

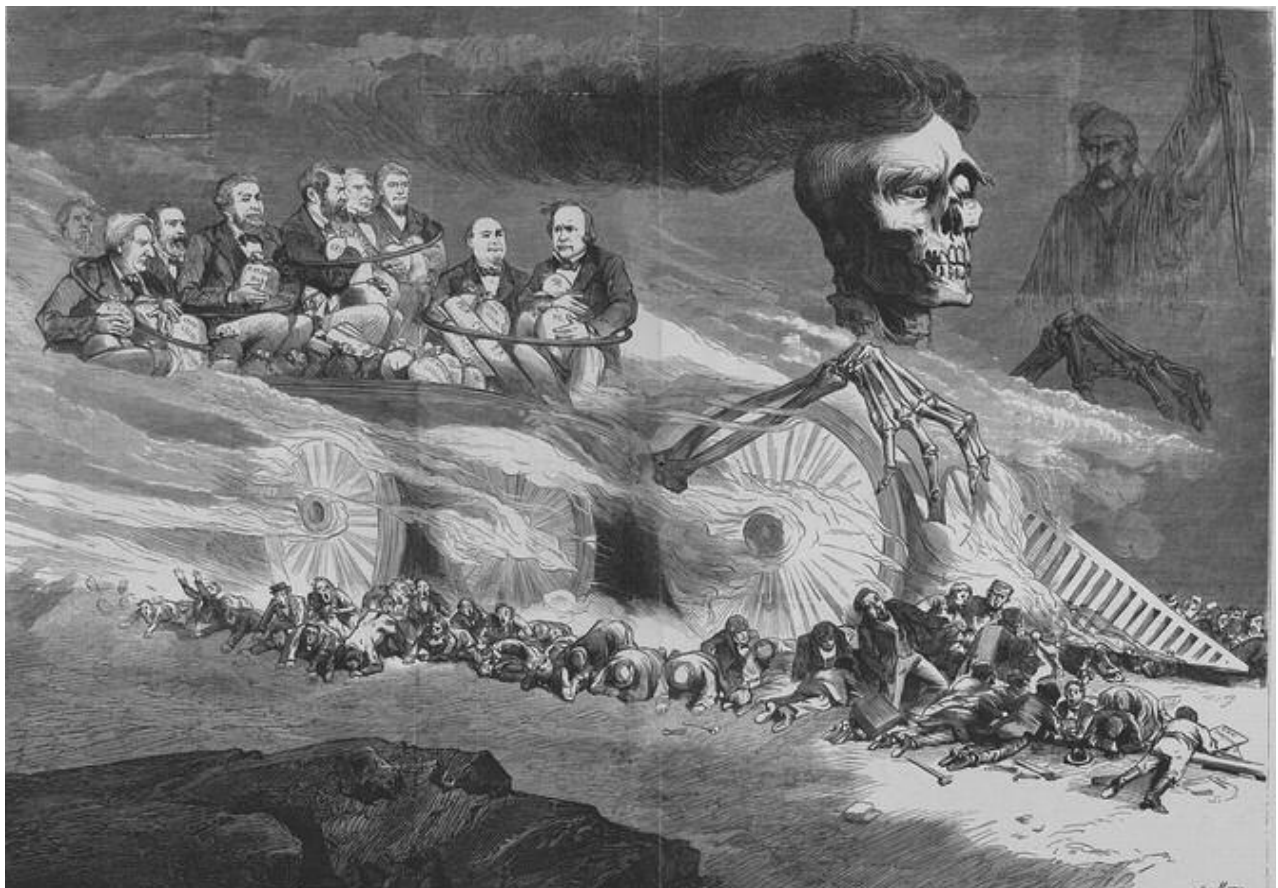
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – SOCIAL ENGINEERING OR BUST by Mia Brech. Ms Brech, of Mahopac, NY, writes, “My first short stories are appearing in the fall of 2018 in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *The Literary Nest* and *Bewildering Stories*. I was an art critic with a bi-weekly column at *Fairpress*, a Connecticut newspaper, and have a BA in art history from Vassar College. I’m currently writing and illustrating a graphic novel.”

Page 4 – RESCUE ON MARIANUS PRIME by Kevin Stadt. Mr. Stadt is an English teacher with a master’s degree in teaching writing and a doctorate in American literature. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Aether and Ichor*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Enter the Aftermath*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Forbidden Anthology*, *The Ginger Collect*, *Issues of Tomorrow*, *Kzine*, *Lazarus Risen*, *Phantaxis*, *Stupefying Stories* and more. He lives in South Korea with his wife and sons, who are interdimensional cyborg pirates wanted in a dozen star systems. This is the third story in his *Hominum Futurus* space opera universe. The first was published in *Fiction on the Web*, and the second appeared in *Phantaxis*.

Page 16 – JAW DROPPERS by George Papandreou. Mr. Papandreou resides in Bayside, NY.



“SOCIAL ENGINEERING OR BUST”

by MIA BRECH

—What you should know about our country is that it’s divided roughly in half: those who’ve agreed to social engineering and those who haven’t.

—I’ve heard about social engineering, but no one will explain it to me. Not clearly.

—We’re not supposed to discuss it. That’s part of the deal. But families have some leeway, and you’re a distant relative, so I’ll tell you what happened to me.

—Great! Thank you.

—My parents and, earlier, my grandparents signed onto social engineering. Soshes, they’re called.

—Meaning what?

—They have a good life. Good marriages, good jobs, nice houses. Upper middle class. Bourgeois, it used to be called. Plus, once a year, for a month, a vacation to any safe spot in the world. We can go to unsafe places, too—and did, a few times—but for that you need extra vaccines, antidotes, guides and security.

—The sosh thing doesn’t sound toooo bad. Must have a catch.

—Let me explain the other 50%, first. They have more freedom, but most are poor. It’s hard to stay middle class in their corrupt economy, but a few are super rich. I don’t want to generalize, though. My story

will make everything clear.

—Go ahead.

—So. I had the usual happy sosh childhood. I didn’t question it till I turned 15, and my parents said they’d found a future spouse for me.

What? I screamed.

He’ll just be a friend, they said, for many years. You only have to see him one day a month. Then, in your mid-twenties, you can marry him or not.

I won’t.

Fine. But give him a chance.

Will I be kicked out of the community, if I don’t?

No. You’ll want to leave.

—Wait. What is the community?

—It’s the whole social engineering network.

—Like a parallel government?

—More like an organism. An amoeba: many-fingered, shape changing. Anyway, to show my parents what I thought of this planned marriage, I skipped classes, didn’t do homework and hung out with freebies.

—Free bees?

—Ha! People who aren’t socially engineered. They go to public schools—if at all—not private schools, like soshes. Freebies get a little government money, but not enough to live on, so they share houses and clothes

and sometimes dumpster dive for food. A lot of them deal drugs or moonshine. But they're more fun than soshes.

—In what way?

—More...unpredictable. Adventurous. Better parties. More drugs, drinking and sex, of course.

—Hmm. Did you ever meet your “future spouse?”

—Dan. I saw him once a month in return for the freedom my parents gave me. And the passes I got from teachers and cops. That's all they asked for: that I still see Dan.

—Weird. What was so great about him?

—Nothing. He was nice, not bad looking. Smart but not brilliant or talented. He was about three years older than me.

—Did anything...happen between you?

—Not sex, if that's what you mean. He was a good listener. I told him everything I was doing, even made up things to shock him, but he didn't shock. Then, in my senior year, I was in trouble academically. I didn't want to be poor like my freebie friends, so I had to get a degree. Dan tutored me every day for a week, and I aced the exams. Got into Bredweller College.

—I heard from Aunt Zelinda you studied art.

—On the side. I majored in sociology, with a focus on freebies. Did lots of “field work.”

—I can imagine! Where was Dan, meantime?

—Learning dentistry. *Ick*. He was a few hours away but still visited once a month. I didn't mind. He was my living diary.

—Did he ever talk about himself?

—Not much. Besides studying and volunteering for charities, he loved sports, which bore me. I taught him about art, so we could talk about something besides me and teeth.

—I don't get this. Does every sosh have an assigned spouse?

—No. The community engineers suggest different ways for parents to influence their kids. The whole community helps out, mostly in secret.

—Creepy. So you finished college?

—I wish. Fell back into drinking and drugs. Not even Dan could tutor me out of it. But he got me into rehab. After six months, I was clean.

—Stayed clean?

—Yes. My next problem was earning. I sold my artwork but not for much. After a couple of years, I couldn't stand living with my parents anymore, so I moved in with some freebie artists. It was terrible, but I had too much pride to go home again. And was crazy about a super-rich freebie who came to our parties. He bought my paintings, We made love a few times, and I had hopes of...you know? But one night the building caught fire. We and some other people were on the fifth floor. He ran away. I was dizzy from the smoke. I couldn't tell where the fire, the doors or the stairs were. I yelled his name, but it was Dan who appeared. He got me and the others out of the building. Like a hero in an old movie.

—Whoa. How'd he know you were there?

—It was supposed to be our meeting

day, and I hadn't shown up. He was nearby, doing charity work, he said. Probably the community told him where I was.

—Figures. Did the fire change your feelings about him?

—Not as much as other stuff. He got a small gallery to show my art. I was never so happy, till I read the awful reviews. None of my art sold. Then he got an art director to ask me to illustrate a children's book. I drew a dummy for it, which the author hated. They paid me a small fee and dumped me.

—I'm sorry. Could it be that—

—I was 27. Failed at everything, no real friends but Dan. He started to look better

to me. He'd opened his own dental practice and bought a house. I pictured a rosy cottage with a garden; Dan and I living there with two kids, a cat and a dog. An art studio for me in the backyard. For the first time, I brought up the subject:

Are we supposed to get married?

He laughed. *Do you want to?*

Do you? I said.

I'm very fond of you, but I'm already married. With two kids.

What! Why didn't you tell me?

Because the community hired me to play a role. I'm an actor, not a dentist.

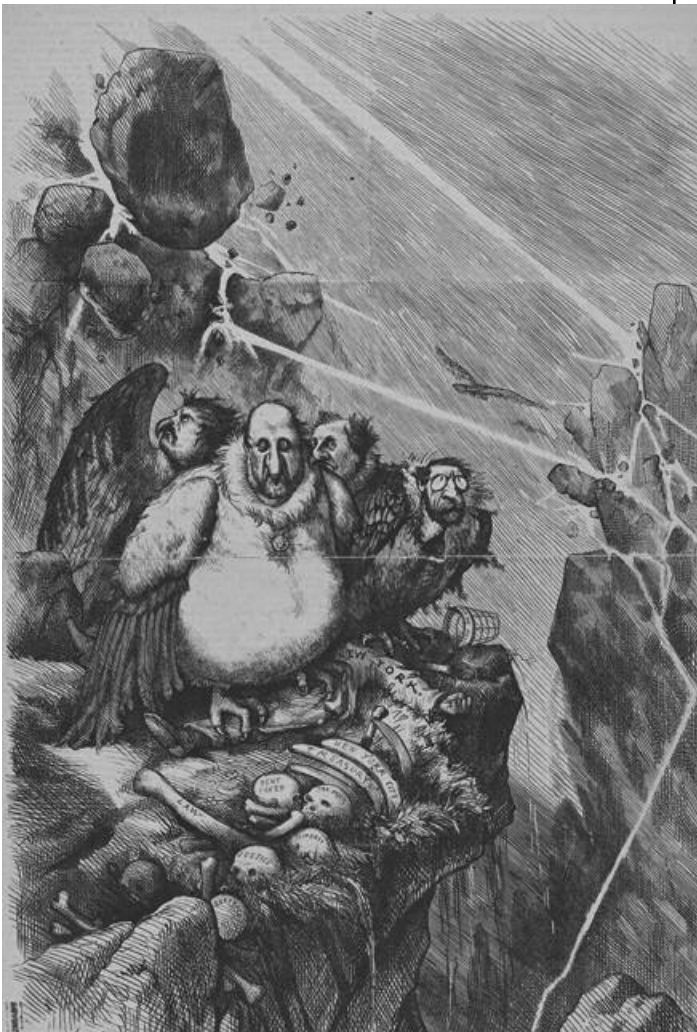
My lungs constricted. I could barely speak. *My parents lied to me, too. For twelve years!*

For your sake, he said. So you'd figure out what you really wanted.

I stumbled from the café. The sidewalk reeled; traffic lights glared. I plunked onto a park bench and rested my head in my hands. For all his lies, he was right about one thing: I'd seen what I wanted. It was rare among freebies, common among the socially engineered.

I became a sosh.

—You can't be both? Or something different? ❖



“RESCUE ON MARIANUS PRIME: A HOMINUM FUTURUS CHRONICLE”

by KEVIN STADT

Maddox swam across the lab toward the front window, scooping water with his wide, flat hands and feet. Colrin had been gone almost two hours already. Goddamn kid. How long did it take to hop in a pod, shoot over to Empyrea, pick up a simple fucking thelluric processor and bring it back? He swore to fire that dipshit this time, get a lab assistant whose head wasn't so far up his ass.

As he neared the glass wall that separated the ambient water inside the lab from the ocean outside, Maddox noticed his reflection. He stopped swimming and let his hands fall to his sides as he straightened to examine himself. His black eyes scanned the image, and he couldn't help but admit he looked better these days. The form-fitting wetsuit, the traditional clothing of Homo Oceanus, revealed he'd put on a little weight and didn't appear nearly as skeletal as he used to. His dolphin-like skin had a healthier color to it, too. Combined with having his gray hair cropped short for a change, Maddox thought he looked half his age.

Okay, okay. So the kid made sure he ate once in a while and cut his hair. Still needed to fire that dummy. One of these days.

He peered out. A constellation of sub-pods, drones and swarms of fish filled the

water outside the cliff face where his lab was located. He looked up to where the water shimmered more brightly, and then down into the dark depths. It seemed much like any normal day, until a parade of military pods cruised by, heading toward the front.

Bunch of stupid kids with second-rate tek. They were all just going to get themselves killed. He needed to get the device functioning and quick. If it worked, it could be a game-changer in the war with the Chaku.

And that war was about to come knocking on his own door. If the front moved this far, would he be able to leave the lab? How many years had it been since he'd ventured out there? Nine, maybe ten.

He closed his eyes and imagined packing up and heading...*outside*. Immediately his chest tightened up and his heart started racing. No, there'd be no leaving. Not even if the whole goddamned Chaku fleet splashed down right above them. He couldn't do it. No way. The agoraphobia was something he'd learned to accept and live with and that was that. Better to just go down fighting here, in his home.

Maddox needed to blow off some steam. Too much nervous energy, too much waiting. Cleaning out the pipes would probably take the edge off. He waded into the

Fantatek Chamber, which Colrin always referred to as the “perve palace.” When the door slid shut behind him, the room was as black as a cave.

“Ten, give me the foursome protocol.”

The AI replied, “Of course, M. Enjoy.”

The Fantatek Chamber, using a mixture of programmable matter and holograms, hummed and swirled as it brought the scene to life before his eyes. A cliffside breeding ground formed, three Homo Oceanus females laying clusters of small, leathery eggs in the cracks and outcroppings of the rocky face. All three of them gestured for him to come and fertilize the eggs, each emitting the low-frequency purring vibration that drives Homo Oceanus males wild.

Or, usually drives males wild. Maddox scrunched up his face and scratched his head. He tried to concentrate on the sound, closing his eyes. Then he swam closer to one of the women squatting, watched and tried to lose himself in the way she teased him, dropping one sticky egg after another, now a dozen at least, into a clump that stuck to the rock.

But nothing moved downstairs. He sighed, let his shoulders droop, and said, “Ten, turn it off.”

“I noticed you didn’t fertilize the eggs, M. Is there anything about the program that I could improve for maximum sexual gratification?”

“No. It’s me, not you.”

Colrin would be all right, wouldn’t he? The front wasn’t too close yet. Maybe he should call him, make up some reason to check in. Just to make sure that he was

okay.

No. Leave him alone. Don’t want to hover over him like a fretful grandmother. The kid’s twenty-five.

Swimming out of the Fantatek Chamber and into the main lab, he cast his eyes around the huge room for something to distract him. Lab tables and shelves everywhere, all piled high with gadgets and parts. But while he usually had a dozen different projects going at once, lately he’d been utterly focused on just one.

It still wouldn’t work yet, he knew. Not without the part Colrin went out to get. But he needed something to occupy himself.

Digging through the mess of components on the nearest table, he searched for one of the jump rig prototypes. He spotted the coin-sized black disc and picked it up. Rubbing the cool, smooth surface of the device, he glanced around the lab for something to test on. He settled on small broken matter printer, then closed his eyes and focused on his mindscreen. Maddox mentally swiped through icons, held the disc against the printer and willed it to adhere.

It stuck. That had never been the problem.

Next, he stared at a spot on the floor ten feet away and repeated “go there” slowly in his head. The new software would interpret the patterns of electrical impulses in his brain and know where he wanted the object to go. That, too, had never been the difficulty.

The next part was the problem. The printer stubbornly sat there. Maddox thought it vibrated for a second, but it defi-

nately didn't teleport.

He sighed and shook his head. After swearing at the device, he swam back to the front window and said, "Ten, news on audio. What's going on with the invasion?" Before he even finished the sentence, he realized the last part was unnecessary. As if the newsfeed would be talking about anything else.

"In this seventy-third hour of the invasion, Homo Oceanus forces have successfully contained Chaku invaders to the Posirus region, although human casualties are estimated to have reached thirty-seven thousand already. Fortunately, help has come from multiple hominum species. Several Homo Apparatum elite guard squadrons and Homo Bellicus battalions arrived early this morning, and their presence seems to have had a marked effect on the battle. In a statement issued only minutes ago, Admiral Rezal said he feels cautiously optimistic that they'll be able to overcome the invading forces, and that Marianus Prime will not become another Earth."

Maddox spotted Colrin's pod approaching and he breathed a liquid sigh of relief. "News, off." He swam back through the lab, floated by the side entrance and crossed his arms.

Colrin came through the door and held out a small, brown box. When Maddox snatched it from his hand, Colrin rolled his eyes, pulled the hairband off his black ponytail and re-tied it more tightly. The young assistant had a patchy black beard and darker skin than the older man. Maddox opened the box and lifted a small processor chip up

in the water, examining it.

"For fuck's sake, took long enough. Did you go all the way to Arboros for this?"

"You're welcome. Think this is going to work?"

Maddox bent over a table, popping the disc open. Colrin watched over his mentor's shoulder as Maddox performed surgery on the gadget, installing this new heart that he hoped would bring it to life. After he finished, he looked up and nodded at Colrin. "Let's try it."

Maddox again scrolled and clicked through icons on his mental desktop, again stuck the disc to the broken printer and willed it to move. Both men stared intently at the printer.

Go there. Over there. MOVE, dammit.

The device vibrated a little. It hummed. It looked like it wanted to move.

But it didn't go anywhere.

Maddox banged a fist on the table. "Fuck!" He ran flat, wide fingers through his hair.

Colrin said, "What if we tried a Chroniton processor, or—"

"You need to pack. Get offworld."

"All right. Just let me know what gear you want to bring."

"Just you. I'm staying."

Colrin folded his arms. "Oh, here we go. Are you kidding me?"

"I need to finish this."

"You don't need to finish it here. And you can't finish it if you're blown up or choking down a gut slug."

"This is my home. I'm not leaving."

"Don't give me that. Like you have

some noble, heartfelt attachment to your homeland. You just have an anxiety disorder. One that's highly treatable, I might add."

"You're a good kid, and you've helped me a lot. But I don't need your services anymore. You're fired. Get out of here."

Colrin's face softened in an expression of infinite patience. He paddled himself closer and looked Maddox in the eye.

"Listen, old man. I'm not going unless you are. So let's just get that straight right now. Whatever's coming, we're dealing with it. Okay?"

Maddox tried to glare sternly at his assistant, but he became acutely aware that he felt a tear threatening to well up. What was he, an old fucking woman now? He turned his back to Colrin. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Let's not start yanking each other's gorks."

Colrin laughed. "What other components could we try?"

The older man stared out the front window. "I suspect it's not the processor. We need a different kind of power source. I want to try a rubidium battery."

Colrin settled into a chair, looking thoughtful. "Those are pretty dangerous, aren't they? And illegal?"

Maddox chuckled. "All the good stuff is. I have some Homo Apparatum smuggler friends who can get anything. Over the years, I've made them toys they were pretty excited about. They love me."

An unfocused expression crossed Colrin's face, which meant his attention had shifted to his mindscreen. He stood

suddenly and opened his eyes wide.

"News on the main screen," he said.

"...to repeat, a second wave of Chaku forces just uncloaked near Persivose, the moon of Dinerth. The reinforcement fleet appears even larger than the initial wave that attacked seventy-four hours ago. It's on its way now, and is expected to arrive within the hour. Officials have sent out an emergency request for aid to all hominum forces, but with manpower and resources stretched thin on multiple fronts, it's not clear what help might be forthcoming."

The two men floated on the tips of their toes, their hands moving slightly in a treading motion. Maddox's mind raced. If they got overrun before he figured out the device, he and Colrin would become sushi at best, or would get gutslugged at worst. And more importantly, the hominum forces would never get the new jump rig tek that was so close to working.

The news continued. "It's recommended now that all citizens remain calm and evacuate in an orderly manner. While Admiral Rezal hopes to coordinate effective defensive measures, he warns that the situation is serious and there now stands a significant chance that hominum forces could be overwhelmed."

Maddox paced. Colrin stared blankly at the wall. Neither said a word for what felt like a very long time.

Finally, Maddox spoke. "Ten, hail Kace and Rohana on the Nistra."

"Working." A moment passed, then Ro and Kace appeared on the screen, standing on the dome-shaped bridge of their ship. Ro

had nothing but a black bra and panties on, and cradled a little brown dog in her arms. She stood next to an elderly woman tied to a chair. Kace sat in the background, his black beard and shaved head half hidden in a cloud of cigar smoke, holding a glass of what Maddox knew was undoubtedly Corvellian whiskey.

“Ro! Kace! How the hell are my favorite pirates?”

Rohana’s big green eyes lit up. “Mad! We haven’t heard from you in forever!” She giggled and cuddled the puppy, nuzzling her face into its fur. She spoke in a silly, high voice. “Mr. Bubbleberry, it’s your uncle Maddox! Yes it is!”

Kace blew smoke and downed his whiskey. “Hey, Mad. Damn good to see you’re still kickin.”

“You, too, buddy. Ro, you changed your do. I like it.”

“You noticed!” She turned her head both ways to show off her spiky red hair. “Oh, sweetie, hang on just a sec, could you?”

Ro set the dog down in her chair and pulled a plasma pistol from God knows where. Kace held up a hand and barely managed to open his mouth in protest before Ro leveled it at the elderly lady’s head and fired.

The woman’s skull exploded. Red, wet bits of sloppy mess sprayed into the air and rained onto the floor of the bridge. Ro giggled and stepped closer to the headless body, peering at the smoking neck stump. A six-inch grey slug wriggled out of the esophagus and flopped onto the floor, then tried

to inch away. Ro picked it up and held it in her hand. With a squeal of joy, she squeezed and popped it. Her face lit up with a how-great-was-that expression.

Maddox enjoyed Colrin’s reaction. The assistant floated there as if frozen, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

“For Christ’s sake, man, stop staring at her tits. Show some respect to my friends.” Colrin shook his head and muttered something by way of excuse under his breath.

Ro picked up the puppy again and brought it to her cheek. “We don’t like gutslugs, do we Mr. Bubbleberry? No we don’t!”

Kace puffed on his cigar. “I heard the Chaku have reached Marianus Prime. You in any trouble?”

“It’s not good. You think you could get your hands on some rubidium batteries?”

Ro addressed the ship. “Nistra, do we have any whatever batteries he just said?”

“Absofuckinglutely,” Nistra responded.

Maddox smiled. “Hi, Nistra.”

“How’s it hanging, you old cocksucker?”

“I like this personality setting, Ro.”

Maddox grinned. “That one’s a keeper.”

Ro’s face turned serious. “Are the Chaku close to you, Mad?”

“We’re about to get overrun. Listen, I have a new device we’ve been working on, a teleportation rig. If I can get it functional, it could be weaponized and used against the gutslugs.”

“You need whatever thingy batteries?”

“And a ride out of here for Colrin. There’s going to be a mass panic and off-world transports will be choked, not to

mention they'll present soft targets for the Chaku. I'm telling you, Ro, this jump rig will be epic. When I get it working, you're the first ones to get copies. You could do some really creative killing with this tek."

Her eyes lit up. "Hold tight. We're on our way."

Maddox and Colrin waited. They listened to ever-more serious warnings on the news, which reported that the Homo Oceanus forces were being overwhelmed and warned more urgently for all inhabitants to stay calm and evacuate immediately. They watched out the window as their neighbors fled the underwater cliffside dwellings eastward in droves, their subpods filled with as many of their worldly belongings as they could fit.

They stood next to each other wordlessly at the glass wall for a long time, watching their planet fall before their very eyes. Another hominum world overrun.

Maddox went back and forth trying to decide which was more terrifying, the aliens or leaving the lab. The Chaku were a slug-like parasitic species with the ability to attach themselves to a seemingly endless variety of horrifying alien creatures. They could not be reasoned with, and considered the various hominum species the most exquisite delicacies they'd yet discovered in their exploration of the universe. And the Chaku preferred to feed on living humans slowly, over days, or worse yet sometimes implant one of themselves in a person as a symbiote mole.

If he could just complete the device

before it was too late, then send the prototype with Colrin, Kace and Ro to be copied, then he could die here knowing he'd done something more with his life than make illegal tek for pirates and squirt his seed over holographic egg sacs.

As if reading his mind, Colrin said, "You know we're not going to let you stay here, right?"

Waves of anxiety-driven adrenaline washed through his chest and limbs at the thought of it. Maddox shook his head and gazed out at the fleeing pod traffic. "Listen. I know you don't understand this, but I can't go out there. I just can't. Stepping out that front door..." Maddox scrunched his face up and shook his head. "It's a wide-awake nightmare. Feels like I'm going to die."

"But if you stay, you really *are* going to die."

"I'm old. Maybe it's...maybe it's okay. Everything dies."

Colrin sighed. "Just stop it. You're coming and that's it. Do your friends have a good ship? Will they be able to get us out of here?"

Maddox turned to Colrin and smiled. "Ever heard of a Mimic craft?" His assistant shook his head. "The ship was one of only a handful engineered and built by a rogue AI on the Homo Apparatum homeworld, Notrinus. Its design was inspired by the Mimic Octopus." Maddox started talking faster, and couldn't mask the excitement in his voice as he geeked out over it. "The central disk-shaped hub of the ship is surrounded by a dozen long tentacles which Nistra

can arrange around herself to alter her form into almost any disguise. Using the camouflage, along with illegal software that sends false codes to enemy scanners, she tricks other vessels into thinking she's just a mining rig, a transport vessel, whatever."

Maddox paused for effect and leaned closer. "Or even a Chaku scout."

Colrin shook his head. "That can't be legal."

"It's not. The ship itself is illegal, it's full of smuggled tek that's illegal and even Kace and Ro themselves are illegal. Ro has augs that'd blow your mind. She's got a mindhack suite that would put her in prison for decades. It uses a combination of nanotek, aural hypnosis and pheromones to make you do, say or think anything she wants. And Kace has a telekinetek rig. Wait till you see that baby in action. It's—"

Colrin broke in, pointing outside. "Shit, Mad!"

A Chaku symbiote attacked one of their neighbor's subpods. The alien looked like a six-foot long millipede with hundreds of spidery, thin legs that moved in waves, propelling it through the water. It had huge pincers in front like a stag beetle, and a scorpion-like stinger in the back. Maddox could see the faces of two little girls in the window of the pod, screaming and pounding on the glass while the symbiote circled the vehicle.

Maddox stepped back from the glass. "Ten, give me controls of the defense drone."

A holographic rig materialized around Maddox with screens, command panels and

glove-like controls. At the same time, a sleek black drone pod launched from a portal next to the lab's glass wall. Maddox focused on the central screen, which displayed the drone's perspective. With a series of quick hand gestures, he piloted the drone toward the symbiote and readied weapons.

Just as the alien reared back with its stinger, Maddox squeezed his right hand into a fist and punched it forward. The drone shot a biodart.

The projectile hit the creature right between the eyes. It let out a shriek they could hear even inside the lab, and released the subpod instantly. It thrashed and shuddered for a moment, then went rigid as bubbling foam poured out of its mouth, eyes and tail end.

The animal went limp and floated lifelessly. Maddox turned to Colrin with a shrug. "Well, that wasn't so bad. I don't see why the hominum forces are getting their asses handed to them by—"

The holographic rig floating around him flashed from blue to red, then crackled with static. Maddox turned his attention to the window.

Three more symbiotes attacked the drone, each one bigger than the next and varying in physiological markers. A blob-like creature had attached itself to the drone and appeared to be releasing a layer of slime that was already eating through the hull. A second animal that resembled a fat eel opened a gaping mouth and released a sonic blast that knocked out the robot's controls and was so powerful that Maddox could feel it in his bones. The third and biggest of

them looked like a nautilus and extended a single, enormous pincer from its hatch, which grasped the drone and crushed it with little apparent effort.

The holographic controls around Maddox disappeared. “Ten, activate the safe room protocol.”

“Yes, M.” A hum filled the ambient water, and a pale blue force field materialized just outside the glass.

Colrin peered out. “Mad, this isn’t good. What the hell is *that*?”

A giant, balloon-like creature triple the size of the entire lab floated slowly but surely toward them. Maddox said, “Ten, give us a better look at that thing.”

A circle popped up on the glass wall around the beast, then zoomed in and magnified the image. The mottled black surface of the alien undulated as a carpet of dermal flagella danced in waves, propelling it forward. It had no apparent limbs or sensory organs or face, other than the line of a mouth.

A Homo Oceanus navy vessel appeared from out of nowhere, racing toward the behemoth. The pattern playing over the surface of the thing altered, and the symbiote slowed and turned ponderously. Maddox and Colrin watched in amazement, hands pressed against the glass, as it opened its yawning mouth-like orifice.

The navy vessel fired two torpedoes just as a throng of swimming organisms poured out of the spherical leviathan. They swarmed the torpedoes like piranhas, making them vanish in seconds, then set off toward the ship.

“Ten, what are those things?”

“They are new varieties of marine symbiote subspecies the Chaku are using for attacks on this planet. Presumably they come from alien water worlds, and each is controlled by a Chaku parasite.”

“Zoom in real close. Full screen.”

The picture expanded to cover the glass wall, showing the smaller creatures in clear detail. Infobubbles appeared around a few of them, offering analysis of size and dimensions, and Maddox realized that although it had been hard to tell from a distance, they ranged in size from the length of his arm up to five feet. Some looked like alien versions of deep-ocean horrors, such as anglerfish sporting horrific spiky teeth they used to bite into the hull of the ship. Others resembled eels, except with barbs jutting out of their front ends, which they used to stab and strike brutally. Still others looked like squid with electrified tentacles, octopi that vomited sizzling ink and snake-like forms that encircled the ship, linked to each other in a ring, then began squeezing the vessel like a boa.

Colrin’s face twisted into a mask of horror. “Christ, Mad. They’re going to kill everybody in that thing.”

They watched the beasts crush, burn and bite the ship until it cracked open. Three uniformed Homo Oceanus soldiers swam out the back, shooting plasma rifles frantically all around them.

Maddox sucked in water and Colrin turned away as the Chaku set upon the soldiers, ripping the flesh from their bones and devouring them like sharks. The screen

blurred red with blood.

Colrin met Maddox's eyes, clearly terrified. "Is this field strong enough?"

Maddox tried to put a confidence he didn't feel into his voice. "Absolutely. And the Nistra's coming. Don't worry. They'll get you out of here."

The assistant shook his head. "You saw that! How the hell are your friends going to get past the Chaku? If we try to escape with those things out there, we're dead."

Just as Maddox opened his mouth to respond, commotion outside caught his eye.

The Nistra.

Ro's voice piped in over the comms. "Mad, you okay?"

"So far. Listen, we just saw these marine symbiote species in action, and it wasn't pretty. Maybe you should be careful how you engage them."

"Blah, blah, blah. You're boring me, Mad. I didn't come all this way to be bored. We're just going to go ahead and kill every fucking last gutslug real quick and then we'll get you out of here."

"Not me. Just Colrin. Did you bring the batteries?"

Kace responded this time. "I'm sending them to you now." A small drone deployed from the Nistra, heading toward the lab. "You'll have to lower your defenses for a sec to let it through. We'll try to clean up the



slug pop out here.”

“Thanks, guys. Really.”

Kace laughed. “Ro gets crazy horny after an episode of unrestrained violence. Believe me, I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

Maddox and Colrin watched the Nistra magnified on the window screen. The spherical symbiote turned toward the Nistra and opened its orifice, releasing a second swarm of minion attackers, even as the first wave swam toward Kace and Ro.

The Nistra, in her default mimic octopus form, slowed to a stop and opened small hatches all over her hull. Ro slid out of a hatch on one side, followed by Kace. Both had form-fitting, buzzing translucent green force fields around them, with underwater propulsion devices on their ankles and backs. Kace wore the telekinetek rig, a black ring on his head and matching gloves, but Maddox hardly noticed since Ro wore nothing at all besides the force field and a red thong. She held no weapons other than her evospike, a cutting-edge programmable matter instrument currently in the shape of a spear.

Maddox looked at Colrin and laughed, seeing the assistant staring at the woman as if hypnotized. “Ro, I think your choice of battle uniform today just made my young assistant go through puberty again.”

Ro giggled and waved toward the lab. “Oh, you boys.”

But now the two swarms of symbiotes merged and approached heart-thumpingly close to Maddox’s friends. “Uh, that’s a lot of Chaku, guys. Guys?”

Ro spoke to Kace. “Bun-bun, let me have the first round, okay?”

Kace put his hands behind his head and assumed a relaxed pose, floating. “Sure. Have at it.”

An octopus-analogue creature reached her first, and Ro squealed with pleasure. She brought the spear up over her head, and thrust it forward into the center of the animal. The instant after she plunged it deep, the spear changed shape. Spikes ripped through the beast from the inside out, then retracted back. She pulled the spear out and the alien limply floated downward in a cloud of dark, purplish blood.

An eel-like variant reached her next, and this time she formed the evospike into an axe that chopped the creature’s barbed head off cleanly. Coolest by far in Maddox’s opinion was when the next attacker neared her and the evospike reshaped itself into a spiked metal ball around her fist.

But now the full mass of the swarm converged on her, and Maddox cringed. No matter how insane and badass Ro was, there were hundreds of them.

Kace spoke, clearly thinking the same thing. “Nistra, let’s help her out. Initiate the droneswarm protocol.”

“But I want to see if she can—”

“Do it.”

“Whatever.”

A throng of drones dozens strong poured from the Nistra and sped toward the symbiotes. Some of them fired simple plasma weapons, while others utilized more creative tek like exploding gel capsules that burned flesh, chemical reactant weapons

that instantly froze creatures and the water around them into blocks of ice and nanoinjection tek that shot them full of tiny robots that ate the creatures' organs from the inside out.

Kace, meanwhile, turned his attention to the enormous spherical beast that now opened its mouth to release yet another wave of minions. He raised his gloved hands in front of him, and with the black ring around his head lighting up red, he grimaced in concentration. His robotic hands made a motion as if he were smashing paper into a ball. A thunderous roar boomed through the water as the huge, round alien bellowed in pain and then compressed into a pulpy, bloody mass no bigger than a baseball.

Just then, the drone carrying the batteries reached the lab and Ten lowered the force field. The AI warned, "M, the local energy grid has collapsed, and with our current reserves it will not be possible to restart the field."

As the drone pulled into the subpod bay next to the lab, Colrin swam to retrieve the batteries. Maddox rushed to a lab table and picked up one of the prototype discs, opening and fussing with it. He had to get a rubidium battery in there and see if the new power source would work.

Colrin came up behind Maddox a moment later holding a tiny, glowing purple cylinder between his thumb and forefinger, scarcely larger than a grain of rice. Maddox held the disk up, pointing where Colrin should place the battery in the disc's electronic guts.

And then, just as Maddox popped the cover back onto the device, a spiky barb burst through Colrin's chest.

Maddox screamed and Colrin just gurgled. The young man stared at the barb in disbelief, pain twisting his face. He regarded it as if confused by what he saw, then his eyes turned to Maddox, full of fear. His lips moved, but blood billowed out instead of sound.

The moment slowed down, every detail becoming clear and sharp. Maddox turned to the gray eel-like symbiote behind his friend and swam toward it before he even thought about what he was doing. "You dirty motherfucker. Come to my planet, try to chase me out of my home, attack my friends."

Maddox slapped the disk onto the creature's slimy skin and closed his eyes, opening and mentally swiping through the controls in his mindscreen as fast as he could to activate the disc. He peeked out one eye to see the symbiote pulling the barb out of Colrin. The Chaku turned the spike toward Maddox and thrashed its body to propel itself forward.

Maddox focused on the rocky wall of the lab. "Go there. GO. *THERE.*"

The symbiote disappeared with a sharp crackling noise, re-forming halfway embedded in the wall. The front half of it stuck out and flailed weakly for a moment, then fell slack.

Maddox knelt down by Colrin, scooping him up in his arms. "Hey, buddy. Hey. Hold on, okay? We're gonna get you on the Nistra and fix you up."

Colrin's eyes seemed to struggle for focus. He spoke so quietly that Maddox had to lean closer. "You're coming. Promise."

Maddox nodded his head. "Yeah. Of course. I'm coming, too. I'll be right there with you."

Maddox stayed by Colrin's side in the medbay for three days as Nistra's docbot tended to him. When Colrin finally woke up, his eyes scanned the room groggily and then settled on Maddox, who jumped out of his chair and came to the bedside. The first thing Colrin said was, "Where are we?"

"Medbay on the Nistra. You're going to be okay." Maddox breathed the air in deeply. "Weird to be out of the water, right? It's been a while for me."

Colrin smiled and winced as he tried to lift his arm. Nistra's humanoid docbot rolled over, its digital face angry. "Nice job, dummy. Yeah, just move that arm around, really pull on those stitches. Let's see if you can't fuck up all that beautiful, delicate surgery I did to save your life."

Maddox and Colrin chuckled. Colrin gritted his teeth. "Ah, it hurts to laugh."

"God damn, I really like this personality setting. We gotta get a copy of that for Ten."

After a moment, Colrin furrowed his brow. "Wait. Mad, why are you okay? Shouldn't you be freaking out? Your agoraphobia, I mean."

"Well, I admit I might have experienced a teensy amount of anxiety at first. But Ro can do wonders with her mindhack aug. And Kace has me on a steady diet of Corvellian whiskey. I feel fucking great."

"The device—did it work?"

"It did. I put the son of a bitch that got you into the wall."

Colrin lay his head back and closed his eyes. After a few moments, he said, "So what's next?"

"We're on our way to the Rilos Cluster to rendezvous with the fleet. Gonna weaponize and mass produce the jump rig and get it in the hands of hominum forces. This is going to change everything. And since I'm a big fucking genius hero who's basically single-handedly saving all the human species from being eaten alive, I think I deserve some me time. I'm gonna go get a little drunker with Kace and then clean out the pipes. Ro says Nistra has a brand-new Fantatek Chamber." ❖

“JAW DROPPERS”

by GEORGE PAPANDREOU

My job is a fairly strange one, but I don't have much to complain about. On paper, I work for the government, but if you really want to know what I do then it's going to need a bit more explaining. It all started when I got my pilots license back in fifty-seven. Apparently, I did the best out of every flight student in the state, which was a surprise to me but to nobody else. As soon as I got my pilots license, the government came knocking on my door. I talked with a representative of some top-secret government facility in Lincoln County, Nevada.

The area was also known as, the middle of god damn nowhere. The way those guys spoke, the way they carried themselves, it was strange. I felt reluctant to take the job but as soon as they showed me the paycheck, I shut up. That monthly salary was able to give me my wedding, my house, and sooner or later it's going to put my kid through college. (Although I might be looking a bit too far ahead with the last one since my kid is only a year old) Plus the job actually isn't too dangerous. The people that work at the facility would take horrendously long to get home by car, so they hired me and some other pilot for pick up and drop off on the day shift and the night shift. I'm the one handling the day shift. It's been five years since I took the job and

nothings gone wrong so far.

Being such a top-secret facility, people have come up with the most ridiculous rumors about the things that go on in there. Some of those rumors are true but its too dangerous for the government to reveal anything. This kind of job isn't exactly what I intended to go into, but as long as I'm in the sky then everything is alright in my book. Setting up the cockpit, checking up the logbook, all of the passengers getting comfortable, checking the weather, taking a sip of my coffee, and getting straight into the sky. It's tough for me to imagine a better job than that.

My work day lasts about ten hours. That might sound horrible to the average person, but you get used to it after a while. The day usually starts off with some scrambled eggs at four in the morning, I head off to the pickup point of the government employees, and I take the plane back and forth from there to the facility. Every hour of the day there's always people clocking in and clocking out of that place. I do get about a twenty-minute break after every flight so I usually either spend it taking a nap or just hanging out around the facility. They won't let me anywhere past the first floor so there's not too much I know, but the employees I bring home usually like to brag around

somebody who won't spread rumors, so they end up talking to me on the way home.

One of those employees would be Ron. He's an expert on reverse engineering, so once a spaceship crashed on American soil they called him, and he's been working on the ship for about a year now. Ron and I got to know each other so he got comfortable with telling me some info on the ship. As far as he knows there's only two alien spaceships on earth. One of them in Area 51 (the one I work for) and one of them is in some other facility in the United Kingdom. What both countries agreed on is that if it lands in the United Kingdom then it's the property of the United Kingdom and if it lands in the United States then it's the property of the United States. It seems that the world runs off of the finders' keepers' clause.

The Alien that was piloting the ship is fascinating too. I learned about him through Douglas. Douglas was a biologist who was hired to study the alien. He said he heard that when the alien was first found, the government attempted to be friendly with him. However, it seems that he wasn't in the mood for being friendly, he killed the entire team of representatives that welcomed him to Earth. The alien is, in Douglas' words "intriguing". He can remove and put back on certain parts of his body, like the fingers, the toes, the jaw, even the nose. Nobody is entirely sure what purpose it serves on his planet but it's definitely something you can't find in your back yard.

My most recent day of work started off like usual. I had some scrambled Eggs, headed off to work, and flew back and forth

with the employees. Nothing too special happened in the middle of the day, I had a damn good turkey sandwich though.

However, when my last flight came around, everything went straight to crap.

Since it was late at night, only about five employees were clocking out of work. It was two employees I didn't know the names of, Ron, Douglas, and Lieutenant Coleman. Lieutenant Coleman was a guy whose blood ran cold, he's seen war at its best and its worst. He had a thousand-yard stare and would easily give anybody the chills. You get used to him being around though, he doesn't talk much.

Anyways, we were all on the plane. The two unnamed employees were chatting with each other, Coleman was attempting to get some shut eye, and Ron and Douglas were hanging out at the cockpit with me. The two of them were trying to talk me into coming to the company barbecue. I wasn't sure about going at the time, I get along with everybody at work, but I would feel awkward outside of the work setting. They said I could bring my wife and introduce her to everybody, but I was worried that she wouldn't know what to say around them. Douglas said "Oh come on, I'm going, Ron and his wife are going, even a stick in the mud like Coleman is going. You have to come."

I still said no. Ron went to the bathroom and Douglas went back to where he was sitting. Everything was quiet and relaxing. We went over miles of desert like usual. Nothing was out there for miles.

Although eventually I had to go to the

bathroom. I put the autopilot timer on for about ten minutes. There were only two bathrooms on the plane and both of them were unlocked, something in which I found to be strange since I knew that Ron was still in one of them. So, I had a fifty-fifty chance of walking into Ron taking a piss or something. I wanted to think about it, but my bladder made me make a quick decision and just chose at random which bathroom I should use. I thought at the time that if I accidentally ended up in the one Ron was in then I would just call him out for not locking the door. Although what I saw wasn't what I was expecting at all.

I was face to face, not with Ron, but with the alien that was imitating him the whole time. I knew this because he was reattaching his jaw when I entered the bathroom. Everybody else who was on the plane wasn't too far from the bathroom, so they heard my screaming and instantly came to help. For a few seconds, it was all of us staring down the alien. Those few seconds felt like forever, but it had to end eventually. The alien was able to stretch out his tongue and quickly knocked out the overhead lights. Guns went off and it wasn't only me screaming anymore.

The emergency lights came on and I saw the alien's dismembered hand choking out Douglas. I tried to get it off of him and I saw the tears rush down his face when he realized the hand wasn't coming off until he was dead, which happened within a few minutes. I turned around and saw Lieutenant Coleman and somebody else pin down the alien while he fought back relent-

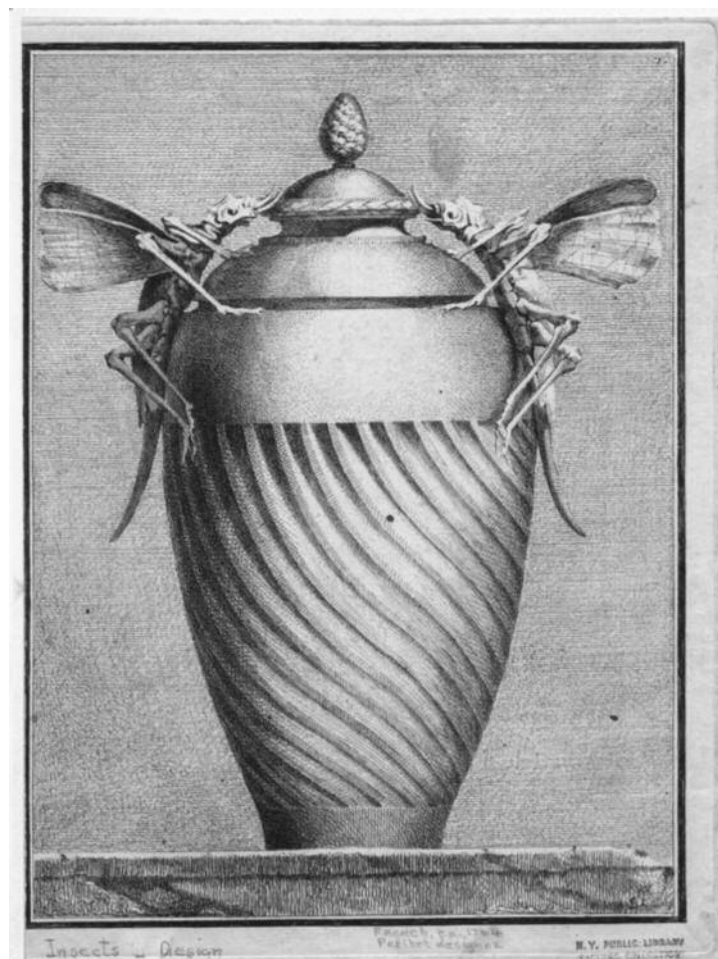
lessly. When the hand was finished with Douglas, it quickly skittered back to the wrist of the alien, just in time for it to punch out the person helping Coleman.

The situation made my head feel like lightning went through it. I couldn't think straight at all; my nerves wouldn't let me. The only thing I could think of is that I knew that I wasn't any good in a fight. Just as I thought about that I remembered that the timer for the auto pilot was about to finish. If I didn't go back to the manual controls, then we would all be in trouble. I ran back to the cockpit as fast as I could. I felt horrible for leaving everybody behind, but crashing wasn't a better alternative. My stomach churned at the thought of this plane going down. I was stuck in the cockpit, keeping control of the plane, and I had a feeling that the alien was winning this fight. It was an absolute nightmare. I was certain that the alien got to everybody else, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. The screaming got louder and louder until each individual voice was cut off one by one.

After a few minutes of flying, everything went quiet. The lack of screaming was just as frightening as the presence of it. I thought of a lot for those few minutes. Whether I was going to get home alive tonight, why the alien was here, and why everyone had to die like that. My thoughts were suddenly cut off when I heard the alien knock on the door of the cockpit; I was hesitant to let him in. However, he let himself in by breaking the lock with just about no effort. He slowly and calmly

walked up to me. What scared the absolute crap out of me was the fact that he looked exactly like Ron, only with a few cuts and bruises. He said, “You’re going to have to keep flying this plane until we get into an area with better reception, I need to let my colleges know that I’m still alive.” as he held up his device that had a picture of four empty bars. I nervously asked him why he had to talk to them. He said “Well, if I

relaxed right on my pilot’s chair. He acted unusually casual about the whole ordeal. This was when I got into deep thought. I started to think of each and every person who lost to this guy. How would each one of them react if they were in my shoes. First, I thought about Ron. Ron was a smooth talker, he could pull off a lot of stuff just by convincing people to do it. I figured he would most likely at least try to talk the



don’t signal them in time then they’ll think I’m dead, and then they’ll deem this planet too dangerous to invade.”

He had nothing else to say, and neither did I. The guy calmly stood behind me while I still flew the plane. His arms were

alien out of what he was doing. He was reasonable like that.

While Douglas is a nice guy, I knew he wouldn’t be fit for this situation. The guy didn’t see much conflict in his life.

Unfortunately, I think he would probably

cry and beg the alien not to kill him. You might call him a pushover for that but put yourself in his shoes and see how well you would do in that kind of situation.

Everything about Lieutenant Coleman gives me the impression that he wouldn't go down without a fight. He would without a doubt give the alien a run for his money, putting one hundred percent into every last punch. If he were to go down in that kind of fight, then he would go down knowing he did the best he could have.

Then there was me, the guy who was actually in the situation. I had no idea what to do, what method to go with. I didn't have Ron's people skills, I didn't want to beg, and I certainly couldn't put up a good fight against the alien. Every outcome ended horribly for me. When I realized all of this I knew there was only one thing to do, so I aimed the planes controls straight for the ground. The alien tried to stop me but there wasn't enough time to do so. We crashed almost instantly.

Next thing I knew, dust filled the air. There was only one issue, I had no idea how strong the plane was. Turns out that official government planes were tougher than I thought. They were built to withstand much more than a crash. Apparently, it's been through worse crap and still got out in one piece. Although knowing that I barely survived the crash, I knew that the alien most likely survived too. His limping body walked up to me, with the look of anger, yet satisfaction in his eyes. He held up the device and I saw that all of the bars on the device were full. The alien said to me

"I should be snapping your neck right now, but I'm just glad you crashed the plane somewhere with good reception!"

Then, much to my surprise, the device was shot out of the alien's hand. He looked at the now broken device with confusion and fear. His already mangled body shook, as he knew that his only hope of success was in pieces. He turned around and who else would it be but Lieutenant Coleman, just barely alive like the both of us. It turned out that he apparently got good at playing dead back in the second world war. Coleman looked at the alien with a slightly angry variant of his thousand-yard stare and said, "That was for everybody you killed on the plane." He clocked the gun, pointed it at the alien and then said, "And this is for the United States of America." The alien tried to run but was only able to get three steps in before the bullet went straight through his head.

Coleman limped toward my bleeding out body and said "Alright kid, don't you die on me now. I radioed the nearest base and it's only a few more miles away, you're going to have to hang in there until help gets here." And then I blacked out.

I woke up in a hospital with my wife sleeping in a chair right next to my bed, she probably fell asleep worrying about me. One of the doctors noticed I woke up and told me that Coleman was surprisingly going to be alright. The guy went through all of that crap and somehow will only need to use crutches for a month or two. Meanwhile I'm the one who's going to be stuck in this bed for a couple of weeks. That's not really what

I was worried about though. What I was worried about was how Ron's wife was going to react to the news. Apparently, the alien had to kill Ron in order to perfectly imitate him. Once I started thinking about how devastated she would be, I started thinking about how much I was going to miss Douglas as well. He didn't have a woman or anything, but I'm sure there has to be somebody out there that was going to miss him as much as I was going to. Once Coleman and I met up in the hospital, he told me "Well, it's horrible how they both had to lose their lives. However, I learned a long time ago that if we let it stick with us, it won't make things any better. I know it isn't the nicest thing to say but I know what

you're going through right now kid. Things like this just got me thinking about it twenty-four seven. Eventually I realized that it's not what my friends would have wanted, they would have wanted me to respect them in their time of passing and get on with my life. Which is exactly what I did, but as you can tell I didn't have to be happy about it. Um, sorry if I'm rambling but what I'm saying is that with all of this crap in your head, it's your choice what you want to do from this point."

I said to Coleman "Well, are you going to the company barbecue?" he told me "I might as well." and finally, I ended our conversation by telling him "I might as well go too." ❖

END TRANSMISSION

