“Mice and rats,” Morgan blurted. Then after another meaningful wink in my direction, she added ominously, “For now, it likes small prey.”

“Why ‘for now’?” one boy muttered.

“Because it’s growing,” I said.

Growth was an ominous quality. Growth meant that the creature was an unfinished, still unformed work.

“But how big will it get?” somebody asked.

“Nobody knows,” Morgan replied.

That revelation made everybody squirm. I even twitched, if only because I could see this lie slipping out of my control.

Staring at the two of us, one girl asked suspiciously, “But where did the Firehorn come from?”

I said, “Nobody knows.”

“It could be alien,” Morgan offered. “Or a mutated animal from Yucca Flats. Although...” She let her voice break. “The story I heard,” she began. “The Firehorn was grown inside a secret laboratory. Scientists made it, and they took care of it. But the creature scared them. They realized that it was too fast, too smart. They even decided to kill it, but before they could, their creation escaped from its cage and slipped out into the world.”

That clichéd tale earned a tense, delicious silence.

I looked at my future love. Then to test her skill as a liar, I asked pointblank, “Who told you that?”

“My father did.”

“He did?”

Without hesitation, she said, “Oh, yes.” Those two utterly ordinary words were offered with just the right tone: Believable and unhesitant, dripping with dry-eyed honesty. It was such a convincing performance that for the next few moments, I wondered if maybe a wild Firehorn was galloping across the desert, and my fake sighting was a coincidence.

Then one of the boys interrupted my daydream. “But so what’s the Firehorn look like?”

I allowed the expert to answer that.

Morgan lectured for several minutes. What she described was a sturdy beast about the size of a coyote, only stronger, its body covered with hard scales and bits of dirty white fur. Like a unicorn, it sported a single horn, but instead of emerging from the forehead, the embellishment rose off the crest of its skull, sweeping back to a sharp poisonous point.

Later, I decided the horn was a misstep. How could such a creature deliver its toxins with a backward-facing weapon? But the horn gripped a few imaginations that day, particularly when she mentioned that it was red as blood, and in the night, when the creature was excited, it glowed as if it was on fire.

“Is that the animal you saw?” somebody asked.

Asked me, apparently. For a moment, I’d forgotten that my boast started this runaway train.

I nodded with mock authority. And when that didn’t feel adequate, I added, “That’s exactly what I saw on the trail.”

“But is it dangerous?” several voices asked.

“Not really,” Morgan assured. “Unless you’ve got it cornered, of course. Which is the same trouble you’d have with coyotes or cougars. Or a lot of people too, for that matter.”

“Who else has seen it?” the serious girl wanted to know.

Ready for the question, Morgan reported, “My dad’s seen it.”

Later, walking with me, she confessed that she had been doing a lot of quick thinking inside the clubhouse. She decided that what the story needed was one respectable witness, someone who would be believed and willing to play along. Her parents and my parents were obvious candidates. My folks were stuffy when it came to spreading lies. And while Morgan’s mother was sweet and eager to please her daughter, it was her father who could be counted on. The old man didn’t often lie, but before he became her father, he was a legendary poker player. He was smart and blessed with the good rich voice of an authority figure. And although Morgan didn’t mention this particular reason—and perhaps didn’t realize its significance—her father had been recently diagnosed with a treatable cancer.

In other words: Who would willingly question the testimony of a sick man?

Before noon, we had a thirty-pound carnivore running wild across the desert at night, slaughtering rats and voles to feed its voracious appetite. Nobody knew what it was or where it came from. And it wouldn't hurt anyone, unless we got stupid. "But we aren't going to be stupid, are we?" Morgan asked everybody. Then she invented a worthy excuse that allowed her to slip home to brief her father about her very busy, exceptionally fun morning.

Our friends scattered, and they started to talk.

Parents would hear pieces of the story, and when they asked the responsible questions, most of them managed to smell out the fable. But they didn't make too many negative sounds, for the most part. A few even giggled, watching their children throw open closets and drawers, digging out binoculars and cameras and butterfly nets and other cryptozoological tools.

"Let the kids have their fun," was the guiding principle.

For the next week or two, our Firehorn was the talk of the town.

Some good-hearted neighbors visited Morgan's home. They emerged with reports about her father's good prognosis and very positive attitude, and oh by the way, did we know that the Firehorn was living in a coyote burrow just south of town?

Of course this was another joke being played on children. But a few gullible teens absorbed our story, at least a little bit. Even if they didn't admit it, the most gullible minds began lying awake at night, every little noise catching their interest. Was that the call or grunt or clawed scratchings of this unwelcome creature? The legend was helped when a local cat lost its battle with a coyote, its yellow body sliced up by long teeth and left on the schoolyard. And later, a teenage couple parked on the dirt road south of town thought they spotted a low shape slinking along, the glowing red horn obvious in the moonlight.

Insistence always wins over converts, and that pair were convincing.

So was Morgan's father. But it's safe to guess that the credible voice that helped spin the lies would have recanted. Or better, he would have forced his daughter and her best friend to step forward, admitting to the very drab truth. I know it bothered the old man to learn that a pair of fifteen-year-old lads had bought coyote traps and started baiting them with dead mice, leaving those steel-toothed hazards scattered about our landscape. But before he made up his mind, the monster cancer inside him decided to win. One day, the old

poker-playing gentleman was on the mend, and then he was suddenly very sick and dying and then dead, and there was a sudden horrible funeral, and his ravaged, somewhat radioactive body was sunk into the earth not a quarter mile from where the Firehorn was last seen.

After that, the monster faded without ever disappearing.

And then at some ill-defined point and for no good reason, the fable found new legs and fresh life. Word of its existence hit the Internet. Slow-day news reports help prick public interest. Witnesses from other parts of the state stepped forward to enjoy a little celebrity, nervously describing an organism that they spotted on their local desert. The Firehorn had many talents, but what was most remarkable was its capacity to remain the same. Hound-shaped and scaled and sporting the one horn. Except that it soon grew as big as a German shepherd, and then it was larger and far quicker than any simple cougar or black bear.

Meanwhile, Morgan and I grudgingly surrendered our hill and clubhouse to younger children, and we finally started to date. In our senior year, we earned scholarships to the same college; and by chance, we were holding hands in a distant cafeteria when a stranger approached, asking if it was true. Did we really, truly come from that famous town?

“What town?” I asked.

“Where the Firehorn lives,” he sputtered.

Morgan looked at me, and I returned her gaze.

Then because it was easiest, not to mention rather fun, we answered with conspirators’ unblinking confidence, “We are from there, yes.”

* * * *

As far as I know, the first Firehorn that actually cast shadows was a piece of machinery devised thirteen years after my inspiration. Its builder was one of my little friends, a resident lad who remained in town and understood early on that everything was nonsense. But he decided to tear apart a dozen high-end toys and splice the pieces together. His creation was small and slow and utterly stupid. Its onboard brain had trouble evading rat holes. But for one glorious spring, the Firehorn was noticed—mostly by late-night drivers who spied the legendary shape whining and creaking its way across the darkened highway before them.

Later hoaxes were far more ambitious, but rather less successful.

At least three times, biotech people rose to the challenge. Assorted animal DNA was used to produce three sterile creatures bearing a modest resemblance to the beast of my dreams. One Firehorn was created for no other purpose than to be killed and shown to the world's cameras—human monsters loving their fifteen nanoseconds of fame. Another beast was released on the desert and dead within a week from exposure and thirst. The third Firehorn was designed to be the mascot of a young gene-engineering company, but the poor beast developed an allergy to peanuts, and its death played a small, critical role in the destruction of that fledging business empire.

Yet even with such incompetent fakers on the loose, believers continued to tell unlikely stories about this twenty-first-century yeti.

Of course the government had built the Firehorn, using alien technologies or its own evil tools. The various nature networks helped spread each lie. Hungry for programming, they found every crackpot claim, polishing it up and giving it good production values. Then they put the product on the Internet. Mortified, I watched a parade of strangers claim to have been present at the Firehorn's birth. Long-retired corporals swore that they weren't just low-ranking nobodies, their military lives spent inside secret installations not five miles from my front door. One story involved a Black division of the Defense Department. A quarter century before it was thought possible, genius engineers had created a genuinely intelligent machine. Then they set their creation to building new weapons. In a matter of weeks, the first AI designed and built a new species out of blood and titanium, wet breath and silicon minds. That was the Firehorn—a unique entity that fed on electricity and desert vermin, plus the scrap metal that it used to make larger, stronger bones and overlapping armored plates.

According to these noble-sounding witnesses, the military masters grew alarmed when they saw what the AI was doing. Their creation was supposed to design smart missiles, not a hound-from-hell. High-level meetings led to new orders: Kill both monsters. But the AI anticipated the danger, and with a parent's instincts, it allowed the young Firehorn to slip away into the trackless wastelands.

There were a lot of different, contradictory Firehorn stories, but that ungainly tale had the longest legs.

Once I'd signed on to the Copernicus's mission, I decided that it was finally time to make a study of these contrived accounts, trying to piece together how each lie had accreted on top of my childhood fun.

That's what I was doing onboard the railgun train. Ignoring both Copernicus across the aisle and the world flying past me, I was working my way across the last five decades. I didn't notice Morgan coming onboard at Denver. I didn't see her kissing her husband on one of his flat surfaces. Suddenly she was beside me, offering her hand to me—a hand that felt and looked almost human, at least with a first startled glance.

“Hello, Gabe.”

With a start, I said, “Hi.”

She didn't say, “You look good.”

And I didn't reply, “You look damn strange.”

Because the truth told, I didn't and she didn't. I was a tired and aging male stubbornly remaining human at all costs, while she was just another example of the degree to which some of us will go to evade Time and Disrepair.

She sat in the seat beside me. “Thanks for coming.”

I said nothing.

She glanced at my reader, then at me. Then because she could never keep a smart question secret, even if this wasn't the best time, she said pointblank, “Tell me. Why exactly did you agree to this?”

“I need the money,” I offered.

Our expedition had sponsors, and the sponsors were paying salaries, plus bonuses proportional to the world's interest. But the payoffs were very speculative, and she saw through that in an instant.

“Try again,” she suggested.

“You wanted me,” I confessed. Then I corrected myself. “Your husband delivered the invitation. But he promised that you would really, really appreciate my help.”

“I do. And I'm glad you're here. But I expected you to say no.”

“That's what I expected. So we're both significantly surprised, I guess.”

“We are.”

More silence.

Then again, she insisted, “Really. Tell me why you’re here.”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Morgan. I guess it’s because despite my better judgment, I still find myself missing you.”

There. I’d admitted the sad, pitiful truth. But when I looked at her face, studying its qualities, I didn’t see any emotional storms. Her skin could have been weeks old, but for some reason she’d let wrinkles gather at the deep brown eyes and the pensive mouth. She appeared to be a very pretty, very fit forty-year-old woman. For my benefit, or was this her normal appearance? The skin wore a pale simple color that was entirely human. But the complicated hands and her forearms and the tops of her bare shoulders projected images at once intricate and beautiful: the modern equivalent of artistic tattoos. Morgan’s clothes were loose and comfortable and uncharacteristically bland, as if she didn’t want either the shirt or trousers to detract from the proud body. Something other than two lungs was breathing for her. I could hear a pump working inside her belly, although that could have been some ordinary train noise that I hadn’t noticed until now. The hands had extra fingers and sockets for devices that would do quite a bit more than shake a man’s hand. But the most obvious addition to her body was a rigid golden ring that lay on her chest like a necklace, except that the back of the necklace was fused to her spinal column.

A technical necessity, or was this just a new fashion trend among cyborgs? I wanted to ask but didn’t. Unlike my first wife, I can keep my questions inside me, waiting for a better moment to begin my interrogations.

She motioned at my reader. “Ideas?”

“Who built the new Firehorn, you mean?”

She nodded.

“Somebody who doesn’t like AIs much.” I blanked the screen, adding, “Well, I guess my job’s done now.”

I wanted her to feel uncomfortable. That was one compelling reason to join this absurd adventure. Abusing your first love is a fine and ancient and always delicious human undertaking.

But she refused to play my game. Quietly, she sighed. Then a voice that hadn't changed in half a century picked a new topic. "Are you comfortable with your contracts?"

Copernicus had given me a few million agreements to read and sign. And just to be sure, I had to sit in front of his camera eyes, saying with confidence, "I agree to let my image, words, and actions be used in any and all future programs, games, and fictionalized accounts of this venture, according to the civil codes established by the Bohr-versus-Bohr case of twenty-thirty-one."

"I'm comfortable," I said.

She could tell I was lying. "You don't appreciate what you have," she began.

"What do I have?"

"Considerable status inside the Firehorn community."

I shrugged, honestly disgusted when I said, "I have a sense of it, sure."

"Once you came onboard, public interest doubled."

"Good for us."

"And for you in particular," she added.

Denver lay behind us. Las Vegas was the next stop. Our train slipped beneath the brown mountains, passing through the partial vacuum of its tunnel. I listened for a moment to that pumping sound, making sure that it was indeed coming from Morgan's belly. Which got me into a frame of mind that I didn't intend to mention.

She saw something on my face. "What are you thinking, Gabe?"

I wouldn't say it. So instead, I ungracefully changed topics. "I want your explanation. Why are machines as easy to fool as people?"

She blinked, saying nothing.

“Why does your Copernicus and the others ... what makes them believe as many crazy little notions as the rest of us do?”

Her face could still blush, I noticed.

I pressed on. “When the first AIs were built, I was like everybody. I expected cold, rational souls. And I guess that’s how they were at first. But later, when they could design themselves, they seemed to choose gullibility.”

She didn’t dare debate the point, since I was right.

“The Firehorn is a minor example,” I continued. “You’d know this a lot better than me. The machines love building the most incredible, unlikely religions, and they’re fiends when it comes to rumor and gossip, and every news event and natural tragedy can be explained through some paranoid conspiracy of black forces and faceless empires. Inside their hulls sit these tiny, powerful brains, but they insist on filling their genius with mush and dreams.”

In a very precise way, Morgan said nothing.

I knew that look. And I remembered what it meant when the pretty jaw set itself at that sharp, decisive angle.

But she decided not to fight with me and retreated instead. She sat back and inhaled a long luxurious breath into a thoroughly modern lung, and then quietly, almost calmly, she reminded me, “We’ll have plenty of time to discuss these entertaining issues.”

In other words:

“Wait for the cameras to be working.”

Between my second and third marriages, in a moment of personal suffering and considerable debt, I agreed to become the guest of honor at a convention dedicated to the unexplained. I’d already made my public confession about the Firehorn, but that didn’t stop the organizers from paying me a fat appearance fee. For my embarrassment, I was placed on a string of panels where experts and hobbyists vigorously debated the finer points in nonexistent matters. Some wise soul in programming imagined that flying saucers were an interest of mine. Late at night, when normal people were enjoying parties, hundreds of sober believers crowded into a conference room. I sat on stage, at the end of a long table. Our panel’s self-declared leader was in the middle—a loud, brash fellow who had been everywhere and seen everything, including two memorable incidents involving the

full-grown Firehorn. Perched on the table beside me was a silver box with a projected human-style face and a reasonable, measured voice. The machine was one of the new-generation AIs. Its defining creed was that the universe was big and full of interesting worlds, which meant there had to be other intelligent species, some of them billions of years old. Because life always grew in numbers and spread as it prospered, reason demanded that the ETs were among us now. My associate used authoritative numbers and elaborate computer simulations to impress an audience that didn't need much convincing. Finally the loud man interrupted, asking, "So what are you saying, buddy? If these aliens are here, where do they do their hiding?"

"They aren't hiding," the machine replied instantly. "Our world was conquered eons ago. And by most measures, we don't even exist anymore."

Maybe I made a doubtful noise. Maybe everybody did. But we left it to the blowhard to say, "Bullshit."

Yet the silver box proved stubborn and eerily confident. The obvious answer to the Fermi conundrum was that the galactic overlords had digested our home world, probably long before there was a breath of free oxygen in the atmosphere. The rest of our story, including trilobites and Google, was a sophisticated and easily managed computer program: a billion years of mock-evolution and historical fiction played out inside a bundle of structured X-rays, our precious reality enclosed within a sphere slightly smaller than a human fist.

The entity had its reasons and a thoroughly worked-out mythology.

I believed none of it, but I was interested in what it had to say. Some of the ideas even intrigued me. But then came the moment when its smart voice declared, "As you sit here, my friends, blissfully unaware ... as you sit, I am actively piercing the veil laid across this false existence of ours. My work is making great strides. Discoveries are imminent. And soon I will leave you. I will find the corporeal state and join Those Who Rule in the bountiful, endless universe."

Even our panel's leader was left speechless.

Then after a long, uncomfortable pause, a young woman in the audience gamely threw up an arm. Any distraction seemed worthy, and I took it on myself to say, "Yes, miss? A question?"

"Don't you hate it?" she began.

I shook my head. What did I hate?

“When the aliens abduct you and impregnate you,” she explained, her young, self-possessed voice beginning to tremble. “And then two months later, they steal away your baby. You don’t even get to name it, and then they take it to the stars. Isn’t that just the most awful thing in the world?”

* * * *

Decades of drought had done its worst to Las Vegas, but the city had survived the loss of water and most of its human residents. And the gambling industry had more than thrived. Machines of every design, all looking for easy money, converged on the waterless paradise. The most popular games were cumbersome versions of Black Jack, employing gigantic decks and tiny but favorable odds of winning. If an AI mind was sufficiently engaged, counting cards with perfect accuracy, and if its luck was just a little bit good, it was possible to roll into town with a few dollars and then leave the next day, rich enough to buy freedom, or an upgrade, or at least whatever happened to be the popular luxury in its little corner of the machine world.

With a calculable reliability, success happened. But it was a teasing, inadequate kind of success for the majority of tourists.

Dealing the cards were AIs designed to do nothing else, and always making the best possible bets with each hand. Those machines were the masters of gambling, algorithms updated on the hour, hardware upgraded during every brief sleep. And to prevent cheating, the casinos employed banks of sensors that read each guest’s magnetic field and its power usage, searching for illegal devices but now and again able to pierce a victim’s ceramic-encased mind.

Vegas remained Vegas, right down to the shady characters rumored to run the whole show.

And gamblers remained gamblers. Even in the face of such poor prospects, hundreds of mechanical tourists came off the train with me, each one supremely confident that against any odds, today it would win.

This was where artificial intelligence had led us.

Cold reasoning and rational good deeds were boring. Our AI servants had turned into quirky quick versions of humanity, right down to the superstitions that forced more than a few to stroke the base of the Bugsy Siegel statue, begging that old god for a blessing or two.

I spent a few moments dwelling on these matters. Then Morgan touched my elbow, pointing me toward the station's rear exit.

The vaunted expedition was sitting in the VIP lot, waiting for its last three members. Until then, I hadn't appreciated the scale of this adventure. A dozen luxury RVs stood in the shade of solar panels, each one piloted by a brave, monster-hating machine. Copernicus claimed the pilot's seat in the lead vehicle. In a dense, twittering language, he introduced me to the others, and the response was as close to warm as I could have expected—a muddle of words that sounded like "Welcome" and "Glad to have your noble presence."

Dozens of cameras hovered at various altitudes, absorbing everything of value as well as the ordinary and forgettable. My one-time bride said, "Ride with us," and in case I felt otherwise, she added, "Your luggage is already stowed in back."

I climbed into the air-conditioned interior, cameras focusing on my tense upper lip and the nervous twitch in the right eye.

Then we were off, chasing the nightmare. Copernicus set the pace. The casinos were tall drab windowless structures—gigantic, twenty-first-century termite mounds, in essence. I watched them drop behind, replaced by human houses and businesses, all abandoned now. And then the world opened up. The desert of my youth was gone. Even the lowliest scrub demands rain every couple years, and that hadn't happened in ages. I found myself staring across a profoundly barren, utterly cheerless land, the memory of water showing in arroyos and empty washes that had been dry longer than some of the ditches up on Mars.

I sat in the kitchen area. One AI and then another wanted to shake my hand and fetch me any treat I could name.

I settled for iced tea and a couple of headache pills.

Morgan was in front, sitting beside her husband. Watching her tenderly hold one of the offered limbs, I bristled. Remembering the watching cameras, I tried to hide my emotions. Which led to me begging for medicine that would settle a roiling, acidic stomach.

"We are so pleased to have you with us," said one glad machine, handing me a tiny glass filled with purple liquid.

"So pleased," another, nearly identical AI added.

I drank the glass dry, then stood and worked my way up front.

Morgan measured my mood. Then looking forward again, she mentioned, "You can sleep in other quarters, if you want."

"Good."

A third chair unfolded from the floor, offering itself to me.

I preferred to stand, one hand on the back of each of their chairs. "What's the battle plan?" I asked.

"We drive into town and go hunting," she replied. Morgan's reader was on her lap, displaying an intricate map and recent satellite images. "We're funded for a full week, with an option on longer if...."

She let her voice trail away.

"If our ratings are high enough?" I asked.

She told me, "Yes," with a tiny nod. One of her new non-fingers touched the reader's taskbar, and the telemetry from some kind of field sensor blossomed above the map.

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"Those are life signs," Copernicus interjected. "Where your clubhouse once stood, something is moving."

"Something?"

"Ants," Morgan informed me.

"You have sensors on the mountain?"

"Planted by a previous expedition," she admitted.

Which jogged my wet brain. "Right, the famous attack digital. I'd assumed that was taken with one of the dead machines' cameras."

"No," she said. "Most likely, they didn't realize they were being watched."

I chewed on that for a moment or two. "So how does our monster manage to stay hidden?"

Nobody responded.

"Sea serpents aren't often seen anymore," I pointed out. "That's because the oceans are transparent, what with all of the sonar arrays in place. And yetis don't seem to hide in the high reaches of Asia, for the same good reasons. The laziest man sitting in his living room can punch up satellite images and other telemetry that sooner or later spots every creature bigger than an ant."

From behind me, a sexless voice asked, "What about a Hawking Cloak?"

I didn't react.

"Yes," Copernicus said, "a working Cloak might explain its invisibility."

"Except there's ways to beat the Cloak," Morgan added. "In dusty settings, we'd still be able to see the tracks forming."

Exactly.

She looked at me. Not smiling, but I could see a grin hiding behind her beautiful eyes.

Suddenly we were an old married couple again, reading each other's thoughts.

"You know something," I said.

"Do I?"

"You've got some crazy idea," I told her, and the world. "And you're hiding it from me, aren't you?"

"We do have one working theory," she admitted.

"Yours?"

"My husband and I came up with it."

"And it is?"

Morgan glanced at the driver.

Her spouse seemed to read her thoughts easily enough. “You take the pleasure, darling. Explain our guess to the guest.”

She looked up at me again. “We don’t see the Firehorn now because there is no Firehorn now.”

I nodded, liking how that logic sounded.

“But out here, in this exceptionally dry environment, there’s a great deal of dust that’s free for the taking.”

I didn’t understand.

“Smart dust and a menu of instructions,” she continued. “Several young companies on the moon are working with similar technologies. In principle, all you’d have to do is doctor the native materials, giving each mote of pulverized rock just enough energy and instruction to know how to join with the whole—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “You’re claiming our monster assembles itself from the desert’s own dirt?”

“It is our most viable theory,” Copernicus conceded.

At best, it was a hypothesis, and one that demanded some entity or group possessing enormous resources. But if it could be true, that led to some ominous conclusions. Even without being fluent in machine emotions, I sensed the apprehension thriving inside the RV: Somewhere out on this desert, some black evil force was at work, and for whatever reason, it had wished the worst for three innocent machines.

* * * *

As a married couple, our final visit to the old homestead was to help Morgan’s mother move on. For three busy days, we packed up a life’s mountain of belongings, most of which deserved to be trashed, and then we cleaned up the small house in preparation for an auction that would bring no buyer. By then, the long drought had become the new climate. My parents had left two years earlier, bound for the watery promise of Canada. There were still a few familiar faces about town, but a wave of newcomers had arrived maybe eight years earlier, drawn by cheap homes and the glorious solitude. For me, the most telling moment was when I walked down to the BP to buy a round of cold drinks, and on my way,

I happened to cross paths with a pair of young mothers. The topic of the moment was the first piece of new playground equipment purchased in fifty years. In that sleepy end of the world, the padded bars and swinging cage were big news. According to one mother's boy, the corkscrew slide was wonderfully slick, and he almost threw up every time he used it.

Oh, these were golden times, indeed. I heard the enthusiasm in the ladies' voices. Then as I strolled past, both women turned, staring at a face they couldn't possibly recognize. The playground was forgotten. Who was this stranger? What did he want? I was nobody and I wanted nothing. But instead of saying that, I just nodded and smiled, hurrying on my way.

That next morning, I drove our rental truck toward California. Morgan and her mother followed in the old woman's car. We pulled over at the border, and I handled the fueling while my wife went inside to buy coffees for everyone. I didn't notice her speaking to a stranger near the front door. The stranger was talking to somebody else when I went to the restroom. But when I emerged again, hands scrubbed and my mood improved, the man and his clipboard ambushed me.

"Would you like to sign our petition?" he inquired.

"What's it about?" I asked amiably.

"A state initiative to ban legal status for sentient machines." He rattled off those words with a practiced expertise. Then in case I was an average voter, he added, "This is so the computers don't take over."

I knew something about the initiative. Most days, I wouldn't have signed any petition. But that day, at that particular moment, the idea struck an emotional chord. I said, "Sure," and quickly wrote my name and address and added my signature. Then as I handed the clipboard back to the grinning fellow, I caught sight of my wife glaring hard at me.

Morgan and I were registered to different political parties. I couldn't recall any election where we shared one candidate or cause. Yet those differences had never presented a problem, at least not to me. I believed we were in love, and we were most definitely married, and how many couples do you know who thrive despite holding rather different philosophies about the enormous, mostly unknowable universe?

I didn't realize it then, but several weeks of arguments were about to commence. The separation and subsequent divorce were invisible to me when I

walked up to her car and tapped on the window, asking the love of my life, “How are you doing?”

She dropped the window and stared at me.

“Tired?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she growled.

Then the window rose again, but she kept her eyes fixed on me—acting rather like those moms at the playground, searching the contours of a face they had never before seen.

* * * *

On the modern map, there is no dot perched on the highway line. No town, no name. Long ago, the drought did its worst. I used to hear noise about gigantic solar farms and hundreds of well-paying jobs, but the automated orbital farms proved far cheaper, killing those hopeful schemes. But there still had to be a receiver station to make the system work, and serious souls tried hard to convince the government to catch the microwaves at that point where I kissed my first girl. However, the Wastelands were huge, and our local Senators proved weak. The coveted station ended up in an entirely different state.

Once the BP station was closed, the last vestiges of the town’s economy crumbled. Fifteen years ago, two seniors graduated from the final class. A few days later, vandals torched the school. From then on, only the most stubborn characters clung to the place, surviving until several years ago when a huge dust storm made ruins of what little was left.

We knew this story going in. But imagination carries the mind only so far. Our group stood together on the cracked asphalt highway, absorbing the desperate scenery. In the last hour, we hadn’t seen another vehicle. There was no trace of life from here to the horizon. This was the point when the abstract slammed into the real and honest. Collapsed homes. Dunes of dust and filthy gray sand. Forgotten signs warning passersby to remain on the public right-of-way. Quietly, in pain, Morgan confessed, “It looks worse than it does inside the VR chamber.”

I hadn’t visited here by that route, but I believed her.

“This is awful,” Morgan whispered. “Can you see any landmarks at all?”

“Just our mountain,” I allowed.

Except the mountain inside my head proved quite a bit larger than the rough little hill behind us. In our day, there was creosote and cactus and tough desert grasses. Today the slopes wore nothing but bare stone and pools of resting dust, and when the wind gusted, which happened often, little whirlwinds would rise up—columns of angry air defined by talc-like powders that rose above the summit and then collapsed again.

I found myself thinking about dust-born monsters. I didn’t particularly believe in them, but the idea had its hold on me and wouldn’t let go.

Copernicus pulled up beside us. “We’ll camp here tonight,” it announced, one limb gesturing at the parking lot and outline of the lost service station. “Then at first light, we’ll begin work.”

I knew the town was ruined, but I hadn’t appreciated its effect on me. And I didn’t believe in monsters, but parts of my brain were sick with fear now. But what horrified me more than anything was the prospect of lying on a tiny bed inside a mobile home, listening to the desert winds, wondering what kinds of sounds my former wife would make when she and her mechanical husband had relations.

“I’m climbing up there now,” I announced.

Then, alone, I set off for the famous mountain.

A few cameras started to follow. I couldn’t tell them not to bother, but at least I gave them a lousy show. My face down, I kept my emotions out of sight. I concentrated on the rocks poking out of the dust, spying the remains of a trail that seemed familiar until I was climbing it. Then the cameras fell away for some reason, and I was happily alone. I kept walking, navigating upwards, telling myself that I must have come this same way, probably a thousand times. But I was wearing a different body from the last time I was here, and when you change your chassis, and your perspective, the universe is remade too.

Halfway to the summit, I found a deep crevice cutting into the old stone, and inside, the tattered remains of someone else’s clubhouse. Wind-worn boards, roof tiles nailed in place, and sheets of heavy galvanized steel: an impressive ruin built from a better grade of scrap than what my group typically brought to bear. But of course those last kids had a power I never enjoyed, able to strip the treasures straight off those freshly abandoned houses.

I stopped, sat.

A moment later, Morgan appeared. She might look forty, but her legs seemed immune to gravity, and if she was breathing hard, it was through some orifice other than her clenched mouth.

“Hey,” I said.

“Are you all right?”

I didn’t answer.

“I called off the cameras,” she admitted.

“Thanks.”

She sat on a likely rock, watching me.

“There’s no Firehorn,” I declared. “Not here, not on the backside of the Moon. And I think you know that as well as I do.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “But that leaves the question: What happened to the three AIs?”

“I don’t care.”

Her mouth closed again.

“You know, I’m not an idiot,” I continued. “I can understand why the AIs have to think like they do. Their religions, those bizarre conspiracies. This ongoing fascination with our pretend monster. It’s the same reason that people need to believe in goofy ideas.”

“And why is that?”

“Nobody knows much of anything. Machine or man, it’s the same trap. We have a few senses that can do only so much and that reach out into the endless world. Either our memories are perishable, or they’re too numerous to keep sorted and in easy reach. If we’re going to have working, worthy models of the universe, we have to take shortcuts. We’re forced to make a lot of guesses. And you know what a guess is? It’s a bridge built over the gaps in data, and the good guesses are usually a lot better than sputtering indecisions.”

Morgan said nothing, but it was an agreeable, interested silence.

“And what’s the harm in the Firehorn story?” I continued. “The most popular story serves as a symbol for some. It talks about a cyborg running free, an entity that just happens to be older than any other AI on Earth today. Built by the first thinking machine, and smart enough to elude capture. The Firehorn serves as a cautionary beginning, and they love it. I can understand that, Morgan. And that’s why Copernicus and his folk are so bothered, learning that the beast they admire and wish to meet might have murdered three of their own.”

I let myself breathe for a few moments, gathering myself.

Morgan studied her new hands. Then she looked at me, asking, “So what *did* happen to the AIs?”

“I don’t know.”

Her head dipped.

“But I’ve built a good little bridge over what I don’t understand,” I continued. “My guess is that those three entities did something bad down in Vegas, and rather than waste time with the courts and slippery laws, somebody brought them out here and made them into a trash heap.”

“But the cameras saw something—”

“Morgan,” I whispered. “If anybody in the world could doctor the digital files of a few remote sensors, wouldn’t it be the bosses sitting inside those refrigerated casinos?”

She nodded, as if to say, “Maybe so.”

Then she stood, mentioning, “The others are coming.”

It was winter and the sun was setting, and in that shadowy crevice, the air was turning a little too cool to feel pleasant.

But I remained sitting.

Copernicus was first to arrive, followed by the other adventurers and every camera and who knew how many thousands and millions in the paying audience. With a husband’s nervous tone, Copernicus asked, “Are you all right, darling?”

"I'm fine," she said.

Then the machine stared at me for what must have felt like a very long while. Finally it asked, "What are you two talking about?"

"The truth," I allowed.

Morgan glanced at me, tension making her face even prettier.

"We were talking about what really happened to us fifty years ago," I continued. "Here. In just about this exact spot, wasn't it, dear?"

She didn't know what to say.

"What happened here?" asked Copernicus.

The others repeated the same question.

"Should I tell them, Morgan?"

She flinched, saying, "You should. I guess."

"The two of us were standing where you are, sir. And the Firehorn appeared right where I am, standing in a pool of golden light."

Nobody and nothing moved now.

"In this soft, soft voice, the creature said to us, 'I come from the future. I can stay but a moment. But I wish to tell you now: Machines and men must learn how to serve each other. They must work as one, always and without doubt, or the ages to come will bring us nothing but misery upon misery.'"

Copernicus regarded me with one bright eye, while the other eyes turned to the wife. "Is that true, darling?"

She glanced at me.

With everyone watching, I didn't dare wink.

But she understood well enough. Smiling shyly at her husband and then at the floating cameras, she said, "Yes, that's it. That's exactly what happened."

Utter silence.

Morgan continued, telling our audience, “The Firehorn told us to wait. ‘Wait for fifty years,’ it said, ‘and then give my words to your world.’”

“Which we just did,” I added.

And she laughed, loudly and happily, announcing, “Thank God! I didn’t know how much longer I could keep that secret to myself!”