

CMV-61

‘I don’t think I can do this.’ Nathaniel swallowed and stared out across the stage. His hands shook and a thin film of perspiration brought an unhealthy sheen to his sun-stroked complexion.

Heather took his hands and squeezed them as hard as she could, as much to steady herself as comfort him. There was a melanoma just below his right ear. She couldn’t remember if it was new or one she’d seen before. Her memory wasn’t the prodigious asset it used to be: partly due to age, mostly due to the inoperable glioblastoma nesting inside her head.

‘Come out with me,’ Nathaniel whispered. ‘You’re a part of this as much as I am; you should be out there too.’

‘We talked about this: they’ll focus better if just one of us is speaking.’ Heather looked out towards the auditorium. The crowd was about two thousand in number: industrialists, politicians, priests, and a few members of the surviving populace who still cared why the Earth had begun tightening its orbit around the sun. In twenty years, the planet would burn in Sol’s corona; not that it mattered: the world would be unable to support life long before then.

‘It should be Michael,’ Nathaniel said, taking his hand from her to wipe his eyes. ‘He understood all this much better than either of us.’

Michael had made the connection between the Antarctic Monument and the planet’s inexorable journey towards its star. He’d left them his research notes before taking his own life – as a third of the world’s population had already done. Yes, it should be him; Heather bit her lip and nodded. ‘You’re right; we’ll go out together.’

But in front of the lectern, before the sea of expectant faces, Nathaniel froze, so it was up to Heather to begin:

‘It’s the Monument,’ she said. ‘That’s what’s killing us.’ They waited until the disappointed murmur had built into a roar, then for the tannoy to appeal for calm. It took eight

minutes to restore order, then came the questions, shouted from every quarter, often without waiting for a microphone.

That's it? Ten years of research and almost a hundred million dollars, and that's what you've come up with: the world's falling into the sun because of a rock formation?

'Not entirely,' Heather replied.

What the hell does that mean?

'When global warming first exposed the Monument beneath the ice,' Nathaniel said, 'everyone believed the pattern in the rocks was the result of some erosion-based phenomena, like the Giant's Causeway. My stepson, Michael, thought differently, and my wife, the geologist, she believed him. She proved that the formation couldn't have occurred naturally, which led Michael to surmise that it was a mathematical pattern.'

Another question, from the somewhere near the centre of the auditorium: *So you're saying that this line of rocks is ... some kind of writing?*

'It's simpler than that,' Heather said. She looked at Nathaniel and flushed with pride. 'The President got us the funding and resources to look at Antarctica from space. From there, our instrumentation could see below the melting ice and examine the Monument in full. It's a thousand miles long, made up of a hundred thousand individual pillars, some are only a foot wide, others extend for ten miles. You need to look from miles above the Earth to see it for what it really is.'

So what the hell is it?

Heather opened her mouth to speak, but Nathaniel gently touched her wrist; if anyone was going to look the fool, then it should be him. He'd been the most skeptical after all, until the moment he'd discovered his stepson's body in the Whitehouse grounds, hanging from the cedar tree ...

He cleared his throat and leaned closer to the microphone. 'It ... it's a binary number. If you see the whole thing from space, then it looks a lot like ...,' he swallowed then coughed, 'well, it looks a lot like a barcode.'

The silence was unexpected, and mercifully short-lived.

Did you say 'barcode'? Like on tinned soup?

Nathaniel nodded, then remembered he couldn't be seen by most of the people crowded inside the auditorium. 'Very much like a barcode, yes.'

A manufacturing stamp.

‘I suppose.’ He thought he would be jeered, laughed at ... in his worst nightmares he saw politicians, scientists and priests throwing chairs at him. Instead, there was just the disquieting hum, until a voice spoke up from somewhere to his right:

What does it say?

This was Heather’s part: the theory that Michael and herself had spent years putting together. ‘My son couldn’t find anything close to a match in any known language, but he did discover that the width of the rocks scale directly with the distances between stars in the local constellations. We think part of the Monument is showing where we are, and where we are destined to be. Other sections – we’re still translating – relate to time: when we were supposed to begin our journey. And the rest of the Monument is our ...,’ she stopped and looked at Nathaniel. He nodded, barely moving his head. ‘The rest of it is our component identifier, which for lack of a reference point, we’ve called CMV-61: Cygnus Mensa Virgo-61.’ She smiled though she knew this was not the time or place; the time or place would never occur or exist again. ‘My son liked to think the real name for Planet Earth is Continuum Maintenance Vehicle Sixty One.’

The tannoy appealed for calm.

‘We believe that the earth was not formed,’ Nathaniel shouted above the uproar. ‘We think it was manufactured by an advanced, likely extinct, civilisation. We think it was designed to be a part of a larger machine, maybe a Dyson Sphere, that would be created by moving all the planets in the solar system and breaking them up to build a shell around the sun.’

The auditorium erupted into cries of *Madness! Preposterous!*

Ironic, Nathaniel thought, coming from the priests ...

‘And we believe,’ Heather shouted, ‘that we damaged the machine! The planet’s journey began as soon as the sun’s rays struck the Monument. Global warming exposed it hundreds, maybe thousands, of years too early!’

‘Whoever built this ... device, didn’t want to destroy us,’ Nathaniel said, his voice already lost to the cacophony. ‘This wasn’t supposed to happen now, and we weren’t supposed to be here when it did: whoever built our home wanted us to cherish it – before we abandoned it for the stars.’

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